

SALT TASTE OF THE SEA

The Multisensorial Beach in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charles Simmons's *Salt Water*

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In her poem 'Inland' (1921), Edna St. Vincent Millay describes the distinction between the interior of a country and the seashore as a difference of sensory experience. The inland's stillness is presented as a lack, an absence of 'the sound / Of water sucking the hollow ledges' that marks the shore.¹ Whereas the loud beating of the waves appears as violent, dangerous, and almost intentionally malignant—'Tons of water striking the shore' (line 6), 'Spanking the boats at the harbour's head' (line 10)—the silence in a house built inland is claustrophobic, its indwellers are '[p]eople the waves have not awakened' (line 9), people who have even lost the ability to long for a change. Against the stillness and stasis of the interior, the poem's speaker is tormented but also animated by a longing triggered by multisensorial memories of the sound, smell, and taste of the seashore. In the closeness of their room, even the existential danger of the shore becomes preferable:

What do they long for, as I long for, –
Starting up in my inland bed,
Beating the narrow walls, and finding
Neither a window nor a door,
Screaming to God for death by drowning, –
One salt taste of the sea once more? (lines 11–16)

As the dichotomous construction of space in 'Inland' shows, the shore is often represented as a particularly sensory-rich environment. This is especially true of the beach as the space along the waterline, where sea, earth, and air interact and where

¹ Edna St. Vincent Millay, 'Inland', in *Second April* (New York: Harper, 1921), 38, ll. 4–5.

individual bodies engage on all sensory levels with the elements. In consequence, the beach is culturally coded as life-enhancing, healthy, and sensuous; at the same time, as the penultimate line in St. Vincent Millay's poem suggests, this heightened sensory engagement is also linked with death.

The beach intensifies multisensorial bodily perception, as it touches, stimulates, and invades the human body through various material channels: the wind that caresses the skin and the sunrays that burn it, the salty air that is smelled and inhaled, the seawater that buoys up the whole body but, when swallowed, makes it choke and, when entering the lungs, makes it perish by drowning. This experience of the beach is not ahistorical. While the Victorians, even as they sought out the beach, tried to shield their bodies from some of its sensory stimuli, especially the sun, the modern beach can be defined by an encompassing exposure to and engagement with its multisensorial experience. Two cultural techniques, widely adopted by beach visitors in the late nineteenth century and in the 1920s, contributed to this transformation: swimming and sunbathing. As the cultural historian Jean-Didier Urbain has argued, it was swimming in particular that recoded 'physical contact with the sea, tactile and coenesthetic', from a dangerous and immoral activity into something pleasurable and innocent.² This transformation of the beach experience is concurrent with the formation of new moral codes, fashions, patterns of consumption, and ideas of both individualism and community.

Literature engages with the multisensorial beach mainly in two ways. Literary texts record a 'thick description' of the sensory and emotional experience of, for example, swimming; in other words, they describe the interaction between the material environment and the body and offer an interpretation of what it means for the individual. Secondly, they explore the ambivalence of the beach, the persistence of conflicting emotional patterns such as sensuous liberation side by side with a dread of the deep. Significantly, the two novels I want to look at in my chapter, although separated by a century, address similar issues. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Charles Simmons's *Salt Water* (1998) are both set at moments of social change (women's liberation at the turn of the twentieth century, the sexual revolution of the 1960s); they both have liminal protagonists (a woman artist and an adolescent boy); and both use littoral activities (swimming, sailing) as conduits to sexual awakening, liberation from social and familial constraints, and greater self-knowledge. However, they also show that these positive developments are not viable outside the heterotopia of the beach; in both instances, the novel ends with a death by drowning.³

² Jean-Didier Urbain, *At the Beach* [*Sur la plage*, 1994], trans. Catherine Porter (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 70.

³ For an elaboration of the beach as heterotopia, see Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter, 'Of Tourists and Refugees: The Global Beach in the Twenty-First Century', in Simon Ferdinand, Irina Souch, and Daan Wesselman, eds, *Heterotopia and Globalisation in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2020), 116–30.

