

Eight Rockets

a novel

and

Stepping Back from the Rail: Watching and Writing Eight Rockets

an exegesis

Submitted in 2013 to the University of Technology Sydney in fulfilment
of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Creative Arts

By David Dyer

Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

In my novel *Eight Rockets* and its accompanying exegesis *Stepping Back from the Rail* I offer a new way of thinking and writing about a particular and peculiar aspect of the *Titanic* disaster. The disaster is one of the most famous and mythologised events of our time, but what is less well known is that a nearby ship saw her distress rockets and did not respond to them. My exegesis and novel explore this incident and grapple with possible modes of its creative representation. My work inhabits the fraught zone between history and fiction, but I hope that it lights a way through and offers a strategy for reconciling the demands of historical truth and the fictional novel. Linda Hutcheon's central notion of 'installing and problematising' allows my novel to play a double game: to insist upon the truth of a particular representation of a historical event and its actors, but also to make overt the subjective and contingent processes involved in constructing such a representation.

In my exegesis I describe my initial attempts to write a 'scientific history' of the *Californian* incident and how these attempts suffocated under a dense weight of detail. I explain how I gave up the struggle to control the facts and instead placed the task of representing the 'truth' into the hands of an invented narrator. Process became part of the product: instead of telling the story of the *Californian* my novel told a story about telling stories.

My novel aims to disrupt and unsettle early 20th century discourses of heroic men, difficult women and the silent poor. My work explores representations of third class passengers in the *Titanic* archive, concludes that they only ever appear as an undifferentiated mass, and seeks to rectify this by giving voice to a specific, historical third class family.

My novel and exegesis together make a statement about what it is to write 'historically' by taking as their subject real 'historical referents' – Captain Lord, Herbert Stone and their actions on the *Californian* and afterwards. I resist Frederic Jameson's nostalgia for an authentic, fully-knowable referent and argue instead that even a referent sensed imperfectly – as a wispy hologram, or a haunting revenant, or an icy presence in the darkness – can nonetheless have its own kind of magic and

power. Further, I argue that my narrator's 'failure' fully to possess or explain Lord is paradoxically my novel's success. By dramatising Lord's resistance to interpretation the novel offers an answer to the conundrum at the centre of the *Californian* tragedy: why Lord did not respond to the *Titanic*'s rockets.

Finally, my novel offers a fable about meaning-seeking generally. In the end my narrator 'steps back from the rail' and is content to know Lord imperfectly from a distance. Perhaps in so doing he teaches us to see value in the quest for meaning rather than in any final meaning itself. Lord, like life, resists any final interpretation.

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Part One

Eight Rockets

(a novel)

[Production note: NO FULL TEXT OF THIS NOVEL AVAILABLE.
Access is restricted indefinitely.]

Part Two

*Standing Back from the Rail:
Watching and Writing Eight
Rockets*

(an exegesis)

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1. Introduction: the deleted scene

The *Titanic* sank at 2.20am on 15 April 1912. One-hundred years later to the minute I stood at the rail of the *Balmoral* and peered down into the black water, beneath which the wreck lay. It was a hallowed place: 1500 people had died in this water. Just as on the night of the disaster, the sea was a flat calm and there was no wind, no moon and no clouds – only a blaze of stars above. It was a time to think and reflect.

A few hours later I spoke via satellite to Fran Kelly of ABC National Radio about the experience. ‘I felt all my life, in a way, had been leading to this moment. I felt very grateful that I was there, but also very sad because I didn’t want the moment to end. I almost felt ... that this space was *my* space. It had been something that I had really thought about a lot all of my life and I wanted to stay there longer ... It was a very strange experience for me, a very profound experience, and one that I will never forget’ (Kelly 2012, pp. 233, 234).

The memorial voyage had been a great success. More than 1300 enthusiasts from around the world had retraced the *Titanic*’s route from Southampton to the disaster site. We had eaten *Titanic* food from specially-prepared menus, listened to *Titanic* music and some of us had worn *Titanic* clothes. A wide range of highly respected *Titanic* scholars and authors had given lectures and led seminars and discussions. The voyage had received much publicity, making headlines around the world. We had had our own adventures: the ship was battered by wild weather and a BBC cameraman fell ill and was airlifted off the ship by helicopter. But it was those brief hours we spent above the wreck site that were the most important and the most meaningful.

When the voyage concluded in New York I reflected on just what an enormous international industry the *Titanic* had become. There is a profusion of books, documentaries, television dramas, websites, IMAX movies, jigsaw puzzles, magazine and newspaper articles. The ship has given its name to restaurants, ice-cubes, academic conferences, computer games, plumbers’ businesses, removalists, harbour cruises, calendars and costume shops. A large part of the ship’s hull is on display in a Las Vegas casino. Steven Biel tells us that ‘rumour has it that the three most written-about subjects of all time are Jesus, the Civil War, and the *Titanic* disaster’ (Biel 1996). John

Wilson Foster calls the phenomenon ‘The *Titanic* Complex’ (Foster 1997). Even back in 1986, Walter Lord, author of *A Night to Remember*, called the *Titanic* the ‘The Unsinkable Subject’ (Lord 1986, Chapter 1). And the ship’s popularity shows no sign of abating. The Australian mining magnate Clive Palmer has announced that he will build a full-scale, operational replica of the ship – *Titanic II* – to sail on its maiden voyage in 2016 (Calligeros 2012).

It has not always been thus. As a young child in the 1970s I had to search hard for material to feed my obsession with the ship. I would wake up to place a tape recorder in front of the television to catch a late-night broadcast of *A Night to Remember*. I read and re-read the *Titanic* entry in the *World Book Encyclopaedia*. I read an old copy of Geoffrey Marcus’s *The Maiden Voyage*. There was not much else around.

But in 1985 Dr Robert Ballard discovered the wreck and general interest in the disaster began to increase. Many books appeared – not only documentary accounts of the disaster but fictional novels too. Kenneth Womack points out that ‘nearly a dozen fictive accounts involving the steamship appeared in the 1990s alone’ (Womack 2004, p. 85). Then, in 1997, the disaster was transformed into a worldwide industry by the release of James Cameron’s film *Titanic*. The film was and still is astonishingly popular. It has grossed US\$2.2 billion worldwide (including its 2012 3D re-release) (IMDb.com 2013). It has spawned academic conferences and papers (Bergfelder & Street 2004, Part III; Sandler & Studlar 1999). It has been estimated that 250 million people have watched the film in cinemas and another 100 million on DVD. Countless others have downloaded the film (Answers Corporation 2012). For most people the *Titanic* story is the Cameron film.

But there is a gap in Cameron’s account. My own deluxe 4-DVD version of the film includes a series of deleted scenes. One of those scenes takes place in the wireless cabin of another ship stopped nearby amid ice. It shows an operator sending a warning to the nearby *Titanic* and the *Titanic*’s operator giving a curt rebuff: ‘Keep out, shut up, I am working Cape Race’ (Cameron 2005). There are many inaccuracies but in broad strokes the scene represents a true event: an ice warning given to the *Titanic* by the cargo steamer *Californian* half an hour before the liner hit her iceberg. A little later – although this is not shown in the deleted scene – that same steamer would watch the *Titanic* fire her distress rockets and would quietly ignore them.

Cameron's *Californian* scene lies on the cutting room floor – a symbol of the *Californian* story's absence from the larger *Titanic* narrative. Very few *Titanic* films or novels refer to it. The collective obsession is with the dramas played out on the sloping decks of the sinking liner, not with the ship that was nearby and watching. The *Californian*'s curious stillness and puzzling complexity resists any easy representation in documentary or fictive accounts of the disaster.

This is the gap which my creative project seeks to remedy.

2. The *Californian* incident

The irony of the *Californian* incident is that although it finds very little expression in blockbuster fictive accounts of the *Titanic*, in the lesser known non-fiction literature it is the most controversial aspect of the whole disaster. Some say the *Californian* did see the *Titanic*'s rockets, others say she didn't, and the battle rages to this day.

All agree, however, that late in the evening of 14 April 1912 in mid-Atlantic the cargo steamer *Californian* ran into an icefield and her master, Captain Lord, decided to stop for the night. An unknown ship approached from the southeast and, at 11.40pm or thereabouts, stopped. From about 12.45am onwards the ship fired eight white rockets which were seen by the *Californian*'s second officer and reported to the captain who was dozing below. At 2.20am the ship disappeared. At dawn, Captain Lord woke his wireless operator and learned that the *Titanic* had sunk nearby – or was sinking – and raced to the rescue. But it was too late. The *Carpathia* was pulling the last of the *Titanic*'s lifeboats from the ocean.

The *Titanic* hit her iceberg at about 11.40pm, fired eight white rockets to attract the attention of a ship she could see to the north, and sank at about 2.20am. To the American and British inquiries this concordance of times and events was conclusive: they found that the *Californian* saw the *Titanic*'s distress rockets and condemned Captain Lord for not responding to them. Yet in the months, years and decades that followed a significant body of opinion arose adamantly proclaiming the innocence of Lord. It was clear, said Lord's defenders, that the *Californian* did not see the *Titanic*. They pointed to inconsistencies in timing, raised disputes about distances and said the rockets seen by the *Californian* were not distress rockets. Or if they were, they did not come from the *Titanic*: there was another ship between the *Titanic* and *Californian* which fired rockets.

Lord's defenders – known as 'Lordites' – emerged surprisingly quickly after the publication of the American and British reports. At his home in Cornwall, A.M. Foweraker, a solicitor and self-styled 'sea lawyer', quickly filled two notebooks with meticulous navigational calculations and diagrams and became convinced that the *Californian* did not see the *Titanic*. He published his findings anonymously in a series

of articles in *The Nautical Magazine* and could properly be regarded as the very first of the Lordites – apart, perhaps, from Lord himself (Foweraker 1913a, 1913b). However, the real defence of Lord did not begin until almost half a century later when Lord, now an old man, saw William MacQuitty's 1958 film *A Night to Remember*, based on the novel by Walter Lord (no relation), and was angry about the way he was portrayed. He visited the Mercantile Marine Service Association in Liverpool and said he 'wanted something done about it' (Harrison 1992, p. 164, 1996, p. 11, 1997a). There he found Leslie Harrison, a very sympathetic listener, who took up the case with great energy and commitment. Even after the death of Lord in 1962, Harrison continued the struggle and succeeded eventually in having the case reappraised by the Marine Accident Investigation Branch of the British Ministry of Transport. Their 1992 findings were inconclusive, and Harrison was much disappointed (see Harrison 1997b). He felt that he had proved beyond any doubt what Lord had known all along: Lord was innocent. Harrison was not alone in his views. As the author of *A Night to Remember* himself puts it, Captain Lord 'was backed by a small but articulate band of marine writers' (Lord 1986, p. 181). More recently, Senan Molony has taken up Lord's case in *Titanic and the Mystery Ship* (2006) and *Victims and Villains* (2009).

There are, however, many writers who strongly resist the claims of the Lordites. Chief among these is Leslie Reade, barrister, author and playwright, who worked for many years on his own book about the *Californian*, published eventually as *The Ship That Stood Still* (1993). So offensive did Harrison find Reade's book that he tried to stop its publication and, when it eventually did reach the shelves, he promptly sued the publishers for libel (Harrison 1996, p. 178). The intense and personal animosity which characterises the battle between Lordites and non-Lordites continues to this day.

