Article:
Huggan, G and Marland, P orcid.org/0000-0001-5458-8821 (Cover date: Spring 2023) Queer Blue Sea: Sexuality and the Aquatic Uncanny in Philip Hoare's Transatlantic Eco-narratives. ISLE Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, 30 (1). pp. 25-49. ISSN 1076-0962

https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa161

Queer Blue Sea: Sexuality and the Aquatic Uncanny in Philip Hoare's Transatlantic Eco-narratives

I, I wish you could swim/Like the dolphins/Like dolphins can swim

David Bowie, "Heroes"

Introduction

One of the most accomplished British nature writers of our times would probably not qualify in most people's eyes as a nature writer.[1] Philip Hoare is little known in America, despite his work's transatlantic allegiances.[2] Nor, despite the acclaim given to his books, one of which, *Leviathan*, won the 2009 Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction, has there been much critical attention to his work in the British Isles. Consequently, one of our main purposes here is to make the case for Hoare, on both sides of the Atlantic. Another is to argue for an expanded view of nature writing—or, as we will prefer to call it here, eco-narrative—that charts its littoral and oceanic dimensions, and to use Hoare's work to open up alternative understandings of the fundamental strangeness of the natural world. Allied to this, we will also claim that Hoare articulates a vision of nature that is both *queer* and *ecological*. According to this vision, identities, sexual and otherwise, are immeasurably fluid, while the porous boundary between humans and other animals challenges normative conceptions of space and place as well as government-sanctioned attempts at social regulation and control (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson; Morton; Seymour). This is a view of "queer" that is both potentially subversive and residually unsettling, contesting explanatory categories and labels but also naming what cannot be explained (Seymour 21).[3]

In Hoare's work, this queer ecological vision is associated first and foremost with the sea and its margins. Not all of Hoare's books have watery origins; he has also written compellingly about rural and suburban Victorian England, while early biographical work includes memorable portraits of such modern-day dandies as Noel Coward, Stephen Tennant, and Oscar Wilde. Still, it would be fair to say that he is best known for his books about the sea, from the cetacean-themed *Leviathan* to the autobiographical *The Sea Inside* to the quirky literary-historical compendium *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR*. These three books are characteristic for their back-and-forth conversations between cultural and natural history, and for a densely allusive, sometimes bewilderingly episodic, narrative style. In *Leviathan* (2009), Hoare offers us an account of human-cetacean interaction throughout history, especially in relation to the development of the global whaling industry, refracted through his own biography and his idiosyncratic reading of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. *The Sea Inside* (2012) documents Hoare's travels from his home on the shores of Southampton Water on the south coast of England to Sri Lanka, the Azores, Tasmania, and New Zealand, in search of further cetacean close encounters, with a narrative again enriched by multiple references to works of literature and art. The third and most recent installment of this marine trilogy, *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR* (2017), sees an even tighter interleaving of the autobiographical, natural, and cultural, as Hoare reflects on his transatlantic adoptive home, Provincetown on Cape Cod, and teases out the synchronicity of a host of cultural references that he weaves into his own personal mythology.[4]

Given this range of reference, "nature writing" is probably the wrong term for Hoare's work; a much better one would be *eco-narrative*. Eco-narratives, Ursula Heise

suggests, encompass everything from "mythological creation stories [to] science fiction novels [to] filmed nature documentaries" (129); they thus go well beyond "nature writing," which, though itself eclectic, is generally recognized as an autobiographical form. Eco-narratives are more than just writing about nature, but also more than just storytelling in the service of environmentalism. Eco-narratives *are* environmental texts insofar as they pass "ecological tenets through rhetorical, linguistic and cognitive strategies" (Soloshenko 5), adopting an inclusive approach to storytelling that "strives to compose with, not for, [the various] non-human characters" it portrays (Donly 17). However, they are better seen, as Heise sees them, as broad vehicles for cross-species empathy in which "the natural world comes alive for the human observer," and ecosystems are seen "not only in their local and regional manifestations, but also in their global reach" (Heise 29–30; see also Marshall and Simpson). To put this differently, eco-narratives stress connections and variant ways of understanding interconnectivity, and in so doing outstrip the narrower demands of "environmental writing," which tends to concentrate on the instrumental function of literature in stimulating action beyond the text (Buell).[5]

Eco-narratives are clusters of genres rather than genres in themselves, and are best defined in terms of the human-animal kinships they foster as well as the historical and geographical crossings they perform. In what follows, we propose to read Hoare's *Leviathan*, *The Sea Inside*, and *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR* as *transatlantic eco-narratives*. There are three main strands to our argument. The first is that Hoare uses eco-narrative to explore different sets of boundary-crossing connections: between America and Britain, between natural and cultural history, and between the present and the past.

The second is that queerness is the principal vehicle for this exploration, allowing Hoare to posit the multiplicity and instability—the performative fluidity—of identity in general as well to establish a queer ecological understanding of the entangled relationship between different life forms. The third is that water, and especially the sea, is the primary element through which this relationship is mediated. Hoare's work, in this and other respects, is an exercise in the *aquatic uncanny*, in which the sea confirms both the irreducibility of the self, which is itself constantly in motion, and the undefinable strangeness of home (TSI 12).

"Queer" is an intrinsically capacious term, critically hard-edged yet tending to float free of the various referents that are attached to it. For our purposes here, we will look to retain the critical edge of "queer" in contexts in which nature's strangeness is apparent, without endorsing all-purpose applications of the term. More specifically, we will ally Hoare's queerness to his situated critique—most evident in *Leviathan*—of the capitalist social relations that underpin the history of whaling, while at the same time acknowledging the predominant whiteness of his referents and his association with a transatlantic counter-tradition of gay writing that is subversive in one sense but potentially conservative in another—not least in so far as his influences are nearly all canonical writers, with the turn to eco-narrative helping him to establish imaginative affinities between mainstream literary texts.[6] Finally, we will posit alternatives to those dominant modes of queer ecocriticism that focus on *terrestrial* conventions ("illicit" places, spaces of exclusion, etc.), asking instead what queer perspectives might have to contribute to *marine*-based criticism written in the wake of the so-called "oceanic turn" (DeLoughrey; Mentz).[7] In Hoare's work, as we will show, it is the sea itself that emerges

as a queer space, allowing for the expression of alternative identities, and conferring a general freedom of movement, associated with its main element, that is only rarely found on land.

