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Water Agency from Virginia Woolf to Jane Urquhart, Piloted Across the Atlantic by Rachel Carson

"To the lighthouse! If it's fine tomorrow!"

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Abstract

Moving from Rachel Carson's studies on Atlantic oceanic currents – which have proven to be disastrous once they crash against the coasts of Great Britain in their circulatory movement from north to south and back eastwards, to the point of creating massive damages to human-made infrastructures, including lighthouses – this contribution analyzes first how this juncture is evoked in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and second how this same theme is presented in the novel by Canadian author Jane Urquhart, *Sanctuary Line* (2010). Ever since Virginia Woolf iconized weather reports and weather conditions as indispensable frameworks for a day trip to a local lighthouse on the coasts of Britain, certainly long before climate change became a concern and nevertheless anticipating today's ecological reasonings in an ingenious way, lighthouses have undergone major transformations. For instance, from being man-maintained – if not family maintained, as in Woolf's novel – lighthouses have been computerized and completely deprived of human presence; above all, they are more and more targets to oceanic – increasingly devastating – surges, as happens in Urquhart's novel. This matter-of-fact evidence necessitates to be discussed through the framework of the Blue Humanities. Amitav Ghosh with his essay *The Great Derangement* (2019), Rachel Carson with her *Sea Trilogy*, and particularly *The Sea Around Us* ([1950] 2021), and ecocritical blue ecology (Mentz 2024; Oppermann 2023; Regazzoni 2022) are among the references here considered for an ecocritical approach to the texts. This approach corroborates and reinforces Rachel Carson's intuitions of seventy years ago, while showing their urgency nowadays. In conclusion, the interaction between oceans and lighthouses in the novels here analyzed, particularly if read through the lens of the Blue Humanities, inevitably leads to a new consciousness and a breach in our imagination of rising sea-level and on its more and more serious effects on our coasts.

On wind and water alike, as on all that moves, be it a ship, a bullet, or a bird, the spinning earth exerts a deflecting force, turning all moving objects to the right in the Northern Hemisphere and to the left in the Southern. Through the combined action of these and other forces, the resulting current patterns are slowly circulating eddies, turning to the right, or clockwise, in the northern oceans, and to the left, or counterclockwise, in the southern.

(Rachel Carson, *The Sea Trilogy*/ "Wind, Sun…")

1. Oceans and shorelines

The aim of this contribution is to highlight the interconnectedness of phenomena – both atmospheric and oceanic – that influence both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, from North America to the UK and back, and to pinpoint how literature represents those specific cross-Atlantic, uncanny phenomena, or "nonhuman interlocutors" (Ghosh 2019, 30). To begin this discussion of two novels, *To the Lighthouse* and *Sanctuary Line,* through the lens of blue ecology ("the 'blue humanities' primarily indicates oceanic matters" [Cohen and Foote 2021, 191]), I would like to borrow the words and metaphors of the Nigerian philosopher Bayo Akomolafe on the reciprocal entanglement and shapeshifting of oceans and shorelines (but also of humans and non-humans):

> The problem with *safe shores* is that they are never too safe from the ocean they pretend to protect us from. Indeed, the anxious work of keeping the ocean to its watery confinements, and of hoping it does not *arrive* too heavily on the shore is futile. […]
> Instead, the ocean *enacts* the shore (the stranger without is already within). It happens the other way around too – in one single move. The shore performs the ocean – a co-constitutive mutuality. (Akomolafe 2017, 44; emphasis in the original)

I have expunged from the above quotation the mention to migrancy for it is not relevant in this context, while I have retained mainly the reference to geomorphology, thus slightly altering Akomolafe's message, but I think that his geological description is nevertheless relevant per se.

Akomolafe's imagery is actually informed by Karen Barad's idea that the ocean and the shore are "much closer" than the abstract report of the periodical structure of their encounters might tell (Akomolafe 2017, 158). Barad speaks of intra-action and intra-dependence as an "ongoing flow of agency" (Barad 2007, 140):

> The notion of intra-action constitutes a radical reworking of the traditional notion of causality. I can't emphasize this point enough. A lively new ontology emerges: the world's radical aliveness comes to light in an entirely non-traditional way that reworks the nature of both relationality and aliveness (vitality, dynamism, agency). (Barad 2007, 33)

