Watery City
Sailors and Sailortown in the Urban Imagination

'What's your name?'
'Roger Riderhood.'
'Dwelling-place?'
'Lim'us Hole.'
'Calling or occupation?'
Not quite so glib with this answer as with the previous two,
Mr. Riderhood gave in the definition, 'Waterside character.'

Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*

Introduction: Waterside Character

The social cartography of nineteenth-century Britain is often framed around a familiar set of poles that span the country and the city, the rural and the urban. It is a predominantly terrestrial cartography that has tended to obscure the significance of oceans, seas, and other waterways, despite the importance of water to industrial global capitalism: from the water that powered mills, to the canal routes that linked industrial cities, to the island nation's coastal routes that offered a passage for trade, to the ports that served as a 'gateway to Empire'. Victorian cities too have been broadly theorised through a landlocked lens, with standard accounts providing notably less attention to the distinctive geographical, cultural, and social features pertaining to the presence of water flowing through and on the edge of port cities.[1] Similarly, the waterfront as a literary setting has been overlooked in favour of other loci of urban modernity, such as streets and thoroughfares, places of manufacture, shops, passages, marketplaces, or the infrastructure of the railways, and slums.

Focussing on representations of the urban waterfront and the cultural figure of the Victorian sailor in the city, this chapter aims to contribute to work that has sought to redress the dominant emphasis given to the land-locked and the terrestrial within the production of literary and cultural

histories. It does so by surveying the tropes and discursive practices of a range of writers who were drawn to urban littoral spaces and attempted to capture their distinctive quality as places in which poverty, cultural heterodoxy, and cosmopolitanism comingled. The 'watery city', as I term it, denotes a physical place (the edge spaces of port cities) as well as a particular way of seeing the urban waterfront as articulated across a range of forms, including memoir, journalism, and fiction. A terraqueous way of seeing and writing the watery city emerged through a variety of modes – or 'metropolitan perceptions' to use Raymond Williams's phrase – that developed throughout the Victorian period as the docks and urban waterfront expanded and became central entry points for Britain's global economy.[2] That way of seeing the littoral city as a place defined by comingling, cosmopolitanism, and otherness was distinctive and formative, laying a foundation for aesthetic modes and concerns that developed at the start of the twentieth century.

Material reality and imaginative possibility were entangled in the places of the watery city, and the waterfront generated its own forms of social commentary and storytelling. In this sense, the urban coast aligns with Cohen's narrative theory of 'waterside chronotopes' as settings that are 'at once geographies and topoi: their contours are shaped by historical reference, and they are rhetorical structures with poetic function and imaginative resonance'.[3] In a historicist vein, Cohen emphasises that such maritime chronotopes emerge from the intersection of fictional and non-fictional forms, pointing to 'the power of preexisting rhetorical patterns to organise the perception and representation of fact as well as fiction'.[4] 'Sailortown' – a recurring setting in descriptions of the watery parts of the Victorian city – formed one such chronotope, constituting a real and imagined place, and a generative setting for urban commentators, social investigators, and novelists alike.

Sailors were among the highly visible characters within descriptions of the terraqueous city. In writing of the early decades of the nineteenth century, 'Jack Tar in the streets' figured as a stock caricature, one of the many urban types to be described and indexed in the burgeoning genre of city writing.[5] To writers of the urban scene, these maritime men could be spotted by their instantly recognisable identity, evinced through their distinct clothing, gait, habits, and modes of speech. Yet one of my aims in this analysis is to go beyond the apparent simplicity of this characterisation. The chapter thus attends to what I conceive of as a shift in writing of the mid to late nineteenth century, in which the 'waterside character' of the sailor moved from being a traditional caricature, into one whose figuration

pointed to a modern unsettling of categories of nationality, masculinity, social class, gender, sexuality, and social propriety.

The chapter begins by exploring accounts of the watery city and waterside characters in works of memoir, social investigation, and popular journalism, from surveys of working-class neighbourhoods that lay at the water's edge of port cities, to the place of urban legend known as sailortown. It goes on to map literary versions of sailortown in adjacent novels of the period, in texts such as Herman Melville's Liverpool-based autobiographical novel *Redburn: His Last Voyage* (1849) and Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865). It concludes by pointing towards the developments of an urban maritime modernism at the *fin de siècle* and into the twentieth century, as the Jack Tar figure morphed into new material and imaginative permutations. In surveying representations of the urban waterfront and the peripheral figure of the sailor in the city, the chapter traces a way of seeing peculiar to the urban water's edge in this period. It was on the cusp of this terraqueous environment, formed of land and water, that new narratives of modernity emerged.

Sailortown: Tales of Watery Streets

Many of Britain's major nineteenth-century cities were shaped and characterised by their proximity to water. Indeed the port cities of London, Liverpool, Bristol, Glasgow, and Cardiff had been hubs of commerce and a conduit for flows of people since at least the seventeenth century. The establishment of the technology of the first commercial wet dock in Liverpool in 1715, for example, revolutionised patterns of maritime trade by enabling cargo to be unloaded from ships, regardless of the tidal flow, and led to the growth of the city as a world trading port. In London, by 1800, it was estimated that the docks provided 120,000 people with work,[6] while the livelihood of many others depended on the trades associated with shipping on the river Thames, described by Peter Linebaugh as 'the jugular vein of the British Empire'.[7] Following Mayhew's panoramic description of the working waterscape of the docks in his *Morning Chronicle* survey, with which this book began, a guide to the 1851 Great Exhibition directed visitors eager 'to appreciate the power, the wealth, and the world-wide commerce of London' to the waterside part of the city where they would 'see the docks, the shipping, and the river below bridge'.[8] There, the guide continued, they would be struck by the contrast with the opulence of the fashionable West End streets, and might even begin to doubt the 'basis of being on terra firma':

'The stranger will find himself in a region, half land, half water, in which the population are chiefly sailors and Jews, and the businesses all that pertains to ships and shipping; and, ever and anon, he will be startled by the figure-head of a ship, or a bowsprit, thrusting itself between the houses into the street.'[9]

This illustrative image of a ship's bow rising above city terraces, provides one example of a visual mingling of seemingly incongruous elements – the maritime and the domestic, rooftops and ships' sails – that recurs in various guises throughout nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural images of the urban waterfront. It is a feature that caught the eye of Charles Booth's notetakers, in sections of that late-Victorian survey of London charting the streets of areas such as Poplar and Limehouse at the watery boundary of the metropolis. In one notebook, Booth's correspondent noted precisely the intermingling of houses and river in the '[p]oor seaport streets' in Rotherhithe: 'at the north end is a sight of the river past the public house at Rotherhithe stairs & from the [south] end of Cathay St there is a momentary glimpse of the large steamers & ships as they pass up and down the Thames'. While in another 'regular seaport street', he observed 'a crowd of children bathing & looking on at bathing off Rotherhithe stairs, by the old public house with a bow window stretching over the water'.[10] Everything about the environment evinced of a maritime character, from the viewpoints it offered, to its characteristic trades, to the waterside characters who inhabited it:

> London, south of the Thames, strikes you as a tan yard & warehouse: in Rotherhithe it is a sea port. Glimpses of large ships sailing at the end of streets, narrow streets with small shops, old houses with carved doorways crushed in between more modern houses, men in jerseys & with clean shaven upper lips & goat beards, notices on doorways of mast & oar & and pump & block makers, half rubbed out & meaning very little now. But still there – all proclaim that shipping or seafaring is or has been the main business of the people.[11]

Autobiographical reminiscences by those who grew up on the urban waterfront in the nineteenth and early twentieth century also provide evidence of the distinctive social and sensory aspects of these areas. The trade unionist Havelock Wilson rendered the urban waterfront of his childhood in incongruously pastoral tones as he began his autobiography with a set of first memories: 'Like the clear voice of singing birds the song of caulking hammers, in the shipyards where wooden ships were built, would come floating up through the window of my bedroom in the house at Sunderland where we lived when I was only 5 years of age.' 'From the

window', he continues, 'out across the house-tops, I could see the masts and spars of tall and stately ships.'[12] Similarly, Dorothy Scannell, born in 1911 in the East End slums, could see the masts of vessels shipped in the East India Docks from her bedroom window and recalled how the 'distant sirens of the ships, muffled like a throaty cough in foggy weather, were all a lovely and nostalgic part of my childhood'.[13] The daughter of a ship worker, Wilhelmina Tobias, born in Wallsend, North Tyneside in 1904, recalled her earliest memory as being held up to a window to gaze at crowds rushing towards a 'colossal object which seemed to my baby eyes to be growing out of the bottom of the street & certainly towering for miles above the small houses' (it was, she later learned, the occasion of the launching of the *Mauretania* ocean liner).[14] The combination of realist detail encompassed in these descriptions, along with the hyperreal intrusion of the maritime into residential neighbourhoods, would later be captured in a celebrated photograph, depicting the stern of the barque *Penang*, newly docked on its arrival from Adelaide, improbably rising above rickety rooftops as a woman resident hung out her washing in the small backyard of the waterside slums (Figure 3.1). As these examples suggest, even in the realist modes of social investigation, memoir, and photo documentary, the waterfront offered glimpses of a different kind of urban landscape, in which city and water combined to produce a distinctive and idiosyncratic environment: of the city, but not quite.

The sense that the nineteenth-century waterfront possessed a marked character had a historical pedigree, and was nowhere made clearer than in the real and imagined area of the city, which came to be known as sailortown. This was the name given to dock areas that catered to the sailor onshore, providing shelter, entertainment, and hospitality – as well as forms of risk and danger – until seafarers set sail again.[15] In its dominant period, from the 1840s to the early twentieth century, sailortown formed a markedly watery region of the city as a place of industry and licentiousness, trade and exchange, as well as a cosmopolitan enclave with an international floating population of native and itinerant seafarers. The compound term – widely used today, although surprisingly unrecorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* – seems, like the cognate term 'chinatown',[16] to have gained popularity in nineteenth-century American journalism from around the late 1860s, when it tended to be invoked to refer to issues of criminality in dock areas (although it crops up even earlier than this in an eighteenth-century Scottish parish book).[17] 'Sailor town' became more widespread as a term in British print literature in the early 1890s, long after its historical heyday. By the twentieth century it lent its name to

Figure 3.1   P39610 3-masted barque Penang in dry dock at Millwall 1932.
© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

the title of merchant sailor Frank Bullen's memoir, *With Christ in Sailor Town* (1901), and in its compound form in surveys of port cities by George H. Mitchell (1917) and Stan Hugill (1967), both entitled *Sailortown*. It then became a byword for tales of the lively, dissolute nature of dockland streets and alleys: an outlandish, legendary sort of place described by one of its chroniclers as 'a world in, but not of, that of the landsman'.[18]