Littoral Visions

In all three of the marine-themed eco-narratives mentioned above, Hoare gestures toward the sea as a quintessentially shape-shifting space, as much inside us as around us: "Perpetually renewing and destroying, the sea proposes a beginning and an ending, an alternative to our landlocked state, an existence to which we are tethered when we might rather be set free" (TSI 7). To immerse ourselves in the sea is to seize the chance of being other: of extending the material and imaginative possibilities of our earthly lives. But it also means putting ourselves at risk, for after all the sea is an alien element. We may not be able to live without it, but we cannot survive for very long in it; and for Hoare, as for many of the High Romantic "writer-swimmers" who populate his pages, "every swim is a little death" as well as a dreamy opportunity to reach out for freedom, the utopian horizons of an alternative life (RTFS 79).

Here as elsewhere, Hoare is painfully aware of living at the edge: his is a *littoral vision* in which the sea, viewed from the shore, affords a constant reminder that human beings are, at best, "watergazers" (TSI 52), owing their material and spiritual development to the water but condemned to living on land (TS1 52). Littoral vision is *liminal*, too, insofar as the fixity of sea and sky are revealed to be a "supreme delusion," and their retreating margins disclose an ever-changing shoreline that is simultaneously

"dead and alive" (TSI 17). But most of all, littoral vision is *queer*. As Hoare writes in his 2018 essay "An Unfinished World,"

> [As] I grew up and felt more of a stranger in the human world — informed by that world that I was *unnatural* — so the natural world seems more of a solace, since nature itself is queer. Its solitude and escape has always attracted the other, to those who claimed the common ground for its utopian prospects, proposing a future world in which their desires, like those of the rest of creation, were not proscribed. (UW 111; emphasis in the text)

This is about as close as Hoare comes to announcing his sexuality; more often, it is up to the reader to infer it. But the literary company he keeps leaves us in little doubt, and his works trace a transatlantic lineage of gay or bisexual artist-figures that blurs the boundaries between the historical and the mythical, blending nature and artifice, author and character, real and imagined selves. On the British side, there are Byron, Shelley, and Woolf; while on the other side of the Atlantic, we can find Whitman, Melville, and Thoreau. Hoare sees many of these writers as transatlantic figures, with several of them caught, as he winningly describes Noel Coward, between "English tradition and American glamour, a case of Hollywood meets Hambleton Hall" (NC 390). Some of them are caught, too, between their stated desire to rebel and their not always acknowledged comfort with being part of the establishment: "Had [Coward] not been homosexual," Hoare avers, "he might have been conservative, run-of-the-mill playwright. Being a sexual outsider gave his work its edge" (NC 402). To a greater or lesser extent, these figures all belong to what Hoare calls a historical "subvert culture" (UW 111) which, "passed [on imaginatively] from hand to hand" (UW 111), ends up with such

modern-day rebels as Derek Jarman, whose famous modernist garden reminds Hoare of his own ramshackle coastal surroundings, the far-from-picturesque Southampton estuary around which he grew up serving as a kind of watery edgeland, a semi-rural, semi-urban "interzone [in which] the modern world has yet to wipe out the past" (TSI 8).

Jarman and Hoare are connected as much by water as by land, as are most of Hoare's colorful anti-heroes, but it is their status as sexual outsiders that arguably connects them the most. This suggests that one of the main concerns of Hoare's work is to explore what the American ecocritic Robert Azzarello calls the condition of *queer environmentality*, which he (Azzarello) defines as a "habit of thought that conceptualizes human beings, other life forms, and their environments as disregarding – and, at times, flaunting their disregard for – the ostensibly primary, natural law to survive and reproduce" (4). Azzarello's two main literary examples are Melville and Thoreau, the former of whom he sees as fashioning a " queer nature" that is characterized by "polymorphous perversity," and the latter of whom he considers as demonstrating "a poetic openness towards the other-than-self" (65, 41).

Azzarello's main aim is to set up a queer counter-tradition which subverts what Timothy Morton sees as being the compulsory heterosexuality of American nature writing, a literary heritage he then claims as being reinforced by American ecocriticism, which operates as "a vector for various masculinity memes, including rugged individualism, a phallic authoritarian sublime, and an allergy to femininity in all its forms (as sheer appearance, as the signifier, as display)" (Queer Ecology 274). A secondary objective, however, is to make the case for the "ambivalent complexity" (Azzarello 74) of queer thought and experience, which registers "a kind of aporia about the world and its

life-forms that can best be described as certain ontological uncertainty, [through which] a world of beings – human and otherwise – [appears] suspended in a kind of epistemological and ontological limbo" (Azzarello 80). The primary figure for this is the *uncanny*, which oscillates between a melancholic understanding of the world as fundamentally unknowable and an enchanted (also embodied) encounter with it as rich and strange: as "polymorphously perverse." The uncanny is a central feature of nature writing on both sides of the Atlantic, and the queer sensibility that informs it is arguably central rather than marginal to both American and British traditions, which, as Hoare for one appreciates, are far more entangled with one another than is often supposed.

Thoreau and Melville are central to Hoare's queer transatlantic imaginary, as well as to the construction of his own transatlantic identity. In his readings of Thoreau, Hoare recognizes the openness to the "other" that Azarello identifies, taking a quotation from *Walden* for one of his chapter epigraphs: "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" (L 361). When Hoare looks through Thoreau's own eyes, he finds them focused on the Atlantic: "I see that same sea in his eyes; eyes that seem to see the sea forever; what it had found, and what it had lost" (RTFS 81). Unsurprisingly, he is particularly interested in Thoreau's Cape Cod writings, suggesting that in visits made between 1849 and 1857, Thoreau was "continually drawn back to this in-between place" (RTFS 80). Hoare homes in on the queer elements of Thoreau's Atlantic littoral: "Everything is residual and tentative in the intertidal zone; a place belonging to no one," he writes, concluding (via Thoreau) that it represents "'a sort of chaos […] which only anomalous creatures can inhabit'" (RTFS 76).