This contribution will show – through literary texts – how the shore and the ocean are co-constitutive and continuously shapeshifting, because of a combination of atmospheric and oceanic currents – per Rachel Carson's studies ([1950] 2021) – weather conditions, and complex intra-active entanglements between wind and water, humans and non-humans. As Steve Mentz has recently argued, "the blue humanities as an intellectual discourse has grown out of investigations of how humans relate to the ocean" (2024, xii). This relation between humans and the ocean, the ocean and the coastline, is particularly evident in the novels here

analyzed, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Jane Urquhart's *Sanctuary Line* (2010), in which a specific way of "thinking with water" is staged (Oppermann 2023, 1; Chen et al. 2013, 3-22). The present contribution, therefore, aims at a thematic comparative reading of the two novels and of the two authors, leveraging research in the blue humanities to analyze their discussion of oceanic forces and agency, eschewing commentary on any direct affiliation or influence between these two authors.[1] Indeed, in the two authors' works, the ocean "is now recognized as an active agentic force that has always been elemental to human life, and as a shaping presence of global cultural imaginary" (Oppermann 2023, 17). Finally, all this will lead to some concluding remarks on topics at the center of contemporary public debates: climate change, global warming, and consequent sea-level rising.

2. Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

I start this cross-Atlantic bustrophedic reading with the incipit of Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927): "'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow,' said Mrs Ramsay. 'But you'll have to be up with the lark,' she added" (Woolf [1927] 1992, 7). Indeed, this is one of the most famous *in medias res* openings in British Modernist literature. This particular episode is all the more famous thanks to a memorable essay by Erich Auerbach, contained in his *Mimesis: The Representation of Realism in Western Literature* ([1946] 1953, 525-553).

From the very outset, the reader is told that all depends on atmospheric conditions and on the weather forecast. The entire novel, so to speak, hinges on such conditions. Only in the last chapter, and after a time-lapse of ten years, do the protagonists eventually embark to reach the Lighthouse. Similarly, when Paolo Rumiz, an Italian writer, went to live in a Lighthouse for a while, the sailors told him: "If you do not go now, you have to wait five days" (Rumiz 2005, 12; English in the text), this being the time span between one stormy event and the next.

With the clear consciousness that climate change is a long-term phenomenon, measured in *millionennia* (Zalasiewicz 2017, 124), independent of day-by-day weather changes and discrete time-frames, reading *To the Lighthouse* today, in the Anthropocene, makes us particularly alert to references to weather forecasts and allusions to atmospheric changes.[2]

[1] Urquhart has been included in critical discussions of "postcolonial rewritings" of the British canon because her novel *Changing Heaven* (1990) is intertextually related and responding to *Wuthering Heights* (Thieme 2001, 72-101). To the best of my knowledge there are no comparative studies on Woolf and Urquhart.

[2] Within the framework of Environmental Humanities, it is by now well-known that the epoch in which we live was named Anthropocene by Paul Crutzen in 2000, as a potential geological unit of time, when "human activities have fundamentally changed the Earth System" (Zalasiewicz 2019, 2). This definition has been voted out in 2024 (Witze 2024).

While James Ramsay, the little son, six years of age, immediately starts rejoicing and imagining the next day's adventurous sailing, quite abruptly Mr Ramsay freezes the child's expectations with a thunderous blocking adversative: "'But,' said his father, stopping in front of the drawing room window, 'it won't be fine'" (Woolf [1927] 1992, 8). Quite obviously, commentators recognize feminine instinctive hope versus masculine scientific rationality as well-identified and clear-cut characterizations of the two parental figures (Lee 1988, 10). As an easy confirmation of this view, punctually comes the answer, provided by Mrs Ramsay with a counter-adversative clause, as shown below: "'But it may be fine – I expect it will be fine,' said Mrs Ramsay," while making some deliberate 'little twist' of the truth that she knew, as well as of "the reddish-brown stocking she was knitting, impatiently" (Woolf [1927] 1992, 8).

'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow.' 'But you'll have to be up with the lark.'	possibility continuum
'But, it won't be fine,' stopping in front of the drawing room window,	impossibility interruption
'But it may be fine – I expect it will be fine,' Knitting, impatiently	possibility continuum

Fig. 1: Schematization of the dialogue between Mrs and Mr Ramsay

The above schematization (Fig.1) reproduces the three statements that form the dialogue between Mrs and Mr Ramsay. Initially, Mrs Ramsay pronounces the conditional clause introduced by "yes… if," alluding to the possibility that the excursion might take place, the next day, depending on the weather. This is in itself a tentative hypothesis. In order to complete her thought, she poses another condition, this time introduced by the adversative "but," thus admonishing her son that he will have to wake up quite early. On his part, her husband rebuts with another adversative, negating any chance of good weather, with a clause in the future negative. While saying this, he stops and stands still. This action performs a ban and mimetically reproduces the fact of being stuck there, in the impossibility to sail out at sea. Conversely, Mrs Ramsay speaking once again to counter her husband's ban, introducing one more adversative "but," insists that the weather will be fine while keeping on "knitting." This final verb in the progressive form indicates a continuity of movement, against stillness, a purpose, instead of a blockage, and the symbolical act of keeping everything together in a tightly knitted pattern: family, harmony, purpose, destination. For the stocking should reach the lighthouse, too.

