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Aeolian Harps in the Desert: Romanticism and *Vermilion Sands*.

Thomas Knowles

J.G. Ballard describes *Vermilion Sands* (1971) variously as "an exotic suburb of [his] mind"; "between Arizona and Ipanema Beach"; and as part of the "3, 000 mile-long linear city that stretches from Gibraltar to Glyfada Beach" (*VS* 7). The resorts of Vermilion Sands, Red Beach and Lagoon West are at once otherworldly and familiar, evoking Mediterranean sun-drenched villas and apartment complexes as well as the dreamscapes of Surrealism and, I would suggest, the Romanticism of English poetry. Supernatural elements of the landscape take the form of jewelled insects, sand rays, singing statues and sonic sculptures, as well as sentient architecture and clothing, and lamia-like faded screen actresses and heiresses. Surrounded by sand seas, multi-coloured sand reefs and fused lakes, the natural world is as exhausted as its beach-fatigued human residents. The denizens and visitors to Vermilion Sands are affectless, bored, capricious and always on the lookout for new ways to stimulate their decadent imaginations. Yet in his descriptions of this future-past world Ballard evokes a lyrical, sometimes decadent, poetry.

The *Vermilion Sands* collection bookends Ballard's career just as *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) stands at its centre. Published individually between 1956 and 1970, these short stories include Ballard's first professionally published fiction, "Prima Belladonna" (1956), whilst "Say Goodbye to the Wind" (1970) takes us up to the publication of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Their resonance can be clearly detected in the "Summer Cannibals" chapter of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and also extend into the final quartet of Ballard's novels, becoming infused in the specified nowheres of *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000). Ballard, in an interview with Will Self,

suggested that authors do not necessarily write their works in the correct order, and that *Vermilion Sands* ought to have been his last book,

> I have often thought that writers don't necessarily write their books in their real order. *Empire of the Sun* may well be my first novel, which I just happened to write when I was fifty-four. It may well be that *Vermilion Sands* is my last book (*EM* 314).

Vermilion Sands, then, is a presence before, after and throughout the universe of Ballard's writing, a location of excess that is suggestive of the aesthetic of the sublime, and which this chapter will trace through the perpetuation and disavowal of Romanticism in both *Vermilion Sands* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

The nine short stories that make up *Vermilion Sands* have been read in Jungian terms as an externalization of the warring elements of the psyche in the self's quest for individuation.[1] References to Surrealist art works, painters and textual effects abound, too.[2] However, the texts also support a reading which sees them as experiments in the calibration of the imaginative faculty which mediates between mind and world, and therefore as epistemological tales that both perpetuate and critique the Romantic drive to synthesize the dichotomous relationship between subject and object. This is an explicitly Romantic concern, and the oscillations in Ballard between the dejection of the "death of affect" (or "beach fatigue" as it is referred to in these stories) and the engorged imagination that would remake the world in an aesthetic revolution, hinge upon that subjective/objective divide which featured so prominently in the poetry and critical debates of the Romantic era. Ballard's use of such Romantic tropes and of

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[1] See for example William M. Schuyler, 'The Portrait of the Artist as a Jung Man: Love, Death and Art in J. G. Ballard's Vermilion Sands' (1993), in *New York Review of Science Fiction* no. 57 (May1993): 8-11, and no. 58 (June 1993): 14-19. (the article is spread over issues 57 and 58 of *New York Review of Science Fiction*)

[2] See Jeanette Baxter's *J.G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship*. London: Ashgate, 2010. Although *Vermilion Sands* itself is not covered in detail, Baxter's insightful readings are equally pertinent to these stories.

lyrical language forms, I would claim, is part of a nexus of textual resonances, which include psychoanalysis and Surrealism, and which allow Ballard to create responses in the reader that often run entirely counter to the plotted events of a text, thus achieving a perpetual ambivalence, or a studied ambiguity.[3] Ballard seems to confirm the existence of this triumvirate of influences upon his work in answer to a question from Christopher Bigsby for the *Writers in Conversation* series,

> Yes, I think I am a romantic. I feel my links are not with any writers or school of writing but really with the surrealists. I am an old-fashioned surrealist, probably the last of them. I think there is a strong strain of romanticism running through surrealism. It is romanticism making a strange mixed marriage with psychoanalysis. It is the informed waking dream. But it is still a dream in some ways and I think there are dream-like and romantic elements running through my fiction. I am glad they are there (79).[4]