3. The disorderly buzzing

In my view, the evidence – considered dispassionately and in its entirety – overwhelmingly proves that the *Californian* saw the *Titanic*'s distress rockets and did nothing about them. So when, in 2007, I read Molony's *Titanic and the Mystery Ship* I was surprised by the book's central conclusions: that the ship seen from the *Titanic* was not the *Californian*, and the rockets seen by the *Californian* were not necessarily the *Titanic*'s. In any event, Molony argues, Captain Lord was justified in ignoring them (Molony 2006). I was also surprised by the vehemence with which the book attacked those who had given evidence or made findings against Captain Lord. I felt protective of these men. They could not speak for themselves and my own research had revealed them to be good men with good reputations. But, most importantly, I felt protective of the historical record itself. In my view Molony's book was terribly misleading, and its conclusions were already finding their way into mainstream *Titanic* literature. In *The Titanic Experience*, for example – a large glossy book designed for the mass *Titanic* audience – I read that there was 'abundant proof that the *Californian* was not the mystery ship [seen by the *Titanic*]' and that Lord was a 'predetermined scapegoat' for both the American and British inquiries (Riffenburgh 2008, p. 55). I knew there was no such 'abundant proof' and was dismayed to think of an unsuspecting public being told that there was.

I decided to embark on no less a task than setting the historical record straight once and for all. I felt I was well placed for the job. I had studied navigation and shipping at the Australian Maritime College, I had worked at sea as a ship's deck officer and in London as a maritime lawyer, and I had researched the *Californian* incident for many years. I wrote a 20,000-word, 350-footnote response to Molony's book and invited the Titanic Historical Society to publish it. In the end, they declined – because, they said, it was a response to another person's work rather than an 'original' piece. Whether this was the reason, or whether it was because the article was too long, or because the society's founding member had been friends with Captain Lord's son, I did not know, but no matter: I decided to park the article on my website and write a book instead.

The book would be a lengthy, objective, fully-footnoted work setting out once and for all the true facts of the *Californian* incident.

By coincidence, I had at a hand a model to follow. At about the same time Molony's book was released, Vincent Bugliosi published *Reclaiming History*, a book about the Kennedy assassination (Bugliosi 2007). It is an enormous work, with 1600 oversized pages of small type and another thousand pages of endnotes on a CD-ROM. I read it from cover to cover, including the endnotes. Bugliosi, a Los Angeles lawyer, argues that Lee Harvey Oswald killed Kennedy and acted alone. He worked on the book for twenty years, driven by his frustration at the conspiracy theories which persist in the face of the 'mountain of uncontroverted evidence against Oswald' and despite the fact that 'the case against Oswald himself is overwhelming and relatively routine' (Bugliosi 2007, pp. xvii, xxv). Bugliosi dedicates his book *to* the historical record because, he says, it is 'sacred, and should never be tampered with or defiled by untruths.' Like Bugliosi, I thought, I would reclaim the true history of the *Californian* incident.

Bugliosi offered me a model and Ann Curthoys and John Docker offered me a theoretical framework. In their book *Is History Fiction?* the authors compare the work of the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides, showing that while each 'search for truth', Herodotus' writing is 'polyphonic' and 'multiple and frequently contradictory', whereas Thucydides' is 'monologic' and 'magisterial' (Curthoys & Docker 2010, pp. 48, 37, 34, 56). Thucydides' work is 'precise, directed, decisive, carefully structured and highly analytical', an approach epitomised by Leopold Ranke, the early 19th century advocate of 'scientific history', who says:

We cannot expect from the writing of history the same free development as is, at least in theory, to be expected in works of literature ... A strict presentation of the facts, contingent and unattractive as that may be, is the highest law (Curthoys & Docker 2010, p.56 and notes 10 and 20).

I wanted my history of the *Californian* incident to comply with Ranke's 'highest law'. It was a noble enough mission, but I soon ran into difficulties. The data was dense like a jungle thicket and the further I penetrated the thicker it became. I have said that there is a raw correspondence between what happened on the *Titanic* and what was seen on the *Californian*. These correspondences, to my mind, prove conclusively the case

against Lord. They are like the thick tree trunks of a very obvious forest. But those who defend Lord see a very confusing undergrowth, and to clear away that undergrowth is not at all easy. For example, there is good evidence that the *Californian* saw a ship fire about eight white rockets between about 12.45am and 2am, and that the *Titanic* fired about that many rockets at about that time. But Leslie Harrison, Lord's key defender, sees problems in this correspondence. He considers passenger estimates of lifeboat-lowering times, interrelates these in complex ways with timings of wireless signals received by other ships and shore stations (all of which were in different time zones), and considers the putting back of clocks and watches at midnight by some crew but not others, to reach the conclusion that the series of eight rockets fired by the *Titanic* commenced twenty minutes earlier than the series of rockets seen by the *Californian* (Harrison 1992, pp. 163-165). They therefore cannot be the same rockets.

To rebut Harrison's arguments is not easy. Timekeeping at sea is a complex business because clocks are adjusted to take into account changing longitude of the ship. In the *Titanic*'s day – and even when I worked at sea in the 1980s and 90s – clocks were adjusted at midnight so that as near as possible midday occurred the following day when the sun was at its zenith. It was an estimate based on best guesses of the ship's current position and her projected speed and course over the next twelve hours. It was more art than science. Two ships in the same part of the ocean might well have had different times. And the *Titanic*'s sinking straddled midnight, which means that the usual time adjustments were overshadowed by more pressing events. Some clocks and watches were advanced, others were not. There were 700 survivors and their memories of times are unreliable. To assign exact times to events on board is the work of a PhD thesis. David Brown, an American mariner and teacher of US Coast Guard licensing courses, has tried. His 'Chronology – Sinking of SS Titanic' consists of 40 pages of detailed analysis in a table with the following headings: 'Linear Hours', '*Titanic* Ship's Time', 'Bridge Time (in bells)', 'New York Hours' and 'GMT London' (Brown 2009). His article explaining the chronology runs to 13 pages. It is a technical business. And this is just the time on the *Titanic*. Try to synchronise this with time on the *Californian* and the jungle of data and calculation becomes impenetrable. You can spend so long in the thicket that at the end of it all you have forgotten the

main point: the *Titanic* fired eight white rockets and the *Californian* saw eight white rockets in about the right place at about the right time.

Such is the difficulty of trying to counter Harrison's point at his level of analysis, and the timing of the rockets is just one small point in his thick book. There are many other points, many of them about navigation and position-fixing, which is an even more complex art in mid-ocean than time fixing.

I began to feel as if I was working with fractals, not history. As I pushed down into the data it seemed to resolve itself into ever finer patterns, ever more detail, ever longer calculations. I felt like Alice in her rabbit hole: down, down, down. Would my fall never come to an end? The data was unruly. It mocked me. I was reminded of my early university studies of Foucault, who tells us that 'there is undoubtedly in our society ... a profound logophobia, a sort of dumb fear of these events, of this mass of spoken things, of everything that could possibly be violent, discontinuous, querulous, disordered even and perilous in it, of the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse' (Foucault 1972, pp. 228-229).

I had discovered Foucault's lesson anew: that discourse – language – data – information – was, like water flooding the *Titanic*, unruly and invisible and always threatening to rush up and drown us.

4. Fighting facts

It was never going to work – this attempt to control information, to master every data point, to produce a once-and-for-all, case-closed, Bugliosi-esque reclamation of history. Moreover, my drive to control the facts did not allow sufficient space to develop the interiority of my central characters, an interiority which was essential to an understanding of why Lord did not respond to the rockets. The captain and his second officer were in silent and subtle conflict that night, based in part on their respective internalisations of conflicting modes of masculinity, and these strange psychologies were being lost in the mass of historical and technical details. I decided I must try to free up my writing.

A useful early model was Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* – an example of the sort of *New Yorker*-style immersive, narrative journalism which I thought would suit my purpose. In the book's foreword, Junger says that his intention was to stick to the facts, 'but in as wide-ranging a way as possible'. 'Wide-ranging' means that there are 'varying kinds of information in the book': facts based on interviews, technical books and documents but also suppositions, assumptions and inferences informed by his own experience and intuition. He wanted to write a 'completely factual book that would stand on its own as piece of journalism', but he 'didn't want the narrative to asphyxiate under a mass of technical detail and conjecture' (Junger 1997, p. xv). This seemed to me to be a useful formula.

I introduced a new character into my narrative – Philip Franklin, the head of the White Star Line in New York. I had carried out detailed and extensive research and knew him to be a forceful, dynamic man of action – in short, the perfect contrast to Lord. Franklin's story would run parallel to Lord's, finally intersecting with it when the two men met at the Washington hearings into the disaster. Following Junger, I created my character of Franklin using 'various kinds of information' and crafted him as something of a 'reader's guide', observing Lord closely and offering commentary on his actions.

But the experiment failed. Even though Franklin was based on facts 'in a wide-ranging way', those facts nonetheless – like those waters in the *Titanic*'s hull – rose

up to sink my narrative. A better metaphor, perhaps, is that my writing consisted of great mountains of data linked by small and flimsy footbridges of my own supposition and invention.

‘The chapter is drowning in detail,’ my supervisor said. ‘There is too much flashback and historical information.’ To use Junger’s words, it had ‘asphyxiated under a mass of technical detail’. I soon discovered that there were plenty of theorists ready to warn of the problem. Robert McKee, in his famous bible of Hollywood scriptwriting, *Story*, says of historical film scripts, ‘A story is not an accumulation of information strung into a narrative, but a design of events to carry us to a meaningful climax’ (McKee 1999, p. 75). Linda Hutcheon notes William Gass’s characterisation of the novel as a ‘fact-infested form’ in which a battle is always fought between ‘data and design’ (Hutcheon 2002a, p. 80), and in my case the data was winning. My narrative lacked pace and drama and, more importantly, I was not achieving the interiority I was hoping for in the novel’s characters. They remained distant, formal and clunky constructions.

I deleted the Franklin chapters in their entirety. This was painful. They represented months of work. But into the gap emerged a new character, a character completely of my own invention. John Steadman, a journalist, was initially to be a minor character representing the Boston press. But slowly, inexorably, the character of Steadman began to develop and grow and my novel at last began to live. With Steadman I was free of the burden of historical facts and his interiority worked. His chapters were written in first person. He became a proxy for me. My struggle to understand Lord became his struggle, my frustrations with the captain’s iron impenetrability became his. Steadman became the centre of consciousness for the novel, a mediator, commentator and guide, a prism through which the real characters and events could be seen and filtered. He gave me the distance I needed from the facts.

5. Installing and problematising: writing metafiction

5.1. *Viva postmodernism*

If this distancing from the facts gives my novel a sense of the postmodern, then it does so just as some theorists are saying that postmodernism is on the way out. Andrew Hoberek tells us that ‘declarations of postmodernism’s demise have become a critical commonplace’ (2007, p. 233) and even Hutcheon writes, ‘Perhaps we should just say: it’s over’ (Hutcheon 2002b, p. 5). Both theorists point to the appropriation of postmodernism by mass culture and its rapid and complete institutionalisation in academia, journals, textbooks and how-to guides. It has become the dominant counter-discourse requiring, perhaps, its own countering. In its success lies its failure; in its dominance lies its demise.

But neither theorist, it seems to me, really believes it. Hutcheon ‘resolutely stayed with the present tense’ in her rewriting of *Politics of Postmodernism* for the 21st century (Hutcheon 2002a, p. 165) and Hoberek says that the narrative of the end of postmodernism is only ‘one way to tell the story’ and it is a problematic way. It is, he suggests, a throwback to a *modernist* way of thinking: an ‘investment ... in difficult formal innovation as the defining characteristic of serious literature’ and an ‘understanding of literary change as grounded in periods of sweeping innovation that set aside their now-outmoded predecessors’ (Hoberek 2007, pp. 233, 234).