In her conspicuous hope, Mrs Ramsay is no idealist and no naive soul. Like her husband, she is characterized by logical and rational reasoning; she, too, is able to stick to truth and practical evidence; simply, she does not want to kill the joy in her little son. When she launches herself into the description of what life is like for a lighthouse keeper, she demonstrates her skills in deductive thinking, as well as in "thinking with the ocean":

> For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn? She would ask; and to have no letters or newspapers, and to see nobody; if you were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were, – if they were ill, if they had fallen down and broken their legs or arms; to see the same dreary waves breaking week after week, and then a dreadful storm coming, and the window covered with spray, and birds dashed against the lamp, and the whole place rocking, and not be able to put your nose out of doors for fear of being swept into the sea? How would you like that? She asked, addressing herself particularly to her daughters. So she added, rather differently, one must take them whatever comforts one can. (Woolf [1927] 1992, 9)

It is clear from the passage above that Mrs Ramsay builds up her discourse upon major and minor premises to reach a final deductive conclusion. Her premises are rhetorical questions, the answer to which is that, obviously and logically, nobody would like a lighthouse keeper's kind of life. It is interesting that the questions are addressed to her daughters, and not to the males in her family; perhaps, this is aimed at moving them to compassion and showing them the necessity of acting morally and of providing comfort for those in need of it. Her practical attitude, which induces her to make a pair of woolen socks for the lighthouse keeper's son who is sick – and to send them over magazines and tobacco for the father – also provides a view on material culture and class consciousness. The lighthouse keeper is a working-class man, whose life and whose family depend on his job and his meagre wage. Mrs Ramsay also considers his working conditions, which are mainly subject to the weather, in particular to a combination of agentic intra-active forces: the winds and the waves.

Virginia Woolf's observations are accurate and she is scientifically correct in her analysis and representations of Atlantic oceanic forces. Moreover, she is able to see the ocean as dynamically agentic ("We have come to know the sea as much through the humanities as through science" [Gills 2013]). For, more precisely, agency is not an attribute, as Karen Barad said, but "the ongoing reconfigurings of the world" (Barad 2007, 141). Woolf was already able to attribute this type of reconfiguring agency to the ocean, particularly when she imagines the flooded island.

"Stormy weather, dreary waves breaking week after week, dreadful storm, windows covered with spray, birds dashed against the lamp, the whole place rocking, fear of being swept into the sea" (Woolf [1927] 1992, 9) – all this narrative and descriptive terminology

clearly and explicitly speaks of the strength, the power, and the energy of winds and waves. The rough ocean waves might reach the lamp and the windows; the wind is capable of pushing birds against the lighthouse and of throwing a human being into the sea; the storm is capable of making the structure rock as if under the effects of an earthquake. Finally, Woolf is attentive on "cross-species empathy" (Ladino 2018, 199): both birds and humans are victims of strong winds and surging waves.

The setting of the novel is the Isle of Skye in the Inner Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland, although the vivid description is inspired by the lighthouse on Godrevy Island, off the north coast of Cornwall, just in front of St. Ives. Thus, the two geographies somehow overlap. The west side of the British Isles is dramatically shaped by Atlantic waves and winds which gather force in the ocean, off the coast of North America and Canada, as best explained by marine biologist Rachel Carson, one of the first authorities in a field known today as "blue ecology." In a chapter entirely dedicated to "Wind and Water" (Carson [1950] 2021, 297-315), in her *Sea Trilogy*, and focusing on the intra-actions between air and sea-water on the border, she provides an example of what happens along the west coast of England, at Land's End to the west of Cornwall – not far from St. Ives, coincidentally:

> Most of the waves that roll over the recorder at Lands End [sic] […] are born in the stormy North Atlantic eastward from Newfoundland and south of Greenland. Some can be traced to tropical storms on the opposite side of the Atlantic, moving through the West Indies and along the coast of Florida. A few have rolled up from the southernmost part of the world, taking a great-circle course all the way from Cape Horn to Lands End [sic], a journey of 6000 miles. (Carson [1950] 2021, 297)