However, it is in Melville that we find the writer who is probably Hoare's single most powerful influence. In its unabashed queerness—at one point in *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR* Hoare writes of reading in bed in storm-swept Provincetown, "held under the heavy blankets and quilts, […] layered against the sea and wind like Ishmael in bed with Queequeg" (111)—*Moby-Dick* is a foundational text for Hoare. In Hoare's account, Melville himself is an inherently transatlantic figure who made much of his visits to England, drawing on works of British cetology and exercising his passion for the paintings of J.M.W. Turner. From these encounters, Hoare writes, "Melville's enterprise acquired an English anchor" (L 252). Paul Giles has written that what might best characterize a transatlantic imaginary is a "dialectic of familiarity and alterity" (6), but Hoare's interest lies less in the disruption of national identities than in the ways in which this dialectic signals the queer aspects of Melville's work. Echoing his own sense of sexual freedom in the U.S., Hoare argues that "Melville was liberated by America, a place where he could write about anything and everything, and where he was perfectly aware of the double meaning of his words, even as Starbuck exhorted his crew: 'Pull my boys! Sperm, sperm's the play!'" (L 180)

Hoare sees Melville's voyages to England growing in significance towards the end of his life, exerting a particular influence on his last novel, *Billy Budd*, which was published posthumously in London in 1924. Visits to Greenwich and Portsmouth came back to haunt Melville, Hoare suggests, bringing with them "the body and soul of the Handsome Sailor, washed ashore at his feet" (RTFS 329). As with *Moby-Dick,* Hoare has no doubt about the text's homoeroticism: "As much as he covered his traces, Melville laid flagrant clues for future readers" (RTFS 326), offering as an example the way in

which the text lingers over Billy's body "like a movie camera" (336). He then claims Benjamin Britten's later opera version of the novel for a specifically queer, transatlantic maritime lineage: "For Britten, as for Forster, his librettist, and Auden, their friend, Melville's writing was an eternal, subversive response, embodied in the otherness of the sea" (RTFS 342). It is this otherness that uncannily draws the strands of Hoare's queer ecological vision and its resulting eco-narratives together, establishing his ambivalent vision of the sea as both an inherently unsettling element and a celebratory queer space that is freed—if never entirely—from the conventional shackles of terrestrial life.

Liquid Lives

Tidally recursive, Hoare's eco-narratives mimic the rhythms of the sea in which they are both literally and figuratively engulfed. These narratives depend on patterns of repetition and recurrence in which different personalities, relentlessly superimposed on one another, eventually break down or dissolve. Theirs might thus best be described as a *liquid style* in which uncanny doubles, crossovers, and resemblances proliferate, and in which an underlying fear of the void—akin to the sea's capacity for absorption—lurks beneath the texts' surface play with multiple personalities and plural selves. This style encompasses *vicarious life writing*, the fanciful tracing of direct and indirect correspondences between the author's own and other people's lives. But it also includes what might best be described as *multispecies biography*; for Hoare, who as noted above is as much a natural as a cultural historian, is intensely interested in nonhuman animals' "unwritten lives" (L 63).

In works such as *The Sea Inside*, this involves a conscious back-and-forth between human and animal worlds that corresponds to the author's dream-like ambition to become another being entirely: a bird, soaring untroubled over the ocean; a whale, sinking effortlessly to its depths. In *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR*, this ambition is taken further in a text in which human and animal bodies seem to merge, creating an animate ecology of elective affinities in which different material entities, often housed in hybrid bodies, collide and interact. British and American Romantic writers loom large—Shelley and Keats, Melville and Hawthorne—but so too do the ambiguous mythological figures, "subvert emblems of a queer nature" (RTFS 289), that they either dreamily imagine or actively create.

[Figure 1. Philip Hoare, photo by Andrew Sutton, used with permission]

Prominent among these is Icarus, whose avatars are present throughout the text, and whose fate inexorably awaits each of them, "falling stars" whose bright young lives, rebelling against a world that cannot contain them, are—like Benjamin's Angel of History, who hovers over all of them—destined to succumb to the demons that they themselves create. The celebrated image of "the winged boy falling from the sky" (RTFS 102) offers an uncanny reminder of the price we pay for attempting to go beyond our station; and yet this is precisely what Hoare's work, and the free-spirited alter egos that traverse it, attempts. In this context, the eponymous "rising tides" and "falling stars" of the text—a motif throughout Hoare's work—function as apocalyptic portents, reminders of our limited life spans and our equally limited tenure on an anything but timeless Earth.

But if these mythical-cum-meteorological phenomena gesture toward a fallen world, they also reach out to an alternative one, a utopian horizon that takes radically different forms in Hoare's writing, from the doomed eco-anarchist enclaves of *England's Lost Eden* to the description of Thoreau's forlorn attempt to "distil utopia into a commune of only one" in *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR* (RTFS 146).

The sea is itself a utopian space, offering the imaginative possibility of a journey "through species, sex and time" (RTFS 94), but also registering the material impossibility of that exercise; for, in his resurrection of literary works from *The Tempest* to *The Waves*—classic ocean-going texts whose shipwreck plots and ghostly submarine imagery are ingrained in our consciousnesses—Hoare makes it clear that the ocean is at once echo chamber and graveyard, resonating with the stories of the living but also the lessons of the dead (RTFS 99). Hoare's work reminds us that the sea, and the elements more generally, continually remake us; witnessing a massive storm at Cape Cod—itself less land than sea—Hoare sees the battered town as being "jump-started by the climate," just as he sees himself as being re-energized by his encounter with a planet—a cosmos—that is immeasurably bigger and more powerful than himself (RTFS 117–118). This plays in turn into his conviction that we (humans) are the sum of our ever-changing selves, both psychologically and physiologically; we are "wonders of regeneration," he muses when, after suffering a serious accident that lands him in hospital, he looks at an X-ray of his upper body and contemplates the fact that he has had "six or seven skeletons in my life" (RTFS 226). At the same time, the grainy image reminds him that, at another level, he is little more than a shadowy presence, a *Tempest*-like "sea creature with a wonky spine, all

flickering and glowing, all clouds and bones, skeins and roots, growing into ghostly corals and pearls" (RTFS 227).