In this essay I offer a Romantic reading of the sonic sculptures and singing statues that populate the decadent beach resorts and the sand sea surrounding Vermilion Sands, and of the wind that plays upon them. I also address related Romantic themes and tropes which occur in these and in Ballard's other fictions, as part of a wider understanding of J. G. Ballard as an imaginative author who engages with and critiques Romantic concerns in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My focus is on "The Cloud Sculptures of Coral D" and other stories from the collection which I attempt to link with the "Summer Cannibals" section of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. For my definitions of Romanticism I draw upon the literary and aesthetic theory of William Wordsworth's

[3] For an account of the psychoanalytic and psychological components in Ballard, rather than psychoanalytic readings of his works, see Samuel Francis's *The Psychological Fictions of J. G. Ballard* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[4] I came across this quotation by asking Mike McGrath's "Ballard-Bot", "Are you a Romantic?" The bot searches a database of interviews and opinion pieces for relevant answers to your questions. <http://demo.vhost.pandorabots.com/pandora/talk?botid=f6e046f76e347dal>.

"Preface" to the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, as well as upon the Romantic theory and criticism of M. H. Abrams, whose work is roughly contemporaneous with the first fifteen years of Ballard's writing. Particular attention is given to Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor" (1960), and *Natural Supernaturalism* (1973).

Romantic Aesthetics

The Aeolian harp or wind harp is a wooden, stringed instrument which is played upon by the wind. In the late eighteenth century it became a symbol for creativity and the beauty of the natural world, especially for the authors and poets we now call Romantic. Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" (1802) and his "The Eolian Harp" (1795), provide the best known examples of symbolic appearance of the instrument in poetry, and the psychical journey that the ode describes is also a movement that can be traced in the stories of *Vermilion Sands*. Abrams outlines it thus,

> The rising wind […] serves as the vehicle for a complex subjective event: the return to a sense of community after isolation, the renewal of life and emotional vigour after apathy and spiritual torpor, and an outburst of creative inspiration following a period of sterility (Abrams "Correspondent Breeze" 113-4).

That the singing statues and sonic sculptures of *Vermilion Sands* are metaphorical devices of a comparable significance in the landscapes of Ballard's fiction may be immediately acknowledged by the reader of Ballard. In particular there seems every invitation to hone in on the phrase "spiritual torpor", which Abrams borrows from Wordsworth's "Preface", and to bring it into dialogue with the Ballardian concept of the "death of affect". In his introduction to the 1975 French edition of *Crash* (1973), Ballard defines "the death of affect" as "the most terrifying casualty of the [twentieth]

century", a "demise of feeling and emotion" which accompanies a capacity to take pleasure in pain, mutilation and the pursuit of "our own psychopathology as a game" (*R/S JGB* 96).

Two components of Wordsworth's thought in his "Preface" may be of particular interest when considering Ballard's portrayal of a "death of affect", and his aestheticizing of the "technological landscape" (*C* viii). These are, firstly, the poet's insistence upon the need for poetry and poets to cleanse the perception of city dwellers, who are benighted by an "almost savage torpor" and a "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" (Wordsworth 599); and, secondly, his prophecy of the place of the poet in a world transformed by technology, which was only beginning to beckon from the margins at the dawn of the nineteenth century:

> If the labours of Men of Science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions that we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present, but he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of Science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of Science itself (Wordsworth 606-607).

It is clear enough that Ballard's writing makes good on the prophecy concerning the role of the writer in relation to the man of science. More significant still may be the lasting resonance of Wordsworth's intention to lift city dwellers out of their "savage torpor", in Ballard's descriptions of "beach fatigue" and the "death of affect". "Beach fatigue" is peculiar to Vermilion Sands and its neighbouring resorts and is described variously as "lethargy"; "irreversible boredom and inertia"; "a limbo of endless sunbathing, dark glasses and afternoon terraces"; and "heavy dreamless sleep" with

insidiously numbed senses, blunting despair and hope (*VS* 19, 51, 147, 157, 175).[5] Compared to the cold and flattened psychopathology of the denizens of Ballard's later cityscapes, this "beach fatigue" seems a relatively benign version of the "death of affect", perhaps representing "the most terrifying casualty of the [twentieth] century" on holiday (*R/S JGB* 96). Both early and later versions involve something like Wordsworth's "thirst after outrageous stimulation", and the outrageous lengths to which the characters of these stories will go in order to feel something is a part of the driving force behind the psychopathological behaviour witnessed in the *Vermilion Sands* stories, *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*.