I follow Hoberek in resisting the elitism and avant-gardism underlying the story of postmodernism’s demise. Mark McGurl, when describing the merging of academia and the arts in the ‘campus novel’ arising from burgeoning university creative-writing courses, points to the irony of the institutionalised innovation of such novels. He suggests the experimental prose of academic creative writers can be read as ‘radically conventional, as testaments to the continuing interest of literary forms as objects of a certain kind of professional research’ (McGurl 2005, p. 111). So if the postmodern is no longer radically experimental this may not be such a bad thing. In a startling example of contemporary, mass-market postmodern fiction, Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, the novel’s young narrator is offered advice about her short story by the publisher of a literary magazine:

We wondered whether it owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs Woolf ... Who can doubt the value of this experimentation? However, such writing can become precious when there is no sense of forward movement. Put the other way round, our attention would have been held even more effectively had there been an underlying pull of simple narrative' (McEwan 2002, p. 312).

As we read this letter we realise that its detailed advice as to style, content and form has been incorporated into the very novel we have been reading. The advice to resist modernist 'preciousness' is thus embedded in the postmodern strategy of self-reflexivity, and shining through all this cleverness is a simple message: never forget your reader, and the need always for the underlying pull of simple narrative.

Besides, postmodernism has never been about innovation for its own sake. 'Postmodernism was never simply a matter of style, it inevitably also involved the ideology of representation, including self-representation' (Hutcheon 2002b, p. 6). The postmodern raises political questions as much as aesthetic ones – questions about who has access to the means of representation, who has the power to construct narratives, who is entitled to confer authenticity. Such questions are as important now as ever. Even as I write this a television commentator tells me that Prime Minister Gillard now has 'lost both newspapers' – Fairfax and News Ltd – and so cannot win the election. She cannot control her story; she has lost access to the means of her own representation. My novel – whether it be postmodern or not – raises the postmodern questions of who owns the *Titanic* and *Californian* story, how that process of owning works, and how it can be subverted. I hope to demonstrate that in the end Lord's story resists ownership altogether – by Stone, by my invented narrator Steadman, by me, by anyone.

Viva postmodernism! Institutionalised and canonical as it might now be, I suggest that it remains alive and well and at least hints at a new way of writing and thinking about the *Californian* incident. Linda Hutcheon's formulation of 'historiographical metafiction' (Hutcheon 1988, Chapter 7) and its central strategy of 'installing then problematising' historical contexts and events (Hutcheon 1988, p. 89 and following) continues to open up a space in which I need not fear the disorderly buzz of discourse – of language, of history – but can embrace it; a space in which my novel can acknowledge – even if only in passing – the constructed nature of narratives and historical truths.

5.2. *Fiction about fiction*

By having John Steadman overtly grapple with the mechanics of his own narrative, and having the text draw attention to its own mode of production, my novel in part becomes ‘fiction about fiction ... fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity.’ Metafiction is not new – the first chapter of each book of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), for example, is set aside for the author-narrator’s commentary about the events and characters as they unfold, including instruction about the strategies the author-narrator is adopting and advice to the reader about proper interpretation. The narrator and reader are positioned as fellow travellers in a stagecoach who, ‘notwithstanding any bickerings or little animosities which may have occurred on the road’, say farewell to each other at the end ‘with cheerfulness and good humour’ (Fielding 1749, p. 813). Patricia Waugh asserts that ‘although the *term* metafiction might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself’ (Waugh, 1984, p5).

Now even the term is not new: more recent narrative theory describes self-referential practices using more contemporary labels. Mark McGurl, for example, calls such practices ‘autopoetics’ and locates them within the field of systems theory (McGurl 2005, p. 111). Any system, he says – mathematical, logical, discursive – has internal rules which from within are invisible, and autopoetics is about making those rules visible. Similarly, in their conception of ‘narrative as rhetoric’ James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz insist that narrative does not just describe or represent a series of events, but is ‘itself an event’ – that is, it is part of what it seeks to represent (Herman et al. 2012, p. 3). Further, Brian Richardson re-labels traditional realist narratives – which aim to offer ‘realistic’ story worlds by hiding or suppressing the machinery of storytelling – as ‘mimetic’ narratives, and then posits ‘antimimetic narratives’ as those which ‘flaunt their artificiality and break the ontological boundaries that mimetic works so carefully preserve.’ He points out that his conception of ‘antimimetic narrative’ forms part of the larger field of ‘unnatural narratology’. Phelan and Rabinowitz offer the label ‘synthetic’ for antimimetic narrative and describe it as involving ‘an audience’s interest in and attention to the characters and to the larger narrative as artificial constructs’ (Herman et al. 2012, pp. 7, 20-21). Finally, Robyn

Warhol points out that contemporary feminist theory embraces (or at least has much in common with) all of these approaches: feminism after all has always been ‘self-conscious ... about methodology’ (Herman et al. 2012, p. 10).

While these recent developments in narrative theory, especially in relation to the self-aware narrative, have much to offer, it is also true that Hutcheon’s formulations are still relevant, indeed could easily be recast in the newer terminology. The self-reflexivity and metafictionality that Hutcheon identifies in ‘narcissistic’ fiction could, for instance, be reconceived as a shift from the mimetic component to the synthetic, or as an awareness of narrated characters and events as rhetorical constructs, or examples of virtuosic autopoetics. However, I have found Hutcheon’s terminology and formulations continue to offer a best-fit framework for my own creative practice. In particular, her delineation of the genre of self-reflexive *historical* writing – that is, ‘historiographical metafiction’ – does not seem to me to have been bettered, and seems to me to resonate with the aims and concerns of my thesis.

5.3. *Steadman: the metafictional journalist*

Process is visible from the outset of *Eight Rockets*. In the first chapter the narrator senses ‘a good story’ and his fingers tingle ‘as if they were already beginning to write it’ (*Eight Rockets*, p.7). At first Steadman tries to write action adventure, emulating one of his colleagues, but is unsuccessful: he must find another type of narrative. The head of White Star in Boston demands of him a story, but what sort of story? The reader participates in Steadman’s mission to find the answer and from an early stage there is gentle ironic play: Steadman, his newspaper’s ‘body’ writer, is disappointed by early reports of ‘all saved’ from the *Titanic* because for him no bodies meant no story. The reader, of course, knows that there will be plenty of bodies soon enough but in the sequences that follow the reader’s knowledge becomes incomplete and uncertain: she suspects that the third-person narrative sections, set aboard the less-well-known *Californian*, might well be written by Steadman but they do not seem to be the body story he so keenly desires. The reader – double guessing, knowing more than the narrator but also less, thinking forwards but also backwards, informing the narrative with her own knowledge of *Titanic* disaster but also being misled by that knowledge – becomes an active co-constructor of the heterocosm of the novel.

Narrator and reader are like Henry Fielding's travellers in the stagecoach – affable companions working together as best they can, each with their imperfect knowledge. There is a curious double movement here: the novel, through Steadman, works inwardly – focussing on itself, interrogating its own processes – but also looks outwards, offering up to the reader an invitation to participate. According to Hutcheon, this is the paradox of historiographical metafiction: 'that it is both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader'. Readers are 'distant, yet involved, co-producers of the novel' riding with Steadman as he investigates, rejecting certain narratives and embracing others and trying to construct their own story. As Hutcheon puts it, 'The process may be becoming as intriguing as the product' (Hutcheon 1984, pp. 7, xii, 8). But what sort of process is it?

5.4. *Narrative-making in 1912*

Steadman is embedded in a grand narrative-making machine. He is a reporter for William Randolph Hearst's *Boston American* towards the end of the great period of 'yellow journalism' in America. Newspapers in the big cities had become big business, with enormous circulation, capitalization and profits (see Mott 1962, p. 546). The editor had become a money man. 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (Mott 1962, p. 548). It was a time of febrile narrative-making: large black-ink scareheads daily proclaimed the sensational. So when the *Titanic* story began to break, the media machine over-revved, spinning and whirring so much that it seemed it might fly apart. Headlines suggested a world pushed to the brink of madness: 'Crazed by Wreck Talk', 'Reads of Titanic Disaster; Crazed; Wades Into Lake', 'He Was Driven Insane by the Titanic Tragedy', 'Wreck Causes Rich Woman to Throw Self Into Ocean', 'Editor Killed in Office' (Biel 1998, pp. 160-163). Here was the story of the year – of the decade, of the century – unrolling in real time, sometimes obscured, delayed or incomplete but always dramatic. It was an event of mythic proportions; a story like no other; a dense, generative seed planted into the soil of American journalism at its most fecund. Michael Hammond observes:

The press reportage of the event at the time was the first re-telling of the sinking by virtue of ... the process of story construction, inflected by varying degrees of hyperbolic suppositions, morally inflected rumours and stories that functioned to fill the gaps between the sporadic flow of

confirmed information ... The *Titanic*'s circulating interpretations and retellings run a range of narrative possibilities from mythic tales of individual heroism to the tragic consequences of the irresponsibility of institutions (Hammond 2004, p. 26).

Steven Biel agrees. 'As a social drama,' he says, 'as a public performance in which American culture thought out loud about itself, the *Titanic* disaster produced a cacophony of voices rather than a chorus' (Biel 1996, p. 132). Steadman is immersed in this cacophony. In one scene – as he sits in a waiting room at Washington's Union Station – he is literally surrounded by *Titanic* narratives: newspaper stories framing the disaster in a multitude of ways. The primary purpose of these narratives, he discovers, is to ameliorate, restore and reassure. The disaster is a shock to confidence: the sinking represents a catastrophic failure of the British technological culture which built and crewed her and the American capitalist culture which funded her. The newspapers seem to have taken on the duty of restoring faith by affirming existing social structures ('the rich behaved splendidly!') and by extracting lessons from the disaster, showing the way forward for humbled nations.

Biel calls this type of story a 'conventional narrative', which he defines as the 'interpretative framework that affirmed existing power relations – that made sense of the disaster according to dominant conceptions of gender, class, ethnicity, and race' (Biel 1996, p. 241). In such a narrative, dominant ideologies are affirmed and reaffirmed. Discordant or radical narratives, like Foucault's disorderly buzzing, are suppressed. Following the disaster, the conventional narrative 'contained tensions and anxieties', argues Biel. 'It included them ... by raising doubts about modern civilization. And it controlled them by resolving, at least in part, the same doubts it raised' (Biel 1996, p. 75).

Steadman participates in this conventional narrative but he is also something of a budding metafictionalist, and, as Hutcheon tells us, 'the point of metafiction is that it constitutes its own first critical commentary, and in doing so ... sets up the theoretical frame of reference in which it must be considered' (Hutcheon 1984, p. 6). Steadman – with his fine perception and his wise cynicism – is the site and origin of the novel's self-commentary. He does not offer a single, unified master-narrative of the disaster from above but rather interrogates and challenges from within. His 'theoretical frame of reference' is an anti-framework: he shakes the structure and looks up to see what

falls. He follows Hutcheon's central formula of installing and problematising. This is a reversal of the vector of Biel's 'conventional narrative', which first problematises (anxious recounts of an appalling disaster) and then installs a solution (soothing moralising and lesson-taking). Steadman instead first installs conventional narrative by recounting it in his own text and then problematises it by exposing and challenging its inscribed ideologies of nationhood, gender, race and class. In doing so, he makes Hutcheon's argument: that self-reflexivity is one of the most useful 'weapons in the arsenal of denaturalizing the so-called 'natural' and 'neutral' in culture' (Hutcheon 2002a, p. 174).