Hoare's emphasis on the materiality of metamorphosis is reminiscent of Stacy Alaimo's grounded concept of *trans-corporeality*, which she describes in terms of a vast composite of "material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world" (112). One such set of interchanges involves the sea, which Alaimo, much like Hoare, conceives as operating inside us as well as around us: "The sea surges through the bodies of all terrestrial animals, including humans – in our blood, skeletons, and cellular protoplasm" (118). Human life, both of them imply, is solid and liquid at the same time; but for Hoare, especially, it is *spectral*: that is, it is linked uncannily to alien presences that it carries within itself—ghostly emanations that suggest the world of the living coexists with the world of the dead.

These presences take several different forms, which are simultaneously material and immaterial; and they involve more or less constant interchanges between human and animal bodies—particularly the body of the whale. Whales, as will be seen in more detail in the next section of the essay, are spectral beings *par excellence* in Hoare's work, huge material presences in their own right but also strangely insubstantial—rarely visible, and still less audible—to human ears and eyes. Virtually the whole of *Leviathan*, and lengthy passages in *The Sea Inside*, are devoted to the whale, which carries a symbolic freight that is disproportionate to even its own outsize body, and which alternates as a signifier of salvation and perdition—as a symbol of humanity's hopes for the future, but also a reminder of the abiding human capacity for destruction and self-harm (Huggan; Kalland). Self-harm also figures prominently in Hoare's texts in its most extreme form, suicide,

with real/imagined death by drowning—from Shelley (accidental) to Woolf (self-willed)—providing a running commentary across the body of his work. For Woolf, especially, water is the quintessentially haunting element; and, as Hoare imagines it, the sea "was a mirror for Woolf's descent into madness, a process made profound by knowing what was about to happen" (RTFS 91). Drawing connections with *The Tempest* again, Hoare imagines Woolf imagining being enchanted by Ariel: "'I felt unreason slowly tingling in my veins,' she would say, as if her body were being flooded by insanity or filled with strange noises: birds singing in Greek; an 'off whirring of wings in my head'" (RTFS 91). A few pages later, Hoare makes another of his characteristic imaginative leaps, this time to Melville. With Melville, he says,

> The modernists had found their sea […], an alternative, absolute power with which there is no dialogue, no debate. It stood beyond the depredations of a violent, unequal century, yet was filled with stories like those wreaths cast into its depths, dashed with votive offerings and the ghosts of the living and the dead: 'There are figures coming towards us. Are they men or women? They still wear the ambiguous draperies of the flowing tide in which they have been immersed.' The shores are patrolled by phantoms abandoned to the waves. 'It is strange how the dead leap out at us at street corners, or in our dreams.' (RTFS 99–100)

In Hoare's work, literary texts turn out to be as liquid—as fluid in their form, as fundamentally un-navigable in their content—as the multiply interconnected lives they set out to narrate. Characters improbably recur, doubles irrationally multiply, and human and nonhuman lives seep continuously into one another, with birds, whales, and other creatures of land, sea, and air all potentially functioning as uncanny doubles, mirroring us

but nothing like ourselves (RTFS 35). In this hall-of-mirrors world, everything haunts everything else, irrespective of its historical provenance; thus, behind every apparent Ur-text (*Moby-Dick*?) lurks another one (*The Tempest*?), while real and imaginary beings play at stalking one another, with art imitating life at one moment and life imitating art the next.

However, while this uncanny scenario is by definition unsettling, it also affords an opportunity to make border-crossing links, creating unlikely but rewarding kinships between apparently incompatible things. This, to return to an earlier point, is one of the effects of a queer ecology that holds the imaginative capacity to forge "empathetic, ethical interrelationships between the queer and the nonhuman" (Seymour 23). *Queer empathy* is Nicole Seymour's term for this, linking it to the notion that "queer values – caring not (just) about the individual, the family, or one's descendants, but about the other species and persons to whom one has no immediate relations – may be the most effective ecological values" (27). Seymour's intervention is deliberately ranged against those forms of "queer negativity" that she sees as foreclosing attempts to make a genuine environmental difference, whether by acting on one's own environmentalist convictions or by supporting a common liberationist cause.[8]

This resonates with Hoare's sympathetic view of a multispecies world as well as his stated preference for alternative lifestyles that rebel, however unsuccessfully, against "repronormative" values and principles that are driven by the desire for self-perpetuation—by the wish to consolidate a world that looks the same, and from which all those who are seen as not fitting in are unceremoniously expelled (UW 111; see also ELE and WLS). However, pragmatism is not Hoare's strongest suit, and it might be more

appropriate to align him with those Romantic strands of "queer utopianism" that reach for the stars without really embracing the possibility of getting there—hence the *melancholic* impulses in Hoare's work, which is quite capable of accommodating queer empathy alongside a queer-oriented form of existential despair.

This melancholic view of the world, most pronounced in *Leviathan* but present throughout his work, veers uncontrollably between extreme states of despair and elation, constantly on the search for the objects it needs in order to validate itself (Huggan; Pensky). For the melancholic, losses are imagined not just as loss itself, but as the very condition of the irrecoverable, and this idea more than any other accounts for the haunted atmosphere of Hoare's work. In the next section of this essay, we will move on to a discussion of how this condition both underpins and undermines Hoare's queer ecology, and how it links in turn to his idea that water is haunted (RTFS 381), bearing memories that, traceable across the generations, are carried in the symbolically over-determined figure of the whale.