Swimming Far Out: Edna Pontellier's Multisensorial Awakening

Two key scenes of *The Awakening* are set on the beach and describe the protagonist Edna Pontellier's attempts at swimming. During a nocturnal bathing party, Edna, until then an inept swimmer and afraid of the deep, for the first time masters the technique and swims out into the sea at Grand Isle, where the affluent Creole families of New Orleans are spending their summer vacation. As several critics, especially those approaching the novel from a feminist angle, have pointed out, this successful swim marks a turning point in Edna's personal development: she 'awakens' sexually, sheds the shackles of bourgeois marriage, and pursues a career as an artist. In the final scene of the novel, Edna returns to Grand Isle in winter and swims to her death, an ending widely interpreted as the ultimate failure of her emancipatory departure.⁴ While the importance of Edna's bodily experience of swimming for her mental liberation is generally acknowledged, only a few critics have paid detailed attention to the multisensorial impact of the littoral setting, and in particular her sensory experience of immersion and swimming.

Tara K. Parmiter has pointed out the connection between resorts, the discourse on women's health, and the emancipatory potential of vacations for women: 'these summer places offer alternatives to the domestic realm, affording new freedoms to women writers to reevaluate the social restrictions of the homes left behind for the summer.'⁵ As family vacations at the seaside had become an established yearly ritual both in North America and Europe, bathing in mixed company also became a respectable practice for women, and arguably paved the way for a broader social emancipation.⁶ As Parmiter notes, however, 'sea-bathing can simultaneously benefit and threaten a spirited woman like Edna, whose need for bodily stimulation mirrors her need for intellectual excitement', if this 'new freedom' is strictly limited

⁴ For classic examples of feminist engagements with *The Awakening*, see Sandra M. Gilbert, 'The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire', *Kenyon Review* 5 (1983), 42–66; Elaine Showalter, 'The Awakening: Tradition and the American Female Talent', in *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 66–85; Patricia S. Yaeger, 'A Language Which Nobody Understood': Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 20, no. 3 (1987), 197–219.

⁵ Tara K. Parmiter, 'Taking the Waters: The Summer Place and Women's Health in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*', *American Literary Realism* 39, no. 1 (2006), 1–19 (1).

⁶ Swimming was long considered unsuitable for women, because wet bathing suits, however modestly cut, revealed too much of the body. In the context of late nineteenth-century discourses on physical fitness and health, however, swimming was accepted as an ideal sport for women both in the United States and the United Kingdom. See Claire Parker, 'Swimming: The "Ideal" Sport for Nineteenth-century British Women', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 27, no. 1–2 (2010), 675–89. On the development of women's swimming in the first decades of the twentieth century, and its challenge to restrictions on women's conduct and clothing, see Catherine Horwood, '"Girls Who Arouse Dangerous Passions": Women and Bathing, 1900–39', *Women's History Review* 9, no. 4 (2000), 653–73.

to the vacation period.⁷ Like other scholars, Parmiter highlights the importance of swimming as ‘a major component of Edna’s vacation’ which ‘greatly influences her well-being and sense of self’, but does not pursue further Chopin’s depiction of swimming as an embodied, multisensorial activity.⁸

Kathrin Tordasi is one of the few critics to pay detailed attention to the seaside as a socially constructed space in *The Awakening*. The actual resort, that is, the hotel and summer cottages, ‘reflect the spatial and social order of the mainland’, but even here the middle-class codes of social, especially gendered, conduct are observed less strictly.⁹ It is the beach in particular, however, visited by Edna at odd times—for instance, during the midday heat—and unchaperoned, that functions as a transformational space:

Edna experiences the liminal space-time of the island in a way that changes her perspective and resets her life course. *The Awakening* is therefore another example of a literary text which locates self-altering experiences on the beach and, on a structural level, uses beach liminality to disrupt social routines and create alternative (and, as I am going to argue, queer) temporalities and spaces.¹⁰

In a close reading of Edna’s nocturnal swim, Tordasi interprets the scene as ‘a rite of passage during which Edna turns into a threshold person, who no longer perceives herself the way she did before, and does not yet understand who she is about to become’.¹¹ While this reading is persuasive, again the physical and sensory components of Edna’s swim are mentioned only perfunctorily, such as her disorientation in the water and her ‘departure from stable ground and the forward motion’ of swimming.¹² In what follows, I focus on precisely these neglected aspects of *The Awakening*: the multisensorial environment that prepares Edna for her transformation, and her embodied engagement with the elements, especially the sea.¹³

The setting at Grand Isle, on the Louisiana shore of the Gulf of Mexico, constitutes a crucial spatial framework for Edna’s radical self-examination, which begins long before her successful swim. In the warmth and relaxation of the summer resort, Edna is exposed to sensory stimuli that heighten her awareness of her body, as well as accentuating her dissatisfaction with her role as the representative wife, the ‘valuable piece of personal property’ of the wealthy New Orleans businessman

⁷ Parmiter, ‘Taking the Waters’, 2.