In these later fictions Ballard's aesthetic invokes the quotidian landscapes of urban modernity in a process of defamiliarization. Motorway overpasses, access roads, empty car parks, high-rise buildings and shopping centres, which have been rendered invisible through overfamiliarity, are revealed anew through an apocalyptic gaze. Ballard's fiction thus cleanses the perception of the city dweller and allows us to see these objects aesthetically transformed into the beautiful, the sublime, the terrifying and the horrific, and in such a way that they rekindle dormant affect. A major component of Wordsworth's aesthetics, particularly as evidenced in *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth 597), is the attempt to imbue the ordinary and everyday with a sheen of unfamiliarity, to find the supernatural in the natural so that the subject perceives anew and with childlike wonder, the approach that M. H. Abrams defines as his "natural supernaturalism". If we see the urban landscape as somehow natural to the modern city dweller in this sense, then we can admit Ballard's reinvigoration of the affecting qualities of our environment as another kind of "natural supernaturalism". Abrams, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, reads Wordsworth's famous Gondo ravine passage, in Book VI of *The Prelude*, as the

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[5] Five of the nine *Vermilion Sands* stories refer to "beach fatigue" directly, but the sense of malaise is endemic to the resort.

momentary synthesis of the "ineluctable contrarieties" of the beautiful and the sublime in human existence (Abrams *Natural Supernaturalism* 106-7). A comparable tendency is discernible in Ballard, when the depiction of sublime terror is lavished with lyrical prose, rendering the terrifying and abhorrent somehow beautiful.

Meanwhile, in the stories of *Vermilion Sands*, Ballard's "natural supernaturalism" is given a complementary Coleridgean inversion, one in which a fantastical or supernatural landscape of haunted mariners roaming the desert seas can be rendered somehow natural. In the supernatural elements of the *Vermilion Sands* landscape noted above myth meets modernity and modernity meets the transformative imagination, turns into solipsistic nightmare, and is rescued by the hope of creative renewal. Ballard, in a seemingly Romantic gesture, has brought the landscape, or nature, back into the equation.

Whilst the "beach fatigue" of *Vermilion Sands*, with all of its passionless levelling of experience, might seem an unlikely place to look for Romantic echoes, Ballard's depiction of this casualty of the twentieth century might be read as a brutal diagnosis and a nihilistic, satirical celebration of modernity and postmodernity and their ills. Such a bleak portrayal also suggests that things might be otherwise and perhaps that they ought to be, in the tradition of William Blake's depiction of "dark Satanic mills" (161), or in the critique of over-stimulated city life in Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*. Such a tradition is in keeping with Ballard's studied ambiguity and ambivalence, since in the stories discussed below he seems at once to be denigrating this affectless realm whilst celebrating its limitless potentiality. There is decadence in the lifestyles of the denizens of Vermilion Sands, Red Beach and Ballard's other beach resorts, shown in their limitless freedom to pursue their own psychopathologies, and in their sense of sensory exhaustion. On a Romantic plane, the very ephemerality and

diffuseness of the resort lends it the quality of a Romantic fragment or dream, briefly gesturing towards a sublimely vast whole before melting into isolated remnants at the season's end.

The Wind in Romanticism and in *Vermilion Sands*

The mode of creative reinvigoration in these nine stories calls upon the Romantic metaphors of personified wind and the Aeolian harp in the form of their singing statues and sonic sculptures. In Romanticism the wind is a literary and artistic master metaphor for change, creative inspiration and the capricious aspects of the natural world. It is worth noting that the wind was also Ballard's earliest metaphor for catastrophic change in his novels, the first of which was *The Wind from Nowhere* (1962). This ephemeral but demonstrably real force can carry a sailor home across the wide sea, but may just as likely stir up a ship-wrecking storm, or drive a ship out into the frozen wastes as in Coleridge's *Ancyent Marinere*. The air, whether moved by human intervention or by natural forces, is not just a literal aspect of the landscape but a metaphor for change in the poet's mind. Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" is a classic example of the wind viewed as inspiration, of the poetry of Romanticism as being "thoroughly ventilated" as Abrams puts it (113). The poet/speaker's "dull pain" of dejection, which is the occasion of the poem, and Ballard's condition of "beach fatigue" – "The beach fatigue from which I suffered numbed the senses insidiously, blunting despair and hope alike" (*VS* 175) – are surprisingly conversant:

> A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,
>
> A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
>
> Which finds no natural outlet, no relief" (*Coleridge* 114).