Cetacean Blues

When Hoare learns to swim for the first time, in his mid-twenties in an Edwardian municipal swimming pool in London, he falls in love with the medium of water: "It was the idea of going out of my depth, allowing something else to take account for my physical presence in the world: being part of it, and apart from it at the same time" (L 3). This notion of being a *part* of the world yet also *apart* from it might be seen as a quintessentially queer stance, resonating with Sara Ahmed's notion of "queer phenomenology," which entails the "dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and

unfamiliar" (7), and recalling Hoare's description of his elective transatlantic home, Cape Cod, as "both part of America, and set apart from it" (L, 116). It is a mode of experience shared by the cast of cultural-cum-mythological outsiders who populate Hoare's writings, and by the whale, perhaps his greatest obsession, which "lives between worlds […] having forsaken the land for the sea" (L 216).

For Hoare, the release of an album of humpback whale songs recorded by cetologist Roger Payne in 1970 intensified our sense of the whale's strangeness, revealing "an animal out of time and space" (RTFS 133). While we were "looking for aliens beyond our galaxy, […] all the while they were living in our oceans" (RTFS 133-4). As noted above, whales carry considerable symbolic freight, bearing the weight of human guilt for the destruction we have wreaked upon them along with the burden of our eschatological fears. In the 1970s, in large part as a result of Payne's recording, this composite whale (or "superwhale," as Arne Kalland wryly describes it) would come to provide the oversized subject for "the new founding fable of the environmental movement […] our albatross around our necks, an emblematic absence" (Hoare, "Staring into the abyss"). Nor is it just their own absence that whales conjure, for as Graham Huggan suggests, they "have historically operated under the sign of *extinction*—and not just the partly realized possibility of their own disappearance, but also that of humanity and even the planet itself" (2; emphasis in the original).

While, as Hoare notes, whales have come close to paying the ultimate price for the human ravaging of the globe, this has also come at a cost to human beings themselves: it is the "price we [have] paid in our souls" (L 38–9). Much of his work is concerned, accordingly, with the way in which Western culture has wrestled with that

price, with his far-reaching exploration of human guilt frequently refracted through the medium of religious imagery. One of the numerous characters Hoare repeatedly inhabits is Jonah: castaway, outsider, and rebel. Indeed, the Prologue to *Leviathan* is headed by an epigraph from The Book of Jonah, and in a recent interview Hoare further mentions that the pool he learnt to swim in was "ribbed and arched like the belly of a whale" ("Six Questions"). Thus, in a reversal of the biblical story, while Jonah is rescued *from* the belly of the whale once he agrees to bend to God's will, Hoare is rescued *by* the belly of the whale, and is reborn in order to tell the animal's story, rehearsing the bitter history of its encounters with the human, and pouring as much "whalish" natural and cultural history into his work as he can in a remarkable act of contrite obsession and reparative love.

Hoare's whales also take on a variety of religiously inflected incarnations, from prelapsarian innocents—"animals before the Fall, innocent of sin" (L 30)—to messianic figures. Citing D.H. Lawrence to the effect that "Jesus, the Redeemer, was Cetus, Leviathan," Hoare himself frequently imbues cetaceans with Christ-like qualities: "But the sperm whale also bears the legacy of our sins" (L 65); "Whales died that men might describe them" (L 74). These Christian echoes are particularly powerful when he dwells on the suffering of whales at the hands of whalers. For example, his hyper-dramatized account of a whaling expedition in *Leviathan* is interspersed with allusions to the crucifixion. These religious references are deeply ingrained in his psyche, going back to the images which marked the Stations of the Cross in his childhood church, glass panels that constituted "a narrative shattered by trauma and put back together again" (RTFS

360)—a quasi-redemptive formulation that neatly captures the function of Hoare's literary oeuvre.[9]

Notwithstanding the whale's symbolic heft, Hoare is deeply connected with its material presence, and his tendency to mythologize is counterbalanced by page on page of detailed natural history and close attention to the animal's physicality, sometimes to comically bathetic effect: "But they also have bad breath, and shit reddish water" (L 30). Moreover, he demonstrates a keen awareness of whales' entanglement with human history: with colonialism, with the industrial revolution and with global capitalism. As he argues, "More than anyone has realized, perhaps, the modern world was built upon the whale. What was at stake was the future of civilization, in the most brutal meeting of man and nature since history began" (L 38-9).

Hoare's eco-narratives also involve a multifaceted exploration of his own physical encounters with whales. As the American film maker John Waters—whom Hoare describes as his literary godfather and "one of the U.S.'s most notably queer figures" (AotO)—mischievously says of Hoare, "He writes about birds and whales like a gay man might write about his best tricks—beautifully and sensually. He'd better be careful though: pretty soon I predict he's going to have sex with an animal."[10] It is doubtless the case that when Hoare fell in love with the sea, he also fell in love with whales, and his relationship with them is colored by a mixture of adoration, prurience, and eroticism that courses through his work. As Hoare tells us in *Leviathan*, the first time he saw a whale, he experienced a response that was both visceral and hopelessly romantic: "Knowing it is there tugs at my gut, and something inside me makes me want to plunge in and dive with it to some unfathomable depth where no one would ever find us" (L 28). At other times,

an invasive curiosity comes to the fore, for example, after finding the corpse of a common dolphin washed up on the beach, a "beautiful naked animal" (RTFS 60), Hoare admits to inserting his finger into the dolphin's genital slit, "ostensibly to investigate if she […] had bred, but in reality out of prurient curiosity" (60). A similar prurience informs his encounter with the corpse of a stranded minke whale, whose body has been reduced to "raw cartilage," to the extent that there is "barely anything to indicate that it had ever been alive, save for its pale little penis hanging from the underside of its belly, flaccid and worm-like" (L 300). Once again, Hoare guiltily confesses, "I fingered it, then […] walked back in the failing light" (300).