⁸ Parmiter, ‘Taking the Waters’, 8.

⁹ Kathrin Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront: Modernist (Re)Visions of Gender, Self and Littoral Space* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2018), 234.

¹⁰ Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 235.

¹¹ Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 244.

¹² Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 244–5.

¹³ For the concept of sensory, emotional, and cognitive embodiment in relation to the sea, see Barbara Humberstone, ‘Embodied Narratives: Being with the Sea’, in Mike Brown and Barbara Humberstone, eds, *Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea. Embodied Narratives and Fluid Geographies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 27–39.

Léonce Pontellier.¹⁴ The narrator describes at great length the tropical nature surrounding the resort, the sounds and smells, the heat, the sea breeze, and other sensory triggers that have, by turns, calming, oppressive, and stimulating effects on Edna. For example, the path leading to the beach is bordered by ‘acres of yellow camomile’, a plant with calming and soporific qualities, and, beyond, ‘small plantations of orange or lemon trees’ (15). These citrus groves not only are fragrant but also form a visually pleasing aspect: ‘The dark green clusters glistened from afar in the sun’ (15). As Edna walks down the beach path with her friend Adèle Ratignolle, she perceives these vegetable scents as well as the smell of the sea, brought inland by ‘a breeze . . . , a choppy stiff wind’ that not only carries odours but touches the skin and impedes the women’s walk as it flutters their skirts (16). The women also register the heat and the soundscape produced by the wind, the waves, and the absence of other human beings: ‘The beach was very still of human sound at that hour’ (16).

Sensory engagement with this environment is a matter of the whole body, including not only the ‘classic’ senses such as smell, sight, touch, and hearing but also the sense of temperature and kinaesthesia, the sense of movement. Proximity to the sea, according to Barbara Humberstone, heightens this holistic embodiment: ‘Being in or on the sea attends to the whole body, not the (un-)consciousness in isolation but the whole of the corporeal body: mind, senses, their inter-relatedness and particular embodied relationship with the sea.’¹⁵ I argue that Edna’s experience of the seaside provokes such a profound upheaval of her psychosocial position because it does not engage with single senses but precisely with the totality of her sensory perception. As Caroline Potter has observed, ‘the senses should be understood as an intermeshed web of perceptory apparatuses that direct the body’s total attention to its situation in the world, rather than as a set of discreet biological pathways that respond independently to physical stimuli.’¹⁶ It is the ensemble of these stimuli that makes Edna ready for her unsettling swimming experience, and alters her understanding of ‘her situation in the world’, or in the novel’s own phrase, the realization of ‘her position in the universe as a human being’, and of ‘her relations as an individual to the world within and about her’ (14).

In this multisensorial set-up, the sea plays a particularly agential role. It is not simply part of a topography understood as passive, as the background for human action. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu, spatial elements in a narrative can serve as ‘a focus to attention, a bearer of symbolic

¹⁴ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* [1899], ed. Margo Culley (London: Norton, 1994), 4. Henceforth page numbers are given in the text.

¹⁵ Humberstone, ‘Embodied Narratives’, 28–9.

¹⁶ Caroline Potter, ‘Sense of Motion, Senses of Self: Becoming a Dancer’, *Ethnos* 73, no. 4 (2008), 444–65 (446).

meaning,¹⁷ an object of emotional investment, a means of strategic planning, a principle of organization, and even a supporting medium.¹⁸ The spatial arrangement of a narrative, such as, in *The Awakening*, the littoral situation of Grand Isle, thus actively engenders potential plot trajectories. However, as proponents of the new materialism argue, the agency of non-human objects, including natural spaces, can be understood even more literally:

Agency assumes many forms, all of which are characterized by an important feature: they are material, and the meanings they produce influence in various ways the existence of both human and nonhuman natures. Agency, therefore, is not necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and with human intentionality, but it is a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism.¹⁹