Atlantic waves gain strength and might produce storms rendering it necessary to "raise storm warnings along the coast of England" (Carson [1950] 2021, 297). Similarly, Rachel Carson describes what happens in the Shetland Islands, to the North of Scotland:

> Forces within the sea itself may affect a wave most profoundly: some of the most terrible furies of the ocean are unleashed when tidal currents cross the path of the waves or move in direct opposition to them. This is the cause of the famous "roosts" of Scotland, like the one off Sumburgh Head, at the southernmost tip of the Shetland Islands. During North-easterly winds the roost is quiescent, but when the wind-born waves roll in from any other quarter they encounter the tidal currents, either streaming shoreward in flood or seaward on the ebb. It is like the meeting of two wild beasts. (Carson [1950] 2021, 302)

It must be noted that in Virginia Woolf's novel one secondary character reinforces Mr Ramsay's rationalistic and deterministic view of Nature. It is Mr Tansley, called "the atheist," who pronounces the sentence: "It's due west." Consequently, the knowledgeable narrator explains for us, the readers: "That is to say that the wind blew from the worst possible

direction for landing at the Lighthouse" (Woolf [1927] 1992, 9), thus anticipating – and therefore corroborating – Rachel Carson's above quoted observations. And all this shows how Virginia Woolf, too, was well informed about extreme nautical conditions in that precise region.

As a matter of fact, Rachel Carson also confirms – in her oceanic studies – the terrible situation of Lighthouses once they are hit by storms, thus reinforcing "acknowledgements of the reciprocal relationships between the aqueous and the terrestrial" (Oppermann 2023, 53):

> Waves have taken their toll of shipping and of human life on the open sea, but it is around the shorelines of the world that they are most destructive. Whatever the height of storm waves at sea, there is abundant evidence, as some of the case histories that follow will show, that breaking surf and the upward-leaping water masses from thundering breakers may engulf lighthouses, shatter buildings, and hurl stones through lighthouse windows anywhere from 100 to 300 feet above the sea. Before the power of such surf, piers and breakwaters and other shore installations are fragile as a child's toy. (Carson [1950] 2021, 305)

This shows that Virginia Woolf had already understood the dynamism and intra-actions of Atlantic oceanic forces, as well as the agentic quality of the weather, capable of hindering human activities and of competing with human will and intentions. The same result is obtained by Rachel Carson, whose purpose, perhaps, was not only to contribute to the scientific discourse and discoveries about oceans, but also to stress the mighty power and uncanny agency of Nature itself. This is a warning that Amitav Ghosh insists on promoting in his *The Great Derangement*. That the waves may "hurl stones through lighthouse windows" is simultaneously a scientific observation of oceanic behavior and an example of plain storytelling, worthy of a novel. It is even more foretelling that Mrs Ramsay fears the sound of the waves, to the point of envisioning a scenario that today might be defined as sea-level rising:

> The waves on the beach […] made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, […] this sound […] suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror. (Woolf [1927] 1992, 28)

And Rachel Carson seems to echo: "Over the millions of years the waves, running ahead of the storms, have been crying a warning, but only now are we learning to read their language. Or only now, at least, are we learning to do so scientifically" (Carson [1950] 2021, 298). The erosive aggression of the ocean onto the coastlines and against anthropic presences and infrastructures is a serious concern both in Woolf's fiction ("the island and its engulfment in the sea, this sound thundered…") and in Carson's later studies, to the point that they seem to

be echoing each other's lexical choices ("thundering breakers may engulf lighthouses"). Finally, John Gillis warns us that the coast is "the least natural place on earth" (Gillis 2012, 172), considering the expansion of beachfront and real estate in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; while Ghosh also criticizes the indiscriminate consumption of littoral spaces in both Mumbai and New York (Ghosh 2019, 39). Therefore, lighthouses provided – at the time of Rachel Carson, and even more so nowadays – the scale of what might happen to coastal infrastructures, tourist or luxury seafront resorts, or simply cities built on the water in the near future.

