

# Allegories of Alta

Dr. Glenn Loughran

The infinite ocean and its stranded shipwrecks have long held a fascination for visual artists, from the sublime, existential oceans of Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1809) to Gericault's torturous crossing on the *Raft of Medusa* (1818). Where the divine light of Turner consumed our horizon lines and led us towards pure abstraction (*Light and Colour – Goethe's Theory*, 1843), Piet Mondrian's *Pier and Oceans* (1915) captured the surface / abyss tension of oceanic representation through mathematical notation. More recently, British artist Tacita Dean has narrated the melancholic violence of the ocean and its mysterious, disappearing vessels in the *Teignmouth Electron* (2000), and

Irish artist Dorothy Cross's pioneering public artwork *Ghostship* (1999) blurred the boundaries between imagination and reality. Together, these works present the ethereal, otherworldliness of the ship/ocean relation, an 'otherworldliness' that Michael Foucault named 'heterotopia', or 'other space',

if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their

gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (I have not been speaking of that today), but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence<sup>i</sup>.

Built in 2017, in Hommelvik Norway, the *MV Tanager* was a 77-metre-long cargo ship destined to sail the Mediterranean, across the Atlantic Ocean to Haiti. Intended for more modest expeditions than the 5000-mile journey it undertook, it was sporadically registered in Greece, Panama, and Tanzania. Changing ownership and name at each port of call, the *MV Tanager* eventually became the *MV Alta*, taking its final journey from Greece, in 2018. Around

October of that year the ship suffered engine failure and drifted aimlessly across the ocean with its crew. Eventually located off the southeast of Bermuda and running low on supplies, a rescue effort was set in place by the Coast Guard Air Station Elizabeth City in South Carolina to support the crew onboard, with the aim of eventually towing the boat to safer shores. However, tropical storm Leslie derailed those plans and the entire team had to be air lifted to safety by the US Coast Guard<sup>ii</sup>. Once again, the *Alta* continued to drift. Cut loose from ownership it was hijacked by pirates in Guyana for a short period of time before being abandoned in 2019. Further drifting across Europe it ended up on Irish shores when hurricane Dennis delivered it into the arms of the small coastal village of Ballycotton, Co. Cork in 2020. Following this, and in the absence of

any international claim to ownership, the Irish state took on responsibility for the vessel. Since then, the *MV Alta* had its fair share of trials and tribulations, vandalism and deterioration, fragmentation and fire. Finally, in March 2022, following a series of heavy storms along the Irish coast, the *Alta* split in two. And this today, is how it sits, clinging to the rocks and sea-bed of the Ballycotton shore-line.

Speaking from her studio on Sherkin Island, artist Majella O'Neill Collins reflected on the drift, neglect and resilience at the heart of *Alta's* journey<sup>1</sup>. Pointing to her experience of life in the pandemic, she identified with *Alta* around feelings of being lost, of being carried away by forces beyond one's control, and yet, still finding

the motivation to steer life in a certain direction, to still find a route. In between feelings of being lost and the motivation to keep going was the experience of drift. Curiously, the drift expressed is, in equal parts, existential and artistic. On the existential side of this drift Majella spoke of innocence, of memory-events produced by old smells, sounds and symbols. Ice-cream days emerging from the fog of standardised living in lockdown that steered her work in a new direction, inspiring risk and confidence with experimentation. On the artistic side of drift, she spoke of finding direction in the studio after long periods of inactivity, of how the story of the *Alta* became a guiding light at a time of creative malaise, the once calm, flowing blues and whites of oceanic form, now bright pinks and yellows,

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<sup>1</sup> In discussion Madge referred to the ship only as *Alta*

folded in on each other in unfettered whips of painterly joy and anarchy. Over time the familiar signposts of her narrative style dissolve, the horizon lines begin to fade and the ship-vessel, in all its weighted and centred compositional significance began to break apart, figurative marks on the foreground become shards of red and hovering yellows, embryonic in the sky.