The sea, as an expanse, a voluminous body of water which has not only surface but depth,²⁰ and a personified ‘voice’, is in this sense an agent that interacts with Edna and summons her sensory response. Before the nocturnal swim, the sea acts on Edna mostly through sight, smell, and sound. For example, the expanse of the sea and the horizon invite her gaze, which turns from active—‘casting... about’—to passive and is ‘carried... out’ by the clear atmosphere, and offer themselves as a vanishing point for her restive eyes: ‘Edna Pontellier, casting her eyes about, had finally kept them at rest upon the sea. The day was clear and carried the gaze out as far as the blue sky went; there were a few white clouds suspended idly over the horizon’ (16). Her sense of smell is similarly stirred by ‘the breeze soft and languorous that came up from the south, charged with the seductive odor of the sea’ (13). According to Potter, smell is a ‘trans-boundary mode’, that is, in contrast to touch and taste, which ‘bring explicit attention to the body’s boundaries’, smell transcends these boundaries between the body’s outside and inside.²¹ The ‘odor of the sea’ invades Edna’s body, is intrusive but also welcome. Throughout this passage, the

¹⁷ In literary studies, the sea has predominantly been interpreted as ‘a bearer of symbolic meaning’; an example in the literature on Chopin is Molly J. Hildebrandt’s ‘The Masculine Sea: Gender, Art, and Suicide in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*’, *American Literary Realism* 48, no. 3 (2016), 189–208. Hildebrandt reads the sea as a metaphor for artistic creativity, practically without mentioning the actual ocean in *The Awakening* at all. Advocates for a non-figurative engagement with the sea within oceanic studies are, for example, Philip Steinberg and Hester Blum, whose lead I am following here: Philip Steinberg, ‘Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions’, *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013), 156–69; Hester Blum, ‘The Prospect of Oceanic Studies’, *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010), 670–7.

¹⁸ Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu, *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016), 1.

¹⁹ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, ‘Introduction’, in Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, eds, *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 1–17, 3.

²⁰ See Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, ‘Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33 (2015), 247–64.

²¹ Potter, ‘Sense of Motion’, 456.

narrator's phrasing stresses Edna's position as a sensory receptor, and correspondingly accentuates the sea's agency as a personified seducer:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (14)

This passage shows distinctly the functioning of the senses as 'an intermeshed web of perceptory apparatuses' in which the senses are not separable from each other: voice blends into touch, which enfolds the body from the outside while simultaneously penetrating the soul and inviting introspection.²²

As Edna's sensorium is animated by the variegated stimuli of the natural environment, as well as the attentions of her suitor Robert Lebrun, she realizes her unhappiness as a conventional wife and mother. The tension built up by the sensuous caresses of nature and Robert's admiration on the one hand, and her husband's demands on the other, is cathartically released in two stages during a social gathering. In the first phase, Edna experiences a piece of music as an immersion in the sea; in the second, she actually enters the ocean and learns to swim. The two events are inextricably linked; Edna experiences both as direct physical encounters rather than social rituals. When, after a series of amateur recitals, the professional pianist Mademoiselle Reisz begins to play Chopin, Edna doesn't so much hear the sound as absorb the shock of the chords: 'The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column' (26). Instead of translating the music into visualizations, as she is used to doing during concerts, Edna experiences the unmediated emotions as an internal storm:

She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (26)

More violently than through the sea's acoustic and olfactory caresses, the boundaries of her body are transgressed, in terms reminiscent of immersion and of drowning ('she was choking'). Edna's internal vision, her ability to create 'material images', is impaired by the impact of the music, just as her external vision is blurred by her tears; the sense of sight is replaced by a more visceral sensory experience. The fact that she cannot translate the sound into a visual medium but experiences 'the very passions themselves' suggests that this inner storm gives her access to a core of the self beyond social conventions, but also that she is not fully in control of the passions so released.

²² Potter, 'Sense of Motion', 446.

After the concert, a joint swim by moonlight is proposed. Again, the narrator stresses the multisensorial quality of the stroll to the seaside and the bathing: the moonlight, the 'strange, rare odors' of the night, the quietness of the sea (27). Still aroused by Mademoiselle Reisz's performance, Edna, who 'had attempted all summer to learn to swim' but could not overcome her 'ungovernable dread... when in the water' on her own, suddenly feels confident like a child learning to walk: 'She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water' (27). This moment of buoyancy also decisively marks her separation from the community of Creole families, and from her own husband and children: 'She would not join the groups in their sports and bouts, but intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone'; she also wants 'to swim far out, where no woman had swum before' (27).

Edna's swim is thus characterized by independence, solitude, and ambition; if before Edna was the languorous recipient of sensory stimulation, she is now depicted as active and energetic. But, as she swims farther out, her feat appears as ambivalent, more fanciful than realistic, and marked by sensory confusion:

She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself.

Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance – that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome.

A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land. (28)

Edna only *seems* 'to be reaching out for the unlimited', she only believes she has swum out a great distance, and in the end she barely regains the land. Her achievement—not only the physical feat but the supposedly gained independence—is further undermined by her husband's casual comment: "You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you," he told her' (28). Regarding the depiction of the senses, there is an interesting difference between the impact of the Chopin piece and Edna's swim. Her hearing of the music appears to be, for the first time, truthful and revelatory about her sense of self. Her swim, by contrast, although celebratory, is marked by sensory confusion. Edna is not sure about the distance she covered, her perception of the sea is marred by 'her excited fancy', and in the end her senses are 'appalled and enfeebled'. A straightforward reading of her successful swim as the beginning of an emancipatory trajectory is thus put into question.

However, a dismissal of Edna's endeavours would fall similarly short. Arguably, the novel's achievement lies in offering Edna neither a successful artistic career nor

a happy ending with Robert, but in keeping her suspended between radical liberation and failure or, in Tordasi's words, 'looking, drifting and experimenting with the pleasures of the moment' until she returns, deliberately, to the sea.²³ Seen in this light, Edna's final swim is similarly ambivalent to her first. If her nocturnal venture into the sea was troubled by sensory confusion and the fear of death, what is usually read as her suicide by drowning is marked by an *erasure* of death. As Tordasi points out, following Gilbert, Edna's suicide is not shown; in the novel's final scene she swims towards the horizon, 'the unlimited' which was unattainable in her first swim.²⁴ The ending thus leaves Edna 'in a liminal state of still conscious and not quite oblivious. . . . With its ending, the novel therefore successfully consigns the representation of its protagonist to ambiguity, mobility and possibility.'²⁵

Tordasi's suggestion that the novel does not end with a resolution, but in a queer suspension that undermines heteronormative narrative structures, is supported by the passage immediately preceding Edna's final swim. After the disappointing end of her affair with Robert, Edna has returned to Grand Isle, which, in winter, is abandoned by its seasonal visitors. The verbatim repetition of the phrase about the seductive voice of the sea suggests that her journey has come full circle, but now the beach, so sensuous in summer, is recoded as bleak and desolate:

The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water. (108)

The setting remains as ambivalent as ever: despite the strand's desolation, and the ominous portent of the 'bird with a broken wing', the sea is still resplendent, 'gleaming with the million lights of the sun', and still seductive. The sea suggests both the possibility of death and the offer of an embrace. Edna thus approaches the water not in a suicidal mood, but with a gesture that boldly defies all conventions and enables her to enjoy her body in a self-conscious, almost narcissistic, way:

Edna had found her old bathing suit still hanging, faded, upon its accustomed peg.

She put it on, leaving her clothing in the bath-house. But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. (108–9)

²³ Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 266.

²⁴ Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 266; see Gilbert, 'The Second Coming of Aphrodite', 58.

²⁵ Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 271.

To appreciate the audacity of this gesture, one should remember that the champion swimmer Annette Kellermann ‘was arrested for indecency on a beach in Boston, USA in 1907’—eight years after the publication of *The Awakening*—‘when she wore a clinging ankle-to-neck bodysuit.’²⁶ Controlling and covering the female body stood at the centre of the disputes about women’s swimming at the turn of the century. Here, Edna not only undresses herself but does it without reference to the gaze of others, be it lascivious or censorious. The fact that the beach is empty makes her gesture even more defiant: she does it for herself. If in the novel’s first part Edna was much more ready to expose her skin to the sun than the ‘mother-woman’ Adèle Ratignolle (9, 15), thus damaging her value as a well-groomed wife, she now exposes herself fully to the touch of the sunrays and the breeze. Prompted by a sensory response, the itch of ‘the unpleasant, pricking garments’, she returns, even more radically than in the first swim scene, to a primal state of being in the world, a moment of sensuous fulfilment. When Edna then enters the sea, it is as an active being who enjoys the buoyancy of the water and her kinaesthetic mastery: ‘The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace’ (109). Even as she is overpowered by exhaustion, she remains suspended between the horizon and the shore, in the sea’s embrace.