Moreover, the way in which the wind acts upon the speaker and the "Eolian lute" in the poem, corresponds very closely with the plotted events of the first story in *Vermilion Sands*, "The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D" (1967). In Coleridge's poem, the speaker's state of alienation and creative stagnation is at first plagued by, but then finally transcended and alleviated by, the ministrations of the wind upon the Aeolian Harp, his metaphor for the natural world's working upon the mind of the speaker. The discordant notes the storm plucks from the harp allow the speaker to feel and inhabit the state of dejection and this in turn provokes those dormant powers of creativity into describing his melancholy state. Thus primed, when the rising storm of the wind plucks from the harp an alarming succession of notes ending in a cacophonous crescendo, the speaker's imagination is buoyed-up, producing lines of lyrical intensity. The poem, however, ends on an ambivalent note. The state of dejection to some extent returns, but with the knowledge gained from the frightening but invigorating intervention of the natural world, and the concomitant waxing of the imaginative power. Abrams sees in this condition both the reinvigorating potential of the natural, phenomenal world, and the deliberate transfer of its power into the subjective realm of the speaker's imagination (Abrams "Correspondent Breeze" 117). Through this movement, the speaker takes command of that which he had been subject to, so that a future stimulation of the imagination will be possible through a reflection on this internal world.

Such a reconfiguration of the phenomenal world into a source of internal visionary potential seems to have intriguing parallels with Ballard's "The Cloud Sculptors" and the other stories of *Vermilion Sands*. Major Parker, the narrator of "The Cloud Sculptors", is a retired pilot with a leg injury which prevents him from flying, an ailment that is immediately suggestive of wounded or dormant imaginative capacity,

flight (according to T. E. Hulme) being another Romantic master metaphor.[6] Driving into the desert, Parker stops to observe the coral towers on the road to Lagoon West. There he hears the music of some sonic statues which have "run to seed" (*VS* 11), and follows it to an abandoned workshop where he will build kites and gliders which hang tethered above him "in the afternoon air like amiable ciphers" (*VS* 12). As in Coleridge, change is heralded here by the wind: "A sudden gale rose over the crest of Coral D" and in its wake appear Petit-Manuel and Nolan, later to be joined by Van Eyck (*VS* 12). These are the pilots who will do what Parker cannot and take to the skies in order to sculpt the clouds. The artist and pilot Nolan tightens the helixes of the sculptures by the workshop to make them sound more tuneful. This one event can be read as a microcosm for Ballard's engagement with Romanticism and for the similitude between the sonic sculptures of *Vermilion Sands* and Aeolian harps. The sonic sculpture is discovered abandoned and in disrepair in the desert, a desiccated hulk which no longer produces a tuneful sound. The glider-mechanic, though, an artist himself, is able to adjust its helixes and make it harmonious with its surroundings once more. We can understand this moment as a Ballardian discovery of Romantic sentiment and feeling, amongst the "pseudoevents, science and pornography" of modernity (*R/S JGB* 96). By updating its symbols and through a marriage of modern technology and inward shamanism, Ballard resurrects the ghost of this movement as a potential force for personal and social revolution. Put another way, in Andrzej Gasiorek's terms, Ballard "draws imaginatively on the resources of Romanticism" in order to "re-mythologize the past, present and near future" (48).

In Ballard's story the wind howls, companions appear, the harp is tuned, sings harmoniously once more and an artistic troupe is formed in what Abrams calls "the

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[6] T. E. Hume claimed, for example, "You might say if you wished that the whole romantic attitude seems to crystalize in verse around metaphors of flight" (*Speculations* 120).

renewal of life and emotional vigour after apathy and spiritual torpor, and an outburst of creative inspiration following a period of sterility" (115). The early pages of "The Cloud Sculptors" follow this pattern closely enough. The transience of cloud sculptures aligns them with the ephemerality of music, its dependence upon the wind with that of the wind harp and with the fickle nature of inspiration. The troupe of sculptors craft gorgeous, vanishing displays out of their windborne medium,

> Lifted on the shoulders of the air above the crown of Coral D, we would carve seahorses and unicorns, the portraits of presidents and film stars, lizards and exotic birds. As the crowd watched from their cars, a cool rain would fall on to the dusty roofs, weeping from the sculptured clouds as they sailed across the desert floor towards the sun (*VS* 11).