5.5. Heroic men

Perhaps what was most natural and neutral in the days and weeks following the disaster was the proposition that the men of the *Titanic* had behaved splendidly. Stories affirming (or reclaiming) heroic masculinity filled the newspapers. Biel's conventional narrative was shaped within days: rich and powerful men had stood calmly back to let the weak (the women and children) go through to the boats. 'In the midst of harrowing recitals,' proclaimed *The Washington Post*, 'shines the heroism of American manhood, which protected the weak and helpless' (*The Washington Post* 1912b, p. 6). 'The tale of the sinking of the steamship *Titanic* is a story of heroism,' said *The Boston Globe*. 'There were brave men on board that ship ...' (Carberry 1912, p. 1). During my review of the contemporary press I was surprised by the extent of this type of eulogizing of the masculine. It may have been a comfort for a grieving society, but it also seemed to me a little desperate and frantic, like a panicked child repeating a familiar nursery rhyme under his breath. It struck me as a flight to safety. Biel casts the phenomenon in terms of mythmaking: 'what emerged in the days after the disaster was a myth – not because it was false necessarily but because it located a disturbing event within routine structures of understanding' (Biel 1996, p. 24). Biel relies on Richard Slotkin's conception of mythmaking as 'a means of deriving usable values from history, and of putting those values beyond the reach of critical demystification. Its primary appeal is to ritualized emotions, established beliefs, habitual associations, memory, nostalgia' (Biel 1996, p. 24). The mythologising of American masculinity – and the quarantining

of it from challenge – thus provided reassurance and comfort to a nation that had suffered a surprising and disorientating blow.

The hero-narrative of *Titanic*'s first class male passengers was not just reassuring, it was transformative. The men were elevated by the disaster, put beyond the reach of any counter-narratives that might suggest they were greedy, slothful or undeserving, and any pampered softness and indolence was stripped away to expose the shining glory of American manhood. 'They stand redeemed!' proclaimed a contemporary poet:

They are not what we said
Or felt, or thought; they are the kingly dead,
Who turned heroic after years of sloth
To save the weak. No longer need we loathe
These rich whom slander oft has smeared with muck ...

They stand redeemed! These fathers, brothers, men!
They bring old faith in manhood back again ...
Beside the boats they stood and saw dear wives
Take the one chance that in doom's hour survives –
The chance made possible by sacrifice
When manly men fold arms and pay the price ...
(Biel 1998, pp. 21-23)

'Old faith in manhood' was restored. Men were not just men but *manly* men. As Ann Larabee puts it, 'Progressives had charged Economic Man with callous materialism; now, as first class *Titanic* man, he was the model of honor, courage and benevolence' (Larabee 1990, p. 12).

It is, of course, all too much for Steadman. Heroic manhood is a narrative which he – and through him, the novel – sets about problematising. When Thomas, representing White Star in Boston, begs Steadman to write up Captain Lord as a hero, Steadman tries to comply. He starts by installing the conventional narrative, following as a model *The Boston Globe*'s eulogising of Major Butt, the president's aide and best friend. 'The story of the *Californian*,' he begins, 'is a story of heroism. There were brave men on board that ship ...' (*Eight Rockets*, p.94). But he cannot continue. The *Globe* story troubles him. One of Major Butt's heroic acts was the shooting of six 'cravens' and Steadman finds himself feeling sorry for the cravens and contempt for the major. The established values of heroic masculinity are not quite beyond the reach of critical demystification after all, and it is the underside of things for which Steadman

begins to develop sympathy. When he raises his glass to Major Butt he does so ironically, giving a gentle shake to the structure from within. A little later the structure collapses completely when he discovers that 58 first class men lived while 53 third class children died. For Steadman the mythology of heroic American manhood has turned sour. He sees its self-serving hypocrisy and resolves to write another type of story.

Steadman makes explicit the processes involved in the construction of the conventional narrative of masculine heroism. The young Cyril Evans, for instance, the *Californian's* wireless operator, not only says he wants to be a hero but develops his own ideas about how that heroism might be rendered as a narrative. He knows how the press works: he has seen it lionise his mild-mannered colleague Jack Binns, who in 1909 became the world's first Marconi hero by summoning aid to the stricken White Star liner *Republic*. When Evans learns of the disaster to the nearby *Titanic* he begins to craft his own dramatic story that he might sell to the press. But almost as soon as he tries to construct his narrative of heroic manhood it begins to dismantle itself. When he learns that his own ship did not respond to *Titanic's* distress rockets he begins to understand that his ship's story is to be an *anti-hero* narrative. In the end, his narrative dismantles itself into silence: Steadman, the narrator, does not wait to hear his evidence at the Washington inquiry.

A similar process takes place in relation to Herbert Stone, one of the two key historical figures of the text. My rendering of the diffident second officer who actually saw the *Titanic's* rockets is informed by my own experience as an adolescent contemplating a life at sea. As a child I knew of the sea from books – *The Cruel Sea*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, Brian Callison's merchant-marine adventures, and others – and as a young man I sought to replicate in the real world what I had found in these fictions. Herbert Stone does the same. As a boy his mother gives him *Moby-Dick* and he hopes to find in a career at sea something of that novel's vast skies and close friendships. Central to this idealised sense of the sea is his hope that it will develop and strengthen his own faltering masculinity. Life at sea is, after all, a world of men as well as vast skies. From his father Stone has learned to despise his own sensitivity, tears and warm heart, and these feminine elements, he thinks, must be smelted out.

Perhaps Stone has read and internalised the ethos of the sea as articulated by Captain Vere in that other great Melville novel, *Billy Budd*:

let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool. Ashore in a criminal case, will an upright judge allow himself off the bench to be waylaid by some tender kinswoman of the accused seeking to touch him with her tearful plea? Well, the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must here be ruled out (Melville 1962, p. 362).

Captain Vere's 'here' is, of course, his ship at sea – a hard, masculine place. It is not a place for women. Interestingly, David Gerstner identifies a similar ideology in James Cameron's film. 'In *Titanic*,' he says, 'unchecked femininity delivers the unlucky blow to the "unsinkable" and over-feminised machine' (Gerstner 2004, p. 180). He cites the words of the Archibald Gracie character in the film – 'Women and machinery do not mix' – and observes that women were traditionally not permitted on ships because they were 'unlucky' (Gerstner 2004, p. 176). Instead, female figureheads were mounted in their place and the very famous positioning of Kate Winslet on the bow of the film's *Titanic* 'demonstrates the popular and moral rhetoric issued during the Gilded Age regarding women's perfidious and "unlucky" effect on the machine; it is an idea contemporaneously tied to the notion that *Titanic*'s sinking marks the end of the age of excess' (Gerstner 2004, p. 176). Women are femmes fatale – alluring, hysterical, captivating, causing 'feminised mechanical chaos' (Gerstner 2004, p. 175). In Cameron's film this is made literal: the ship's lookouts are distracted by Rose's voluptuous figure as she cavorts on the well-deck and the film suggests that this is why they did not see the iceberg in time (Cameron 1997, at 1:33:20). Cameron, who elsewhere is meticulous in his fidelity to the historical record, does not mind at this critical point departing so wholeheartedly from it to say: the allure of the feminine is fatal.

Larabee takes this analysis a step further. She does not see the feminine as a threat to the machine, she sees it as the machine. The *Titanic* herself is a giant, grotesque woman – dangerous, predatory, threatening. The ship is a vast 'mechanical bride', a 'feminine enigma', 'a figure of wanton destruction, dragging her self-sacrificing men and their "civilization" down into the icy ocean'. Further, the ship is 'an awesome female presence', 'a giantess who, putting on her most seductive and opulent clothes, rushed to her ruin'. She is worse, even, than a bride – she is a sexually voracious

maiden who, on her first voyage, throws herself onto an 'icy phallus'. Larabee cites one 1912 newspaper which described the ship as a 'doomed queen of the ocean ... [who] forced her giant bulk far upon a submerged spar of the iceberg' (Larabee 1990, pp. 5-8). The *Titanic* embraces her iceberg in a shuddering, apocalyptic orgasm and the progeny of such an encounter is, of course, death. I am reminded of that 'snaky sorceress' Sin in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who, impregnated by her father Satan, gives birth to Death. 'I fled, and cried out *Death!*' Sin says. 'Hell trembled at the hideous name, and sighed/From all her caves, and back resounded *Death!*' (Milton 1674, Book II lines 787-789).

No wonder, then, that Stone must try to 'rule out' such destructive feminine energies in his efforts to establish the conventional narrative of his own manhood. He wants a life story of unsullied masculinity and has the same hopes for the redemptive and transformative power of this story as do the American newspapers. It will redeem his image in the eyes of a father who has in the past mocked his nervous sensitivity and weakness, and it will transform him by admitting him to the transcendent spiritualised realm of a fully-bonded brotherhood: he imagines himself as 'Starbuck aloft, scanning the horizon, handsome in his excellent fitting skin, radiant with courage and much loved by a noble captain' (*Eight Rockets*, p.9).

In Steadman's hands such a narrative cannot remain unproblematised. The piteous kinswoman can never be fully silenced, any more than Foucault's disorderly buzzing of discourse can ever be fully quelled. Chaos always comes along to taunt Order; the Id to challenge the Superego; the Feminine to frustrate the Masculine. Even Stone's very model itself, *Moby-Dick*, has disorderly undercurrents which destabilise his idealised reading of it as an epic of manliness and courage. There are many examples; one is the 'strange sort of insanity' which underlies Ishmael's own membership of the transcendent brotherhood. With his fellow sailors, Ishmael squeezes whale sperm in a tub:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my colaborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally ... let us all squeeze ourselves into each other;

let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness (Melville 1851, p. 527).

The soft, murmuring homoeroticism of this passage is the very opposite of the stern military-masculine heroism of the *Boston Globe* story, and it is a counter-ideology which Steadman subtly inscribes within his own narrative of Herbert Stone. When he first meets Stone, Steadman describes him and his fellow officers as stoic soldiers ready for battle, but notes that Stone's eyes are as large as a woman's with flickering eyelashes. Steadman repeatedly describes Stone as 'pretty'.

The dismantling of Stone's mythmaking narratives – of the sea, of masculinity – reaches symbolic completion when, after he realises he has been shamefully passive at the very time manliness was most desperately required, and that his captain plans not to 'stand close' but to sacrifice him, he stands at the stern of his vessel, deep in fog, and throws overboard the symbol of his masculine ideals: *Moby-Dick*. His idealised notions of transcendent masculinity and fraternity have been sullied forever by a captain he no longer trusts or reveres. The piteous kinswoman is back, whispering to him: 'manhood is such a difficult machine to keep cranking; throw your *Moby-Dick* away; let it be engulfed by the great abyss of the feminine sea.'

The feminine in man must be ruled in rather than ruled out. It is no accident that Stone's confession – his acknowledgement of complicity in the deaths of 1500 people – comes to Steadman through the mouth of Mrs Stone. It is the female Stone that is, paradoxically, strong enough to make the admission of weakness, of mistake, and accept responsibility for all those lives. Steadman first meets Mrs Stone in her garden, surrounded by her spring flowers, but later they speak on a high piece of ground overlooking the wharves and forbidding brick warehouses of the River Mersey. She is feminine strength amid Merseyside masculinity, and it is here she offers a confession and apology on behalf of her husband.