‘You Have to Know What You’re Doing’: Kinaesthetic Knowledge in *Salt Water*

As in *The Awakening*, the sea in Charles Simmons’s *Salt Water* is an agential force, shaping the topography of Bone Point, a peninsula off the Atlantic coast, and influencing the life of its inhabitants. As John R. Gillis has observed, ‘beaches are the most fluid of landscapes, the ultimate *terrae infirmae*.’²⁷ Under the impact of the tides, waves, currents, winds, storms, erosion, and silting, coastal areas undergo a constant process of transformation. Seawater can be murky, undercurrents strong, the ground beneath one’s feet unstable. In this environment, all the senses are particularly challenged, and often deceived. This renders littoral space treacherous, as the dangers are often hidden from sight, and only perceptible to those intimately familiar with the shore and the sea:

The first day after a nor’easter is sunny and cool. You can’t lie on the beach, because it’s still wet. If you want you can swim, but you have to know what you’re doing. Father used to say that after a storm the sea is short tempered. The waves are strong and full

²⁶ Horwood, ‘Girls Who Arouse Dangerous Passions’, 657–8.

²⁷ John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 143.

of sand. Sand is all through the water and doesn't settle out for a couple of days. A lot of sand gets washed out from the shore, so the incline into the water is steep. An undertow can sweep you off your feet, and the gritty waves slap you down hard. Near the shore the water is unpleasant, farther out it's dangerous. Currents move against one another. Whirlpools form and pull at you.²⁸

This unstable littoral topography determines the organization of the plot in Simmons's novel, and also indicates to the reader that the relations between the characters are governed by the same deceitful undercurrents as the ocean. The story, set in the summer of 1963, is narrated by 15-year-old Michael, the only son of parents whose marriage is rocky due to the father's adulterous forays. Their house at Bone Point is a summer residence, but unlike Grand Isle not at an elegant resort but a former military area and now a federal reserve with only a few inhabited houses. When Michael's parents rent their guest house to Mrs Mertz and her daughter, he falls in love with the latter, 20-year-old Zina. Later he learns that his father, Peter, and Zina are lovers. The story, inspired by Ivan Turgenev's 'First Love' (1860), is as much about Michael's relationship with his father as his first love for Zina; the ocean, and their sailing boat *Angela*, are the 'object[s] of emotional investment' which at first forge a deep link between father and son, and then tear them apart.²⁹ It is on board the *Angela* that Michael forces Zina to have sex with him, and where subsequently he causes his father's death—whether intentionally or by accident remaining unclear.

Sensory perception and the embodied experience of swimming play an equally important role as in *The Awakening*; however, the northern climate of *Salt Water* offers little of the seductive sensuousness of Grand Isle. Perhaps in consequence, the senses are less directed at enjoyment and more closely tied to knowing. As Michael states in the quotation above, whoever wants to enter the sea has to know what they are doing. This is true on the figurative as well as the literal level. Both Michael and his father—as well as Zina—miscalculate the effects of their emotional entanglement. Similarly, although highly competent swimmers and sailors, father and son on several occasions do not know what they are doing, and put each other in danger.

Their strong emotional attachment is based to a large extent on their joint aquatic activities: fishing trips from which the mother is excluded, and swims in the ocean. Both revel in their kinaesthetic competence as swimmers:

We were both good swimmers. Father used the crawl for general purposes. I did the backstroke, which is slower but not so tiring, and I liked looking up at the sky when I swam. Is there anything better than your body in the water and your mind in the sky? Whenever we swam together, because he was faster, Father would pull ahead, flip over, dive, stay down, come up, and fool around till I caught up. He was a regular porpoise.
(16–17)

²⁸ Charles Simmons, *Salt Water* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1998), 21. Henceforth page numbers are given in the text.

²⁹ Ryan et al., *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative*, 1.

This description highlights the ties between father and son, but also the difference in their characters. Michael is a 'sky-gazer', a dreamer, whereas Peter likes to show off his superior strength and skill; by his aquatic nature—'a regular porpoise'—he is connected to the treacherous sea. In the opening chapter, Peter's readiness to assume a risk puts their lives in danger. The changeability of littoral topography affords him the opportunity to challenge his son to a hazardous swim, when a sandbar forms 'half a mile out in the ocean, remaining hidden underwater but discernible to the knowledgeable shore dweller: 'we knew it was there because waves were breaking on it' (13). After a week, they still 'couldn't actually see the bar', but 'its presence got plainer every day. Complete waves were breaking on it' (16). Peter's plan, when he asks Michael to swim out to the bar, is to work with the tides: "'The tide is out", he said. "We can rest on the bar when we get there. On the way back the tide will be coming in and carry us along"' (16). However, it soon turns out that, despite his intimate knowledge of the sea, Peter has miscalculated both his own strength as he pulls off his usual playful routine and the timing of the tides. Michael discerns his father's error:

I didn't think he should be doing it this time. We were heading half a mile straight out to sea, and he was using up his energy. Then two hundred yards out I knew we had miscalculated. We were moving too fast. It wasn't ebb tide, as Father had thought. The tide was still going out and speeding us to the bar. Every day the tide is an hour later. Today we had started out at noon, and I remembered that the previous day low tide had been at noon. Now low tide wouldn't be for an hour. (17)

To miscalculate the tides like this is a rather basic error for a shore dweller with nautical knowledge. It characterizes Peter as an overly self-confident, foolhardy man who puts his son's life at risk. When they reach the sandbar, Peter can stand with his mouth above water, but the smaller Michael cannot. Instead of resting, they have to swim back against the outgoing current: 'It was hard getting in. What kept us going was knowing that the tide against us was weakening. The question was, would the tide wear out before we did?' (18). As they reach the beach with their last ounce of strength, two things happen: Michael meets Zina for the first time as she looks down on him, lying exhausted on the ground: 'I fell in love with Zina upside down' (18). And he voices for the first time doubt in his father: "'I thought for a moment out there you were going to leave me", I said' (19).

In contrast to *The Awakening*, in *Salt Water* the individual senses are not separately named. Implicitly, however, Michael's swimming experience is similarly constituted as a multisensorial experience, with kinaesthetic enjoyment at its centre. The distance to the sandbar is partly calculated by sight, as Michael and his father observe the position of the waves breaking over it, but once they have entered the water it is the experienced swimmer's embodied knowledge that informs Michael about his body's position—'two hundred yards out'—relative to the strength needed

to reach the bar. As for the professional dancers in Caroline Potter's study, for the experienced swimmer 'kinaesthesia is a crucial sense that frames the shaping of all other sensory modes, interconnecting one moving body to another'.³⁰ In Michael's case, his kinaesthetic sense tells him about his distance from the sandbar and the shore, his proximity to his father's body swimming near him, and the growing fatigue of his muscles as he battles against the outgoing tide. Interestingly, in the description of the actual swim, Michael is aware of his father's factual errors—wasting his powers by cavorting in the water, miscalculating the tides—but his moral doubt is voiced only after their safe return to the beach. During the swim, there is no indication that Peter might leave him to drown. Michael's inference that his father may not only be irresponsible but deceitful, although in the end it turns out to be correct, is not founded on sensory evidence, but is a spontaneous insight—'It was just a thought' (19)—an unvoiced knowledge about his father that Michael does his best to suppress.

The theme of drowning, in connection with kinaesthetic competence, recurs twice more in the novel. In the first instance, Michael takes Zina out sailing. As an excellent swimmer, Zina is metaphorically connected to Peter—she 'was a porpoise like Father' (25)—and metonymically to water. However, she lacks Peter's and Michael's long-term experience with sailing in the open sea. As she spontaneously dives from the boat, 'she was surprised by the feel of deep water. It has a swell and pull that let you know you're in its power' (68). Like Peter in the novel's opening chapter, Zina endangers both herself and Michael, as the *Angela* drifts away and he has to execute single-handedly a complicated manoeuvre for her rescue. To return 'to a given spot in a sailboat', '[y]ou execute a figure eight. As roundabout as that sounds, it's the proven way to get back to someone overboard. Father taught it to me. I had done it once, and did it again now' (68). While Michael's rescue of Zina is successful, and shows his ability to control the boat under difficult circumstances, the scene again highlights the agential power of the sea and foreshadows a second sailing scene that ends fatally.

After Michael has found out by coincidence that Zina and his father are in a clandestine love relationship, he blackmails her into letting him sleep with her in the cabin of the *Angela*. Although he realizes immediately that 'I had made a terrible mistake' (165), destroying any friendly feelings Zina had for him, he later provocatively blurts out the truth as he is sailing with his father. Peter gets up and moves towards Michael:

Then I thought he wanted to hurt me. He seemed immense. I yanked the tiller. The boom swung across the deck, slowly at first and then fast. He tried to duck, but it hit him in the head, and he went over backwards and disappeared. The *Angela* swerved sharply toward the Rocks. I lost control and almost capsized. By dropping the tiller and

³⁰ Potter, 'Sense of Motion', 453.