3. Atlantic influences

And, indeed, a Canadian writer, on the other side of the Atlantic and decades after Woolf's and Carson's time, picked up the same theme and wrote a novel partly dedicated to the destiny of lighthouses and of their keepers, thus partaking in Woolf's imaginative and Carson's scientific "figurative submergence" (Oppermann 2023, 17) – by which I mean that in both writers' works lighthouses are both preconfigured, imagined, and sometimes seen as flooded, half destroyed, ot uprooted by waves. Jane Urquhart explores the life of some lighthouse keepers, in the wake of Virginia Woolf and of her capacity of "thinking with the ocean," one might say. In this cross-Atlantic reading it is possible to reconfigure diachronic women writers' genealogies in contrast with those that assimilate Melville, Conrad, Coleridge, Hemingway and other sea writers ("masculine conquest narratives" [Dobrin 2021, 16]). Bridging Woolf and Urquhart is further allowed by some other similarities. The two novels belong to the genre of the *Familienroman*; the Ramsays and the Butlers are families portrayed respectively at the beginning of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While the First World War is a ghostly presence in Woolf's novel, claiming the life of young men, Jane Urquhart more intensely refers to the War in Afghanistan, which killed a young woman-officer.

> A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous. (Woolf [1927] 1992, 145)

> As you know so well, it is one year after Mandy's burial, a full year since those of us who remain went to the air base to attend the repatriation ceremony. (Urquhart 2010, 14)

Urquhart, moreover, introduces interracial relations in her narrative as a more central theme, as well as multi-species co-migrations, focusing on Monarch Butterflies and Mexican migrants. The lyrical prose and the use of flows of thoughts also create a bond between Urquhart's style and Woolf's writings. Even though time and geography separate the two novelists, the fact that their novels start on – and move off from – the west coast of the UK

entwines them as North-Atlantic, oceanic narratives, and that is the main subject of the present contribution.

In Jane Urquhart's novel, the protagonists are the male branch of a family of Irish immigrants to North America and Canada who stick to marine environments and coastal shores, while the other branch of the family settles in farms on both sides of Lake Erie, partly in Ohio and partly in Ontario.

> The keepers would have been eventually taken into the world of the elegantly named Commissioners of Irish Lights and would have been considered fortunate indeed by their brothers in that they would have been given a recognizable job, a house, monogrammed silverware, and solid ironstone crockery with the motto *In Salutem Omnium* etched on its surface. They would have been given lamps to light, storms to contend with, lives to save, and an elevated vantage point. (Urquhart 2010, 32-33)

Although fairly prestigious, the work of a Lighthouse keeper is defined in the above passage as 'fighting against storms' and as 'saving lives,' at least symbolically, for a lighthouse indicates a safe harbor for ships, and the light provides orientation to sailors. In the novel, these truisms are mostly hopeless failures. Interestingly enough, Virginia Woolf famously claimed that she refused to attribute a specific symbolism to the lighthouse:

> I meant nothing by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refuse to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions – which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalized way… directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me. (Woolf to Roger Fry [27th May 1927] 1977)

Moreover, as Richard Shone writes, "[a]s we now know, the lighthouse of her novel has been made to stand for almost anything – unattainable desires, the enduring life of art, male tyranny, past experience flashing its illumination on the present moment" (Shone 2000, 12-13).

Jane Urquhart, on her part, does not represent the lighthouse in symbolic terms. Rather, similarly to Mrs Ramsay in Woolf's novel, she sees the lighthouse pragmatically as a working place. Nor does she romanticize the figure of the lighthouse keeper at all: rather, she 'gothicizes' it, so to speak. Moreover, she is well aware that the technological era has dispossessed the keeper of a job as well as of a social status, and of the aura of rescuer of lives:

> By the time I was born, there hadn't been a keeper among us for half a century, though the lighthouse my great-great-uncle had manned was still visible to us and shone, and still

> shines, completely mechanized now, from the end of nearby Sanctuary Point. (Urquhart 2010, 33)

The mechanization of most of the lighthouses around the world has rendered the human presence obsolete and redundant, as Paolo Rumiz claims. He visited one of the last outposts in the Mediterranean Sea, where there still are lighthouse keepers, and where he was hosted for a short period of time to experience solitude and solitary writing, from which there emerged his travelogue *Il Ciclope* (2015) that is also a beautiful and nostalgic hymn to lighthouses and to marine, monastic-like existence.