This is an invented scene but it is based on a little nub of historical evidence. In 1965, Leslie Reade, carrying out research for his book *The Ship That Stood Still*, received a response at last to his many letters to John Stone, Herbert Stone's son. 'My father never,' John Stone wrote, 'at any time, discussed with me or with my brother and sister his part in the Titanic story. But my mother tells me (and this is all that she will tell) that, as you say, he was sure that distress rockets were being fired' (Reade

1993, p. 320). The evidence is hearsay five times removed – Herbert Stone told Mrs Stone who told John Stone who told Leslie Reade who tells us – but it is persuasive nonetheless, and is one of the most touching documents in the whole case. Herbert Stone, according to his wife, knew that distress rockets were being fired. He told his captain about them, but he really ought to have done more. John Stone's letter shows us that the shadow of this failure fell not just over Herbert but his wife too and, in time, their children. John Stone's comment in parentheses 'and this is all that she will tell' is tantalising; it makes us wonder what else she knew, and felt, but did not say. But it is not, perhaps, difficult to imagine the sadness with which Mrs Stone would have told her children of their father's unheroic participation in one of the defining events of the century. Interestingly, while the voice of the mother admits her husband's mistake, the voice of the son seeks – gently, tentatively – to reinstall in his father's story at least little of the conventional narrative. 'Knowing my father,' he writes, 'and here I speak of my knowledge of him as a man, not as his son, I am quite sure that he would never do anything dishonourable and he would always do his duty' (Reade 1993, p. 320).

John Stone then asks Leslie Reade to tell his father's story with kindness and sympathy. 'This is all the information I can give you, and hope that your book will be a success and that my father's part in the Titanic affair will be treated fairly, as he deserved, and sympathetically' (Reade 1993, p. 320).

Leslie Reade complies as best he can with John Stone's plea for his father's reputation; and so does my own narrator when he seeks to tell Herbert Stone's story.

5.6. *Difficult women*

I have said that affirmation of the conventional narrative of male heroism represented something of a flight to safety at a time when confidence in that narrative had been shaken by a catastrophic failure of British technology and American capitalism. But the *Titanic* disaster was not the only challenge to the paradigm of male supremacy at the time. There was another equally destabilising force: the women's suffrage movement. By April 1912 it had gained real momentum. A campaign of window smashing by London suffragettes had taken place only weeks before the disaster; on the very day the *Titanic* hit her iceberg *The New York Times* reported a 'Suffragists' Thirst Strike', 'Chinese Women to Parade for Woman Suffrage' and 'Howls Greet

Suffragists' (14-15 April 1912). This last article reported that 'the suffrage demonstration organised in Hyde Park this afternoon to protest against the alleged forcible feeding of suffragettes now in prison for window smashing produced very noisy scenes' (*The New York Times* 1912b). Window smashing, forced feeding, noisy scenes: the suffrage movement had come into violent collision with the patriarchal narrative of 'paternalism-as-natural' which was trying desperately to keep the voice of 'that piteous woman' ruled out. But she was not taking 'no' for an answer: she was insisting on the right to be heard. And in return, the traditionalists were insisting on the preservation of existing gender roles, arguing that the *Titanic* disaster showed they were natural and immutable. As Biel puts it, 'by representing the disaster as a catastrophic return to nature, the conventional narrative made paternalism appear commonsensical and universal' (Biel 1996, p. 29).

But the suffragettes could not be stopped. By coincidence the largest suffrage parade in American history – planned before the *Titanic* sank and in which 15,000 women marched up Fifth Avenue – took place on the same day as the funeral of John Jacob Astor (Biel 1996, p. 12; *The New York Times* 1912c, 1912e). There had been some calls for the parade to be cancelled because of the *Titanic* disaster but it went ahead (see Biel 1996, p. 32, and sources cited at note 17). The funeral of Astor, the richest man aboard *Titanic*, whose body had been recovered from the Atlantic with hundreds of pounds and thousands of dollars in his pocket, was pushed off the front pages. It is easy to read this symbolically as the old narrative of wealthy male heroism being nudged aside by a new narrative of female power.

Steadman is installed the midst of this historical narrative of the suffragettes' advance. He is surrounded by strong women: an independently-minded wife who has left him in order to live with another woman and a teenage daughter whose prodigious energy and flashy defiance are emblematic of the times. 'This is a new age, papa,' the daughter proudly announces, perhaps on behalf of all women, 'and girls don't always do what their fathers say!' (*Eight Rockets* p.107.) Patriarchy was being challenged by a feminism on the rise.

If by successfully problematising the narrative of natural patriarchy the suffragettes' movement had itself become one of the dominant narratives of its day, then we might expect my novel to offer up its 'own first critical commentary' of that

narrative. In my reading of contemporary newspapers, it seemed to me that the suffragists were at first wrong-footed by the *Titanic* disaster, and in attempting to regain their balance made some interesting missteps.

Perhaps most obviously, the narrative of gender equality was problematised by the stark inequality in survivorship: 77% of the women on board were saved, but only 19% of the men (Lord 1956 & 1976, p. 128). The adherence to the ancient Rule of the Sea – ‘women and children first’ – had been widely reported and celebrated in the press as part of the narrative of masculine heroism. But what did this fact of differential survivorship say about women’s demand for the vote? The *Titanic* disaster, suggested commentators, proved that at times of crisis, chivalry was better protection for women than the vote. The point was summarised pithily in a poem by Clark McAdams in the *St Louis Post-Dispatch*:

‘Votes for women!’
Was the cry,
Reaching upward
To the sky.
Crashing glass
And flashing eye –
‘Votes for women!’
Was the cry

‘Boats for women!’
Was the cry,
When the brave
Were come to die.
When the end
Was drawing nigh –
‘Boats for women!’

Was the cry ... (set out in Biel 1998, pp. 27-28)

If the suffragettes truly wanted the vote, then could they still expect the protection and courtesy of men’s chivalry to be extended to them? Were they asking to keep their cake and eat it too? This issue proved difficult for the suffragettes and their attempts to defend their cause were sometimes problematic. They argued that ‘by natural law women and children should be saved first’ (*The New York Times* 1912d) and even the famous suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst argued that there was ‘no special chivalry’ aboard the *Titanic* because ‘it was the universal rule in cases of shipwreck that women and children should be saved first’ (*The New York Times* 1912a). But to affirm ‘natural laws’ and ‘universal rules’ in this way tends to subvert the narrative of women’s equality and suffrage. If, after all, it is a natural or universal rule that women should

be saved first from a sinking ship, then is it not also natural and universal that they should confine themselves to the domestic sphere and leave politics and voting to the men? Steadman's wife Olive recognises the problem. In a now deleted part of my novel she asks rhetorically, 'do they know how much damage that word "natural" does to our cause? This catastrophe has scared all of us, so we flee to conventional understandings and safe categories. Well, safe categories are no friend of the suffragette!'

Olive Steadman's thinking is informed by Steven Biel's concept of the conventional narrative, but she is also channelling the feisty feminist Emma Goldman, who even at this time of crisis stuck to her guns:

With all the claims the present-day woman makes for her equality with man, her great intellectual and emancipatory achievements, she continues to be as weak and dependent, as ready to accept man's tribute in time of safety and his sacrifice in time of danger, as if she were still in her baby age (Biel 1996, pp. 101-102, 1998, p. 152; Goldman 1912).

It is easy to sense her despair at the 'flight to safety' of her sister suffragettes.

The feminist narrative is problematic in other ways. Steadman notices that the rhetoric of women's suffrage seems curiously silent on the question of the children who died in the disaster. They are not mentioned in his wife's passionate speeches or in the many pages of newsprint devoted to the disaster. Steadman's search of the newspapers mirrors my own. During my review of the contemporary press I was surprised that the death of more than fifty children had been almost completely ignored. The disaster was reported over many hundreds of pages, and, as I have said, there were countless stories about the heroism of first class men and much discussion of gender roles and implications of the disaster for women's suffrage. But about the lost children there was perfect silence.

5.7. *The silent poor*

The issue, of course, was one of class. All of the children and most of the women who died were in third class. As Larabee points out, 'Although the media struggled mightily to prove that "women and children first" was the masculine ethos that night, decisions about who would survive were based at least as much on class as on gender' (Larabee 1990, p. 17). Similarly, Biel observes, 'With its interest in celebrity, the commercial

press tended to represent the disaster exclusively as the story of the first cabin' (Biel 1996, p. 39). Indeed, there are many examples in the mainstream press of active condemnation of the poor. Francis Wayne of *The Denver Post* tells us that 'When men go down to the sea in ships, chivalry flowers like the rod of Aaron,' and this chivalry brings with it enormous social cost:

John Jacob Astor owns two hundred million dollars ... Chattering nearby is a peasant woman holding fast to a low-browed man who clasps in his arms a child marked with the blight of Europe ... The disease bitten child, whose life at the best is worthless, and whose value as a prospective citizen of the United States is less than worthless, goes to safety with the rest of the steerage riff-raff, while the handler of great affairs, the men who direct the destinies of hundreds of thousands of workers ... stand unprotestingly aside (Wayne 1912).

There was a literature of dissent. As Biel puts it, 'socialists and other labor radicals ... spoke directly to the silences in the conventional narrative, the class bias in its roll call of heroes, the conservative "lesson" it drew from the disaster' (Biel 1996, p. 121). But it seems from my own review that this literature almost always deals with the third class in abstract terms: class struggle, oppression, inequality, the plight of labour. There are no stories of individual members of the group. In both the conventional and the counter-narratives, the third class people are an unindividuated mass which, depending on the narrative, might rise up from below to threaten the social order, or are the victims of enormous social injustice. There seems to be a strange across-the-board acceptance – even by the suffragettes, who by now had a loud voice in the mainstream media – of the irrelevance of the third class as individuals. In stark contrast to the lengthy, detailed renderings of the heroics of specific, named first class men and women, there are no references at all to individual acts of courage or sacrifice by the third class passengers. These men and women never had the chance to play the honour game. By the time they reached the top deck the polite playing-out of chivalrous dramas and moral dilemmas had passed. It was a brute battle for survival as the boat deck slid under the water, funnels collapsed, lights went out and the ship itself began to tear in two.

This ruling out of third class voices characterises not only the narratives of the contemporary press but almost every narrative ever since. Third class passengers do feature – as a group, they are an essential part of *Titanic* mythology – but they are an

undifferentiated group. Even in highly respected accounts sympathetic to the plight of third class, individual passengers are rarely named. Geoffrey Marcus in *The Maiden Voyage* devotes two full chapters to detailed biographies of specific first class passengers ('The Boat Train', 'Vanity Fair Afloat') and some second class (for example, the writer Lawrence Beesley), and follows their trajectories during the course of the voyage, but when the third class appear they are invariably described compendiously: 'alarmed and angry shouting from the steerage quarters below', 'a party of foreigners made a rush', 'the Norwegian emigrants', 'the poor Irish boys and girls from the steerage', 'a huge crowd of steerage passengers' (Marcus 1969, pp. 158-160). In Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember* the third class are described in similar ways: 'hundreds were kept below', 'steerage passengers crawling along the crane', 'surging up from below', 'dozens of them', 'milled helplessly about' (Lord 1956 & 1976, pp. 127,129). A reader feels sorry for them but doesn't know them individually. Walter Lord makes the point explicitly: 'No one seemed to care about third class – neither the Press, the official Inquiries, nor even the third-class passengers themselves' (Lord 1956 & 1976, p. 130). In James Cameron's film actors play 'real' people in first class (Ismay, Astor, Guggenheim, Molly Brown) and 'real' crew members (Smith, Lightoller, Murdoch, Lowe) but the only third class passengers we see are invented ones, including the film's hero. More recently, Julian Fellowes' centenary anniversary miniseries *Titanic* follows the same formula: 'real' crewmen and first class passengers, but only invented third class.

In *Titanic* narratives it seems, the poor are even more piteous than Captain Vere's tender-hearted kinswomen – who at least, from time to time, are named – and must be even more comprehensively ruled out.

On the *Titanic* memorial voyage there was some attempt to remedy this. Senan Molony spoke about his book, *The Irish Aboard Titanic* (Molony 2012), which sets out biographies and stories of individual Irish immigrants. The maritime historian Claes Goran Wetterholm, who has a particular interest in *Titanic*'s third class passengers, told us about specific Swedish immigrants on the ship (Wetterholm 2012). But even these lectures seemed to me to be driven more by *nationalist* agendas – to give countries other than Britain and America some ownership of a disaster which has now become a lucrative international industry – rather than a desire to remedy the

historical silencing of the third class. Another lecturer spoke about the Canadians on the *Titanic*, and even I was asked – when preparing for an interview with ABC Radio National – whether I might speak specifically about any Australians on board. The *Titanic* archive is enormous and growing, and it seems to me that these new nationalist narratives have emerged in recent years as yet one more way to develop new perspectives on the disaster.

My novel sets out to remedy – at least a little – this absence of individual third class voices in the *Titanic* story. When John Steadman learns that the Women's Titanic Memorial Fund is raising funds to build a marble monument as a 'tribute of woman to heroic manhood' (Biel 1996, p. 35) he knows that the usual names will be etched upon it – Astor, Guggenheim, Butt, Straus – and vows to raise a different monument. It would not be a 'noble structure of enduring stone' (Biel 1996, p. 93) but a structure in words. Inspired by Shakespeare's Sonnet No.55 – 'But you shall shine more bright in these contents/Than unswept stone besmear'd with sluttish time' – Steadman says he will give the children the living blood of words. When in England he learns of the Sage family – John and Annie Sage and their nine children, all of whom died – he knows he has his story. How could it be, he wonders, that none of them found their way into a lifeboat? He does his research and in the end writes an article – 'Eight Rockets' – which inverts the dominant narrative of the day. It foregrounds third class children, who are named and active, and when the family patriarch becomes overwhelmed and strangely passive it is his fiery daughter Stella who emerges as the chivalric leader and hero in the family's subsequent struggle to survive. None of the usual *Titanic*-drama suspects appear in the story – no first class passengers, no Captain Smith or his desperate officers. Or, if they do, they are unnamed and undifferentiated, appearing just as third class passengers do in the conventional narratives – as a shadowy background to the main action.

Thus Steadman challenges and inverts the dominant narratives of his day, and in the end gives to voice to those who have been silent not only in contemporary accounts but in *Titanic* narratives ever since.

6. Installing and problematising: writing history

6.1. *Just write the truth*

Although Steadman's account of the fiery Stella Sage offers a challenge to the dominant gender and class narratives of his day, perhaps more importantly it serves as a stark contrast to the dozing, coffee-drinking men who were watching the *Titanic* from just a short distance across the water. Stella's desperate action brings into sharp relief their persistent passivity, her heroics their puzzling indifference to duty. At one point in his account Steadman conceives of his narrative explicitly as a 'profound and puzzling drama ... which needs the grand entrance of its main player to make sense of it all' (*Eight Rockets* p.180). But when Captain Stanley Lord does enter stage right, the puzzle only deepens. Lord resists coherent narrative; he is a spanner in the works; he undermines Steadman's undermining. He is the most counter of all the counter-narratives. And yet Lord is the central historical figure of my novel – the historical referent which the novel seeks to represent and explain.

In a way, the installation and subversion of the contextual narratives of Steadman's time – the cult of the American hero, women's demands to be heard, the silencing of the poor – serves only to establish the spirit of the times. My novel's real collision with history comes in its efforts to represent the specifics of Lord, Stone and what happened on the *Californian*. Unlike John Steadman, whom I invented, the men of the *Californian* were real people who exist in detail in the historical record. They have never before been represented in biographical fiction, so how was I to do it? What duty did I owe to them as historical figures, and how did this duty relate to the demands of the fictional novel? To put it bluntly: how much could I make up? This has been the central question of my creative project.

Stone, in real life, within a day or so of the disaster was asked by his captain to write down everything that had happened during the midnight watch. In my novel, he asks his friend Victor Groves for guidance. 'Just write the truth,' Groves says. But things are not that simple. For Stone the truth is complicated by his loyalty to his captain; for me, it is made problematic by the demands of the novel. And Stone's complexities are in many ways my own: the captain's face haunts Stone's conscience,

but it also haunts my own writing in the form of a black and white photograph that hangs above my desk. The captain's image is stern and forbidding – all sharp angles and dark shadows – and evokes, perhaps subconsciously, my own sense of duty and loyalty to shipmasters which lingers from my own time at sea many years ago. Lord's intense eyes, beneath the shiny, dark rim of his captain's cap, seem to demand things of me – at the very least, that I don't tell deliberate lies about him.

6.2. *History problematised*

Linda Hutcheon describes the postmodern 'confrontation between realist referentialism and modernist reflexivity, between the historical and the parodic' (Hutcheon 2002a, p. 166). For me, the first step in solving this problem was, as I have said, to farewell an idealised conception of the historical referent as easily accessible and capable of transparent, objective representation. I have described how in the early stages of this project I set out to write something of a Bugliosi-esque 'reclaiming of history' – a magisterial, Thucydidean account of Lord and the *Californian* which upheld scientific history's 'highest law'. This was a naïve ambition. The historical referent is no butterfly waiting to be captured, dried out and mounted behind glass for all to see. It is an elusive, slippery creature, hard to pin down, hard to make behave. Herodotus realised this, perhaps, 2,500 years ago when he wrote his 'polyphonic' (rather than 'monologic' or 'magisterial') histories of the Greek/Persian wars (see Curthoys & Docker 2010, pp. 37, 48). Herodotus understood that 'every act involves interpretation' and he, like John Steadman, was also a metafictionalist: 'In postmodern terms,' suggest Curthoys and Docker, 'we would say that he is highly self-reflexive in making clear to the reader at all times what he is doing' (2010, p. 19). That is, he understood that he was part of the process, that his histories were their 'own first commentary', showing from within how he interpreted, invented and reconstructed events and people.

Curthoys and Docker track the work of key postmodernists – feminists, poststructuralists, postcolonialists – in their deconstructing of notions of ideology-free, fiction-free, literature-free scientific history (Curthoys & Docker 2010, chapters 8 and 9). This work demonstrates that historical writing cannot be anchored in an external, independent 'historical referent'; that there is no method of transparently and

neutrally representing events or personages of the past in a way which is beyond ideology or – to use Foucault’s metaphor once again – which is uncontaminated by the disorderly buzzing of discourse. Derrida offers another metaphor - not an absent anchor point outside a structure, but a missing (although longed-for) origin or centre within. ‘Thus it has always been thought that the centre, which is by definition unique, constitutes that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality.’ There is no such transcendent centre – no ‘fixed origin’ to ‘orient, balance and organize the structure’, no ‘centre which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions’ (Derrida 1988, pp. 109, 119). As I have described, I experienced this uncentered ‘play of substitutions’ in my early efforts to write the definitive history of the *Californian* incident. Above, I used metaphors of rabbit holes and fractals to describe the problems I encountered but it is just as easy to see the process as a sort of Derridean echo chamber, where words lead to other words, phrases to other phrases, calculations to other calculations until meaning evaporates into an endless echolalia of everything and nothing.

This is not to say that historical events do not exist, only that we have no unmediated, neutral way of knowing them. As Hutcheon says,

The narrativization of past events is not hidden; the events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed – not found – order is imposed upon them, often overtly by the narrating figure ... This does not in any way deny the existence of the past real, but it focuses attention on the act of imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning-making through representation (Hutcheon 2002a, p. 63).

This is the essence of Hutcheon’s historiographical metafiction (Hutcheon 1988, p. 106). It is writing which actively installs historical events at its centre, but then problematises or subverts our way of knowing those events.

Farewelling the notion of a neutral, objectively-knowable history has not been easy. The Marxist postmodernist Frederic Jameson writes of a ‘crisis in historicity’ (Jameson 1984, p. 25) and seems to mark the loss of the authentic, knowable ‘historical referent’ with something akin to grief:

The historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes ‘pop history’). Cultural production is thereby driven back inside a mental space which is no longer that of the old

monadic subject but rather that of some degraded collective ‘objective spirit’: it can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world, as some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present; rather, as in Plato’s cave, it must trace our mental images of that past upon its confining walls. If there is any realism left here, it is a ‘realism’ that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement ... we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach (Jameson 1984, p. 25).

The downbeat mood of this passage is clear: Jameson speaks of cultural production being ‘driven back’, of a ‘degraded collective spirit’, of ‘confining walls’, of ‘shock’, of ‘condemnation’. I sense a real nostalgia – a yearning, even – for what has been lost: the ‘old monadic subject’, being able to ‘gaze directly on some putative real world’ and a real, capitalised ‘History’ which is ‘forever out of reach’.

I have felt something of Jameson’s grief for the lost referent myself. The whole purpose of the *Titanic* memorial voyage was, after all, to ‘gaze directly on some putative real world’. I and more than a thousand others paid good money to see the actual place where the disaster happened at the actual date and time – one-hundred years later to the minute – in a very real ‘reconstruction of past history which was once present’. We – all of us – wanted to escape Jameson’s ‘confinement’; we wanted ‘the old monadic subject’ to be present again. We all, in our own ways, sought access to the one true narrative of that night. As we stood silently on the open decks, our ship floating quietly over the wreck site, ablaze with light in the calm darkness just as the *Titanic* had been one-hundred years earlier, I heard people mark off to each other in reverent whispers the key moments of the sinking: ‘this was when the first lifeboat was lowered’; ‘this was when the orchestra began to play’; ‘this was when Mr Astor farewelled his wife’. I saw a distant light in the darkness and imagined it to be the *Californian* sitting perfectly still nearby, watching us. There was something more than nostalgia at work here: there was an aching desire to experience directly an event which until that moment we knew only as a representation – in books, in films, in the archives. We wanted something more real than traces on Jameson’s cave wall; we wanted to bring History back within our reach.

It seemed, almost, that we wanted time to stop, so that we could stay in this sacred place forever. But of course, the minutes ticked by; 2.20am arrived; we threw our wreaths into the ocean and our ship steamed on. And the extraordinary

commemorative experience that we had just shared began itself to drift into History. Our memorial journey itself now only exists as representation: in press reports, in photographs, in diary entries, on YouTube, on Facebook. Like the disaster itself, it has become Jameson's lost referent.

But all hope might not be lost. The objective 'collective spirit' on that deck clearly had value, even if Jameson conceives of this value as 'degraded' in comparison to the idealised, 'old monadic subject.' The spirit was objective, in that our thoughts coalesced on a 'real' event outside ourselves, even if that event could never be fully, perfectly grasped; and it was collective because it was shared. To label this experience 'degraded' is to set it against an impossibly idealised notion of what history should or ever could be: the distilled, untainted, perfect, external Historical Referent. Well, we are never going to have that, but perhaps it is enough to know that it is Somewhere Out There.

A useful metaphor, perhaps, is the ice which Herbert Stone senses in the darkness during the midnight watch:

Somewhere out there, Groves had said, was the icefield. He could not see it, but he could hear its low, grinding whisper – it felt like there was something close and alive in the darkness. Then, slowly – just beyond the ship's stern – he began to see it: a cold and feeble light, as if the ice somehow caught and stored up starlight. It was so faint, so delicate, so elusive that he could see it only with the sensitivity of his peripheral vision: when he stared directly at it, it vanished into darkness. There was a smell, too, equally as strange and insubstantial: a clammy, glacial odour which faded to nothing the more he breathed it in (*Eight Rockets* p.15).

I certainly sensed the 'low, grinding whisper' of the *Titanic* during the memorial voyage, particularly during the commemorative ceremonies, when the real ship seemed 'close and alive in the darkness', like a ghost. Perhaps it is enough that the 'historical referent' in my writing – the 'real' events I describe – be like Stone's icefield: close but never fully grasped, visible only by some strange and mystical starlight. The process might almost be considered teasing or playful: the more intently my novel seeks the perfect, idealised referent – the more it tries to stare at it directly – the more it slips away. And history sensed only by its fickle, feeble light, or its strange, subtle scent, might, after all, have its own kind of beauty.

My confidence that my writing of history has value – even if its historical referent can only be sensed in this indirect way – is buoyed by Linda Hutcheon's optimism

about postmodern historical writing. She suggests that Jameson's desire for 'a single, essentialised, transcendent concept of 'genuine historicity' is borne of his Marxist nostalgia and might be more hindrance than help to postmodern historical writing (Hutcheon 1988, p. 89). In more recent years she has firmly resisted Jameson's 'theoretical denunciation of the postmodern as ahistorical and unconnected to the "world" ' (Hutcheon 2002b, p. 10) and has pointed out that 'Even on the left, some have occasionally found this yearning for a "lost authenticity" in itself either regressive or defeatist' (Hutcheon 2002a, p. 177).

As I have said, 'install and problematise' is Hutcheon's key formula and has a significant resonance with my own writing about Captain Lord. Hutcheon cites Umberto Eco: 'The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence [the discovery of modernism], must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently' (Hutcheon 1988, p. 90, parentheses in original). The postmodern is not, then, *ahistorical*, but a rich way of thinking and writing *about* history. The referent is not ignored or destroyed, but made visible along with the processes involved in its representation. The 'irony' of Hutcheon and Eco is the open acknowledgment of this process – its celebration, even, rather than its denial – and is what best meets a Jameson-esque nostalgia for the 'lost' pure referent. Historical 'facts' are pulled close then pushed away, stared at then ignored, diffracted then refracted in an ongoing process of installing and problematising. But in the postmodern landscape history is alive to be wondered and puzzled at; it is not dead and withered like dried tubers in a modernist wasteland, where the sun beats and the dead trees gives no shelter.

Early in my work, my supervisor suggested E.L.Doctorow's *Ragtime* as a possible model for this type of historical writing. Doctorow's novel, like large parts of my own, is set in America in the early years of the 20th century and, also like my novel, interrogates the master narratives of the time: class and wealth; American heroism; women's rights. I was enthralled by Doctorow's hypnotic, dancing prose; his mesmeric, freelance movement between the invented and the real. There is an electric, Herodotus-like polyphony at work here. I was never certain what was fictional and what was historical, so tightly wound were his threads, so seamless were his transitions. An example is his brief portrait of Emma Goldman, the feminist-anarchist,

whom we encounter giving a spirited speech in a New York workingman's hall. 'Comrades and brothers ... if white slavery is a problem, why is marriage not a problem? Is there no connection between the institution of marriage and the institution of the brothel?' (Doctorow 1976, p. 47). Doctorow does not cite a historical source for this speech but I have read many speeches like it in the newspapers of the day; and this part of Doctorow's biographical sketch reads like a 'conventional' historical portrait: the historical referent is present and close. But a little later, in an exotic encounter with another historical figure, Evelyn Nesbit, Goldman asks the younger girl to undress so that she might give her a massage. It is a scene charged with a similar homoerotic intensity and intimacy as Ishmael's squeezing of the whale blubber in *Moby-Dick*: 'Her eyes were closed and her lips stretched in an involuntary smile as Goldman massaged her breasts, her stomach, her legs. Yes, even this, Emma Goldman said, briskly passing her hand over the mons. You must have the courage to live' (Doctorow 1976, p. 54). The historical referent has drifted away. Perhaps we no longer think what is being described as 'true' but no matter, we have stopped thinking in these terms. The virtuosic writing has us in a kind of spell.

We might, at the end of the novel, find ourselves asking, but what really happened? *Was* there a siege at Morgan's library? *Did* Henry Ford really meet Morgan in the manner described? *Was* Coalhouse Walker Jr. a real person? And a diligent student of Doctorow might attempt to give an answer – to disentangle the threads and explain it all. But I wonder what would be the point? To attempt the task would be to fall down the rabbit hole, or to descend into the fractals within fractals, or to become lost in Derrida's echo chamber. Whatever level of analysis we achieve, there will always be the possibility of a finer resolution.

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, a *New York Times* reviewer asks, 'Why do these historical images – half documentary, half invented – seem truer than the truth?' (Lehmann-Haupt 1975) and suggests the answer is that Doctorow taps into the large-scale historical movements of 20th century America – immigration, industrialization, gender issues – and renders them in images which are 'delightfully concrete and immediate'. Hutcheon identifies a similar process – 'fictive corporality instead of abstractions' (Hutcheon 1988, p. 90). Lehmann-Haupt adds that the novel is 'so

immediate and accessible that it resists the label “experimental” (Lehmann-Haupt 1975).

On the other hand Jameson sees Doctorow’s novel as incorporeal and ghostlike, as experimental writing which resists interpretation. The characters are ‘incomparable substances, like oil and water – Houdini being a historical figure, Tateh a fictional one, and Coalhouse an intertextual one – something very difficult for an interpretive comparison of this kind to register’ (Jameson 1984, pp. 22-23). For Jameson, the novel is ‘a non-representational work that combines fantasy signifiers from a variety of ideologemes in a kind of hologram’ (Jameson 1984, p. 23). He adds that the ongoing dialectic between what a reader might already know about the historical figures and what they read in the novel generates an ‘extraordinary sense of déjà vu and a peculiar familiarity one is tempted to associate with Freud’s “return of the repressed” in “The Uncanny” rather than with any solid historiographical formation on the reader’s part’ (Jameson 1984, p. 24).

Whether the historical referent shows itself in the text like the ‘grinding whisper’ of nearby ice, or by coalescing into images which are ‘delightfully concrete’, or by shining outward in a three-dimensional ‘fantasy-hologram’, or by emerging from the recesses of our repressed subconscious with a strange, ‘uncanny’ familiarity, our attention is drawn to the process of its appearance; to the varying ways in which it makes itself known in text. Whether the text resists the label ‘experimental’, or whether it resists interpretation, the referent is nonetheless present; it is there – problematically there – but there. When Jameson says, ‘*Ragtime* remains the most peculiar and stunning monument to the aesthetic situation engendered by the disappearance of the historical referent’ (Jameson 1984, p. 25), it is difficult to tell whether he is lamenting or celebrating, but either way Hutcheon resists his assertion that the referent has disappeared. ‘It is just as easy to argue,’ she says, ‘that ... the historical referent is very present – and in spades’ (Hutcheon 1988, p. 89). The referent is well and truly installed, but the process of accessing it and representing is never straightforward; it is always problematic.

This, then, was the way forward for my own writing of the history of Lord of the *Californian*: to install him as the historical referent but subvert any final, summarising knowing of him; to project an image of him on a screen, but to always have the

projecting apparatus itself visible to the reader. Or, as Hutcheon puts it, ‘The past really did exist. The question is: how can we know that past today – and what can we know of it?’ (Hutcheon 1988, p. 92).

6.3. *Lord and Stone in the archive*

What, then, can we know of Stanley Lord? He was an English sea captain told by his second officer that white rockets were being fired by a nearby ship, in the middle of the night in the midst of ice, and he did nothing about it. But why? John Steadman’s quest to find the answer is a central dramatic vector of the novel and in many ways reflects my own real-life search. Both before and during my doctoral studies I visited libraries, archives and historical sites in Liverpool, London, New York, Boston and most recently the mid-Atlantic to try to find the answer.

The question turned out to be a complex one. Lord was not drunk. There is good evidence that he never drank at sea – except perhaps a glass of wine on Christmas day. He was not slovenly, uncaring or lazy. The record is full of commendations for diligence and sense of duty. He rose quickly through the ranks of the Leyland Line and was one of their most respected captains (Bridgewater 1904; Harrison 1992, Chapter 2; 1996, p. 118; Latta 1928; Lord & Harrison 1961, q.585; Roberts 1913). Even the solution offered by the writer I respect most in this area, Leslie Reade, I find unpersuasive. He suggests that Lord was afraid to take his ship at night through the ice to the rescue, and so deliberately waited until dawn (Reade 1993, p. 322). But Lord was no coward: the record shows him to be a courageous seaman who, among other things, landed thousands of men on the Essex coast at night during military manoeuvres and picked them up again (Harrison 1992, pp. 37-38, 1996, p. 82). Once he knew of the *Titanic*’s plight Lord pushed his ship as hard as he could through the ice without regard to his own safety.

Was Lord mistaken, then, about what the rockets meant? In his well known recount of the disaster, second class passenger Lawrence Beesley evocatively describes the rockets being fired and says, ‘Anybody knows what rockets at sea mean’ (Beesley 1912, p. 35). But is he right? Supporters of Lord suggest the rockets were fired for all sorts of reasons – to acknowledge the Morse lamp signals, or signal that a ship has icebergs around her, or to try to light up the sky to ‘illuminate her way through the

ice', or to say 'farewell' (Molony 2006, pp. 116, 119, 183, 112 respectively). As a child I remember reading that the rockets were thought to have been a fireworks celebration for passengers. But during my research I could find no evidence that rockets were ever used for any of these purposes. Instead, I found an international code for distress signals in 1912 that was very clear: 'When a vessel is in distress and requires assistance ... the following shall be the signals to be used or displayed by her: AT NIGHT ... Rockets or shells, throwing stars of any colour or description, used one at a time at short intervals' (Molony 2006, p. 126; Reade 1993, Appendix B, p.346). Moreover, the best maritime minds of the day must have thought that rockets meant distress: Captain Smith, Commodore of the White Star Line, ordered that rockets be fired from his sinking ship precisely to call for help from the ship he could see in the distance. Herbert Stone on the *Californian*, who watched the rockets, told the British Inquiry that 'a ship is not going to fire rockets at sea for nothing', that he knew that the rockets weren't 'being sent up for fun' and 'the first thought that crossed [his] mind was that the ship might be in trouble' (*British Inquiry* 1912, q.7984, 7895, 7906). Some of the most anguish-ridden parts of the whole *Californian* archive are the questions asked of Stone about the rockets. In London, he is asked about the examinations he took for his First Mate's Certificate:

- Q: Is not part of the subjects of examination the signals of distress?
A: Yes. I learned them.
Q: Do you mean to tell his Lordship that you did not know that the throwing up of 'rockets or shells, throwing stars of any colour or description, fired one at a time at short intervals,' is the proper method for signalling distress at night?
A: Yes. That is the way it is always done as far as I know.
Q: And you knew that perfectly well on the night of the 14th of April?
A: Yes.
The commissioner: And is not that exactly what was happening?
A: [*Silence*]
Q: You have heard my Lord put that question. That was what was happening?
A: Yes.
The commissioner: The very thing was happening that you knew indicated distress?
A: If that steamer had stayed on the same bearing after showing these rockets ...

The commissioner: No, do not give a long answer of that kind. Is it not the fact that the very thing was happening which you had been taught indicated distress?

A: Yes.

Q: You knew it meant distress?

A: I knew that rockets shown at short intervals, one at a time, meant distress signals, yes.

Q: Do not speak generally. On that very night when you saw those rockets being sent up you knew, did you not, that those rockets were signals of distress?

A: No.

The commissioner: Now do think about what you are saying!

(*British Inquiry* 1912, questions 8025-8035)

The more I read the transcript, the more I shared the commissioner's frustration: Stone refuses absolutely to collapse the general to the specific. But when one thinks about it, it isn't difficult to see why. He goes only as far as he can. In the general rockets were distress signals, but in the specific what he saw could not have been, because if he acknowledges they were then what must he tell himself about his responsibility for the 1500 who died?