catching the butt of the boom I turned the Angela into the wind and steadied her. I had to get back to where he went over. I did a figure eight, tacking southeast and northwest. On the last tack I slammed into the Rocks and tore a hole in the Angela's port side. Water flooded in, and she sank to the gunnels. Whitecaps in the moonlight looked like Father and then didn't. (170)

Despite the first-person narrative, we don't get any insight into Michael's—or his father's—intentions. It is not clear whether Peter really wanted to attack his son, and whether Michael manipulated the boom in panic, in self-defence, or with the intention to hurt his father. He tries to replicate the manoeuvre that led to Zina's successful rescue, but only damages the *Angela*. In this fatal scene, as falsehoods in the family finally come to light, sensory perception appears as treacherous. While at first Peter 'seemed immense' to Michael's overstrung eyes, after falling overboard he becomes indistinguishable from the crested waves. In his panic-fuelled state, and impeded by the rough sea, Michael's nautical embodied knowledge does not suffice to rescue his father. In the end, Peter's body is never found. As a result of his unresolved trauma, Michael remains frozen in the liminal state of adolescence: 'I'm now older than Father was when he drowned. I don't know why I still feel like a child' (175). In both *The Awakening* and *Salt Water*, sensory encounters with the sea lead to the protagonists' greater self-knowledge. If, however, the ending of Chopin's novel can be interpreted optimistically as a queer suspension in which Edna keeps swimming to the horizon, Michael's insight results in stasis.

Conclusion

The two novels discussed here show how the multisensorial engagement with the beach and the sea opens up but also forecloses the potential for the protagonists' personal development. Drawing on littoral and oceanic studies and new materialism, my chapter has focused on the interplay between the material environment—the unstable topography of the beach, the impact of natural elements on the senses, the agential and unpredictable force of seawater—and Edna's and Michael's entangled sensory experiences. Swimming is so important in both novels because it does not privilege a particular sense, but stimulates the whole perceptory ensemble as well as sensory experiences specific to the immersion in seawater, such as a feeling of buoyancy and weightlessness, but also the pull of the deep. Both novels describe the feeling of mastery and achievement connected to swimming, but also the potential overestimation of one's strength and the danger of disorientation in deep water. Swimming thus always constitutes a profoundly ambivalent experience, keeping Edna and Michael suspended between the capacity for renewal and the finality of death. By taking their protagonists from dry land into the water, the novels funda-

mentally complicate the representation of the senses. In the sea, human sensory perception—the sense apparatus of a land-adapted mammal—is altered: sound carries differently across and below water; salt water stings the eyes and blurs vision; proprioception is materially affected as the body is borne up, but also tossed and turned by the waves. Water thus constitutes an alienating, but therefore cognitively stimulating, element for human beings: because their senses are rendered strange, they perceive their bodies in their full animality while, paradoxically, becoming aware of what it means to be human most fully. This exploration of the human experience could not be achieved with a restricted focus on a single sense; in this regard, attentiveness to multisensorial entanglements is essential to the novels' attainment of psychological complexity.

The comparison of two novels from different literary epochs, separated by a century, suggests that this phenomenology of sensory perception can to a certain extent be generalized. Edna and Michael could hardly be more different, and yet they share a sense of kinaesthetic pleasure in the act of swimming, the richness of sensory experience in a particularly stimulating environment, and the potential for self-development offered by the liminal space–time of the beach. At the same time, both novels reflect the historically specific concerns of their respective period of origin, or the period when they are set. Whereas Edna battles against the restrictions the late nineteenth century imposes on middle-class women, and uses the innovative activity of swimming to further her emancipation, Michael, experiencing his adolescence on the brink of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, gets caught up in the pitfalls of a type of masculinity represented by his father, which he idealizes but is not able to reproduce. In consequence, he is also incapable of coming to terms with Zina's self-determined sexuality, and of reconciling her autonomy with his desire. This gendered positionality has repercussions for the representation of the senses, which in both cases are shown to be unreliable and delusive. While the senses are the conduits to personal development, in the end their liberating potential is limited—both novels conclude with the protagonists' failure to realize their possibility for achievement outside the littoral setting. Like the swimmers who experience the simultaneous uplift of their buoyant bodies, and the outward and downward pull of the undertow, the multisensorial beach remains suspended between its positive potential as a space of sensory stimulation, renewal, and liberation, and the pervasive mortality that constitutes its darker side.

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