Sailortown was both a transnational place occurring within a number of the major port cities across the world and a discursive construct with a similarly global appeal.[19] In London, as Sarah Palmer notes, the unofficial cartography of sailortown in the 1830s and 1840s placed it around Ratcliffe, Wapping and Shadwell, and by the 1860s it extended eastward to encompass Poplar and Limehouse.[20] In Liverpool, it centred around the city's suggestively named Paradise Street.[21] Descriptions of the nefarious practices of sailortown have been well rehearsed, both by its Victorian observers and by later cultural historians. Hugill's twentieth-century insider ethnography, *Sailortown* (1967), did much to revive interest in this historico-imaginative space, as well as to propagate some of its enduring

myths. Interdisciplinary scholarship in the blue humanities, cultural geography, and urban history has further served to conceive of the waterfront – including the urban shore, dock areas, waterside neighbourhoods, and sailortown – as an emblematic 'contact zone', a term defined by Mary Louise Pratt as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other'.[22] Drawing on Pratt's work, for example, Laura Tabili shows in her study of South Shields in Tyneside that proximity to water made even a small port town a form of contact zone: 'a pathway or borderland permitting populations, cultural practices, artifacts and ideas to converge and mix'.[23] The legacy of this work has established the conception of global sailortown as a dual edge space: a crucial part of the city that served as a gateway for trade, movements of people, and flows of capital, as well as a locus of countercultural, transcultural, and deviant practices.[24]

Journalists and city writers of the period seized upon sailortown's foreign and out-of-place character. It was sometimes described as an exotic or 'other' space contained within national borders: a type of internal orient. As Brad Beaven has argued, sailortown was conceived as a place replete with aspects of the carnivalesque, in which civic norms of metropolitan society appeared to be overlaid with 'an alternative economic infrastructure and a dynamic sub-culture that was separate and cut adrift from the rest of civilized society'.[25] Indeed, an emphasis on cosmopolitanism runs through historical depictions of sailortown as a place set apart from the national character.[26] In the eighteenth century, for example, the social reformer Sir John Fielding commented: 'When one goes into Rotherhithe and Wapping, which places are chiefly inhabited by sailor, but that somewhat of the same language is spoken, a man would be apt to suspect himself in another country. Their manner of living, speaking, acting, dressing and behaving are so peculiar to themselves.'[27] And in a later popular picaresque narrative, *Life in London* (1821), Pierce Egan summed up the international, carnivalesque bonhomie of sailortown through his sketch of an East End pub, All-Max-in the East:

> It required no patronage; – a card of admission was not necessary; – no inquiries were made; – and every *cove* that put in his appearance was quite welcome; colour or country considered no obstacle; and *dress* and ADDRESS completely out of the question. … The group motley indeed; – Lascars, blacks, jack tars, coal-heavers, dustmen, women of colour, old and young, and a sprinkling of the remnants of once fine girls &c., were all *jigging* together.[28]

Egan's visit anticipates by forty years Dickens's similar description of a multiracial motley crew of revellers in Victorian Liverpool's sailortown

presented in 'Poor Mercantile Jack', his 1860 urban exposé of the revelry and criminality of the waterside community that catered for the sailor.[29]

As well as the multicultural composition of sailortown, many writers emphasised its sense of being an environment apart, a place possessing its own peculiar urban ecology. An illustrative example occurs in an article from *Household Words* in 1881, as the writer of 'Sunday with the Sailors' sought to capture the 'evidently amphibious kind of parish' of Stepney, suggestively personified as 'a proper foster-mother for the children born at sea':

> Commercial Road East differs not greatly from classic Whitechapel, and yet there is a difference; there is more air, more vigour, the keen east wind seems to bear a kind of briny flavour, and the men who swarm up to the roof of the tramway-car display a cat-like agility in the process, that suggests the habit of going up aloft. And in those model dwellings somebody has draped his room with gay bunting, recalling indefinitely white cliffs and breaking surge, and the coastguardman's snug cabin by the shore.[30]

For the Reverend Harry Jones, whose Christian philanthropy rooted him in the East End, the docklands were also 'a world in themselves'.[31] 'The ebb and flow of the tide has, moreover, I fancy, some effect upon the atmosphere in these parts', Jones surmised, before observing that '[h]owever still the air may be, yet the constant movement of a large volume of water must more or less affect it.'[32] The commercial aspect of sailortown depended precisely on the mariner's global travels, and according to this writer, within the shops and establishments of the place, 'many a sailor turns his collection of foreign curiosities into money'.[33] Thus Jones remarked on an establishment in Ratcliffe Highway in the 1860s that was filled with parrots and a vendor who claimed to be able to purvey the sale of tigers, orangutans, and apes. This shop, located on the famous maritime thoroughfare, offered 'a collection of all sorts of heterogeneous things from all parts of the world – armour, china, inlaid furniture, shells, idols, implements of savage warfare, and what not'.[34]

The language used by social explorers to sketch the landscape of the waterfront reflects their fascination with the urban terraqueous environment. In the context of a recent emphasis in literary and cultural criticism on the so-called cultural anxieties of the Victorians, it is easy to overlook those earlier writers' evident pleasure and appetite for describing the outlandish and the heterodox (and, by implication, their keen awareness of the public's desire to read of it). Some commentators did, however, express concern about sailortown and sailors' licentiousness and apparent deviancy. The writer and social investigator Florence Bell, for example, remarked in her book on workplaces and homes of Middlesborough (on the River

Tees), that there was 'something in the intercourse of sailors from other ports who come and go, nomadic, unvouched for, who appear and disappear, with no responsibility for their words or their deeds, that seems to bring to the whole world a kinship of lawlessness and disorder'.[35] Many other writers decried the practices of crimps (boarding-house runners) and prostitutes in these areas who 'preyed' on 'poor Jack', as part of reformist and disciplinary campaigns driven by 'simultaneous concern and contempt for the sailor class as self-governing subjects'.[36] But writers' perceptions of the vibrancy and allure of waterside quarters – together with an apprehension of the promise of strangeness and risk glimpsed where the city tipped towards the water's edge – are equally and emphatically evident.

Even before the compound term 'sailortown' became commonly used, writers attempted to characterise and define their sense of the composite nature of a terraqueous environment that fused disparate things into new formations. That comingling could result in a sense of estrangement: things seemed visibly or sensorily different and exotic on the waterfront, without yet being wholly alienating. This perception was sometimes registered through the trope of a writer sensing an invigorating shift in atmosphere, appearance or experience as they approached what one observer calls the 'very muddy, tarry, salt-water-smelling portion of the metropolis'.[37] In this manner, the journalist James Ewing Ritchie remarked as he approached the streets, stores, and beer-houses of Ratcliffe Highway: 'Everything has a nautical adaptation.'[38] As the term 'nautical adaptation' suggests, sailortown appeared to perform a type of semiotic alchemy, transforming drab shops and boarding-houses into a more fanciful and appealing network of settings.[39] Journalists, too, could use this topography as a colourful setting for tales of urban trickery and deceit; simply put, sailortown provided good copy. Thus writers rehearsed carnivalesque stories of marine store-keepers who purveyed stolen goods from the docks; tap water disguised as gin; 'sailors wives' who were prostitutes; lodging-house keepers or brothel owners addressed as 'Mother'; 'duffers' who peddled smuggled goods to seamen; shops selling life-buoys stuffed with a cheap, sinkable straw. Indeed, as one entry for *Household Words* notes of the 'nautical regions' east of the Tower of London: 'Even the policeman is not the stern composed guardian of the constitution familiar to Regent Street; he is too often an easy *dégagé* man, with loose belt and wildish air.'[40]

Sailors themselves reported this sense of worldly otherness in sailortown. '[W]hen a fellow lives the greater part of his life afloat, all land is to him, more or less, fairy land,' remarked a midshipman to an enquiring journalist: 'He feels when he gets on shore as a respectable man would,

who had been miraculously detained a year or so in a balloon. Hence, he can scarcely be called *compos*, but wanders like an Eastern in an enchanted valley, and requires protection!'[41] The haptic culture shock of being on shore after long periods at sea was one aspect of the sailor's sense of the 'unreality' of the waterfront. It Sailortown could provide mariners with a form of imagined community, forged not only by national identity but through a network of cultural markers connoting a maritime aesthetic and a sense of belonging to a wider world that lay beyond the streets of any specific place. For all the talk of sailors being lost – or paradoxically 'at sea' – when on land in foreign ports, sailortown had the potential to offer a familiar, codified environment that replicated itself across the globe. The decorated signboards outside sailor taverns, for example, provided a heterogeneous semiotic field of harpoons, mermaids, ships, and crowns that appealed to its nautical clientele. Rather than indexing the names of local places, these pan-geographical signs of maritime hospitality expressed references that were both transnational and mythological: 'Admiral's Cabin', 'Mare Nostrum', 'The Pacific', 'The Atlantic', 'The Flying Cloud', 'The East Indiamen', 'Bucket of Blood', 'Flags of All Nations', 'House of All Nations', 'The Spyglass', 'Arctic Whaler', 'Wheel of Fortune'.[42] Other names indicated the nationality of the proprietor and directed its hospitality to a particular foreign seafaring clientele.

Like its agglutinative name, sailortown fused diverse things together: houses and ships; urban poverty and cosmopolitanism; bonhomie and violence; commerce and mythology; the grit of the city with the fluid horizon of the sea. Mitchell, a missionary reformer, reflected that both in name and character, sailortown was a 'paradox; a conglomeration of good and evil; a mixture of sweet and bitter … the reservoir of the flotsam and jetsam of the seven seas'.[43] Sailortown made explicit and visible the paradoxes of the Victorian city and global capitalism itself – spectacle on the one hand, abject poverty on the other. In the context of American port cities, for example, Dan Walden comments on the 'inherently contradictory' nature of these parts. Noting that they provided 'entry points for the goods and wealth that drive the expanding American economy', he also observes that 'the waterfront regions of those cities contain the most pathetic abject poverty in the country. Port cities border the ocean, an expansive, limitless, and free realm, but the waterfront is often cramped, dark, and squalid.'[44] Indeed, the coarse attributes of British sailortown, as a site of working-class poverty, disease, and violence, can be traced through its demotic nicknames, as later recorded by Hugill: 'The Guts, Cages, Numbers, Rags, Shit Streets, Bluffs, and Rows'.[45] The evidence of seafarers' memoirs, rather

than the more fanciful contemporary reportage of newspapers, lays bare the common sailor's own sense of the stark realities of making a temporary 'home' in poor waterside quarters.[46] Sailor-author Frank Bullen, for example, emphasised how stepping on to native land, after a trip abroad, was no guarantee of a benevolent homecoming. Using an oceanic metaphor to describe his experience of shore life, he described his 'penniless' temporary stay in Liverpool as being 'again adrift in my own country' and his memoirs give scant detail of his 'solitary wanderings in Liverpool' before he decided to set sail again.[47]

While the floating space of the ship has long been seen as emblematic of an emergent cosmopolitan workforce and society, sailortown also presents a vital example of a multiracial, multilinguistic, and cosmopolitan place within the Victorian city.[48] The descriptive evidence from newspapers, periodicals, and memoirs are important in this sense precisely because of the incomplete nature of public records to fully reflect the diverse population of port cities at this time. As John Belchem and Donald MacRaild put it, in the context of Victorian Liverpool, '"snapshot" census figures' cannot be relied on 'to capture the essential character of Liverpool's shifting seaborne population', including its 'ethnic groups [that] came and went with the tides'.[49] The presence of Victorian Britain's black population in port cities, for example, is palpable in ephemeral texts that lie beyond official public records. Thus Caroline Bressey's analysis of tangential items in the local press, including classified advertisements and notices, traces Liverpool's ethnic diversity in the nineteenth-century city, including figures such as a black tattoo artist, known to his customers as 'Professor Johnson', who plied his trade from a public house near the Liverpool Sailors' Home in Paradise Street in the 1880s.[50]

This did not mean that port cities such as Liverpool, with their 'precocious multicultural demographic profile', were a cosmopolitan haven for its foreign sojourners, and some merchant seafarers of colour experienced brutal treatment.[51] A newspaper report in the *Liverpool Mercury* in 1880, for example, detailed the racist treatment meted out to black seafarers – men who formed part of crews that brought ships and cargo to Britain and then found themselves homeless, hungry, 'treated like dogs', and without the means to return home.[52] Indeed, while British port cities offered a certain degree of transnational fluidity, the presence of foreign sailors was increasingly regulated throughout the nineteenth century. Some shipowners refused to employ black sailors and lascars on the grounds of race. Others were impelled to provide lists of all lascar sailors and could be heavily fined if their crew did not return to ships and instead called upon

the charity of the Poor Law.[53] The reality was that not all sailors benefitted equally from the delights that sailortown promised.

As a contact zone between city and sea, Victorian sailortown appeared to form a separate sphere, within a wider cultural context that was increasingly dependent on firm categories, including those pertaining to the precepts of domestic ideology and gendered comportment. Despite its name, women were central to the social life and industry of sailortown, including the business of hospitality that accommodated a body of labourers who formed, in Raphael Samuel's phrase, one strand of a number of 'comers and goers' within the Victorian city.[54] From early in the century women, including dockers' wives, laboured as textile workers producing sailors' slops (cheap forms of sailor clothing and the first ready-to-wear clothing),[55] and they also worked as sailmakers, public house landladies, and lodging-house keepers. In contemporary writing, however, the most prominent female figures described in sketches of global sailortowns were prostitutes. To the journalist George Augustus Sala, for example, the prostitute was more of a mainstay of those parts than even the sailor himself ('Jack is a cosmopolite – here to-day, gone to-morrow; but Jill is peculiar to maritime London').[56] Writers represented the sex workers of sailortown in predictably caricatured terms, not least as the predatory scourge of Jack Ashore. Aligned as the female counterpart to the crimp, she was said to prey upon male seafarers who found themselves 'waylaid by the women', in a reversal of standard gender roles.[57] Ritchie also deployed common tropes when he wrote of '[w]omen, wild-eyed, boisterous, with cheeks red with rouge and flabby with intemperance, decked out with dresses and ribbons of the gayest hue' who were 'resolved on victimising poor Jack'.[58] In Tiger Bay, Cardiff's sailortown, the journalist James Greenwood resorted to figures of the masculine woman to describe the presence of prostitutes as 'petticoated bipeds', demanding drink with the 'air of a Whitechapel fighting man in female disguise'.[59] John Binny, who contributed to Mayhew's survey of London labour, divided his classification of prostitutes into two groups; the stereotype of the 'dissipated and abandoned' woman, many of them possessing 'a robust, coarse, masculine frame', and the younger and 'more respectable-looking' girls who, 'dress tolerably well, in silk and merino gowns with crinolines, and bonnets gaily attired with flowers and ribbons. Many of them have velvet stripes across the breast and back of their gowns, and large brooches with the portrait of a sailor encased in them.'[60] This emphasis is echoed in one of Booth's survey, as the notetaker distinguished the 'lowest class of woman' who worked around the 'Fenian barracks' in Bromley from the

'younger prostitute [who] is in appearance the "sailor's wife" of Ratcliffe Highway (Sage & Albert Streets): the clean white apron & the frizzed hair & earrings is the mark of this class'.[61]

While the 'sailor's wife' was a well-known euphemism for the sailortown prostitute, it was also a description of a more intricate and reciprocally beneficial common-law relationship within working-class communities.[62] Some women engaged in long-term relationships with sailors, while continuing to work as prostitutes in port cities; indeed, a relationship with a sailor could be a source of stability for such women, who could draw on their partners' pay while they remained away at sea. Using a paradoxical but suggestive phrase, Jones referred to 'an illegitimate sort of faithfulness' existing among prostitutes and itinerant sailors in 1870s London.[63] Some sailors appeared to be tolerant of the fact that they returned from voyages to find their wives cohabiting with other men as a means of economic survival, and there appears to have been a consistency to these outwardly irregular relationships.[64] The journalist, Bracebridge Hemyng, for instance, described how sailors arrived in port, collected their wages, then 'picked up some women to whom they considered themselves married pro tem., and to whom they gave the money they had made by their last voyage'.[65] One of Hemyng's female respondents, a German woman who had lived in England for six years, straightforwardly set out her polyandrous, semi-settled relationship with an English sailor in the following terms:

> His ship is in docks, and will not sail for one months from this time I am now speaking. He always lives with me when he come on shore. He is nice man and give me all his money when he land always. I take all his money while he with me, and not spend it quick as some of your English women do. If I not to take care, he would spend all in one week. Sailor boy always spend money like rain water; he throw it into the street and not care to pick it up again, leave it for crossing-sweeper or errand-boy who pass that way. I give him little when he want it; he know me well and have great deal confidence in me. … I know very many sailors – six, eight, ten, oh! more than that. They are my husbands. I am not married, of course not, but they think me their wife while they are on shore. I do not care much for any of them; I have a lover of my own, he is waiter in a lodging and coffee house.[66]

This suggestive narrative, which challenges so many received Victorian proprieties, makes clear the intricacies of one form of the international urban-maritime family, in which the female partner adopted the role of lover, maternal protector, and rigorous account-keeper for each of her sailor 'husbands'.

Another woman situated in a lodging-house in the notorious slum area of Bluegate Fields near the London docks, China Emma (or 'Chaney Emm' to her friends), related how she lived with a sailor 'as his wife' for six years, drawing on his half-pay throughout that time. He subsequently died of yellow fever in the West Indies, but she was keen to emphasise that he had not cut her off: 'for one of his mates brought me a silver snuff-box he used to carry his quids in, which he sent me when he was at his last'.[67] She was now in a relationship with 'a Chinaman called Appoo' who sent her regular money, although Chaney Emm regretted the fact that her new partner was far less tolerant of her drinking.[68] Interestingly, Joseph Salter, the missionary at the Strangers' Home for Asiatics, Africans, and South Sea Islanders that opened in Limehouse in 1857, also mentions a 'Chinese Emma', alongside a number of other women known by the international monikers 'Calcutta Louisa' and 'Lascar Sally', all of whom were English mistresses of lodging-houses catering for Chinese, Malays, and Indians. He claimed that they had learned and now spoke 'the Oriental vernacular', even acting as interpreters in court cases involving sailor-lodgers.[69] As Judith Walkowitz explains, 'women provided a whole series of social as well as sexual services to sailors in port, housing them, holding their money, and protecting them from being skinned by unscrupulous lodging-house keepers and thief-prostitutes', while a relationship with a sailor might, in fact, offer a woman the financial security to get out of prostitution.[70] Walkowitz further argues that these women's 'temporary moves into and out of prostitution reflected the fluid social identity among the casual laboring poor who so violated Victorian society's sense of order and place'.[71] They, too, were subject to the precarious rhythms of the maritime trade: as Hemyng observed, sailors' wives were 'at times well off, but at others, through their improvidence and the slackness of the shipping, immersed in poverty'.[72]

More generally, the issue of hospitality and the provision of accommodation for sailors were key aspects of the waterfront's internal economy (particularly in port cities such as Liverpool where it was illegal for sailors to sleep overnight on vessels). The question of securing some form of temporary home was all the more salient since, as Palmer shows, by the late nineteenth century 'increasingly the business of manning sailing vessels fell to those without family ties and to foreigners' and 'a third of sailors coming into London were alleged to be entirely without any home anywhere in the world'.[73] Cheap lodging-houses offered temporary accommodation, setting out to welcome the sailor's custom with a 'homely' nautical appearance. Like drinking taverns, lodgings could be decorated with maritime-inflected fixtures and fittings, based on the principle that

the sailor's 'real' home was the sea.[74] This pan-national symbology served to gloss over one of the many paradoxical features of sailortown: self-conscious cosmopolitanism juxtaposed with explicit forms of national self-identification.

The provision of this homeliness extended to the philanthropic attempts to provide safe shelter – as well as modes of discipline and regulation – for the mariner in the form of institutional sailors' homes. In an age of much-lauded separate spheres marked along gender lines, sailors' homes stand as an anomaly in their functioning as model forms of a respectable homosocial domesticity, bereft of traditional feminine touches and exclusively designed for maritime men. Opened in 1835, for example, the London Home in Well Street became a well-known lodging-place for British seamen in port, providing a large reception room and communal hall that featured a ship's bell in one corner 'used for the purpose of sounding the hours, according to the fashion followed on board ships at sea'.[75] Henry Mayhew was one of many visitors and commentators who was drawn to inspect this home and laud its attractive and 'peculiar character'. He admired an all-male homely scene: sitting by the fireplace, 'newly "rigged out"' sailors were 'smoking and chatting together', while others 'in couples, pace half across the hall, backwards and forwards, as if still upon the deck'.[76] 'The whole place smacks of the sea', Reverend Jones remarked approvingly of the London Home, noting the dial on the wall which measured the weather at the entrance, the maps and rigged ship models.[77] By 1872, the sailors' home was presented as a type of working-man's club, offering, at least to the clients who could afford the accommodation, a bar serving refreshments to its boarders, a barber shop, and a skittle room in the basement.

In Liverpool's ornate Sailors' Home, built in 1850 on the corner of Paradise Street, the building was also designed to project a respectable maritime domesticity:

> The interior was of novel character to imitate that of a man-of-war, the sailors' department was in the form of an amphitheatre, the ground floor an assembly room, whilst the rows of galleries at every 10 or 12ft were set apart as dormitories, each man having a small room, something like a cabin.[78]

In a perfect fusion of its ornamental and disciplinary purposes, the Liverpool Home's imposing iron gates – used to enforce a strict curfew on sailor-residents – invoked the symbology of the sea through a fanciful design of nautical motifs, including fish, shells, ropes. Wrought in iron, Melusine, the twin-tailed mermaid, provided an erotic charge on the gates that bordered Liverpool's red-light district.

Beyond their material properties, sailors' homes, of both the down-at-heel and institutional varieties, were sites of important social relations beyond those of immediate kin, and seafarers could form attachments to the male and female proprietors of both private and philanthropic establishments.[79] In Melville's semi-autobiographical *Redburn* (discussed in more detail below), the Liverpool boarding-house at which the eponymous hero stays is a transnational partnership between 'a broken-down American mariner' and his 'buxom English wife [who] lived upon her industry', although it is the woman who has the entrepreneurial nous: 'Mary had become the business personage of the house, bought the marketing, overlooked the tables, and conducted all the more important arrangements.' Her lodgers feel loyalty towards their landlady, and even try to defend her when she is set upon by her violent, drunken husband: 'The sailors took her part, and many a time volunteered to give him a thorough thrashing before her eyes; but Mary would beg them not to do so, as Danby would, no doubt, be a better boy next time.'[80]

Father Robert Dolling, the vicar of the Winchester College Mission of St Agatha's, in Landport, reported with parental exasperation and fondness on the intermittent relationship he had established with sailors of the 'Portsmouth slum' over ten years:

> Sailors seldom, or never, write. I have known lads use our house continually for eighteen months, then be ordered abroad, and walk in in three years' time, saying, 'Oh, I lost your address,' or, 'I didn't know what to say, so I didn't write.' And then they would use the house again as if they had only left it yesterday, very likely showing us that they had thought about us by bringing us some impossible gifts – 'curios' they would call them – sometimes a monkey, sometimes a bird.[81]

Friendship, a neglected but important aspect of kinship relations, particularly within maritime networks, was a significant element in the practices of sailortown hospitality.[82] The Reverend George Hill, who, along with his wife Emily Hill (née Jennings) ran a charitable home for sailors in the notorious Ratcliffe Highway, operated a form of philanthropy founded on the idea of friendship. 'Outcast sailors', as Hill's biographer labels them, were among the prime benefactors of this extended philanthropic friendship, and the couple appear to have spent much of their working lives in correspondence with sailors, receiving their 'confidence about everything, from the troubles in the forec'sle to the welfare of their families'.[83] In one instance, a sailor who boarded a leaky unseaworthy vessel had apparently penned his last letter to Hill on board the foundering

ship, asking his former host to pass on a message to his wife and family if nothing was heard from him within six months.[84] Such arrangements may have been ad hoc and transient, but maritime boarding-houses and sailors' homes formed a significant social network of community, professional opportunity, and care, beyond the dominant, heteronormative spaces of the Victorian city.

The Sailor in the City: Performing Sailorhood

If sailortown presented an alluring setting in the Victorian urban imagination, its chief character was, of course, the sailor himself. Indeed, 'Jack Tar in the streets' can be added to the diverse and colourful street types that Victorians were fond of narrating, alongside the street-seller, costermonger, flower-seller, patterer, and street urchin. The idea that the sailor was 'knowable' on shore – that is, instantly recognisable through appearance, behaviour, speech, and character – had been a recurring trope extending from at least the eighteenth century. In her reading of 'A Message from the Sea' (1860), a nautical short story by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins published in *All the Year Round*, Anthea Trodd traces the way in which the 'archetypal Tar' of the post-Napoleonic decades was seen to transmit an 'open spontaneous expression of feeling' (particularly in his role in stage drama) and an 'instant identifiableness': an anomaly and reassurance in a 'modern world of reserve and secrecy, where it was increasingly difficult to ascertain the occupation or identity of persons encountered'.[85] Sailors were thus embedded in a tradition of urban writing as a visually identifiable and audibly frank figure who presented as a colourful and curious specimen on the peopled landscape of the Victorian city. Early in the nineteenth century, particular emphasis had been placed on the sailor's exotic appearance and comportment. Hay, for example, remarked on the visible character of the 'jolly tar', outlandish in both the literal and figurative senses of the term as he sauntered along the streets of Plymouth:

> with his white dimity trowsers fringed at the bottom, his fine scarlet waistcoat bound with black ribbon, his dark blue broadcloth jacket studded with pearl buttons, his black silk neckcloth thrown carelessly about his sunburnt neck. An elegant hat of straw, indicative of his recent return from a foreign station, cocked on one side; a head of hair reaching to his waistband; a smart switch made from the back bone of a shark under one arm .... Thus fitted out, in good sailing trim, as he himself styles it, he strides along with all the importance of an Indian Nabob.[86]

Later in the mid-nineteenth century, the clergyman-turned-social-investigator Thomas Beames observed the sailor as a type of species that superseded racial boundaries at a time when those categories were being codified:

> Some are Negroes, many foreigners, – but the Jersey frock – the souwester, or tarpaulin hat – the pilot coat and pea jacket – the large trousers gathered in tight at the hips – the rolling walk as though the ship was pitching beneath them – the low quartered shoes with large bows, are characteristics of a race, which, whether at home or abroad, are distinguished in a moment from the rest of the population.[87]

These accounts figure sailors as providing a visual spectacle, attracting the attention of passers-by for their flamboyant dress, sunburnt skin, distinct way of walking or strolling, generosity with money, rambunctiousness and drunkenness, and their possession of exotic, global goods.[88] The sailor in the city was thus hyper-visible – an attractive figure and the object of what Joanne Begiato calls the 'female and male desirous gaze'.[89] According to Begiato, this gaze extended to a number of other labouring figures – but the sailor in town, who was at leisure rather than engaged in the physical, dangerous, and dirty work that defined him – was especially well-placed to become the object of scrutiny:

> His body bore and made visible his professional identity through his metaphorical arms and heart of oak and his literally distinctive skin and clothing. … When combined with their specialised clothing – trousers whose fabric and shape marked the sailor out as a man of cosmopolitan, global significance – it is not surprising that men and women desired and consumed the erotic frisson of the general image of the sailor ….[90]

Contemporary literary representations also placed an emphasis on the sailor's visual allure, including the portrayal of the 'Handsome Sailor' strolling the docks of Liverpool in the opening pages of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1886), and the intense scrutiny of the physique of the fallen first mate, in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1899).

Sailors had a vivid aural presence too and were deemed famous for their distinctive 'sailor talk'.[91] This heteroglot maritime speech – with its specialist jargon and pidgin words – appeared a fitting idiom for the floating citizenry of global sailortown. R.L. Stevenson described it as a 'free or common accent among English-speaking men who follow the sea. They catch a twang in a New England Port; from a cockney skipper, even a Scotsman sometimes learns to drop an *h*; a word of dialect is picked up from another hand in the forecastle; until often the result is undecipherable, and you

have to ask for the man's place of birth.'[92] In this way, sailors exemplified the principle of indexicality, a term in linguistics that denotes how particular modes of speech, including accents and specific forms of vocabulary, are discursively constructed in such a way as to become markers attached to cultural and social identity categories.[93] Sailor talk, like the classic visual markers of nautical appearance (neckscarves, tattoos, jewellery) indexed a common semiotic system of differentiation and recognition that served to categorise seafaring men on shore.

Such indexicality is sometimes presented as being merely constructed from the outside by observers who are able to identify members of social groups such as sailors (or Cockneys, Scousers, and so on) through modes of speech and 'characteristic' behaviour. As Dening argues, since the Georgian period it had been politically expedient to render sailors' language 'incongruous and laughable on land', their otherness 'controlled by a joke'.[94] But what prevents indexicality from being merely external stereotyping is that its workings are also understood and actively deployed by those who are seemingly codified by it. As Tony Crowley argues in this regard, as indexicality develops, linguistic markers are 'available for both "insiders" and "outsiders" to "perform" the identity, for purposes ranging from self-identification, to solidarity, irony or even ridicule'.[95] In this sense, sailors did not simply spontaneously produce their sailor talk and ways, since through their speech they became performative agents of the sailor identity – an identity that could be deployed and altered for a variety of different ends. As I will go on to argue, the sailor identity in the city was in fact far more complex and multifunctional than its caricatured representation would suggest.

Despite a long-standing emphasis on sailors as a transparent, recognisable type, sailors in cities always carried a dislocated identity. For an ironic feature of sailortown was that its eponymous residents – the sailors – were not practising the vocation from which they derived their name but instead embodying the persona of 'Jack Ashore' (journalese for the visiting tar). This was a related but distinct identity, a discrepancy noted by a late-Victorian social commentator who mused that in the age of steam, a sailor paradoxically looked more sailor-like in his 'shore "rig-out"' garb than in his 'greasy and grimy' work clothes.[96] In this regard, Beverly Lemire points out that historically the mariner would wear his best clothes in port, with bespoke 'decorative touches' to defy the literal uniformity of his naval garb. In this sense, and in the context of the Victorian enthusiasm for taxonomy, the sailor thus both amply fulfilled his caricature, but also embodied the slipperiness of fixed social identity. And while 'a

mariner's vocation was written on his body and his clothes', his appearance was, in fact, by no means transparent.[97] Clothes, as McClintock observes, 'are the visible signs of social identity but are also permanently subject to disarrangement and symbolic theft'.[98] Thus, as the urban detective of literature would increasingly come to realise, the fact was that the more distinctive the urban 'type', the more it became available as a form of disguise and deception.[99] Indeed, the idea that 'sailorliness' could be performative can be traced through the linguistic shifts by which 'sailor' becomes attributive in forms such as 'sailor-like' (1805), 'sailor-fashion' (1848), 'sailor-phrase' (1856), 'sailor-looking' (1890) and as an element in compound nouns such as 'sailor hat' (1873), 'sailor mind' (1894), and, of course, 'sailor town' itself.

In this respect, it is telling that Mayhew's encyclopaedic compendium of social and cultural urban types sought to provide lengthy descriptions of the sailor's urban counterpart, the fake sailor, as well as actual sailors. For, somewhat paradoxically, all the things that made the sailor distinctive – his appearance, gait, talk – also made him liable to impersonation. Thus while sailors were defined by their own slang and argot rooted in the workings of maritime labour at sea, that very self-same salty 'sailor talk' was among the nautical trickster's most notable feature. Such ersatz sailors of the urban streets included a number of sub-types: religious tract sellers 'who were, or pretended to be, maimed old soldiers and sailors'; the 'lurking patterer'; the 'shallow cove' (a beggar who tells tales of shipwreck); 'turnpike sailors'; 'swells out of luck'; the 'screever' (writer of false petitions); the writer of 'slum letters' and 'fakements' (fake begging letters designed to elicit money); 'duffers', 'hawkers', and 'lumpers of pretended goods'.[100] One character observed by Mayhew was a 'lurking patterer' known as Captain Moody, an orphan who had tried out a number of trades before his 'roving disposition then induced him to try the sea, and the knowledge he obtained during several voyages fitted him for those maritime frauds which got him the name of "Captain Moody, the lurker"'.[101] After a lifetime of impersonation, he cut a forlorn figure:

> Old, and worn out by excesses and imprisonment, he subsists now by 'sitting pad' about the suburban pavements; and when, on a recent evening, he was recognised in a low public-house in Deptford, he was heard to say, with a sigh: 'Ah! once I could "screeve a fakement" (write a petition) or "cooper a monekur" (forge a signature) with any man alive, and my heart's game now; but I'm old and asthmatic, and got the rheumatis, so that I ain't worth a d—n.'[102]

With a certain degree of irony, some of the sham sailors' best customers were the 'real' sailors themselves, who either took pity on their counterparts or failed to see through the lurkers' performative disguises. Mayhew spoke to one interlocutor who had cause to comment on this:

> I have often thought it strange … that these men could induce any one to credit the fact of their being sailors, for, notwithstanding the showy manner in which they chew their quid, and the jack-tar like fashion in which they suffer their whiskers to grow, there is such a fresh-waterfied appearance about them, that they look no more like a regular mariner than the supernumerary seamen in a nautical drama, at the Victoria Theatre.[103]

In his lively study on the 'dealings, dodgings, and doings' of hawkers and street dealers in the North of England, another writer made a similar point: 'To make "their tales of smuggling" more plausible … they dress in the garb of sailors; the "make-up", however, is generally over done, the habilimente being more flashy, and "character" like, than those of the genuine salt water "tar", and, therefore, their appearance may not be inaptly termed, *ultramarine*.'[104]

As part of their repartee and solicitation, the sham tar used precisely the discursive style of a transglobal seafaring brotherhood. As Mayhew reported:

> They address the simple-looking passers by thus: 'Shipmate' (here they take off their fur-cap and spit their quid into it) – 'shipmate, I've just come ashore arter a long voyage – and splice me but I've something in the locker that'll be of service to you; and, shiver my timbers' (they are very profuse in nautical terms), 'you shall have it at your own price, for I'm determined to have a spree, and I haven't a shot in the locker; helm's a-lee; just let's turn into this creek, and I'll show you what it is' (perhaps he persuades his dupe down a court, or to a neighbouring public-house).[105]

Yet the usual street laws of supply and demand applied in the case of these maritime schemes too, and some 'pretended tars' were impelled to seek out a 'fresh lurk'. As one such turnpike sailor put it, using the turn-of phrase of the land-bound fake mariner: 'The Shallow [cove] got so grannied (known) in London, that the supplies got queer, and I quitted the land navy. Shipwrecks got so common in the streets, you see, that people didn't care for them, and I dropped getting cast away.'[106] In this and other instances, the supposedly 'frank' and plain-speaking sailor became the brazen purveyor of stylised maritime speech.

Aside from the more carnivalesque examples that abound in the archive of urban writing, it is worth noting that dressing up as a sailor had a more

radical history. In the US context, for example, it was precisely this guise that facilitated Frederick Douglass to escape enslavement by boarding a vessel. As W. Jeffrey Bolster points out, 'Douglass employed a seafaring subterfuge instead of a ship to escape his chains. Rigging himself out in "a red shirt and tarpaulin hat and black cravat, tied in sailor fashion, carelessly and loosely about my neck", he borrowed a seamen's protection certificate from a bona fide black sailor and struck out for Philadelphia by train.'[107] Likewise, in her autobiographical account, Harriet Jacobs told the story of her escape from enslavement in 1835 using the androgynous disguise of 'a suit of sailor's clothes, – jacket, trowsers, and tarpaulin hat' brought to her by a friend who advised her: 'Put your hands in your pockets, and walk ricketty, like de sailors.'[108] Thus for all that sailors were deemed to be knowable, the evidence of the literature suggests that they also navigated and depended for economic (or literal) survival on the fact that identities were more malleable and fluid than the trope of the 'frank' sailor suggests.

Herman Melville's *Redburn*: Perambulations in Liverpool's Sailortown

The waterfront was chronicled not only in the quotidian print world of journalism and social commentary, but also formed an imaginative topography in Victorian fiction – although its role as a distinctive literary chronotope remains underexplored. There, too, it could function as an environment defined by comingled realities and as a place that deviated from standard forms. As argued by Jason Finch and Jessica Kelly, the 'waterside slice', running eastwards from the City of London along the Thames, attracted a 'specific imaginative literature' from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, extending from Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* to Thomas Burke's collection of stories *Limehouse Nights* (1915).[109] Away from London, and before the publication of *Our Mutual Friend*, it was an American author who best captured the real and imagined topography of British sailortown. Based on his own voyage to Liverpool in 1837, Herman Melville's semi-autobiographical novel, *Redburn, His First Voyage* (1849), makes the port city itself the destination for this rendition of the initiation-by-seafaring story. The 'son of a gentleman', compelled to find employment as a common sailor before the mast of a trading vessel travelling between New York and Liverpool due to a demise in the family circumstances, Wellingborough Redburn follows in the watery footsteps of his father, who had visited the city as a young man. On board the ship,

his more worldly and well-travelled fellow sailors tell tales about port cities, spinning urban myths as part of their stock of yarns:

> During the greater part of the watch, the sailors sat on the windlass and told long stories of their adventures by sea and land, and talked about Gibraltar, and Canton, and Valparaiso, and Bombay, just as you and I would about Peck Slip and the Bowery. Every man of them almost was a volume of Voyages and Travels round the World. And what most struck me was that like books of voyages they often contradicted each other, and would fall into long and violent disputes about who was keeping the Foul Anchor tavern in Portsmouth at such a time; or whether the King of Canton lived or did not live in Persia; or whether the bar-maid of a particular house in Hamburg had black eyes or blue eyes; with many other mooted points of that sort.[110]

The port city of Liverpool was a particular favourite among the sailors for this kind of mythologising. As Redburn remarks, 'sailors love this Liverpool; and upon long voyages to distant parts of the globe, will be continually dilating upon its charms and attractions, and extolling it above all other sea-ports in the world'.[111] Liverpool, for Redburn, is an imagined place, constructed at sea even before it is encountered as a real city, a point accentuated by the image of the young greenhorn 'leaning over the side, and trying to summon up some image of Liverpool, to see how the reality would answer to my conceit'.[112] When the ship eventually enters the port through fog and mist, Redburn's view of the Liverpool waterfront is tinged with disappointment as he is confronted with a stolid line of commercial warehouses stretching along the waterfront: the storehouses of goods traded between port cities that constituted the material reality of global capitalism.[113] Not for the last time in the novel, Redburn is forced to reconcile a twin perception – a myth and the reality behind it – as he embarks on his Liverpool adventure.

On shore, Redburn's fascination and disappointment continue as he spends his first night in the city at a boarding-house named in traditional nautical style – the 'Baltimore Clipper' – run by 'a broken-down American mariner' and his industrious English wife 'Hansome Mary' who serves as landlady of the place.[114] It is one of an array of such houses adorned by transnational nautical symbology, being 'each distinguished by gilded emblems outside – an anchor, a crown, a ship, a windlass, or a dolphin'.[115] Ensconced within, he reflects on the fact that he is finally 'seated upon an English bench, under an English roof, in an English tavern, forming an integral part of the English empire', but the interior surroundings quickly serve to deflate any sense of national and imperial grandeur.[116] For what he

sees before him is 'a long, narrow, little room, with one small arched window with red curtains, looking out upon a smoky, untidy yard, bounded by a dingy brick-wall, the top of which was horrible with pieces of broken old bottles stuck into mortar'.[117] Representations of maritime worldliness decorate the place, but in what he observes to be a rough improvised form: from a 'dull lamp … placed in a wooden ship suspended from the ceiling', to the wallpaper which features 'an endless succession of vessels of all nations continually circumnavigating the apartment', to a map 'representing in faded colors the flags of all nations'.[118] Upstairs the dining room features 'smoky walls, of what had once been sea-blue, covered with sailor-scrawls of foul anchors, lovers' sonnets, and ocean ditties', while playing cards of Jack, the knave, are pinned across the wainscot.[119] Sailortown's familiar maritime iconography is rendered here in a decidedly down-at-heel form. This prompts Redburn's growing scepticism about how much of the 'world' the sailor really sees on the peripheral edge spaces of sailortown:

> I began to see, that my prospects of seeing the world as a sailor were, after all, but very doubtful; for sailors only go *round* the world without going *into* it; and their reminiscences of travel are only a dim recollection of a chain of tap-rooms surrounding the globe, parallel with the Equator. They but touch the perimeter of the circle; hover about the edges of terra-firma; and only land upon wharves and pier-heads.[120]

Yet Redburn's dejection at the sailor's limited vision is in one sense premature, belying what is shown to be his own rather more penetrating reading of the city. Both naïve and perceptive, Redburn will come to see precisely the dual heart of global sailortown – a place of inalienable riches and poverty. Thus he observes the Merseyside docks in all their cosmopolitan glory as a type of watery Great Exhibition: 'a grand caravansary inn, and hotel', a 'walled town, full of life and commotion … a small archipelago, an epitome of the world …. Here are brought together the remotest limits of the earth; and in the collective spars and timbers of these ships, all the forests of the globe are represented, as in a grand parliament of masts.'[121] Yet Redburn also sees the underbelly of portside poverty as he strolls 'the cellars, sinks, and hovels of the wretched lanes and courts near the river', observing the 'tattered wretches' raking through the ships' debris heaped along the docks.[122] The dual vision again captures the paradoxes of sailortown: a collage of writing and advertisements papered on the dock walls emblematise the opportunism and textual heteroglossia of the waterfront, its 'semiotic mangle',[123] where scrawled begging messages, or 'advertisements of pauperism', are pasted alongside notices of the departure of

ships sailing for the United States, Canada, and New South Wales.[124] And in the neighbouring streets Redburn observes interracial couples who seem to walk free from prejudice. 'In Liverpool indeed the negro steps with a prouder pace, and lifts his head like a man', he observes, noting the 'black steward' from the *Highlander*, now 'dressed very handsomely, and walking arm in arm with a good-looking English woman'.[125] But as he reaches the financial heart of the city – the Merchants' Exchange – the foundation of the city's wealth is revealed by his downward enquiring gaze. There he looks upon the statue depicting Nelson's heroic death, his eyes drawn to the figures of the enslaved men who decorate its base. These captive men, he acknowledges, were 'emblematic of Nelson's principal victories; but I never could look at their swarthy limbs and manacles, without being involuntarily reminded of four African slaves in the market-place'.[126] The city's wealth and its history, Redburn's gaze implies, is entwined with the spoils of imperialism and enslaved labour.[127]

A type of sailor-*flâneur* – the mariner as observer rather than observed – Redburn is both in thrall to and questioning of the surface effects of the waterfront. In the sailortown district, 'the narrow streets where the sailor boarding-houses are kept', he continues to survey the characteristic mingling of cosmopolitanism with extreme poverty. Even the soundscape of the place captures this binary, where 'old sailors who chance to stumble upon a shipmate, last seen in Calcutta or Savannah' greet each other and music is played, interlaced with the 'groaning and whining of beggars'.[128] Redburn remarks directly on the endemic destitution of the place: 'In these haunts, beggary went on before me wherever I walked, and dogged me unceasingly at the heels. Poverty, poverty, poverty, in almost endless vistas.'[129] On one of his observational walks he encounters the distressing vision of a starving woman and her children surviving in one of the unsanitary cellar-dwellings in the town – the veritable underbelly of the so-called Second City of Empire. But when he tries to summon help from a policeman, he is patronised with the injunction: 'There, now, Jack, go on board your ship, and stick to it; and leave these matters to the town.'[130] After bringing the family food and water, served from his sailor's tarpaulin hat, Redburn returns on the third day to find that there remains no trace of the starving people, except for an ominous sign marking their death and disappearance: a glistening 'heap of quick-lime'.[131]

Redburn experiences both a social and personal reckoning in sailortown. Plagued on board ship and in Liverpool by his difficult attachment to his father – a gentleman fallen on hard times – and mocked by other sailors for his naïve ways, Redburn finds a transformative freedom in the

possibility of the sailor's ability to reinvent himself on land. Indeed, a number of critics have noted that arriving onshore allowed a sailor a degree of liberation. For as Gilje observes in his study of the American sailor's complicated liberty:

> Locked into a world of authority and deference at sea, sailors enjoyed flaunting social barriers and relationships while at liberty on shore, where they could be 'their own lords and masters, and at their own command'. Sailors aped their social betters by playing at being gentlemen. … Many sailors also rented carriages as soon as they reached terra firma.[132]

The sailor's payment on reaching shore also meant that he could temporarily 'assume different identities and lifestyles', as was the case of one naval sailor passing as a 'gentleman' with the aid of the lump sum he had acquired on the course of a voyage.[133] Being able to disguise one's sailorliness had also been crucial, of course, in the earlier period of impressment before 1815, when men who did not have an exemption warrant could be taken against their will to serve in the navy.[134]

In line with popular observational writing about sailortown that laid emphasis on its carnivalesque properties, the waterfront in *Redburn* is a place that seems to allow for the possibility of transcending codes of class, as well as those of social and sexual propriety. Indeed, the potential to change identity and assume a temporary persona in the port city is a recurring motif in a novel that significantly abounds in descriptions of clothes, fashionable attire, and surface ornament (Redburn's nicknames aboard ship are alternatively 'Boots' and 'Buttons', the latter a reference to the elaborate carved-fox buttons on his shooting-jacket, the source of much ribbing from his fellow shipmates). The rogue captain of the *Highlander* on which Redburn sailed to Liverpool, for example, is a Russian who attempts to conceal his national identity by assuming an American accent. At sea, he undergoes a sartorial and moral degeneration, losing his landsman attire of a 'glossy suit' for 'shabby clothes', battered hats and 'sadly patched boots'; even his 'whiskers lost their gloss' and turn grey. 'I put him down as a sort of imposter,' Redburn concludes of this maritime shape-shifter, 'and while ashore, a gentleman on false pretences'.[135] Other seafaring characters also demonstrate a protean tendency for self-fashioning. A 'handsome, dandy mulatto' going by the name of Lavender, a former barber from New York turned steward on the *Highlander*, is both a working 'hand' and a nautical dandy. His flamboyant clothes are inherited and recycled: 'mostly cast-off suits of the captain of a London liner, whom he had sailed with upon many previous voyages … all in the height of the exploded fashions, and of every kind of color and cut'.[136]

Transformation through fashion is further suggested in the novel's intro-duction of the enigmatic, queer character Harry Bolton, first glimpsed by Redburn outside the Baltimore Clipper lodgings in sailortown, occu-pying a threshold position 'in our street of boarding-houses, standing in the doorways, and silently regarding the animated scenes without'.[137] He is Redburn's English counterpart, another well-to-do youth fallen on hard times who has also taken, rather incongruously, to the seafaring life. Having lost his inherited fortune, Bolton had enlisted as a midshipman in the East India service, before assuming 'duck trowsers and tarpaulin' in order to cross the Atlantic as a more lowly sailor, then finally selling a few velvet vests in order to '[rig] himself in a Guernsey frock and man-of-war trowsers' to secure his passage as a 'boy' alongside Redburn's crew on the *Highlander*'s return journey out of Liverpool.[138] Yet despite his ability to assume various nautical ranks, Bolton possesses a most 'unseamanlike per-son', a description based on the traditional equation of sailorliness with manliness.[139] Indeed Redburn's description of Bolton is resonant for its queer and effeminate description:

> He was one of those small, but perfectly formed beings, with curling hair, and silken muscles, who seem to have been born in cocoons. His complex-ion was a mantling brunette, feminine as a girl's; his feet were small; his hands were white; and his eyes were large, black, and womanly; and, poetry aside, his voice was as the sound of a harp.[140]

'Charmed with his appearance', Redburn soon strikes up a friendship with the mercurial Harry who accompanies him on his escapades across the city, '[strolling] about with me in perfect abandonment'.[141] In a curi-ous chapter, 'A Mysterious Night in London', the two friends take an excursion to a purple-lighted 'semi-public place of opulent entertain-ment' known as Aladdin's Palace, which has been interpreted as a male brothel.[142] The visit leaves Redburn reeling from the excitement and strangeness of the scene. Returning to Liverpool, Bolton stuffs his 'false whiskers and mustache into his pocket' as he returns to the boarding-house 'where we immediately shifted our clothes, appearing once more in our sailor habiliments'.[143] Whether these clothes are those of the 'real' Harry Bolton, or indeed Wellingborough Redburn, remains a tantalising mystery in a text in which maritime life is suffused with performative displays, shifting identities, and a proto-modernist sense that the terra firma of identity became dissolute at the water's edge. As explored in the following section, these motifs would re-emerge, in darker and more morbid hues, in the work of Melville's transatlantic counterpart, Charles Dickens.

Absent Sailors and Other Waterside Characters: Maritime Relations in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*

While Melville is the sailor-author of the nineteenth century par excellence, a writer whose experiences on board merchant ships and whalers framed his fictions, Charles Dickens's navigational experience was of a more modest nature. Born in the seaport of Portsmouth as the son of an assistant clerk in the navy pay office, the family settled in the town of Chatham, at the mouth of the River Medway, where Dickens's father served as a clerk at the dockyard. As a boy, Dickens accompanied his father on his Navy Pay yacht, the *Chatham*, on the route up the Medway river to the isolated coastal port of Sheerness. Water was thus a formative influence in Dickens's life and work, as observed by Peter Ackroyd:

> Dickens grew up beside water – beside the sea, beside the tidal waters, beside the river – and there is no doubt that it runs through his imagination, no less strongly than the Mississippi ran through that of T.S. Eliot. Of course he is the novelist of the city, the novelist of the huddling tenements and of the crowded streets; nevertheless, it is hard to think of one of Dickens's novels that does not take place within earshot of the river or of the tides.[144]

Indeed, in his essay on Chatham dockyard (1863), Dickens reflected that

> [r]unning water is favourable to day-dreams, and a strong tidal river is the best of running water for mine. … Everything within the range of the senses will, by the aid of the running water, lend itself to everything beyond that range, and work into a drowsy whole, not unlike a kind of tune, but for which there is no exact definition.[145]

For Dickens, water was associated with childhood experience and family, but it also represented an element that heightened the senses and was conducive to the imagination.

The identity of the sailor – as a generic and symbolic figure – preoccupied Dickens as a writer. In another sketch for the periodical *All the Year Round*, later republished in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, Dickens recalled a visit made to Anglesey in the aftermath of the wreck of the steam-clipper, the *Royal Charter*, off the North Wales coast in 1859, in which 370 passengers and a crew of 112 men drowned. Dickens accompanied a local clergyman as he surveyed the bodies laid out at St Gallgo's Church in Llanallgo and undertook the grisly, fragile work of identification, 'patiently examining the tattered clothing, cutting off buttons, hair, marks from linen, anything that might lead to subsequent identification, studying faces, looking for a scar, a bent finger, a crooked toe, comparing

letters sent to him with the ruin about him'.[146] Identifying drowned sailors, as Dickens notes, presented its own peculiar difficulties:

> The identification of men by their dress, was rendered extremely difficult, in consequence of a large proportion of them being dressed alike – in clothes of one kind, that is to say, supplied by slopsellers and outfitters, and not made by single garments, but by hundreds. Many of the men were bringing over parrots, and had receipts upon them for the price of the birds; others had bills of exchange in their pockets, or in belts.[147]

As Dickens observed, even in death, the sailor presented as a generic type, with interchangeable markers, while the unredeemed promissory notes reveal the transitory patterns of these men's lives. It is the body's surface, however, that offered the most expedient clues: the residual tattoos on the water-logged bodies of the washed-up sailors provided evidence of the individual's 'social skin'.[148] Indeed, Dickens observed that this 'tattooing was found still plain, below the discoloured outer surface of a mutilated arm, when such surface was carefully scraped away with a knife. It is not improbable that the perpetuation of this marking custom among seamen, may be referred back to their desire to be identified, if drowned and flung ashore.'[149] Reviewing the forensic notes that described the recovered bodies of the drowned sailors, Dickens showed his fascination for the common iconography of maritime tattoos:

> A sailor had these devices on his right arm. 'Our Saviour on the Cross, the forehead of the Crucifix and the vesture stained red; on the lower part of the arm, a man and woman; on one side of the Cross, the appearance of a half moon, with a face; on the other side, the sun; on the top of the Cross, the letters I.H.S.; on the left arm, a man and woman dancing, with an effort to delineate the female's dress, under which, initials.' Another seaman 'had, on the lower part of the right arm, the device of a sailor and a female; the man holding the Union Jack with a streamer, the folds of which waved over her head, and the end of it was held in her hand. On the upper part of the arm, a device of Our Lord on the Cross, with stars surrounding the head of the Cross, and one large star on the side in Indian Ink. On the left arm, a flag, a true lover's knot, a face, and initials.'[150]

Paradoxically the tattoos marked the sailor's individuality and identity (for example, through tattoos of initials) while also rendering him once again a generic, interchangeable type, bearing the shared nautical symbology of his vocation. 'Identity', after all, contains within its meaning a sense of individual distinction and sameness (implied more strongly in the associated term 'identical').

A number of Dickens's novels engaged directly with the sea and introduced stock sailor characters, including James Steerforth in *David Copperfield* and the more affable Captain Cuttle of *Dombey and Son*.[151] But beyond this explicit engagement with maritime figures and places, the urban waterfront forms an enigmatic chronotope in several novels by Dickens, not least in terms of a narrative impetus that hurtles towards the watery edge of the city as a place of denouement (for example in *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, and *David Copperfield*). In *Bleak House* too, Esther Summerson is taken to the docks by Inspector Bucket in search of her mother, Lady Dedlock. As the carriage approaches the edge of the city, Esther apprehends the type of dream world of dissolved boundaries evoked by Dickens in his earlier reflections on Chatham Docks:

> I was far from sure that I was not in a dream. We rattled with great rapidity through such a labyrinth of streets, that I soon lost all idea where we were; except that we had crossed and re-crossed the river, and still seemed to be traversing a low-lying, water-side, dense neighbourhood of narrow thoroughfares, chequered by docks and basins, high piles of warehouses, swing-bridges, and masts of ships. At length we stopped at the corner of a little slimy turning, which the wind from the river, rushing up it, did not purify; and I saw my companion, by the light of his lantern, in conference with several men, who looked like a mixture of police and sailors. Against the mouldering wall by which they stood, there was a bill, on which I could discern the words, 'FOUND DROWNED;' and this, and an inscription about Drags, possessed me with the awful suspicion shadowed forth in our visit to that place.
>
> … In my memory, the lights upon the bridge are always burning dim; the cutting wind is eddying round the homeless woman whom we pass; the monotonous wheels are whirling on; and the light of the carriage lamps reflected back, looks palely in upon me – a face, rising out of the dreaded water.[152]

Esther's vision of a pale face rising out of the 'dreaded water' anticipates a central motif in Dickens's last completed novel *Our Mutual Friend*, published in nineteen monthly instalments in 1864–1865.

Our Mutual Friend is perhaps the best novel written about seafarers that does not feature any actual sailors. Yet it provides one of Dickens's most compelling meditations on the strange alchemy produced in the encounter between city and water. The only 'real' mariner directly encountered in the text is a dead one – evoked, but not fully seen, and soon to be misidentified – described in the opening pages as Gaffer Hexam and his daughter Lizzie dredge the Thames for drowned bodies from whose pockets they eke out a living.[153] The sailor's corpse appears as a depersonalised and subjugated form, animated only by the energy of the water in which it is contained:

> What [Hexam] had in tow, lunged itself at him sometimes in an awful man-
> ner when the boat was checked, and sometimes seemed to try to wrench
> itself away, though for the most part it followed submissively. A neophyte
> might have fancied that the ripples passing over it were dreadfully like faint
> changes of expression on a sightless face.[154]

It is only in retrospect that the reader knows this apparently hollow form to be the body of a sailor – the lowly third mate George Radfoot – and not, as so many characters in the novel intimate, the body of the heir to a fortune, John Harmon.

While the sailor as a character may be strikingly absent, the text is full of the traces of maritime labour and social life that defined the water's edge. As Matthew Ingleby notes, '*Our Mutual Friend* is a coastal novel as much as it is an urban one', and some of its most memorable and piv-otal locations include the working river of the opening pages, as well as the streets and alleys off Limehouse hole in the East End, the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters pub that tips precariously towards the wharves and Pleasant Riderhood's Seaman's Boarding-House, which moonlights as an unlicensed pawnbroker dealing in sailors' wares.[155] In line with the tra-ditional descriptions of sailortown surveyed in this chapter, this area is defined by its sense of geographical marginality; for Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood, it is a 'confoundedly out-of-the-way place', as they leave their genteel chambers and hurry to investigate the identity of the anonymous, unclaimed body recovered from the Thames.[156] And in an echo of Esther and Bucket's water-bound carriage ride, there is once again a dissolute mingling in these parts of city, houses, and ships:

> The wheels rolled on, and rolled down by the Monument, and by the
> Tower, and by the Docks; down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe; down
> by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from
> higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its
> own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river. In and out
> among vessels that seemed to have got ashore, and houses that seemed to
> have got afloat – among bowsprits staring into windows, and windows
> staring into ships ….[157]

The image of the sailor as an enigmatic identity – simultaneously pres-ent and absent – is further echoed in a key waterfront establishment in the novel: the Seaman's Boarding-House of Pleasant Riderhood, daugh-ter of Gaffer's former 'partner' in watery crime, the villainous Rogue Riderhood. In these Limehouse lodgings, the material remnants of the pilfered and discarded clothes of sailors form a strange, silent, and disem-bodied audience:

> The background, composed of handkerchiefs, coats, shirts, hats, and other old articles 'On Leaving,' had a general dim resemblance to human listeners; especially where a shiny black sou'-wester suit and hat hung, looking very like a clumsy mariner with his back to the company, who was so curious to overhear, that he paused for the purpose with his coat half pulled on, and his shoulders up to his ears in the uncompleted action.[158]

Riderhood's 'leaving shop' (code for a maritime pawnshop) serves as a key location for a novel that is preoccupied with themes of identity – and more specifically, mistaken identity. For as *Redburn* indicated, an economic mainstay of sailortown based on the needs of an itinerant population, the pawnshop was also a commercial establishment which allowed mariners to exchange their own belongings and assume a new guise on land.[159] Yet in *Our Mutual Friend* the sailor is less an agent than a figure to be exploited for profit. Like the nameless figure emerging from the oozy depths of the Thames, the hollow and disembodied form of the 'clumsy mariner' in the pawnshop demythologises the sailor, revealing him to be merely a source of petty profit for casual waterside characters such as Gaffer Hexam or Rogue Riderhood. Not represented by a body, the sailor is merely *of use* to other people: his absent presence makes him one of a set of figures in the novel who are preyed upon and assessed as commodities.[160] In this sense, the sailor is the epitome of the urban character, for as Brian Cheadle argues, the 'city is not amenable to the anguished autobiography of the ordinary man; in its vast anonymity it hardly matters whether one is Radfoot, Handford, Rokesmith, or Harmon. … Everywhere, those not speculating or trading in purchasable identities – the vast majority who are not falsely presuming to realise great expectations – are subject to its routines, or caught up in an improvisational economy of survival.'[161] The sailor as a source of profit is embodied here in an unsentimental rendering of the watery character, far removed from his caricature in earlier city writing and cultural artefacts.

In *Our Mutual Friend* there is money to be made from the (mis-) identification of sailors. Hexam is illiterate, yet he knows how to read – that is, weigh up and evaluate – the bodies of washed-up sailors and professes himself to be a master of this seedy discipline. His work-home interior is papered with advertisements of drowned bodies, recalling the posters that lined the dock roads in Esther Summerson's earlier journey. Pointing to cards detailing the bodies pulled out of the Thames, including sailors, he boasts:

> I can't read, nor I don't want to it, for I know 'em by their places on the wall. This one was a sailor, with two anchors and a flag and G.F.T. on his arm. Look and see if he warn't … They pretty well papers the room, you see; but I know 'em all. I'm scholar enough![162]

In this respect, Hexam's professional confidence echoes Mayhew's inter-view with a Thames dredgerman who spoke in similarly emphatic terms about his own waterside form of know-how or 'learning': 'I got no larnin', how could I? ... Larnin's no use to a dredger, he hasn't got no time to read; and if he had, why, it wouldn't tell him where the holes and furrows is at the bottom of the river, and where things is to be found.'[163]

As proprietress of the Boarding-House-pawnshop, Pleasant Riderhood also makes a living through the swift identification of sailors as potential clients. As her name suggests, she is both a romantic and a hardnosed prag-matist. While dreaming of 'vaporous visions of far-off islands in the south-ern seas or elsewhere ... where it would be good to roam with a congenial partner among groves of bread-fruit, waiting for ships to be wafted from the hollow ports of civilization', Pleasant plies her trade for the moment by robbing the waterfront's comers and goers: 'For sailors to be got the better of were essential to Miss Pleasant's Eden.' She does this through a careful scrutiny of the Boarding-House's clientele: 'Pleasant Riderhood had it in the blood, or had been trained, to regard seamen, within certain limits, as her prey. Show her a man in a blue jacket, and, figuratively speaking, she pinned him instantly.' With her knowledge of sailors and her inherited 'swivel eye', Pleasant scrutinises Harmon, disguised in mariner's garb, as he visits the Boarding-House during his investigation of the murder of his missing counterpart, his former seafaring friend George Radfoot.[164] 'Pleasant had an eye for sailors,' Dickens writes, using a suggestive phrase in which the sailor's apocryphal erotic appeal blends with an economic drive motivated by 'principal and interest'.[165] And while Pleasant can spot that Harmon is not a 'true' sailor, she notices that he is a character who knows how to embody a passable imitation of one:

> His manner was the manner of a sailor, and his hands were the hands of a sailor, except that they were smooth ... and she noticed the unused col-our and texture of the hands, sunburnt though they were, as sharply as she noticed their unmistakable looseness and suppleness, as he sat himself down with his left arm carelessly thrown across his left leg a little above the knee, and the right arm as carelessly thrown over the elbow of the wooden chair, with the hand curved, half open and half shut, as if it had just let go a rope.[166]

As noted in a previous section of this chapter, sartorial codes in the city func-tioned as a 'form of symbolic communication ... conveying information about the wearer's social role, social standing, and personal character'.[167] And again, as such, they also offered the possibility of dissimulation.[168]

Through a convoluted series of disguises and double-bluffs, which involve adopting the clothes and persona of the sailor Radfoot, Harmon

eventually evades his inheritance and re-emerges in the new identity as John Rokesmith. As Pleasant's father Rogue Riderhood later expostulates, in response to the news that George Radfoot has disappeared: 'What's that for a sailor? Why, there's fifty such, out of sight and out of mind, ten times as long as him – through entering in different names, re-shipping when the out'ard voyage is made, and what not.'[169] The conundrum of the sailor is once more put into play here – he is both distinctive and generic, identifiable and easy to mistake. Far removed from the antecedent of the transparent, naïve Jolly Jack Tar, the sailor has become one more element in a modern, opaque world of signs and symbols that shift and slide back into a watery unknown – an elusive, transferrable, even morbid identity.

From the sailor dressed in clothes that are not his, to the sailors' clothes that are missing a body, *Our Mutual Friend* exhibits a series of ambiguous recoveries and disappearances of waterside characters. As seen in the novel's opening, the recovered body, dredged from the river, propels a recurring structural motif in the story where things and truths rise up to the surface. But in Dickens's watery city, surfaces are both telling and wildly misleading; truths are revealed and retract in a type of undulating, tidal motion. As Steve Mentz observes, '[i]n an aqueous environment, nothing stays on the surface forever'.[170] Indeed, the Harmon murder, as it comes to be called, is compared to a tidal motion that 'went up and down, and ebbed and flowed, now in the town, now in the country, now among palaces, now among hovels, now among lords and ladies and gentlefolks, now among labourers and hammerers and ballast-heavers, until at last, after a long interval of slack water, it got out to sea and drifted away'.[171]

In this sense, water is foundational to this city novel. As Kyle McAuley argues, in a compelling reading of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, the novel's 'hydrography' is that which provides 'the formal scaffolding upon which the social world of the novel is constructed'.[172] In line with McAuley's interpretation, 'reading water' allows us to see how *Our Mutual Friend* resists the linear unfurling of one kind of realist nineteenth-century plot in favour of nonteleological sets of entanglements.[173] Thus a description of a railway train carrying Mortimer Lightwood and Bella Wilfer on a route that follows the river up to Henley, presents a stark contrast between the forward-thrusting course of the engine of industrialisation that 'roared across the river, a great rocket: spurning the watery turnings and doublings with ineffable contempt, and going straight to its end, as Father Time goes to his'.[174] The time and tide of the river are both of the city and yet marginal to its dominant diurnal rhythms. Water seems to cause strange things to happen, defying the logic of the modern industrial city:

rogues are brought back to life, identities shift and are dissolved. There is a type of amoral order to the flow of water in the novel, and as John M. Robson points out, 'There is of course irony, inescapable as well as powerful, because the common uses of *up* and *down*, of *surface* and *depth*, refuse easy and constant association with any such pair as *good* and *bad*, *healthy* and *diseased*, *life* and *death*, or *truth* and *lies*'.[175]

The notion that identities can be buried, not in the earth or returning to dust but in the submerged waters, is key to the plot development of *Our Mutual Friend*, 'the very title of which is a reaching after an identity'.[176] It is after all by using a nautical motif that the self-created character known as John Rokesmith initially is said to have 'buried John Harmon many additional fathoms deep'.[177] As the sailor is dredged and revived from the riverine depths at its start, so the novel's violent climax propels Riderhood and Headstone towards, and then into, water in a morbid 'mutual' embrace. The novel returns cyclically to the scene of the opening, in which Hexam and his daughter are, in economic terms, described as being '[a]llied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface' as they perform their watery foraging.[178] Water in all its forms is once again both a place from which to make a living and a place of morbidity, as encapsulated by the figure of Riderhood, who opens the novel dredging its depths before sinking down into it by the end. Ultimately, the novel is bound by a fluid hydrography that connects all the locations in the novel, from Limehouse to the canal areas of Henley where the denouement unfolds. For as Michelle Allen observes of Dickens's novel: 'As important as the difference and distance between places is the fact that they are all connected by the river. The secret of metropolitan life lies in this connection.'[179] Indeed water, as J. Hillis Miller notes, is not an abstract metaphor or 'symbol' in the narrative; it is a determinedly material element that flows through the novel as a place of labour, livelihood, death, and potential transformation of fortunes.[180]

Conclusion: Towards an Urban Maritime Modernism

Our Mutual Friend was the first of Dickens's novels to be set contemporaneously, though it has also been described as 'a novel before its time'.[181] In the text, the mythic figure of the sailor is put into question, and the urban water's edge has become a location in which mysteries are not so much resolved as certainties dissolved. The shifting ambiguity of the water's edge anticipated literary developments that became more pronounced towards the century's close. As Michael Cotsell indicates: 'The heirs of

Our Mutual Friend are not just [George] Gissing's novels of the urban poor, but the consciously creative, richly allusive texts produced by the modernists.'[182] For example, the residual figure of the sailor in the city, a peripheral character who nevertheless puts identity into question, can be encountered in James Joyce's quintessentially modernist urban novel *Ulysses* (1922), set in the maritime port city of Dublin. In 'Eumaeus', during a late-night encounter with 'jarvies or stevedores' in a cabman's shelter at Butt Bridge near the Custom House, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus are approached by a character described as a 'redbearded bibulous individual … a sailor, probably', later confirming himself to be an able seaman called D.B. Murphy who has just been paid off from his ship.[183] Conforming to type, the seafarer attempts to regale his listeners with lurid tales of his global adventures, replete with the caricatures and sailorisms of many a tall maritime tale, while brandishing his discharge card and a postcard (suspiciously addressed to another person) as evidence of his identity. The listeners, Bloom and Stephen, manifest 'an expression of dubiosity' as they listen to this 'doughty narrator' (later referred to as a 'redoubtable specimen'), whose doubtful tales rehearse stock themes of seafaring adventure.[184] He appears to the men as a bit of a 'literary cove', a phrase whose double meaning points to both a coastal location and the sailor as a teller of tales.[185] And yet as Jennifer Levine observes, the sailor's 'words strain to make Murphy known, yet render him increasingly suspect'.[186] For Murphy's name morphs into 'Morpheus' at various points in the episode, indicating that this maritime *raconteur* is yet another shape-shifter. Indeed, nothing about this '*soi-disant* sailor' seems solid or authentic; he is a rover, wearing his shipmate's trousers and oilskins and carrying his knife.[187] The biographical coordinates of this 'old stager' (performer) are unreliable – he cannot remember his son's age and is uncertain whether his wife is really waiting for him.[188] And his embodied identity is itself something of a cliché: at one point he bears his 'manly chest' to his interlocutors, revealing a large tattoo of an anchor, the enigmatic number 16 and the profile of a young man's face – that of his close friend Antonio, apparently eaten by sharks.[189] Bloom's scepticism and – according to one critic, his homophobic panic – infuse the way he reads and engages with this sailor in the city.[190] Echoing the words of Dickens's novel, he remarks to Stephen:

> —Our mutual friend's stories are like himself, Mr Bloom, *apropos* of knives, remarked to his *confidente sotto voce*. Do you think they are genuine? He could spin those yarns for hours on end all night long and lie like old boots. Look at him.

> Yet still, though his eyes were thick with sleep and sea air, life was full of a host of things and coincidences of a terrible nature and it was quite within the bounds of possibility that it was not an entire fabrication though at first blush there was not much inherent probability in all the spoof he got off his chest being strictly accurate gospel. … And when all was said and done, the lies a fellow told about himself couldn't probably hold a proverbial candle to the wholesale whoppers other fellows coined about him.[191]

Here Joyce gestures towards the central conundrum of the urban figure of the sailor, a character as much talked about as self-narrating, subject to identification but also eluding it. For Joyce's seafaring man evinces a number of the sailor's traits, outlined in this chapter – licentiousness, the *grammatica jocosa* of the sailor's speech, his self-invention and self-reflexivity about that construction, and the performative identity that is simultaneously identified and misinterpreted. As my analysis has shown, the stock character is familiar enough that anyone can inhabit it, though by dint of that very fact, it raises questions as to the authenticity of any and all identities in the networks of the modern city.

In *Our Mutual Friend* and the later fictions of the modernists, the archetypal figure of the sailor became a cipher for the flux and uncertainty of identity in a modern, globalising world. Thus despite a dominant view that sailors were eminently knowable and identifiable through the indexical features of appearance and speech, I have argued that as the nineteenth century progressed there emerged an alternative discourse which suggested that the identity, provenance, and type of the sailor was increasingly self-reflexive and potentially troubling in relation to notions of secure identities and modes of social distinction in the city. In that sense, the roaming sailor, a figure often defined by its peripherality to the metropolis, was emblematic of an emergent emphasis on the instability and dislocations of modern identity per se.[192] The idea of the water's edge – and by extension the sailor – representing dissolution and uncertainty is developed further in modernist tropes of the turn of the century and beyond, from the 'recalcitrant tidal current'[193] that frames the narrative structure of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, to the echoes of the 'drowned Phoenician Sailor' in T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (1922).[194] Indeed, in Eliot's archetypal modernist poem, the figure of the sailor, like Joyce's Murphy, is a residual, disembodied figure of multiple fragmented forms – textual flotsam and jetsam – running through the cityscape of a poem that is simultaneously about 'dying of thirst and about drowning'.[195] Abstracted from the materiality of the ocean world and maritime work, images of fluidity and dissolution, more broadly, emerged as a dominant trope

within modernist aesthetics, as exemplified in Daniel Albright's *Quantum Poetics* and Kerr's examination of watery idiom in the work of Eliot and Virginia Woolf. As Albright notes, '[m]etaphors of water are inevitable when discussing the Modernist concept of the human subject: indeed the Modernists themselves often described the world of Modernist literature as a kind of ocean'.[196]

If sailors and water were ciphers within modernist discourse, it is worth noting that attempts to represent the lived reality of sailors – as family men and an increasingly politicised body of workers – belonged to a separate tributary of land-bound maritime modernist writing. By the early twentieth century, the industrialisation of the maritime workplace and the dominance of steam, resulted in different demographics, labour practices, and social formations.[197] The international seafarer, whose journeys had become shorter by dint of new technologies, was more fully integrated into changing models of family life that presented new forms of masculinities (a subject taken up in more detail in Chapter 4). As Fink notes, early twentieth-century writers responded to this development in a literature that 'reconstructed the mariner's image for more modern but less heroic times': 'Industrialized work routines, miserable pay and conditions, the tensions of a polyglot labor force, and the threat of radical upheaval – these were main themes of maritime fiction across the early twentieth century.'[198] This found literary expression in the writing of a group of British working-class sailor-authors in the 1920s and 1930s, with direct lived experience of global seafaring, who produced new stories of sailors, their relations and the changing face of sailortown. In that body of writing, the sailor is not so much a cipher for an abstract sense of modern identity, as a figure enmeshed in complex material and emotional forms of maritime relations, struggling to balance the demands of economic survival, family life, and individual fulfilment.

Against the dominant model of social realism traditionally used to depict proletarian lives, working-class writers such as James Hanley, George Garrett, and Jim Phelan deployed non-realist, experimental and expressionist techniques, developed from European literature, in order to convey the fraught interior worlds and crisis of 'psychological isolation' of the labouring sailor in an industrial-maritime environment.[199] In Hanley's tragic rendition of a stoker's life, 'The Last Voyage' (1930), for example, or his modernist family saga-pentalogy, *The Furys Chronicle* (1935–1959) set in Gelton, a fictionalised Liverpool, the sailor is not so much emblematic of the abstractions of the modern condition as representative of the dilemma of the precarious worker, caught between family responsibility

and insecure, and still dangerous, employment. In these fictions he is no longer a wholly alluring figure or intriguing trickster, but an ageing worker, desperate to sign on or catch his last voyage: a shape-shifter only in so far as he needs to adapt to the new roles demanded by the industrial-ised sea. By contrast to Redburn's 'first voyage', whereby the green seafarer looks out with anticipation to the horizon, Hanley's ageing stoker Reilly's 'last voyage' begins in the dark hellish corners of the ship's fo'c'sle, where the fellow crew taunt him with his imminent retirement and the perennial threat of the workhouse.[200] Hanley's *Boy* (1931) meanwhile, deals explicitly and notoriously with questions that had remained implicit throughout centuries of maritime writing, in its descriptions of homosexuality and male-on-male sexual violence. In these and similar works, sailortown lost much of its earlier carnivalesque allure. No longer attracting the interest of the urban *flâneur* or maritime ethnographer, its pubs and meeting places were the loci of radical activism, sociability – and escapism – for sailors, dockers, and a multitude of other waterfront labourers. Storytelling and the sea, associated with a romantic past of authentic sailors, underwent a sea-change in the nineteenth century, allowing for the emergence of new and complex waterside characters into the interstitial spaces of twentieth-century modernity.