In Jane Urquhart's novel, within two generations the destiny of lighthouses changed and they were either doomed to disappear or to be converted into something else, mainly museums or tourist resorts:

> At the turn of the twentieth century, a member of the third Butler line, a bachelor lighthouse keeper, emigrated from Ireland to America and eventually established himself as keeper of the light...
> The point was a very different spit of land by the time I was born. The lighthouse was mechanized, and a provincial bird sanctuary was established there. The pier was closed down and the name of old Point Road was changed to Sanctuary Line. (Urquhart 2010, 67-68)

The lighthouse in the quotation above is on the shore of Lake Erie on the Canadian side, in south-western Ontario. Thus, in this case, it is an inland lighthouse, whose doom was due to mechanization and not to heavy storms. On the contrary, those lighthouses that stand along the coasts are at risk of becoming targets of sea and of wind storms, as it is only hinted at in Virginia Woolf's novel, while generating one grim and half-gothic narrative in Jane Urquhart's writing:

> Do you remember the story of the Irish children at the lighthouse?
> The first in the litany of lighthouses, or at least the first according to my not always accurate uncle, was situated on one of the Skellig Islands that rise like temples from the sea off the most western tip of the south of Ireland. Everything about the lighthouse was improbable and exaggerated: its elevated position, the constant rain, the near impossibility of its construction, or of even landing boats filled with building materials on the island, the tortuous climb up the cliffs carrying cut stone, wrought iron, and glass. And then there was the monstrous wind that would pluck workers, as if they were insects, from the rising tower and throw them either onto the rocks below or into the sea from which their bodies were never recovered. (Urquhart 2010, 101)

In the passage above, the verbs 'pluck' and 'throw' as applied to the wind produce a linguistic shift, in terms of collocation, from actions normally associated with animate beings to – only apparently – inanimate subjects. In this case the wind is actually given almost

anthropomorphic qualities: might, power, energy and will, a sort of rationality and intentionality of its own, although a deadly one. This representation loosely reminds the reader of the Biblical Tower of Babel, where humans are punished for wanting to reach the sky by building a tower. Here, the wind and the sea disperse even the bodies of the dead ones, in a kind of complicit execution. In other words, what the humans try to build, the non-human hinders, impedes or tries to destroy.

We are all used to images of lighthouses hit by spectacular, heavy waves and storms, from pictures and such-like imagery. Our reaction, as spectators, is not necessarily identifiable with the philosophical category or experience of the sublime, as Italian philosopher Simone Regazzoni explains (2022, 91) by quoting Kant's *Critique of Judgement*: "true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the [subject] judging, not in the natural object the judgment upon which occasions this state" (Kant [1790] 1951, 95). The literary instances I am discussing here are better understood through the category of the uncanny, as defined by Ghosh, for the uncanny is an agency that reaches out to us, that is able to touch us, physically, just like the sprays of the waves. We might contemplate the sublime, but we are porous to the uncanny and entangled with it. And I think that this is the meaning Regazzoni attributes to the term "uncanny" – that is, a sublimity implying an agency that touches us – when he says: "The ocean is *uncanny* in the psychoanalytical sense of the term" (Regazzoni 2022, 27, my translation; uncanny in the original).

This type of uncanny agency, although devoid of any moral willingness or divine intent, is observed by Rachel Carson in the Atlantic Ocean, and in its effects, particularly along the western shoreline of the British Isles:

> But it seems unlikely that any coast is visited more wrathfully by the sea's waves than the Shetlands and the Orkneys, in the path of the cyclonic storms that pass eastward between Ireland and the British Isles. All the feeling and fury of such a storm, couched almost in Conradian prose, are contained in the usually prosaic *British Islands Pilot*. (Carson [1950] 2021, 306)

The British Islands Pilot: The West Coast of England and Wales is a book published in 1917 by the Hydrographic Office of the United States. The book, which has now been digitized and reprinted, is advertised and marketed as a useful tool for navigation as well as an invaluable source of cultural information.[3]

[3] "[A] comprehensive guide to the western coast of England and Wales, providing detailed information on the geography, topography, and navigation of the region. The book is intended for use by mariners and sailors, and includes detailed charts, maps, and illustrations to aid in navigation. The book covers a wide range of topics, including the geography of the region, the tides and currents, the ports and harbors, and the various hazards and obstacles that sailors may encounter. The book is an invaluable resource for anyone sailing in the waters off the west coast of England and Wales, providing a wealth of

The fact is that the stretch of water under scrutiny in all these narratives is extremely troublesome, as Thomas Stevenson, the father of Robert Louis, did prove:

> He found that, in winter gales the force of a wave might be as great as 6000 pounds to the square foot. Perhaps it was waves of this strength that destroyed the breakwater at Wick off the coast of Scotland in a December storm in 1872. The seaward end of the Wick breakwater consisted of a block of concrete weighing more than 800 tons, bound solidly with iron rods to underlying blocks of stone. During the height of this winter gale the resident engineer watched the onslaught of the waves from a point on the cliff above the breakwater. Before his incredulous eyes, the block of concrete was lifted up and swept shoreward. After the storm had subsided divers investigated the wreckage. They found that not only the concrete monolith but the stones it was attached to had been carried away. The waves had torn loose, lifted, and bodily moved a mass weighing not less than 1350 tons. Five years later it became clear that this feat had been a mere dress rehearsal, for the new pier, weighing about 2600 tons, was then carried away in another storm. (Carson [1950] 2021, 307)

When reading such a chronicle, is it possible not to speak of intention, rationality, agency, stubborn will and perseverance, all attributed to natural forces? The passage above examines a fact that happened not once, but twice. This almost incredible story is staged in Jane Urquhart's novel, when the protagonist lists all the tragedies occurred to an ancestor of hers nicknamed Butler Light:

> First, the light that Keeper Butler had so faithfully kept burning was smashed by a two-hundred-foot rogue wave just at the moment when he had finished climbing the tower's hundred steps to inspect it. A hailstorm of glass shards descended on him and entered his flesh wherever it could […].
>
> A new light was duly and without doubt riskily delivered and installed, and Butler returned to his duties. By now he had two sons. Six and eight years old […]. What kind of unusual games did absorb them, I wonder, before they heard the extreme howl of the fatal wind that tossed them both out of the man-made meadow and into the waves below? Like 'coins into a fountain,' my uncle said, relishing the metaphor. (Urquhart 2021, 104)

The grim simile between children tossed into the waves like "coins into a fountain" parallels the preceding simile of "workers plucked as if they were insects," as well as Carson's "installations as fragile as child's toys;" these associations dwarf human beings and man-made infrastructures in front of the mighty combined forces of air and water. As Oppermann claims, "if metaphors are inescapable even in scientific statements, then they work well as cognitive

information on the region's geography, history, and culture." (From the Amazon.com description of the volume, as seen at https://www.amazon.com/British-Islands-Pilot-V2-England/dp/112016771X. Last visited 05/06/2025).

"Some of the most rewarding sources of information about the sea are the Sailing Directions of the US Hydrographic Office (for waters outside of the United States) […] The British Admiralty publishes a similar series." (Carson [1950] 2021, 404).

devices to spread the knowledge gained through scientific research" (2023, 24). High waves might cause damage to material infrastructures, as happened to the tall light itself, as well as to people's life. Lighthouses are not safe places. After all, it is a truism that "salt water overwrites beaches and human bodies" (Mentz 2024, 8). This *danse macabre* continues in Rachel Carson's Ocean pages, too:

> At Unst, the most northern of the Shetland Islands, a door in the lighthouse was broken open 195 feet above the sea. At the Bishop Rock Light, on the English Channel, a bell was torn away from its attachment 100 feet above high water during a winter gale. About the Bell Rock Light on the coast of Scotland one November day a heavy ground swell was running, although there was no wind. Suddenly one of the swells rose about the tower, mounted to the gilded ball atop the lantern, 117 feet above the rock, and tore away a ladder that was attached to the tower 86 feet above the water. There have been happenings that, to some minds, are tinged with the supernatural, like that at the Eddystone Light in 1840. The entrance door of the tower had been made fast by strong bolts, as usual. During a night of heavy seas the door was broken open *from within*, and all its iron bolts and hinges were torn loose. Engineers say that such a thing happens as a result of pneumatic action – the sudden back draught created by the recession of a heavy wave combined with an abrupt release of pressure on the outside of the door. (Carson [1950] 2021, 307)

Carson's accumulation of evidence of oceanic waves hitting the west coast of the UK only amplifies Woolf's and Urquhart's fictions, translating into real scientific data (waves higher than 100 feet) and scientific phenomena regarding pressure ("pneumatic action") what in fictions is dramatized. This is the way in which literature performs "scientific information" mediation which is "relevant for more ecologically oriented modes of understanding waterscapes" (Oppermann 2023, 9).