The passage evokes the exoticism and wistful longing of a Romantic fragment, a lyricism which resonates throughout the collection. Much like the music of the wind harp, the sculptors' creations are fleeting, momentary, and they are soon destroyed by the very wind that was instrumental in their production. In Coleridge's ode the wind rises to a storm pitch that frightens and invigorates the speaker, prompting the poem's most impassioned lines. Leonora Chanel, the retired movie star and patron of the cloud sculptors, seems to be able to exert some control over the wind that bears them on its shoulders, driving them to ever-greater heights of aerial acrobatics and sculpting prowess. Her patronage, however, like that of the muses of old, requires sacrifice, and this *femme fatale* claims the lives of two of the gliders before Nolan drives the climactic storm against her, after which he vanishes. The cloud sculptors are inspired to produce their "strangest portraits" by this troubled muse of the story, whose images "carved in the whirlwind, were to weep their storm-rain upon the corpses of their sculptors" (*VS* 11). Through their self-sacrifice in pursuit of their art, the cloud sculptors fit the type of

the Romantic hero, expiring for the sake of art and for want of recognition by their fickle muse. The forces that the wind-summoned imagination conjure-up prove fatal in this instance, but there remains the possibility of creative endeavour; Nolan may have survived and there are rumours of his exploits in other resorts and towns (*VS* 30). The narrator is content to listen to the sculptures at night with Leonora's secretary, Beatrice. Calm is restored and knowledge of the imaginative faculty has been gained, and its return, heralded by the wind, is anticipated:

> In the evenings Beatrice and I sit among the sonic statues, listening to their voices as the fair-weather clouds rise above Coral D, waiting for a man in a dark-winged glider, perhaps painted like candy now, who will come in on the wind and carve for us images of seahorses and unicorns, dwarfs and jewels and children's faces (*VS* 30).

This pattern of torpor, followed by a reinvigoration of the imagination, and a final wistful reminiscence looking forward to further bouts of tumult, is repeated in the subsequent eight stories of the collection. Configurations, artistic pursuits, professions and locations are moved about like pieces on a chess board, and outcomes vary slightly, but all of the nine stories are reminiscences of times gone by, and each story features a muse-like female figure. There are nine muses corresponding to those of antiquity, and each sets off a chain of resonances with classical and Romantic literature.

The women of *Vermilion Sands* are the destabilizing but creatively invigorating force that blows through each story, fulfilling the role of the wind in Coleridge's ode and playing upon the "strings" of the sonic statues and singing sculptures. In his treatment of Leonora Chanel, and the other exotic female figures of the stories, Ballard seems to reproduce the gendered stereotypes of Romantic aesthetics. If we see in "The Cloud Sculptors" the dramatization of the artist Nolan's attempt to experience and

master the sublime in the shape of the storm, then Leonora Chanel's broken body manifests the rejected feminine that has been considered a by-product of the masculine sublime,

> Leonora's body lay among the broken tables near the band stand, half-wrapped in a bleeding canvas. Her face was as bruised now as the storm-cloud Manuel had tried to carve (*VS* 29).

In the confusion of Leonora's bleeding body with the canvas of one of her many portraits, the climax of the story suggests a moral judgement on the glamorous and vain woman's extreme narcissism. Leonora's secretary, Beatrice, says as much, but hints at something more, "carving one's portrait in the sky out of sun and air – some people might say that smacked of vanity, or even worse sins" (*VS* 21). Peter Shaw in his account of the sublime suggests that,

> Where women appear in [canonical] Romantic poetry, therefore, it is either as the discarded material excess of sublime empowerment, a principle of opposition to be resisted, or as the nurturing, beneficial foil to fantasies of narcissistic reintegration (105).

When Leonora first appears the womanizing Van Eyck heralds her thus, "look at what arrives – my apocalypse […]" (*VS* 16), and the fascination with which she is viewed is maintained from then on, the descriptions of her clothing and persona recalling the mythological figure of the lamia, the paintings of Delvaux, and the perceived dangers of feminine excess, "with the diamonds fixed around her eyes she reminded me of some archaic priestess. Beneath the contour jewellery her breasts lay like eager snakes" (*VS* 23). An apocalypse is also a revelation, though, and through Leonora's excess there seems to be a glimpse of the numinous, fraught with the inherent dangers of dissolution. Leonora attempts the masculine sublime in her wish to dominate the storm and remake

it in her own image, but she also gestures towards the material excess that, according to Shaw, threatened to overrun Burke's definition of the beautiful, destabilizing its distinction from the sublime (Shaw 59-61). Perhaps Leonora's supposed crime, hinted at by Beatrice, was that of a female attempting to assume the mantle of the sublime. The narrator's preference for the "pretty and agreeable" Beatrice over her mistress, a "pale chimera with jewelled eyes" (*VS* 17), offers another instance of this masculine opposition of the sublime and the beautiful, according to which the domain of the feminine is confined to the small, pleasing and knowable.