From drifting at sea to drifting in the pandemic, drifting through aging and menopause, Majella spoke finally of the drifting imagination and the studio as respite, what Tyson Lewis has recently called *studious drift*,

Imagination is a prerequisite for the practice of recklessness and studious drift. It negates laws without destroying them, opening up the parallel space of the studio, which can be conjured up at any place at any time. Thus the

studier's reckless yet ritualistic study is not because she lacks imagination to escape. Rather, the anarchic dimension is unleashed from functionality, diving into the drift of eternity<sup>iii</sup>.

'Unleashed from functionality' the artist is guided by affect, intuition and anticipation rather than cartographic techniques or tools, and, in the rituals and practices of *studious drift* the rootlessness of the world is given route; image become sensation, experience becomes form, knowledge becomes poetry, and story becomes allegory.

#### Allegory as Form

In a recent text on the significance of island imaginaries at a time of climate transition, scholar Elizabeth de Loughrey makes a novel

turn towards the concept of allegory. That such a traditional narrative device could be relevant to our experience or understanding of unfolding climate chaos is, at first, a bit puzzling, a bit lacking in urgency. To fully grasp its significance, however, we need to travel back to 1921, when the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin purchased a small, enigmatic print from his friend Paul Klee, titled: *Angelus Novus* (1920). Benjamin was so struck by the luminous yellow print that he used it as a central allegory in his poetic manifesto; *On the Concept of History*,

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is

turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress<sup>iv</sup>.

A searing polemic against modern progress, Benjamin wrote the text as he fled the Vichy Government in 1940, sending it to his philosopher friend Hannah Arendt, who, also fleeing the occupation, immediately read the

first draft to fellow refugees on a ship organised by the Emergency Rescue Committee<sup>v</sup> to take them to the United States. For Benjamin, allegory had become an essential tool through which to understand and manage the complexity of the world as it teetered on the edge of chaos and obliteration, what he simply referred to as, 'the ruins'. In *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2020), De Loughery returns to Benjamin's concept of allegory to address the scalar complexity of our current planetary crisis, arguing that allegorical form should be 'revitalized and reinvented to represent this perceived disjunction between humans and the planet, between our "species" and a dynamic external "nature."<sup>vi</sup>.

Simply put, in allegorical forms it is the part that stands in for the whole. Following this, it is no

surprise that one of the most instantly recognisable and potent allegorical forms is the figure of the Island, traditionally understood as a microcosm of the world. Today, the island has become an important geographical space through which to read the dramatic shifts in sea levels, warming and pollution (whilst never having contributed to these problems in any way). Because of this, and in the wake of the 'ruins' of modern progress that has led us here, 'the island is moving from the periphery to the centre, a contemporary figure for thought and imaginative action'<sup>vii</sup>.

Working out of Sherkin Island on the south-west coast of Cork, Majella O'Neill Collins' recent paintings give us that island perspective. By transposing the story of the *MV Alta* into a visual form they provide an emotional compass

through our contemporary motivational drift. Each painting is a part of the whole, just as the story the *MV Alta* stands in for our collective experience. Like Benjamin's *Angel of History*, it offers direction and reflection at a time of rupture and suspension, an opportunity to re-centre ourselves. If the ship is an exemplar of 'other spaces' (heterotopia), then allegory (other voices) is an exemplar of 'difference', of 'nuance'.

There have been many different voices along this ship's journey and there have also been many names, maybe too many names, names that indicate a history of misuse, control and dishonour, and yet the *Alta* survives. It is fitting then, that, in a final act of artistic recuperation, the *MV Alta* has at last been left *unnamed*.

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<sup>i</sup> Foucault, Michel (1984). *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 22-27

<sup>ii</sup> British Sea Fishing (2023). *The Mysterious Final Journey of MV Alta*.  
alta/#:~:text=The%20vessel%20has%20been%20abandoned,example%20of%20a%20ghost%20ship.

<sup>iii</sup> Lewis, T. Hyland, P. (2022) *Studious Drift: Movements and Protocols for a Post digital Education*. University of Minnesota Press. P. 77

<sup>iv</sup> Benjamin, W (1942) *On the Concept of History*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016. P. X1

<sup>v</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_Rescue\\_Committee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Rescue_Committee)

<sup>vi</sup> De Loughery, E (2020) *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2020). Duke University Press. P. 4

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid