How to Read the Surface of the Sea

“Everything in a whaleboat hung on the correct interpretation of the glinting forms that broke, if only for an instant, the surrounding water.”

— D. Graham Burnett

“The story has a meaning because it has two, and the second is the important one: this is how allegory works. But Robinson Crusoe is different.”

— Franco Moretti

Among the most surprising arguments against surface reading, denotative reading, and allied modes of interpretation are the frequent objections that the surfaces or literal elements of literary texts either cannot be discerned or do not exist. Such objections may be expressed judiciously, as when John Kucich writes in his latter-day manifesto for the hermeneutics of suspicion that “the categories ‘visible,’ ‘surface,’ and ‘literal’ [are] contingent. . . . Contingent distinctions may be effective analytical instruments, but settling large theoretical paradigms upon them invites instability.”³ They may take more hyperbolic forms, as when Bruce Holsinger declares the surface to be “as illusory and elusive as Heaven” or Carolyn Lesjak diagnoses surface reading as “a form of fetishistic disavowal in its insistence on the real surface of texts.”⁴

In the candid space of the external reader’s report they may even take on an air of belligerent exasperation, as when, in his or her report on what was then the typescript of my article “Tidal Conrad (Literally),” an anonymous peer reviewer for Victorian Studies proclaims: “It seems
hopeless and/or hubristic to me to try to sort out what is ‘surface’ and what is ‘depth’ in any given text.”

One can only ask, with unfeigned incredulity: seriously? Only two pages on from the quotation above, Kucich asserts: “Literary critics can offer the public tools to explain what underlies behavior and experience” (75). Underlies! However contingent decisions about what counts as the visible, the surface, or the literal might be, not only must they be made, but for Kucich it is the peculiar contribution of literary criticism to be able to make them. Or again: how can the logic of fetishism be invoked to condemn such decisions when the two foundational theorists of the fetish define it by distinguishing what it appears to be from what it actually is? Marxism and psychoanalysis—larger theoretical paradigms than which it would be difficult to envisage—were, it seems uncontroversial to observe, settled precisely on the categories of the visible and the surface, categories that have ensured the stability of those paradigms rather than the reverse. In inheriting and renewing the programmatic distinction between what he calls the “inert givens” of texts and those texts’ actual (i.e., deep and hidden and non-literal) meaning, a theorist such as Fredric Jameson, for instance, must of necessity posit both the existence and perceptibility of surfaces. All of which is just to say: except when they are militating against surface reading, no one believes in surfaces more thoroughly than those committed to revealing what lies beneath them.

But to give Kucich, Holsinger, Lesjak, and my peer reviewer their due: what they really seem to be arguing is, first, that to speak of the superficial or visible aspects of texts is to speak figuratively, something surface readers sometimes appear to forget; and, second, that even if texts can be said to have surfaces, the focus of critical attention ought to be elsewhere. In what follows I engage both these arguments by way of a meditation on Erskine Childers’s 1903 The
Riddle of the Sands: A Record of Secret Service Recently Achieved. That Riddle is a reverse invasion novel along the lines of George Tomkyns Chesney’s The Battle of Dorking (1871) or (in a very different register) H. G. Wells’s The War of the Worlds (1898) is less important in this context than its status as espionage fiction and, more crucially still, maritime fiction. Like its subgeneric cousin detective fiction, espionage fiction turns on issues of interpretation, and specifically on the question of what appearances portend. Symptomatic reading is built into the genre as both enabling assumption and modus operandi in that its narratives are constructed on the premise that surfaces are lies, distractions, clues, or an amalgam of all three. But such surfaces are indivisible from the depths they simultaneously imply and conceal. Surface and depth in the guise of clue and solution: as Saussure observes about signifier and signified, they are joined together like two sides of a single sheet of paper.  

Spy fiction thus enables a revaluation of the elements of the surface/depth binary, demonstrating the indispensability of the surface and the visible even in an interpretive situation where the paramount requirement for characters and readers alike is to see through appearances to occluded significance. Inverting the rallying cry of symptomatic readers, espionage novels proclaim: no depths without surfaces. But spy fiction, in its valorization of surfaces, generally leaves their figurative status intact. Riddle is different. By making its espionage plot indistinguishable from its maritime plot, Childers’s novel demetaphorizes surfaces. In its pages, the key to the fate of nations is to be found in the trials of piloting the Dulcibella, a small yacht, through the shallow and treacherous North Sea waters that surround the German Frisian Islands. Success in that endeavor hinges entirely on the visible and the superficial. “I knew by boils on the smooth surface,” writes Carruthers, the narrator, at a fraught moment in the plot, “that we were in a strong tideway.”  

As this and countless similar pronouncements indicate, the principal
interpretive enterprise in which Carruthers and his sailing companion Davies are engaged over the course of the novel is coastal navigation. Only insofar as they navigate successfully can they hope to understand the puzzle in international relations they think they have have stumbled upon, which has to do with German military intentions toward Britain. *The Riddle of the Sands*: the title alludes to two problems, one nautical and one geopolitical, but collapses them into a single “riddle” the solution to which resides in a literal rather than a figurative surface: the surface of the sea.

1. Detail against/as Meaning

The novel opens in London, where Carruthers, forced by his superior in the Foreign Office to postpone a much-anticipated autumn holiday, languishes. Long days of ineffectual work and self-pitying evenings at the club are interrupted by a letter from Davies, a former schoolmate, inviting Carruthers to join him on a cruise in the Baltic. Carruthers accepts the invitation only to discover that he has been, as he puts it, “kidnapped” (*R* 82): Davies, suspecting the Germans he has encountered of a nebulous secret plan, has lured his friend away from London to help him discover what it is. Before Carruthers can be of assistance in that endeavor, however, he must learn to sail. This is the first indication of the novel’s conflation of espionage with sailing as well as the “motivation,” as the Russian Formalists would say, for its surfeit of nautical detail. Due to Carruthers’s almost complete ignorance of the ways of the sea, what he imagines will be an idle holiday turns into an extended apprenticeship in sail management, chart reading, weather prediction, tidal conditions, and the many other bodies of knowledge and practice that sailing requires. Extended sections of the narrative that results read more like a ship’s log than a spy
novel, and, via Carruthers, Childers seems to suggest that he fears he may be overburdening the reader: “I exclude all the technicalities that I can,” Carruthers remarks, and later on the same page encloses the words “nautical details omitted” in parentheses (R 130). In fact he omits very little, providing careful accounts of—to select a few items from a list that could go on for some time—kedging off (deploying a small kedge anchor to free a boat that has run aground), the use of a prismatic compass (to measure angles precisely in marine surveying work), and the difference between maps and charts (“Charts are apt to ignore the geography of the mainland, except in so far as it offers sea-marks to mariners” [R 253]). Few chapters fail to note the day’s wind direction and speed or the state of the barometer and the tide.

A representative episode will illustrate both the degree to which the narrative is given over to technical nautical details and some of the implications of the presence of those details for questions of the surface and the literal. In Chapter 15, Carruthers, in one of many small episodes illustrative of his initial incompetence, accidentally loses the Dulcibella’s anchor cable overboard (R 132). (The cable, more usually referred to as the rode, is the line or, in this case, chain that connects an anchor to a boat; I will have more to say below about the frequent necessity, when writing about Riddle, to gloss terms.) Carruthers and Davies sail away, leaving cable and anchor behind, but return four chapters further on to recover them with the help of a buoy that they had attached to the cable with an eye toward just this sort of eventuality. The first paragraph of Chapter 19 documents the recovery effort:

It was a cold, vaporous dawn, the glass [i.e., barometer] rising, and the wind fallen to a light air still from the north-east. Our creased and sodden sails scarcely answered to it as we crept across the oily swell to Langeoog. “Fogs and calms,” Davies prophesied. . . . I should be sorry to have to explain how we found that tiny anchor-buoy, on the
expressionless waste of grey. I only know that I hove the lead incessantly while Davies conned, till at last he was grabbing overside with the boat-hook, and there was the buoy on deck. The cable was soon following it, and finally the rusty monster himself, more loathsome than usual, after his long sojourn in the slime. (R 166)

Some particulars do appear to have been omitted, as indicated by all that Carruthers should be sorry to have to explain (and doesn’t). But enough are provided to make for sufficiently dense reading nonetheless. Deploying a specialized vocabulary that attests to the success of his apprenticeship in things maritime (anchor-buoy, hove, lead, conned, overside, deck), Carruthers narrates an epyllion of impediments surmounted, one of a vast number of similar episodes out of which the novel in its entirety is built. But the triumph here is not primarily a linguistic one. Rather, it has to do with successful action, itself enabled by correct interpretation. Carruthers’s repeated soundings—the heaving of the lead, a weight tied to one end of a line, to assess the depth of the water and make certain the Dulcibella does not run aground—along with Davies’s keen eyesight and expert helmsmanship eventuate in the bringing back on board of buoy, cable, and anchor. Although figured by Carruthers as sheer, unremitting surface—an “expressionless waste of grey”—the sea is read and negotiated aright.

If, however, the characters overcome the sea’s inscrutability, as happens repeatedly in the pages of Riddle, the very nature of the narrative of their having done so results in inscrutability at a different textual level. For readers unfamiliar with the technical lexicon Carruthers employs, the basic interpretive problem of ascertaining what takes place in this passage may require work: consulting a dictionary and then rereading the passage at the least. But even after that work has been accomplished, another, more properly literary-critical question remains: that of the “meaning” of the paragraph—its import in the context of Riddle as a whole, or Edwardian
literature, or spy fiction, or the history of the novel. Rising glass, light air, oily swell, fogs and calms, heaving, conning, cable: constituting their own kind of expressionless waste of gray, the technical details of the passage may in one sense be deciphered in that we are able to come to firm conclusions about what they denote. In another sense, however, they resist interpretation. For where is critical purchase to be gained? What sort of reading can be fashioned out of such unpropitious materials?

Franco Moretti puts precisely this sort of prose into evidence when, in The Bourgeois: Between Literature and History, he claims the modern European novel immerses readers in detail at the expense of meaning. His central exhibit, also nautical, comes not from Riddle but Robinson Crusoe. Here is Crusoe narrating one of his adventures in the sailing canoe he built during his sixth year as a castaway:

The third Day, in the Morning, the Wind having abated over Night, the Sea was calm, and I ventur’d; but I am a warning Piece again, to all rash and ignorant Pilots; for no sooner was I come to the Point, when even I was not my Boat’s Length from the Shore, but I found my self in a great Depth of Water, and a Current like the Sluice of a Mill: It carry’d my Boat a long with it with such Violence, That all I could do, could not keep her so much as on the Edge of it; but I found it hurry’d me farther and farther out from the Eddy, which was on my left Hand. There was no Wind stirring to help me, and all I could do with my Paddlers signify’d nothing, and now I began to give my self over for lost. . .

Moretti canvasses all the instances of specificity in the passage, noting especially the many details given with “[u]nmistakable definiteness,” and then asks: “But what is it for?” Compared to allegory, which “always had . . . a ‘point,’” the novel as exemplified by passages like this one lacks meaning. Crusoe “come[s] to the Point,” but that point is not the main idea but a “low spit
of land projecting from the main into the sea, almost synonymous with promontory or head.”

The details that litter Robinson Crusoe’s pages do not, for Moretti, convey any message derived from their particulars, as, for instance, details in The Faerie Queene, Pilgrim’s Progress, or Christ’s parables do. They simply attest to a bourgeois approach to what matters: “their significance lies less in their specific content, than in the unprecedented precision they bring into the world. . . . [W]hat is important, is the establishment of a mindset that considers details important, even when they don’t immediately matter. Precision, for precision’s sake.” On this reading, the absence of wind, the tidal race close to shore (which is what I take the “Current like the Sluice of a Mill” to refer to), the eddy on Crusoe’s left that he paddles toward but cannot make: none of these things is important in itself. Their collective importance inheres in what they attest to generally, as though wholesale, since any other assemblage of similar novelistic details would presumably attest to the same: exactitude as an abstract and universal desideratum.

Together with the increased frequency of keywords such as “useful” and “efficient,” the ubiquity of carefully realized detail in the novel from the early eighteenth century on may well reflect an instrumentalist attitude to the world appropriate to the bourgeoisie. But does such detail rule out meaning? Is the inevitable trade off, which Moretti distills from Georg Lukács and Max Weber, “Productivity, or meaning”? Perhaps yes, if “meaning” means “allegorical meaning.” Indeed, although arguing that Robinson Crusoe’s details are meaningless in themselves, Moretti assigns meaning to them by liquidating their specificity in order to claim that what they really stand for is a kind of anti-aestheticism (in which can also be heard a strange echo of aestheticism): not l’art pour l’art but la précision pour la précision. In essence, that is, he constructs an allegorical reading of the non-allegorical. Although he begins by distinguishing allegory, which “has a meaning because it has two,” from Robinson Crusoe, the details of which
seem to have no meaning because they have only one, he ends by allegorizing Defoe’s novel and so discovering in it the dual meaning he initially claimed it lacks.\textsuperscript{15} A text may have either two meanings or none.

But what if it were possible (to pose the counter-intuitive question this analysis leaves us with) for the details in a novel to have only one meaning but \textit{also} to mean, to have \textit{that} sole meaning rather than none at all? Not to mean allegorically, in the shape of fungible particularity that takes on significance only as it dissolves or is resolved into something it is not, but literally, as wind, tidal current, eddy, and distance from shore might mean to Robinson Crusoe, for instance, in his struggle to keep from being swept out to sea. Moretti anticipates and forecloses such a possibility. Positing a remarkable kind of counterfactual, he states that the “point of that page from \textit{Robinson Crusoe} ought to be his sudden terror. . . . But the elements of the world are so varied, and their accurate mention so demanding, that the general meaning of the episode is constantly weakened and deflected.”\textsuperscript{16} It is as though, with Virginia Woolf, Moretti assumes that “it is to express character . . . that the form of the novel . . . has been evolved.”\textsuperscript{17} But Defoe famously lavishes as much attention on things and processes as on people, offering up, for example, seven long pages documenting each step in making bread.\textsuperscript{18} Given such a propensity, it seems plausible to suggest that the point of that page from \textit{Robinson Crusoe} might well have to do with the “elements of the world” themselves rather than character psychology.

Or since, even if he devotes a great deal of space to spelling out how to do things on a desert island, Defoe titles his work not \textit{How to Do Things on a Desert Island} but \textit{Robinson Crusoe}, the point might reside in neither character psychology alone nor the elements of the world alone but the relation between the two. Whatever the case in \textit{Robinson Crusoe}, such a possibility is especially pertinent to \textit{The Riddle of the Sands}. Elsewhere I’ve called Childers’s
novel a bildungsroman of technical maturity, noting the trajectory Carruthers traces from pampered, inept bureaucrat to omni-competent sailor and spy. That maturation is “technical” in the sense that it occurs only in and through mastery of a specialized lexicon and, more importantly, specialized knowledge and skills—as Carruthers makes clear early on:

So I grappled with the niceties of that delicate craft [the Dulcibella]; smarting eyes, chafed hands, and dazed brain all pressed into service, whilst Davies, taming the ropes the while, shouted into my ear the subtle mysteries of the art; that fidgeting ripple in the luff of the mainsail, and the distant rattle from the hungry jib—signs that they are starved of wind and must be given more; the heavy list and wallow of the hull, the feel of the wind on your cheek instead of your nose, the broader angle of the burgee at the masthead—signs that they have too much. . . . [A]ll these things and many more I struggled to apprehend, careless for the moment as to whether they were worth knowing, but doggedly set on knowing them. Needless to say, I had no eyes for beauty. . . . Of our destination and objects, if we had any, I knew nothing. (R 48)

Like the account of the recovery of lost anchor and cable, this passage is full of detail that cannot reasonably be interpreted to index anything other than itself. Wind, ropes, jib, mainsail stand for wind, ropes, jib, mainsail. Although consequential for character development, they are not the veiled equivalent of or analogue for that development. They pertain to Carruthers’s Bildung neither metaphorically nor metonymically. Within the world of the fiction, their intricacy and unfamiliarity require not only perceptive apprehension—something of which Carruthers has been incapable—but complete absorption. “I had no eyes for beauty,” he remarks: the attention required displaces aesthetic appreciation. “Of our destination and objects, if we had any, I knew nothing”: that attention also suspends geographical and motivational teleology.
That last point may seem consonant with Moretti’s claims about the place of details in bourgeois prose. Nonetheless, this is not precision for its own sake—nor even competence for its own sake, although that formulation comes closer.\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Riddle} cannot proceed in the absence of the level of exactitude provided here. First, although Carruthers undertakes his apprenticeship with a view of neither “destination [nor] objects,” in fact, as Davies will soon reveal, the two men have both: their destination is the North Sea (the passage above takes place in the Baltic, which serves as a tideless training-ground for Carruthers), their object the unmasking of a plot for a naval invasion of Britain overseen by Wilhelm II. This may look like—in part may be—Moretti’s instrumentalism romanticized. It certainly evidences the persistence of a contradiction within capitalism, the “unresolved dialectic of the bourgeois type himself” whereby, Moretti writes, “the rational bourgeois will never truly outgrow his irrational impulses.”\textsuperscript{21} But it is also and simultaneously an experiment in the revivification of details and surfaces by way of precision. As I have been arguing, because exactitude provides both the content for and form of Carruthers’s \textit{Bildung}, the novel predicates character development on the ability to perceive specific details, such as knowing when the jib needs more wind, which in turn requires attentiveness to detail as such. In \textit{Riddle}, to become capable of rapt, precise scrutiny of the world is to develop from a half-formed loafer into a full participant in the world.\textsuperscript{22} Enlisted in the novel’s espionage plot, Carruthers’s hard-earned ability to sail, the result of a newfound attentiveness to the world and the cause of further such attentiveness, renews him and the world at once.
2. Interpretation in the Wild

A renewal of the world through attentiveness to detail: some time ago George Levine identified this gesture as a defining characteristic of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century realist fiction. In *The Realistic Imagination* (1981) he writes that in realist novels there is “a shift of focus from the large to the small, from the general to the particular, and a diminishment of dramatic extremes, as from tragedy to pathos”; in such novels, “the means of transcending limits is the exploration of the known as though it were unknown.”23 *Riddle*, although in multiple ways much closer to romance than realism, deploys just this formula. In doing so it repeats the refusal of other, usually earlier misnaming literatures that is also a familiar feature of Victorian realism. In an “Epilogue,” for instance—one of several paratexts—Childers, in the guise of the book’s “editor” (as he appears on the title page of the first edition), considers the possibility that “there may be many [Britons] who, in spite of able and authoritative warnings frequently uttered since these events [those in the novel] occurred, are still prone to treat the German danger as an idle ‘bogey,’ and may be disposed, in this case, to imagine that a baseless romance has been foisted on them” (*R* 291).24 Understood correctly, Childers-as-editor insists, the body of the narrative must be taken as fact.

Of course it isn’t. But relations between fact and fiction become unusually vexed in the case of *Riddle*, which is characterized throughout by what Elaine Freedgood has analyzed under the rubric of “metalepsis,” an “open circuit between fictionality and factuality.”25 Childers wrote his novel to have an effect in the extra-textual world: convinced of Britain’s lack of military preparedness, and specifically of British vulnerability to German aggression, he turned to fiction in order to prompt governmental action.26 The scheme required maximizing the perceived
congruence between the world of the diegesis and the world in which he lived. Accordingly, a number of chapters are largely transcriptions of log-books he kept on his own cruises in the Baltic and the North Sea in the 1890s. Moreover, he commissioned the novel’s two charts and two maps—in the first edition, large fold-out versions of the sort included in nineteenth-century travel narratives—from the firm of Walker and Cockerell. Emery Walker, one of the firm’s two principals, executed similar maps and charts for a number of non-fiction books, including the map of the Canal Zone in Harmodio Arias’s *The Panama Canal: A Study in International Law and Diplomacy* (1911) and several maps in G. M. Trevelyan’s *Garibaldi’s Defence of the Roman Republic* (1907). (He also provided the “Map of the Wessex of the Novels and Poems” for the 1912 Wessex Edition of Thomas Hardy’s novels.) Packaging a novel as though it were a “found” manuscript possessed of an anonymous author but a well-known editor; imagining fiction could have an effect on its readers; insisting that one fiction (this one) is truer than other, older fictions; including maps that locate the fictional world as though in the extra-fictional one: none of this is particularly new or surprising about *Riddle*. Taken together, however, these strategies enable Childers to assign details and their interpretation a key role in coming to right conclusions about fictional and nonfictional worlds alike.

For most of the novel, the entirety of the case against the Germans hinges on a single nautical episode and its correct interpretation. It is this episode—or, more accurately, his reading of it—that prompts Davies to write to Carruthers. And it is this episode—or, more precisely, his estimation that Davies’s reading of it is the right one—that convinces Carruthers the Germans really are up to something. In Chapter 7, hunched over charts and his log-book, Davies makes the case to Carruthers. One of the implications of my claims about *Riddle* is that episodes such as this one cannot be summarized and still retain the function they serve in the novel’s pages. This
is not “the heresy of paraphrase,” as the New Critics dubbed it, but the failure of paraphrase to provide the very thing under scrutiny: the specifics as they unfold line by line, page by page. Current critical practice (not to mention the limits of readerly patience) stands at odds with the indispensability of novelistic detail I’m arguing Riddle demonstrates. As a poor substitute for the desirable but impractical insertion of ten pages of the novel verbatim, then, a brief summary: during Davies’s solo explorations of the waters around the Frisian Islands he encounters a wealthy yachtsman named Dollmann, apparently German but later revealed to be English, who takes an interest in his activities. After some contact between them, during which time Dollmann seems to become suspicious of Davies’s motives, they sail off together, each in his own boat, ahead of an advancing storm. The storm’s arrival causes particular difficulties for the Dulcibella, a smaller boat than Dollmann’s Medusa (which is also sailed by a crew rather than single-hand). Dollmann offers his help, shouting across to Davies to follow him. He then leads Davies to shallows where the Dulcibella almost runs aground—a likely fatal accident given the conditions (see R 57-67).

Yes: nautical details omitted! Which is particularly unfortunate since, still more so than in the passages I quote above, the nautical details are the point. It is with this episode that Davies’s concerns originate. Having carefully unfolded all the circumstances, he arrives at what is for him an indisputable interpretation: “You see, I had come to the conclusion that that chap was a spy. . . He purposely put me ashore” (R 67). Such certainty is achieved when myriad observable phenomena (wind, waves, water depth, the manoeuvres the Medusa executes just before Davies finds himself nearly aground) are noted not “objectively” or neutrally but by someone who, due to training and experience, is capable of educing their meaning. The situation raises an improbable question: How do you know when someone has tried to kill you? The answer, in this
case: by your reading of his behaviour in conjunction with conditions at sea. This is also, and not coincidentally, the way you know when the Germans are plotting something that they want to keep secret. Carruthers later comments: “I had lived with Davies for a stormy fortnight, every hour of which had increased my reliance on his seamanship, and also, therefore, on his account of an event which depended largely for its correct interpretation on a balanced nautical judgement” (R 157). In Riddle, grasping individual motivation no less than the military ambitions of nation-states depends on one’s abilities at sea.

A short passage in which Carruthers calls attention to Davies’s ritualized stock-taking helps make precise how the interpretive model in question works: “he rose, glanced at the aneroid [barometer], the clock, and the half-closed skylight with a curious circular movement, and went a step of two up the companion-ladder, where he remained for several minutes with head and shoulders in the open air” (R 35). Four glances, each of which touches on a different object of observation: barometer, clock, sky, sea. Four objects, two human made and two part of the environment, each of which provides partial but necessary information about the day’s conditions. The barometer’s numbers indicate air pressure: high (generally associated with good weather) or low (often indicating a storm) as well as steady or changing (this last associated with a change in the weather for good or ill). The clock’s numbers, when correlated with a tide table, indicate high, low, rising, or falling water, which in turn provides an indication of the direction and likely speed of the tidal current as well as limits to where a given vessel may travel due to low water. The sea itself may be flat, heaving, or anywhere in between. The sky may be clear or cloudy; if cloudy, it may contain cloud types associated with fair or foul weather. (The Briton Luke Howard originated the present system of Latinate nomenclature for clouds in 1802. Three years later, Rear Admiral Francis Beaufort invented a scale of wind speeds along with a method
for estimating them based on land and sea conditions.) And so on: a concrete, specific question—where it will be possible for the Dulcibella to sail on a given day—can only be answered with recourse to multiple sources of information. Some of these sources present themselves as mere surface or apparently meaningless details: a given barometric pressure, a time, a certain appearance of sky or water. Encoded in those details, however, as either facts of the moment or probabilities pertaining to the immediate future, is information that is not identical to them but that, given the correct set of interpretive procedures, may be derived from them.

Of course this interpretive mode is not the unique possession of a character in an early espionage novel. Far from it. In Cognition in the Wild, Edwin Hutchins marshals the practice of navigation at sea across different human cultures and over a time-frame that spans millennia as the principal evidence for his claim that “human cognition is not just influenced by culture and society, but . . . is in a very fundamental sense a cultural and social process.”

Studying navigation aboard U.S. naval vessels, Hutchins observed a “navigational team” that “distributes computational procedures across a social organization.” This then provides an analogy for all forms of cognition, which for Hutchins are not only socio-cultural through and through. Despite Childers’s emphasis on his heroic self-sufficiency, Davies, too, engages in a socio-cultural process when he navigates insofar as, even when sailing single-hand before Carruthers joins him, he depends on instrumentation invented and built by others—as well as the “tide-tables, ‘pilots,’ etc.” that stock his onboard library (R 179). More important for my purposes, however, is Hutchins’s claim that “[a] way of thinking comes with these [navigational] techniques and tools.”
As illuminated by Hutchins and instantiated in *Riddle*, that way of thinking is a mode of interpretation that looks quite different from the surface/depth model in its familiar incarnations, requiring instead a procedure that notes multiple visible or surface details and draws conclusions about what they portend without dissolving them into the conclusions drawn from them. In the final section of this paper, below, I turn to the workings of this mode and consider the possibility that they might serve, *mutatis mutandis*, as a template for a superficial or literalist literary criticism. Before that, I want to return to the suggestion I make above about the regenerative aspect of the novel’s insistence on the value of the detail. Such regeneration trades on both distinguishing attention to detail from art for art’s sake and replicating the exclusiveness of that slogan—on view in passages such as the one where, despite Carruthers’s protest that he “had no eyes for beauty,” the particulars of sailing seem autotelic in the way that some aestheticist accounts of art suggest that it should be autotelic. The complete immersion in the physical world of wind, water, and boat; the heightened sensory responsiveness to all around him, resulting in the ability to perceive that which had been imperceptible before: in Carruthers’s account, sailing becomes a utopian activity, countering the alienation from the world and himself he had felt in London. These details, that is, do evidence an interest in precision for its own sake, but cast such precision as salvational. We find something of the same impulse in George Eliot’s Ilfracombe journals when she writes about the creatures she encounters in tide-pools along the shore: “I have never before longed so much to know the names of things; the desire is part of the tendency that is now constantly growing in me to escape from all vagueness and inaccuracy into the daylight of distinct, vivid ideas.” Details in *Riddle*: the names of things, so that they may be seen distinctly and vividly, as though for the first time.
3. The Sea is the Sea

Or at least that’s how the novel’s details work for Davies and Carruthers. For readers, those details and the (possibly) rebarbative nomenclature in which they are often couched may well be experienced as dystopian rather than the reverse. We may find ourselves not immersed but alienated if we must choose between continuing to read and interrupting our reading to define terms, or if we cannot visualize or otherwise make sense of the elaborate descriptions of weather conditions and boat manoeuvres. The appeal to readers’ comprehension, a constant undercurrent in the novel, sometimes becomes explicit, as when Carruthers writes about a fall he takes: “It was not far to tumble, for the tug listed heavily to starboard; think of our course, and the set of the ebb stream, and you will see why” (R 280; emphasis mine). Perhaps we will—but perhaps we won’t. The risk Childers takes in placing so much weight on specificity, thorough description, and technical precision is that readers will not follow Carruthers in obtaining mastery but, on the contrary, remain on the outside, uncomprehending, possibly uninterested.34

In a wonderful recent article, Dora Zhang illuminates Virginia Woolf’s frequent recourse to deictics, demonstratives, and other forms of ostension (most famously, the last sentence of Mrs Dalloway: “There she was”) by arguing that such moments indicate at once the limits of description and a way to overcome those limits. Zhang shows that in this Woolf and other modernist novelists contended with the same problem as contemporary philosophers Bertrand Russell and William James: that of the incommunicability of “qualia,” or “the way things seem to us.”35 Although intensely felt—perhaps more intensely than anything else—qualia are doomed to remain ours alone because their particularity is, as it were, too particular, too idiosyncratic to
enter into language. We cannot communicate that which we might most want to. Summarizing Russell’s position, Zhang writes: “Words are general . . . because language is essentially social. In order to serve its chief purpose of communication, ‘it must be public, not a private dialect invented by the speaker.’”36

It may seem as though, even if they are not quite qualia, the densely descriptive and technical passages in *Riddle* might as well be insofar as they impede not simply interpretation (as Moretti claims about similar passages in *Robinson Crusoe*) but comprehension. But there is of course a crucial difference: whereas qualia cannot be learned (whence Woolf’s recourse to “there,” “this,” “that,” pointers indicative of ineffability), a technical lexicon can. In this regard technical language, I want to suggest, stands halfway between the fully public nature of language as Russell sees it and the fully private nature of qualia. The precision and specificity of a technical lexicon, say nautical terminology, is not universally accessible. Nonetheless, it can be accessed. To recall *Interpretation in the Wild*, Hutchins contends that cognition is socio-cultural because even highly elaborate and specialized forms of cognition such as navigation can be shared—both in the sense of shared out or distributed among a group of people, as he observes on board naval vessels, and in the sense of shared with others or taught by one person to another, as readers observe in *Riddle*. Looked at in one way, the novel is a bildungsroman chronicling Carruthers’s gradual education in the ways of the sea (which is simultaneously a gradual education in the ways of the world). Looked at in another, it is a text that traces the impediments to but ultimate triumph of Davies’s attempt to pass on his particular but not finally private or incommunicable knowledge. The climactic scenes, in which Carruthers finds himself a stowaway aboard a tugboat full of German conspirators without Davies to help him, confirm both at once: “There was some way out—some way out, I repeated to myself; some way to reap
the fruit of Davies’s long tutelage in the ways of this strange region. What would he do? For answer there came the familiar *frou-frou* of gentle surf on drying sands. . . . A madcap scheme danced before me. The time, I *must* know the time!” (*R* 277-78). *Frou-frou*: an onomatopoeic coinage approximating the sound of surf on drying sands as Carruthers hears it. From that private percept a leap to what it signifies: the tide is falling, sandbanks are emerging, channels are becoming shallower. As for how long it has been falling and so how low the water is at present and will be in future, that’s what the time will tell. Each detail provides insight into the plausibility of Carruthers’s “madcap scheme”: to run aground the tugboat in which he is travelling, leaving the Germans stranded while he makes his way back to Davies—without whose “tutelage” Carruthers could neither envisage nor carry out such a scheme. (It may be superfluous to add that it succeeds.)

As for Carruthers, so for readers. Earlier I noted the necessity of glossing terms when writing about *Riddle*. My frequent asides either in the body of the paper or the notes to define this or that term bear witness to the resistance the novel poses to comprehension. At the same time, however, they bear witness to the ability to overcome that resistance. Elaborately realized description can be made sense of; technical vocabulary can be learned. But relatively few novels demand this. By doing so, *Riddle*, although an extreme case, raises the possibility that every novel works to a greater or lesser degree the way it does: at the level of the literal, in the details—not as they evanesce into something they aren’t but as they are in themselves. To repeat: in *Riddle*, wind, ropes, jib, mainsail stand for wind, ropes, jib, mainsail.

Which is tautological and so may seem indefensible. Certainly it is for the Roland Barthes who, in a mythology titled “Racine is Racine,” faults tautology as the anti-intellectual gesture *par excellence*—a declaration that forestalls discussion or analysis by appealing to what
everyone already knows. But for a later Barthes, the Barthes of *The Preparation of the Novel*, the literary form of the haiku, that “apogee of the particular,” is noteworthy because it “is an assent to what is.” This Barthes pioneers the thinking of a non-tautological tautology, a tautology that does not abrogate the need for analysis but renders it essential—even if that analysis ends where it began. What is gained in such a formulation? In connection with literary studies, the possibility that the details do not obscure the point but might be the point; that reading might mean cleaving to those details, to that literality as long as possible (perhaps even indefinitely).

Addressing the tautological in Woolf, Zhang observes: “Tautology is not only a precise way of describing who someone is, it’s also a way of letting them be who they are.” If the practice of literary criticism I am proposing amounts to a kind of long-form tautology, one that dwells among or circles back over texts, repeating (albeit with a difference) or amplifying rather than dissolving their specificity, seeing rather than seeing through, then it might also have this dual capacity to describe precisely and to leave as is—a capacity implied, after all, in the word *precision* itself. But to do so it cannot, I think, conceive of its object of analysis as the surface of the text. Although in *The Riddle of the Sands*, Carruthers and Davies interpret the surface of the sea, there is no equivalent of such a surface in (or on) a text. But *Riddle* suggests an alternative conceptualization of what is to be attended to, grasped, read: details in all their particularity and literality; seascape (and by extension landscape or cityscape); the technical language of sailing (and by extension of law, midwifery, chemistry, and so on). *Riddle* also attests to the necessity for an attentiveness to those details that counters the notion of their dispensability, their existence as placeholders for something they are not. Brought to bear on literary texts, such attentiveness is neither identical nor antithetical to historicism, old or New. It neither requires nor rules out
formalism, old or New. But it might be distinguished from these other and fully compatible approaches by being thought of as a New Contentism. Faced with a novel whose pages are devoted to the sea and seafaring, it would say something about the sea and seafaring—as I have tried to do here.

NOTES


“Conned” is probably the least familiar: “This word is derived from the Anglo-Saxon conne, connan, to know, or be skilful. The pilot of old was skilful, and later the master was selected to conn the ship in action, that is, direct the helmsman.” Admiral W. H. Smyth, *The Sailor’s Word-Book* (1867; London: Conway, 2005), 209.


On these two keywords see Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 35-44.

Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 66, my emphasis. Part of my difficulty with this argument has to do with its treatment of the “meaning” of a given passage in a novel as virtually synonymous with Lukács’s “totality” and Weber’s social “meaning”—as though literary works and social formations were homologous (65-66).


Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 65; emphasis added.


Ian Watt proposes a context for the thoroughness with which baking bread, making pots, and similar activities are described, namely the presumed ignorance of contemporary readers: “Defoe was certainly aware of how the increasing economic specialization which was a feature of the life of his time had made most of the ‘mechanic arts’ alien to the experience of his readers.” *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), 72.


Compare Moretti on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: “Marlow’s work ethic impels him to do his work well; to what end, is not its concern.” *The Bourgeois*, 46.


In this regard Childers’s repeats a formula found throughout the work of Robert Louis Stevenson. See Schmitt, “Technical Maturity in Robert Louis Stevenson,” passim.


Along similar lines, Davies protests that he is not “like some chap in a shilling shoker”; Carruthers: “We were not in the South Sea Islands; nor were we the puppets of a romance” (*R* 81, 156).


Jim Ring, one of Childers’s biographers, writes: “It is a testimony to the timeliness and plausibility of the tale that . . . the Admiralty did indeed take note.” He then quotes a 1904 letter in which Lord Selborne, First Lord of the Admiralty, requests Prince Louis Battenberg, Director of Naval Intelligence, have *The Riddle of the Sands* “examined most thoroughly and by an

27 Childers’s log-books are kept in the Royal Cruising Club collection, National Maritime Museum (Greenwich, UK).

28 Harmodio Arias, The Panama Canal: A Study in International Law and Diplomacy (London, UK: P.S. King and Son, 1911); George Macauley Trevelyan, Garibaldi’s Defence of the Roman Republic (London, UK: Longmans, Green, 1907).


30 Hutchins, Cognition in the Wild, 229.

31 Hutchins, Cognition in the Wild, 115.

32 On maritime fiction’s representation of life at sea as utopian workspace, see Margaret Cohen, “Traveling Genres,” New Literary History 34.3 (Summer 2003): 486-87.

33 From June 1856. Qtd. in Moretti, The Bourgeois, 84.

34 For some of the twentieth century (I am still trying to ascertain precisely how much), The Riddle of the Sands was included on the list of texts U.K. students were required to know for their O-level English literature exam. Several people who encountered it in this context have told me they found it unreadable.


36 Zhang, “Naming the Indescribable,” 61. The quotation is from Russell’s Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits (1948).


39 Zhang, “Naming the Indescribable,” 65.