As a climax in the sequence of micro-narratives about the misfortunes of lighthouse keepers in Urquhart's novel there is one final instance of a doomed protagonist: one of the sons of Butler Light, Gerald, accepted a post as assistant keeper of the Light at Mosquito Inlet in Florida. On some occasions, Gerald was left alone as the sole responsible person, maintaining the light while the principal keeper was off duty. Gerald was a good reader, and he believed that this kind of pastime was particularly suitable for a lighthouse keeper. He was familiar with North American literature, which he highly appreciated through buying and reading literary magazines and novels. In 1897 Gerald was left in charge of the Lighthouse for ten days. He knew his duties well, among which ensuring that the light was lit, being on the lookout, using Morse code messages in case of urgent communications, writing down weather observations in a log, starting the fog alarm on misty nights, calling upon rescue services in case of need. In spite of all that, he fell under the spell of reading *Moby-Dick*. Six months later, he was surprised and proud to read about his own Lighthouse in a piece of writing signed by Stephen Crane and published on the pages of the June issue of the *Scribner's Magazine* in

1897. The prose piece described how a small ship found itself in trouble when tall waves started smashing all over it and absolutely no help came from the lighthouse keeper:

> "'The Keeper ought to be able to make us out now, if he is looking through the glass,' said the captain. 'He'll notify the life-saving people.'" […] "Mr Stephen Crane wrote the story on page 48, having survived 36 hours in a dinghy after the sinking of the ship *Commodore* off the coast of Florida on January 3rd of this year." On his watch, Gerald realized with horror, on his watch. […] Stephen Crane was alive, thought Gerald with great relief. […] The story had a positive ending, not one that included him, of course, but happy in spite of everything. […] He had failed to carry out his own duties. He had failed to provide either rescue or sanctuary. (Urquhart 2010, 142-143)

As the passage above shows – with quotations from Crane's *The Open Boat*, also quoted in the novel's epigraph – this traumatic episode of failure in one's duties and responsibilities is what compelled Gerald to abandon the lighthouse in Florida and to move to a quieter place in Canada on the shore of Lake Erie.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, in analyzing the effects of Atlantic currents and storms originating along the north American coasts ("the hurricane season in the western Atlantic represents one of the most visceral reminders of human dependence on the seas of water and air that circulate around our planet's surface" [Mentz 2024, 11]), Rachel Carson[4] warns:

> Great Britain, an island, has always been conscious of that "powerful marine gnawing" by which her coasts are eaten away. An old map dated 1786 and prepared by the country surveyor, John Tuke, gives a long list of lost towns and villages on the Holderness Coast. […] Many other old records allow comparison of present shorelines with former ones and show astonishing annual rates of cliff erosion on many parts of the coast. […] "The configuration of the coastline of Great Britain," one of the present engineers writes, "is not the same for two consecutive days." (Carson [1950] 2021, 309)

Lighthouses might be claimed by waters and winds even more ravenously in times of climate change, global warming and sea-level rising, as the writers here analyzed are foretelling and as had already happened in 1851, when the light on Mint's ledge in Massachusetts was swept away. In other cases, the spray of the waves has stopped the rolling of the light; rocks and stones are constantly hurled against the windows of the light and the glass panes of the lanterns, and against the lights and the roofs of lighthouses all along the coasts of north America. Ultimately, Carson writes: "the work of the waves is attuned to the brief span of human life, and so the sculpturing of the continent's edge is something each of us can see for

[4] Course of the great, wind-driven current systems of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Caption to double-page graphic rendering. (Carson [1950] 2021, 322-323).

ourselves" (Carson [1950] 2021, 308).[5] All this, while Goal Number 14 among the sustainable goals for Agenda 2030 warns: conserve coastal and marine areas! All these examples from the novels by both Woolf and Urquhart, and from the scientific report in Carson's *Trilogy,* should suffice to show first of all that nature and natural or non-human forces have agency and are alive like all living beings, and second that sea-level rising due to global warming is extremely dangerous for both infrastructures and human and non-human lives; as Mentz remarked, "[g]lobal climate change defines the central challenge of the current generation, and scholarship about water in all its forms will be necessary to make sense of our disrupted ecosystem" (Mentz 2024, 7). To Carson those oceanic assaults to lighthouses were – already in the 1950s – the measure of sea-level rising effects on anthropic infrastructures, not differently from what both Woolf and Urquhart also describe in fictional terms – with enough scientific accuracy – that translate into "cautionary tales" (Oppermann 2023, 13). The damage to lighthouses is a powerful prefiguration – as well as a breach in our imagination – of what might happen if sea-level rises, due to continuous and exponential global warming.

Bionote

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[5] In faraway countries, too, for instance, marine earthquakes might affect lighthouses, as happened during a tsunami in the Andaman archipelago: "No one would light the torch of the lighthouse on the archipelago's tip again, for the ocean had claimed its entrance" (Swarup 2018, 86).

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