

THYTPA

ROF

EH

WECFNGM













APPETITE FOR THE MAGNIFICENT

Plumbing the depths of
the aquarium: An essay on
Philip Henry Gosse

SEA CHANGES

Gazing down the shoreline, Philip Henry Gosse saw more than rocks, sand and sea. As he stood on the Dorsetshire strand on a "sweet April morning", the seascape metamorphosed into a visual and aural spectacle: he saw the breakwater as a "noble work, as noble in design and object as marvellous in execution", against which the softly lapping waves "break its face into gems of changing brilliance and make whispering music".¹ As though in a museum, where perception automatically falls in with contemplation, Gosse drank in these impressions of the "bold promontories and abrupt cliffs", "twenty miles of purple coast" and the "bluff precipice that [...] is lost in the brightness of the eastern horizon". But then, like a break in the weather, images of a different *couleur* rose up in his mind's eye: he envisioned the same seascape buffeted by "the fierce gales of November or March, when the shrieking blasts drive furiously up the Channel, and the huge mountain-billows, green and white, open threatening graves on every side".

Gazing down the shoreline, Gosse saw more than gems and heard more than whispering music. The aesthetic spectacle was transfigured into a religious vision. The physical harbour of Portland, whose jetties calmed the waters, appeared to him a metaphysical "Harbour of Refuge". Just as spring had suddenly given way to winter in his imagination, so the profane seaport became a holy haven: "Blessed be God for the gift of his beloved Son, the only Harbour of Refuge for poor tempest-tossed sinners!"² Then another dark vision descended upon the gentle surroundings in his mind's eye: a vision of the End, the Apocalypse. Lines from the *Third Nephi* out of the Book of Mormon occurred to him: "in the coming day of gloom and wrath, when 'the rain descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow,' they only will escape who are sheltered there!"³

¹ Philip Henry Gosse, *The Aquarium: An Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea*, London: John van Voorst, 1856 (2nd edition, 1st edition 1854), p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3. The original Mormon verse is from 3rd Nephi 14:25: "And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not, for it was founded upon a rock."

Gazing down the shoreline, Gosse saw more than a religious vision. The apocalyptic spectacle turned into a scientific pageant. Again and again, the waves cast curious creatures and plants ashore, which Gosse liked to collect and study. He would also look for them in cracks in the boulders and in the silt at low tide. Seaweed. Crabs. Corals. Shrimp. Mussels. Fish. He was sure that exceedingly odd primeval creatures, never before glimpsed by human eyes, lay dozing in the depths of the sea – which was an affront to Gosse's scientific age, in which the terrestrial world had already been circled, surveyed, mapped and analyzed.⁴ Now the task at hand was to expand the field of exploration from the horizontal to the vertical with a view to uncovering the earth's last living secrets. New images arose in his mind's eye. He remembered his "naturalist's sojourn in Jamaica", where he'd kept wild doves in cages and could tell each and every one of them apart. Might it be possible to create such a "cage" for sea creatures, too?

It is perhaps no coincidence that it was Philip Henry Gosse – the son of an itinerant painter of miniature portraits and a gifted draughtsman in his own right –, a passionate and widely travelled naturalist as well as a deeply devout and apocalyptically-minded evangelical, in other words a man in whose mind art, science and religion were inextricably bound up together, who was to popularize household and public aquariums in the mid-19th century.

A LIVING NATURAL HISTORY

Gosse's book *The Aquarium: An Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea* (1854) ushered in a Victorian and eventually worldwide craze for home and public aquariums. In his idiosyncratic blend of scientific and panegyric prose, the English naturalist (b. 1810 in Worcester, d. 1888 in St. Marychurch) initiated readers into the secrets of marine life, showed how underwater worlds could be transferred into the home and explained why this was an activity pleasing to the Lord, reaching lay readers as well as professional zoologists and botanists. *Wonders* turned out to be a bestseller. And England's drawing rooms turned into "wet rooms".

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

It attests to the *Weltgeist's* sense of humour that glass enclosures for people and things developed in the mid-19th century at the same time as glass enclosures for aquatic flora and fauna. Based on the architectural principles of Gothic cathedrals and consequently endowed with a latent religiosity, the industrial vivarium of London's Crystal Palace turned the visitors into zoo animals, so to speak, while in the aquarium, especially the home aquarium, once-obscure sea creatures took on human traits.