Complex gendered tropes that seem to echo those of Romanticism are also present in the other stories of *Vermillion Sands*, including "The Singing Statues" (1962), where the statues of the title sing of the story's tragic heroine. Chopped up and abandoned in the desert to rust, they take root again and come uncannily back to life, continuing to sing in a pale parody of their former resonance, a discordant echo. They are ugly, decaying repositories of trauma, and yet Ballard's prose wrings from them a melancholic beauty. In this passage the statues sing of Lunora Goalen, another of *Vermilion Sands*' apocalyptic muses,

> No one tends the sculptures now and most of them have gone to seed, but on an impulse I cut away a helix and carried it back to my villa, planting it in the quartz bed below the balcony. All night it sang to me, telling me of Lunora and the strange music she played to herself […]" (*VS* 75).

Their music is described as being "Like a forgotten lover, whispering over a dead harp" (*VS* 89), a corpse music borne on a sepulchral wind, evoking a decadent sensibility. This seems once again to concern the ability to create meaningful or resonant art in the beach-fatigued world of *Vermilion Sands*, and by extension of modernity. The artistic productions of the twentieth century display the wounds of atrocities past and future,

doubly haunted by the ghosts of the past and the spectre of a future used up. There is something cruel and disquieting about the part-living, part-sculpted forms, the malleability of their bodies and their refusal to stay dead. In them something approaches an extreme metaphor for the immanence of the phenomenal world that Abrams calls "natural supernaturalism", and Ballard characteristically combines disgust and wonder in these tortured harps.

In "The Screen Game" (1963), the narrator returns to a seemingly abandoned summer house each day to play the "screen game", and echoes of sonic statues drift across the dunes on the wind to him, stirring memories of Emerelda Garland and her jewelled insects. The framing sections at the beginning and end of the story imbue the tale with a melancholy longing. Rearranging what remains of the painted screens, in an echo of the game that had been part of a film in which Emerelda was to star, creates a sense of compulsive repetition and a kind of mourning. The rekindled imagination that had spawned the painted screens, the retelling of the Orpheus myth, and the coaxing of the starlet out of the summer house to wander amongst the film crew is in the past. The statues that had lined the road have fallen silent and the air of the place is sepulchral. We see something like the state of "beach fatigue" in the long creative interregnum that the film production had woken the narrator and his friends from, however, in the act of reminiscence and memorialization, a wistful lyricism infuses the language and thus imagination is reborn even as its loss is lamented,

> All over the deserted summer-house the low refrain was taken up by the statues, echoing through the empty galleries and across the moonlit terraces, carried away to the mouths of the sand reefs, the last dark music of the painted night (*VS* 73).

In describing Coleridge's ode Abrams sees a comparable process at work:

> By the agency of the windstorm it describes, the poem turns out to contradict its own premises; the poet's spirit awakes to violent life, even as he laments his inner death, achieves expression in the despair at being cut off from outlet of expression, and demonstrates the power of the imagination in the process of memorializing its failure" (Abrams "Correspondent Breeze" 115).

This speaks to a Ballard who, in the very act of describing the dearth of all that might be called Romantic, uses lyrical language and the symbols of the imagination: the deep self, the wind, flight and birds, jewelled objects and pale, deathly women of decadent desire.

In some traditions it is Orpheus who is credited with having invented the lyre, or with having increased the number of its strings to nine to reflect the nine muses (March 551-4). In the layering of myths upon myths in the landscape of "The Screen Game", the myth of Orpheus and his death and mourning are also present. Through the singing statues the demise of the film producer, Charles Van Stratten echoes around the landscape that witnessed it, performing an act of mourning of which their human creators seem incapable,

> By some acoustic freak, the dead sculptures along the beach had revived themselves, and once again I heard the faint haunted echoes of Charles Van Stratten's last cry before he was killed by the jewelled insects (*VS* 73).

For the Romantic poets of nature, Coleridge and particularly Wordsworth, the natural world was a living canvas upon which the history of the individual mind could be projected and read, but technology and the products of science were seen largely as invasive and alienating – factors in the estrangement of man from a benevolent nature. Ballard here unsettles this assumption with a rendering of the technologically-perverted singing statues, half of the natural world and half synthetic, as the repositories of affect

and emotion which their decadent creators can no longer feel. “Prima Belladonna” (1956) adds another dimension to this inverted anti-Enlightenment strain in its vision of a future in which the human singing voice has been replaced by scientifically-mutated plants. The narrator, Parker, sells singing plants in his shop, above which he and his friends spend most of their time drinking beer and playing “iGo”. The plants are maintained by a cocktail of gasses and nutrients, keyed up or down chemically as required and tuned by a monstrous “Khan Arachnid” plant. Much like the poetry producing machines of “Studio 5, The Stars” (1961), these plants have largely rendered human talent redundant. Jane Cyracylides blows through the sleepy resort like an invigorating wind, firing up long dormant libidos and latent imaginations. Jane’s vocals provoke hallucinations, and her singing voice is a sensation with which even the genetically modified plants cannot compete. When she first arrives Jane is compared to a force of nature, a muse, a goddess, perhaps even an incarnation of the imagination itself (*VS* 32). There are no sonic sculptures in “Prima Belladonna”, but along with the singing flowers we might consider Jane Cyracylides as another female muse-like embodiment of the “correspondent breeze” whose capriciousness and ephemerality form part of the allure. Just as the singing statues and sonic sculptures of the other stories are repositories for dormant affect, the singing plants of “Prima Belladonna” and the poetry machines of “Studio 5, the Stars” intervene between humanity and the natural world. Their ambiguous roles include both the suppression of the imaginative faculty and its safeguarding; one might say that the crisis provides the material out of which it is to be solved.

Locus Solus and *The Atrocity Exhibition*

If *Vermillion Sands* ought to have been Ballard's first book, then perhaps the world that *The Atrocity Exhibition* describes is drawing us ineluctably towards that exhausted future. In some respects the symbolic landscape of the *Vermilion Sands* stories is revisited in Locus Solus, the setting for "The Summer Cannibals" chapter of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. In his 1990 marginal notes for the Re/Search edition of the novel, Ballard sets out its peculiar appeal,

> The curious atmosphere of the Mediterranean beach resorts still awaits its chronicler. One could regard them collectively as a linear city, some 3000 miles long, from Gibraltar to Glyfada beach north of Athens, and 300 yards deep. For three summer months the largest city in the world […] The usual hierarchies and conventions are absent; in many ways it couldn't be less European, but it works. It has a unique ambience […] At present it is Europe's Florida, an endless parade of hotels, marinas and apartment houses, haunted by criminals running hash from North Africa, stealing antiquities or on the lam from Scotland Yard (*AE* 59).

The landscape of "The Summer Cannibals" is almost beatific in contrast to the extreme atmosphere of menace, derangement, violence, sexual perversion, degradation and black humour that marks many other chapters of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. The components of Traven's fragmented identity in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, variously Travis, Traven, Talbot, Tallis, Trabert, Talbert and Travers, seem to anneal on this endless beach and fade into a dreamlike erasure, as Ballard puts it in his marginal gloss: "This is Traven again […] but a Traven devoid of those larger concerns that preoccupy him elsewhere in the book" (*AE* 60). If "beach fatigue" was described above as a version of the "death of affect", it may be that these non-place resorts represent its true home and birthplace,

> Could it ever become Europe's California? Perhaps, but the peculiar geometry of those identical apartment houses seems to defuse the millenarian spirit. Living there, one is aware of the exact volumes of these generally white apartments and hotel rooms. After the sombre light of northern Europe, they seem to focus an intense self-consciousness on the occupants. Sex becomes stylised, relationships more oblique" (*AE* 60).

Yet whilst the leisure location of Locus Solus resembles the Romanticism of *Vermilion Sands* the dominant experience and context of *The Atrocity Exhibition* suggests a more extreme response to modernity that would require exploration in terms of a more extreme Romantic aesthetic of discordant contraries. Most of the *Vermilion Sands* stories had been written by the time Ballard embarked on his project of writing "condensed novels" that would ultimately become *The Atrocity Exhibition*. In an update on his new fictional work for the October 1966 edition of *New Worlds*, Ballard categorized his new model as analytic rather than synthetic, "the analytic function of this new fiction should not be overlooked. Most fiction is synthetic in method – as Freud remarked, rightly I feel, a sure sign of immaturity" (Ballard "Notes from Nowhere" 151). If the *Vermilion Sands* stories can be said to have celebrated the combinatory powers of the imagination, then in *The Atrocity Exhibition* we witness the pulling apart of contrarieties, left hovering in dialectical opposition. This opposition, however, does not necessarily produce a stasis, but can be seen as productive according to another model associated with Romanticism: the energetic Blakean tensions of texts such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which dynamism is produced through the clashing of contraries. The power to pull apart the overlapping fictions of what Ballard calls the "media landscape" (*AE* 145), however extreme, might in this Blakean sense suggest a possibility that the components become available once more for