Indeed, there are moments when the materiality of whales is too much even for Hoare: times when, repulsed by "their serpentine animalness" (L 371), he struggles to reconcile himself with their corporeality. But more often than not, there is a powerful eroticism to Hoare's interactions with whales. The scent of a piece of whale skin he keeps in his diary is "deeply male and musky, strangely sexual and arousing" (L 415). The final chapter of *Leviathan* finds Hoare swimming with a juvenile male sperm whale off the Azores: a meeting replete with both romantic and erotic possibility. He assesses the whale's appearance appreciatively, lingering over his "rippling muscles [and] tightly clamped jaw" (L 418), like a camera following a Hollywood movie star. The whale appears to reciprocate his interest: "He hung there. And then he turned towards me" (418). Next, "the young whale moved alongside. Noiselessly, for minutes that seemed like hours, we swam together, eye to eye, fin to fin, fluke to fluke" (418).

[Figure 2. Philip Hoare with sperm whales, photo by Andrew Sutton, used with permission]

In this encounter, Hoare imaginatively achieves his fantasy of metamorphosis by taking on, however briefly, the physical form of a whale. This close identification with another animal also allows for the possibility of being mutually seen and understood. In his numerous talks and writings on the subject, Hoare has described his experiences of being echolocated by whales, and at the culmination of *Leviathan* he states, "I knew now that the whales had the measure of me; that they knew what I was even if I could not comprehend them" (L 418). His registering of the whales' superior perceptive powers demonstrates an interest in their subjectivity. In this and other ways, Hoare's cetacean works strive toward the kinds of writing *with* rather than *for* another species that Corinne Donly associates with eco-narratives as empathetically "co-composed" literary texts.

Cetacean Sex

By extension, Hoare also recognizes in his cetacean subjects their own forms of sexuality. Azzarello identifies the openness to the idea of sexuality in non-human creatures as a key project of queer environmentality, arguing that while the notion of heteronormativity in humans has been weakened by arguments for eroticism, which broaden the "accepted" scope and terms of human sexuality, these arguments are inextricably linked with ideas of human exceptionalism (136). Challenging the idea that animal sex is anything other than reproductive heteronormativity as a teleological orientation would dangerously shake that sense of exceptionalism: "To let animals have

their eroticism, the experience of sexuality *as such,* would call too much into question" (136, emphasis in the original).

The final chapter of *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR* poses just such a challenge. The episode in question finds Hoare hanging upside down in the water of a Mexican bay, one of the deepest in the Pacific, transfixed by the song of a humpback whale. He has no doubt that the whale is communicating something, but reflects on the difficulty of interpreting it: "His song sounds like a keening threnody to me; but to another whale, it is a serenade of lust" (387). But he then goes on to complicate even this assumption, critiquing the conventional modes of interpretation that are available to him: "In our male-dominated world, we are vain enough to believe all non-human song is directed solely at the means of reproduction" (389). The song may indeed be a form of "remote foreplay," a means of "bringing a female into oestrus" (390). "But given his awareness and his culture," Hoare surmises, "it may be that this whale is singing for himself as much as for other whales" (390).

Hoare's resistance to reading whale song as a function of reproductive activity brings a further queer insight. When another male joins the first whale, they interact in an ambiguous manner: "Our whale turns on his side, as the two males join together for a while in greeting, or in some other intimate exchange" (391). The fluidity of "some other intimate exchange" allows for eroticism, a *perverse* sexuality on the part of the whales. Indeed, for Hoare whales are "the ultimate embodiment of queer nature […] exhibiting social behaviour which is, of course, not defined by heteronormalcy—or homonormalcy, for that matter" (AotO). He is also open to further erasures of human exceptionalism, citing Hal Whitehead's findings that sperm whales "speak" in different dialects according

to social groupings and his speculations that they may well have developed "emotions, abstract concepts and, perhaps, even, religion" (L 356–8). With this in mind, Hoare concludes, "don't all cetaceans, whose names seem to belong to humans, signal their own stories, their own sense of themselves, rising to adore their own gods?" (RTFS 391)

At the end of his jaunt with the juvenile male sperm whale, Hoare sees the animal dive beneath the waves: "Raising his head one last time, he dipped down, then lifted his flukes, and was gone" (L 418). It is an ending worthy of high romance, a human-cetacean version of *Casablanca* or *Brief Encounter,* but like these celebrated stories it is one also touched by a powerful melancholy, conjuring both the impossibility of any lasting communion with another species and the potential disappearance of the whale from the oceans of the world. Huggan argues that "whales function as multifaceted figures for human melancholy" (xi), and as previously noted, Hoare's melancholy revolves around a form of existential despair, centered not only on loss itself, but also on the notion of the inherently irrecoverable.

In this, it has two functions within the framework of queer ecology. The first of these features as resistance to forgetting the damage done to whales by humans, and can thus be regarded less as a failure to complete the work of mourning than as a refusal, both instinctive and deliberate, to "move on" before we have fully recognized what we have destroyed. Catriona Sandilands associates the condition of melancholia with a queer ecological sensibility that she describes in terms of "a state of suspended mourning in which the object of loss is very real but psychically 'ungrievable' within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural environments and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief" (333; emphasis in the original). By

remaining true to his melancholy, Hoare ensures that, in his work, the terrible history and continuing detrimental effects of the human treatment of whales—and, by extension, the planet—are brought to our attention again and again.

The second function of melancholy raises the existential question of the alterity of the human. Hoare's work is redolent of a great loneliness. This is both *personal*—he has freely admitted to feeling "unaccepted by humans, not having a family or a close relationship, [or] being part of a community" (AotO)—and *general*, somewhat akin to the "loneliness of man as a species" that John Berger posits in *Why Look at Animals?* (15).[11] In the latter sense, loneliness is an integral aspect of the human condition, and any experience of interspecies communion is fleeting at best. The conclusion of *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR* resonates with such loneliness, as the humpback whale's plaintive song carries on long into the night. Channeling Keats and Shakespeare, Hoare imagines himself shaking off his human form, reaching out "a flipper to turn [himself] over, sleepily twisted with oozy weeds" and sinking to the depths of the ocean in "a last little dance before becoming something rich and strange" (392).

Hoare's fantasy uncannily chimes with Lee Edelman's framing of the queer death drive as a radical stepping outside of the existing parameters of political thought through its negation of "reproductive futurism" (2–3). His apparent death wish has a similarly radical function, this time as an assertion of the freedom to despair of the human world entirely, and to dream of sinking, entwined with another species, to a watery dissolution in the ocean depths. But like his unfinished mourning, this unrealized fantasy seems to act at the same time as a spur to Hoare's daily commitment to his "little death" of wild

swimming, and to the ongoing possibility of interspecies and phenomenological encounter in the everyday world.

The framing of whales as part of what we previously posited as an "aquatic uncanny" operates as a correlate to Hoare's melancholy. The British writer Iain Sinclair has observed that Hoare "is preternaturally alert to manifestations of the uncanny" (123). The stranding of whales—"Whales where they should not be" (L 303)—becomes a particular focus for these uncanny manifestations in Hoare's eco-narratives, as a site of repressed and un-mourned history that repeatedly erupts. Reflecting on whale strandings in the Thames in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hoare comments that "It was notable that these whalish strays appeared at precisely the point in London from which their hunters had set out, as if returning to haunt them" (L 307). As much as they are real flesh-and-blood creatures, whales are mysterious beyond measure. Huggan notes that while whales function as "an all-purpose symbol for entangled histories of disappearance and loss," their "*spectrality*, simultaneously substantial and insubstantial," also renders them "quintessentially unsettling" (86, emphasis in the original).

In *Leviathan*, Hoare traces this phenomenon to Melville's writing, in which the quasi-mythical figure of Moby Dick is "a spectral creature believed to be omnipresent" (L 173). For Hoare, the spectrality of the whale reinscribes it, not just as an aquatic creature, but also as a huge cosmic being, "as numinous as dark matter; an animal more mystical than muscular; as if the spermatozoid were a universe at the same time" (L 173). This cosmic dimension situates whales within a queer uncanny in which "appearance exceeds the material" (Palmer 7), and as such they unsettle us ontologically, not only in relation to human exceptionalism, but also by demonstrating our ultimate lack of

knowledge about the nature of their existence and, by association, our own. "The more we look, the less sure we are," Morton writes of the ecological uncanny (*Ecological Thought* 53); similarly, whales render *unheimlich* our own dwelling on the planet, fulfilling Edelman's call for a queerness that would "sever us from ourselves" (5).

Coda: Queer Blue Sea

A panel proposal put together for the 2017 NeMLA convention notes that while queer themes are often seen as emerging in nautical contexts, little attention has been paid to the sea itself as a queer space. As we have sought to show in this essay, Hoare's work goes some way to redressing this imbalance, in part by making a case for the sea as shape-shifting, identity-dissolving territory and in part by recasting the history of human-cetacean relations in homosocial, sometimes explicitly homosexual, terms. Both of these arguments will be familiar to readers, in the U.S. and elsewhere, who know their Melville, and as we have seen Hoare openly acknowledges his debt to America's greatest maritime writer, for whom, as for Hoare himself: "The sea is the queerest place I know" (Angel of The Ocean). Similarly, for Hoare as for Melville the sea is violent and beautiful in equal measure: a place of death and destruction, but also one "full of queer things; in the sea, everyone and everything is beautiful, like a cabaret."

Here as elsewhere in his work, the theatricality of Hoare's writing is apparent. This puts him in line with a transatlantic coterie of gay writers whose lyrical ministrations to watery presence—also to watery spectrality, those absent presences to which we have attached the composite term "the aquatic uncanny"—accord with historical experiences of exclusion while at the same time performing a "queer empathy" (Seymour) that

operates across the species boundary, bringing human and animal together in deliberately inclusive terms. Queer empathy demands, in turn, a reawakened consciousness of the multispecies dimensions of nature writing that goes beyond the stock definitions that continue to be applied to it—demands, indeed, a new approach to "nature" itself, which defies the normative categories that are continually imposed onto it. (The revised first rule of nature writing, perhaps, is that there is nothing very natural about it, while the second is that the nature it seeks imaginatively to engage with is by no means the same as the one it physically experiences—a very different proposition, this last, to Lawrence Buell's influential view of nature writers' accountability to the natural world [Buell, *Environmental*].)

Hoare's writing, we have been seeking to argue here, brings out this covert sense of the queerness of nature writing—a queerness writ large in his oceanic perspective on human-animal relations. For Hoare, humans are animals and yet not, strangers to themselves as much as strangers to the natural phenomena that surround them. It is the sea—itself an alien element—that confirms this strangeness, which is experienced in and through our aquatic beginnings: the water that lives inside us, making up the majority of our bodies, as well as the water that supplies the very origins of human life. As we have seen, Hoare's relationship with the sea (and with the world) is best understood as being constituted by a dialectic of immersion and alterity, with any sense of easy kinship undermined by the sense that he is not ultimately contiguous with the water and its creatures, and never can be. Moreover, it is only whales that have the capacity to preserve their prelapsarian innocence, whereas humans must come to terms with centuries of anthropogenic destruction.

Towards the end of *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR*, Hoare hears of the death of the "starman" in Manhattan. Though David Bowie is never actually named in the book, he is, to borrow Shakespeare's dedication of the sonnets, in many respects its "onlie begetter." His passing generates a wave of intense grief in Hoare, whose response is to "sing out loud to the ocean and scratch his name in the sand. The waves soon wash it away" (RTFS 393). It is an erasure that Hoare attempts to reverse by entering the waves himself. Watched by his friend's dog Dory, who is too sensible to take to the waves herself on such a cold January day, Hoare slips off his clothes and swims "like a dolphin, in the freezing sea" (393). The act typifies Hoare's daily act of wilful re-estrangement from, and passionate recommitment to, the marine world that lies at the heart of his eco-narratives. Thus, while he is reminiscent of Benjamin's Angel, with his face turned towards the past and to the wreckage of history, this "angel of the ocean" deliberately loses his wings, and instead of being carried forward in the storm of progress, insists that he will stay, listen for the voices of the dead, and keep alive the possibility of making whole "what has been smashed" (11). Through watery sacraments such as these, as through his sea-obsessed eco-narratives, Hoare effectively re-enacts the ritual function of the glass pictures that lined the walls of his childhood church. This, above all, is what constitutes Hoare's queer ecology: an impassioned empathy with others, human and non-human, and an ongoing if deeply melancholy desire to revisit and restore to wholeness those narratives that have been shattered by the traumatic events of the past. And it is also what helps to constitute his transatlantic eco-narratives, in which fluid narrative form is allied to a queer sensibility that crosses between both continents and species, and whose tidal rhythms are oceanic intimations of an uncanny queer space.

[Figure 3 [gannet wings]. Philip Hoare, photo by Dennis Minsky, used with permission]

Endnotes

[1] Neither would Hoare necessarily consider himself to be entirely British. Though UK-born, he frequently reflects on his Irish ancestry, identifying himself as "part of a separate and not entirely accepted caste" (RTFS 365), and often looking to Ireland in his cultural references. This self-perception can be seen as informing Hoare's instinctive sympathy with the marginalized, contributing to his own acute sense of being an outsider.

[2] The Irish scholar Nicholas Allen refers to Hoare's work in his forthcoming *Ireland, Literature and the Coast: Seatangled*, while one of the most prominent American practitioners of the "oceanic turn" (see also Note 7), Steve Mentz, mentioned Hoare's sea "trilogy" in a recent lecture (https://soundcloud.com/sydneyenvironmentinstitute/swimming-into-the-blue-humanities).

[3] The connections between queerness and ecology are well documented. For Timothy Morton ("Queer Ecology"), ecology *is* queer in the sense that its intricate web of natural/cultural interdependencies challenges restricted identity categories, while Stacy Alaimo ("Queer Animals") has drawn attention to homosexuality as a common feature of sexual relations in the natural world. Both arguments, especially Morton's, raise the issue of "queer" as an over-used analytic that can potentially be stretched to cover all eventualities. As Andrea Smith reminds us, the "subjectless subject" of queer critique opens up a tension between queerness as a general site of resistance and its reincorporation into specific forms of normativity. Jordana Rosenberg sums up this tendency as follows: "When queerness comes to indicate an ontological or essential form of resistance, we can lose sight of the conditions that make queerness as such in the first place." "Ecology" is likewise often used in critical-theoretical contexts where its precise scientific meanings are either rhetorically expanded or strategically blurred (Phillips; Szasz).

[4] Hoare spent much of his time in Provincetown as a guest of the artist Pat de Groot, who became a dearly loved friend. He wrote an obituary for her in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, in which he identified her as the "presiding genius" of RTFS (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jul/31/pat-de-groot-obituary).

[5] Buell's instrumentalist definition of "environmental text," now fifteen years old and counting, is arguably in need of updating. Nature writing, however environmentally concerned, is more than just an environmentalist call to arms, and many contemporary practitioners, Robert Macfarlane prominent among them, have pointed out that, in keeping with literature more broadly, it "does not deal in deliverables. [Rather it] stirs the sediments of thought and morals, setting them strangely aswirl" (166). In this general respect, Hoare remains very much a nature writer, and although several of his works fit the definition of "eco-narrative" more snugly, they also exhibit the defamiliarizing tendencies that Macfarlane and others associate with nature writing, and with literary texts as a whole.

[6] As previously noted, Hoare's work is wide-ranging and packed with eclectic cultural references, the queer dimensions of which are not limited to males (of whatever species). For example, he pays significant attention in RTFS to Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Sylvia Plath, especially her littoral-themed essay "Ocean1212-W." As

with his cast of male literary characters, Hoare considers these figures, not just in terms of their written work but also their geographical connections to coastal sites, as well as the broadly—sometimes explicitly—queer elements of their biographies and the synchronicities and affinities that connect them across time and space. He also demonstrates in his allusions to Caliban that he is well-versed in postcolonial readings of *The Tempest* (see, for example, RTFS 17-18). Thus, while Hoare identifies with gay writers first and foremost, his eco-narratives offer significantly more than just a "marginal" alternative to the mainstream male traditions of nature writing, whether in the UK or the US. To some extent, gay nature writing is *part* of this tradition rather than a subversive alternative to it: an area of ecocriticism that urgently calls for further work.

[7] While definitions vary, the oceanic turn can generally be understood as describing a relatively recent, vigorously cross-disciplinary critical movement that seeks to address ocean worlds and the fluid discourses associated with them; "the new millennium," Mentz asserts, "is bringing humanities scholarship back to the sea" ("Blue Cultural Studies" 997). Ocean studies is both a historical and an epistemological phenomenon, involving a wide variety of "disorienting" new approaches (Mentz) that have helped give fresh momentum to ecocriticism in the linked contexts of the Anthropocene and an ecologically threatened planet (see Mentz; also DeLoughrey). Many of these approaches are compatible with the destabilizing critical maneuvers of postcolonialism and queer theory, although ecocriticism has not always kept pace with these developments, and many ecocritics on both sides of the Atlantic still prefer to concentrate on the kinds of place-specificity that oceans (and ocean studies) tend by definition to cast in doubt. For a broadly "postcolonial ecocritical" approach to Hoare's work, albeit one that makes little of its queer dimensions, see Huggan.

[8] A classic work of "queer negativity" is Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), which argues fiercely against "reproductive futurism" (2), but equally ferociously refuses to offer a social and political agenda in its place. For Edelman, "Queer can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (17). Seymour would probably agree with this, but defends future thinking as our collective planetary responsibility, requiring both thought and action across constructed social and political divides (Seymour 28).

[9] The glass panels in question, along with some of the stained glass windows in the church, were created by the Irish artist Harry Clarke, himself a notably queer figure, as Hoare notes (RTFS 360-364; "Alien spaceship").

[10] Waters made these comments in a short film promoting the US publication of *The Sea Inside.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUFPNnm1LyE (accessed 25 March 2020).

[11] That said, there is a strong sense of human amity in Hoare's work that in some ways parallels the kinds of interspecies attachments he explores. This amity is evident in the affection with which he describes his friends Pat de Groot and Dennis Minsky in RTFS.

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