recombination. It is here that the full sublimity of the human imagination is realized in all of its terrifying glory, able not only to symbolically connect disparate concepts, but to pull apart the seemingly inseparable and re-make them in new and unexpected ways.

In the *Vermillion Sands* stories the protagonists remained largely passive, happy to await their apocalypse in whatever form it happened to manifest itself. By contrast, the Ts of *The Atrocity Exhibition* are determined to induce their apocalypse through a wilful refashioning of the media landscape in which they are trapped. There are multiple and contradictory drives in *The Atrocity Exhibition* towards reconciliation with the alienating environment of modernity, and the personal and historical traumas of the twentieth century. Firstly, a drive towards affectless abstraction in which the soft curves of the human form intersect with the “motion sculpture” of motorway access ramps and overpasses, the chromium detailing and instrument binnacle mouldings of the motorcar. This schema is Neo-Platonic and modernist in its assumption that human bodies, speech acts and gestures are moduli which can be fitted into grand forms – whether geometric, architectural, mythological or elemental. The goal of this drive is dissolution, forgetfulness, amniotic return, and easeful death. ‘The Summer Cannibals’ chapter perhaps sees the apotheosis of this mode with its unnamed central character and the falling away of the wider concerns of the rest of the novel, concentrating instead on abstract sexual acts and listless *dérives* around the dried up river beds and sand dunes that surround the white apartment buildings of Locus Solus. Allied to this movement in the novel is the finding of equivalence in personal acts, gestures and appearance with the topography of the media landscape; the merging of the media landscape with the internal landscape so that the exploration of a terrain is simultaneously the traversing of a film star’s body, the mapping of the inside of a character’s skull, the descent down spinal levels.

An antithetical movement in *The Atrocity Exhibition* seems aimed at piercing the smooth and placid surfaces of modernity and the media landscape, reinvigorating memory and keeping alive creativity and imagination through extreme measures. This movement is obsessed with the creation and reopening of wounds – both those of the human body and psychological and historical traumas. The wounded human body insists on the biological, the animal and the feeling – it 'opens up' the victim to the world and to others. The rough surfaces of wounds, of bodily imperfections and of environmental decay, resists the homogenization and dissolution of the first movement, insists upon the 'real' and is determined to puncture the agglomeration of mediated fictions that occlude the vision. The fetishization and aesthetic display of wounds is decadent, but it seems a decadence which paradoxically aims at reawakening dormant affect. Pain, violence and the restaging of historical catastrophes and disasters keeps these wounds fresh, awakening memory and desire. In this movement it is assumed that we all carry radiation burns from Hiroshima and Nagaskai, are burdened by the unassuaged guilt of the Holocaust, and are obliquely responsible for the deaths of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, John Fitzgerald Kenney and the Apollo astronauts.

These contraplexual movements are also highly ambiguous, however, each regularly seguing into the other and partaking of opposite aesthetics and effects. The restaging of historical disasters, for instance, as well as working to keep the decaying memory of these disasters alive, works to subsume personal trauma into the wider form of historical disaster – thus the loss of one's spouse becomes just another of the "myriad deaths of the cosmos" (*CCS1* 263), and so the opening of a wound can paradoxically enact the circularity of both closure and repetition. Similarly, the pitting and marking of the canvas of the human skin becomes a part of the erosive forces of time that have decayed both the natural and built environments. The repositioning of the human body

as some kind of Hans Bellmer doll, manoeuvrable into cryptic poses and shapes, can very easily slide into a psychopathic dissociation from pain inflicted upon bodies, and even a fascistic intolerance for the stain of life upon the clean and smooth geometric surface of eternity. In this way the first movement leads to the second movement through the wounding of bodies which awakens affect – if not in the central characters themselves then in the reader. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, then, the cold and emotionless realms of modernity provide the raw material for the reawakening of dormant affect.

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