Lord himself, who has most to lose, at least concedes that the rockets might have been distress signals. He tells the British Inquiry that, from the chartroom below the bridge, he asked Stone whether the rockets might be a 'company's signal':

Q: You did not think it was a company's signal?

A: I inquired, *was* it a company's signal.

Q: But you had been told that he did not know?

A: He said he did not know.

Q: Very well, that did not satisfy you?

A: It did not satisfy me.

Q: Then if it was not that, it might have been a distress signal?

A: It might have been.

Q: And you remained in the chart room?

A: I remained in the chart room.

(*British Inquiry* 1912, questions 6942-6945)

Why did Lord 'remain in the chartroom'? Why didn't Stone do more? Why, at least, didn't these men wake the wireless operator? If they had, they would have heard the *Titanic's* cries for help at full volume.

The more I tried to understand, the less I did. Lord's and Stone's evidence had a peculiar illogic and inscrutability. My novel's key 'historical referent' – these men and this single event – was unyielding. It was not a seed which gave rise to a rich flowering

of storytelling and revelation; it was a hard flint of stone, which became caught in the cogs of narrative and brought it to a halt.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Bugliosi's great Rankean *Reclaiming History* provided some guidance. To support his conclusion of 'no conspiracy' Bugliosi addresses in minute detail the myriad conspiracy theories that have arisen about the Kennedy assassination, and offers a Herculean, comprehensive analysis of the events in Dallas. But more persuasive than all of this is his lengthy psychological portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald. Once Oswald is understood, the precise timing and detail of events at Dealey Plaza become almost irrelevant. It is logical and obvious – inevitable, even – that a man like Oswald would take shots at the president as he drove beneath the windows of his workplace. Oswald's psychology is the key to the puzzle; and I began to think that psychology was the key to the Lord/Stone conundrum. Why didn't Lord come up to the bridge? Why didn't Stone do more? The answer might have nothing to do with drunkenness, or mistaking rockets for company signals or celebratory fireworks, or a failure of courage, and everything to do with the subtleties and complexities of the psychology of these two men: their strange relationship, their unexpressed emotions, their secret drives and fears.

But such things do not show themselves easily in the historical record. They lurk in its gaps and are harder to discover and represent than hard data. So I searched for writing models with this type of referent – that is, novels containing a psychological representation of a particular historical figure. At the 2009 Sydney Writers' Festival, Linda Jaivin, speaking of her book *A Most Immoral Woman* (2009) described how she used the journals of George Morrison, her main character, as a starting point and said that her main goal was to 'find the emotional and psychological truth' in what can only ever be a partial historical record'. She felt free to invent but said her 'first loyalty has been to the history' (Jaivin & Ebershoff 2009). David Ebershoff, in conversation with Jaivin, offered similar insights in relation to his own novel, *The 19th Wife* (2009). The historical record said much about his main character – the nineteenth wife – but was silent about her family members and he felt free to use his imagination to 'fill in' these gaps and to 'go into the imagination and mind of his characters' (Jaivin & Ebershoff 2009). But Kate Summerscale, discussing her novel *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (2009), sounded a note of warning: 'You need to be quite scrupulous about what you

project onto characters – especially if you are accusing someone of murder!’ (Summerscale & Juers 2009). I was accusing someone – almost – of fifteen-hundred counts of murder, and so took her warning to heart.

Such scruples have prompted some authors to refrain from using the full name of their historical referent. Delia Falconer was inspired in her novel *The Service of Clouds* (1997) by the historical figure Harry Phillips, a photographer of the Blue Mountains, but the tug of narrative pulled her far enough from the ‘real’ man to change his surname from ‘Phillips’ to ‘Kitchings’ (Falconer 1997, pp. 319, Acknowledgments). Similarly, Kristel Thornell’s novel *Night Street* is inspired by the life and work of the Australian painter Clarice Beckett, and like Falconer Thornell does not use her historical figure’s surname. She calls her main character only ‘Clarice’ (Thornell 2010a, pp. 241, Author’s Note). ‘The name conjures the historical figure,’ Thornell explains, ‘but it floats free of her surname (or of any name, for that matter)’ (Thornell 2010b, p. 5). It is as if Christian name correspondence is permissible because it connotes only the wispy presence of the referent, but to use the formal, public surname in these novels would create an iron-bar linkage to the referent which would damage the delicate tapestries of their finely-woven, richly-imagined narratives. For Thornell there is a very deliberate ‘disjuncture between sign and referent’; she says ‘the name Clarice was the sign of the protagonist’s haunting by (of) Beckett; it has a hint of the supernatural that flavours the uncanny, the resonance of an incantation, sometimes seeming capable of conjuring Beckett in the magical sense, of summoning a revenant’ (Thornell 2010b, p. 6).

These models helped me decide how far I was prepared to depart from my own historical referent. I wondered whether my novel might feature only ‘Stanley’ and ‘Herbert’, or whether it might summon them only as revenants or spirits. I considered inventing subordinate officers and installing them all on an invented ship to liberate me fully from the burden and dictates of the facts. But I decided against such strategies. Thornell says of Clarice Beckett, ‘I was disturbed and enthralled by the faintness of her historical footprint’ (Thornell 2010b, p. 14) but Lord’s footprint is not faint: there are hundreds of pages of verbatim transcript from two inquiries for a start, which record his words or refer to him directly, as well as newspapers, letters, photographs, recorded interviews, typed notes, affidavits and countless other documents. And the Lord

archive is embedded in the enormous *Titanic* archive, the disaster now being a global industry. The dramatic logic of my novel depends on its close relationship with these archives, and requires Captain Stanley Lord to appear fully named and drawn up to his full height in his merchant-navy uniform – indeed, an early working title for my novel was simply ‘Lord’. The whole *raison d’être* for my novel was that a ship really did watch the *Titanic* sink and do nothing about it: an invented ‘Captain Stanley’ would rob that historical referent of its power. Like *Ragtime*, my novel might well combine ‘fantasy signifiers’ in a ‘kind of hologram’, as Jameson puts it, but much of the dramatic tension relies upon what Jameson also calls a ‘mobilization of previous historical knowledge ... thereafter instituting a narrative dialectic between what we already “know” about [historical figures] and what is then seen to be concretely in the pages of the novel’ (Jameson 1984, p. 23). Readers will know of the *Titanic* disaster; they may even know something of the *Californian*. My novel may play with that knowledge, but always the reader knows at least that the ship being watched is real; that the men watching it sink are real; and that there is a real puzzle to be solved. If my novel works at all, the reader will want to reach into the pages, or backwards through time into history, to shake Lord by the shoulders and get him up to the bridge so that he might go to the rescue of real people.

I could find no useful guidance in the *Titanic* literature. There are no novelised accounts of Captain Lord, Herbert Stone or the *Californian*. The *Titanic* herself, of course, features in many fictional novels (see Bainbridge 1997; Womack 2004, p. 86) but none set out to tell the story of a particular historical figure on the *Titanic*. Rather, the usual formula is to invent out of whole cloth a central character or narrator whose adventures take place on the doomed ship. Historical figures – Captain Smith, John Jacob Astor, Thomas Andrews, J. Bruce Ismay – appear as ‘background’ characters. Erik Hansen in *Psalm at Journey’s End* goes a step further and removes well-known historical figures – the members of the *Titanic*’s orchestra – and replaces them with characters of his own invention (Hansen 1996). For those who know about the *Titanic*’s real musicians and their stories Hansen’s neat substitution is at best disconcerting and at worst disrespectful. In any event it is an approach I did not want for my own novel, the whole purpose of which is to explore – using the tools of fiction – a particular aspect of the historical event. The event is not backdrop, it is central. The

threads of truth and invention weave together in a much finer patterning. If a student were to set out – as I hypothesised above in relation to *Ragtime* – to unravel those threads, then I would want her to be surprised by how much she finds to be true, not false. I don't assert that everything in my novel is supported by historical sources but I do hope that nothing in it overtly contravenes them. In other words, my aim is that nothing in my novel can be shown to be demonstrably false.

But this fidelity to the historical record gave rise to the question: how to access and convey Lord's interiority? This to me seemed essential if my novel were to explain why he did not go to the rockets.

In the late 1950s, Lord complained to the Mercantile Maritime Services Association in Liverpool about the way he was represented in the film, *A Night to Remember* (1956). Leslie Harrison, the secretary of the association, found Lord to be a charming man and offered him enthusiastic support. In return, Lord produced and shared documents which he might not otherwise have done: letters, testimonials, Marconigrams, newspaper clippings, handwritten statements, career papers and certificates, magazine articles and hearing transcripts. He also gave lengthy interviews to Harrison which Harrison recorded. When Harrison died in 1997 these documents were lodged with the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool. Some years ago I visited the museum and spent almost a week reviewing the documents. I wore white gloves, made notes with a pencil and dutifully filled out an application form for each item I wanted photocopied. The process was sometimes tedious, but slowly, hour by hour, I felt Captain Lord coming closer. He was like Thornell's revenant, gradually taking on shape and form in the mist. I began to get a sense of his psychology.

The archive was not, of course, a transparent window to the past offering a clear and undistorted view. My access to Lord was limited by what Hutcheon calls the 'postmodern problematization' of historical archives – that is, 'our unavoidable difficulties with the concreteness of events (in the archive, we can find only their textual traces to make into facts) and their accessibility. (Do we have a full trace or a partial one? What has been absented, discarded as non-fact material?)' (Hutcheon 1988, p. 122). This archive in particular was not unbiased: it had been collected and collated by Harrison specifically and deliberately to support Lord's case. But lurking in the gaps, in the traces, there were sure signs of a troubled man. Often, what was

most telling was not what was in the documents but what was absent. I saw, for instance, that Lord had obtained the transcript of three days of evidence given at the British inquiry (which were available for purchase at the time for one shilling and sixpence) – transcript which contained his own evidence and the submissions made on his behalf by Sir Robertson Dunlop. There are no annotations, apart from dark pencil markings on the page where Dunlop invited Lord Mersey to conclude that it was not the *Titanic* the *Californian* saw. The darkest markings are adjacent to these words: ‘to sum it up, those rockets were not signals from a vessel in distress’ (Dunlop 1912). But there are no markings at other crucial points: where Lord admits the rockets might have been distress rockets, for example, or where Stone and Gibson describe the rockets they saw and how they told Lord about them. Nor did I see in the archive any reference to Lord Mersey’s final report, where he found that if the *Californian* had responded to the rockets ‘she might have saved many if not all of the lives that were lost’ (Lord Mersey 1912, p. 46). None of these things have any place in Lord’s account of that night.

I tried to feel what Lord must have felt when he read those pages. I tried to understand the effect Lord Mersey’s conclusion must have had on him. I imagined the desperation with which he must have searched Dunlop’s submission to find that single sentence: ‘those rockets were not signals from a vessel in distress.’ The pencil markings in the margin – deep, repeated scratchings – perhaps tell us something of Lord’s anxiety. They reveal a strategy: to stare straight ahead at the words ‘not the *Titanic*’s rockets’ until, through sheer effort of will, he can make them true.

There were more tantalizing absences. I found replies to Lord from the two superheroes of *Titanic* mythology – Captain Rostron of the rescue ship *Carpathia* and Second Officer Lightoller of the *Titanic*. Lord’s letters to these men are lost, but we can deduce something of what they must have said from the nature of the replies. ‘I can truly assure you that you have my sincerest sympathy,’ writes Lightoller. There seems to me to be something a little overstated about the ‘truly assure you’: perhaps Lightoller was remembering that at the London enquiry his own wife – a young, independent, strong-minded woman – had refused to shake Lord’s hand (Reade 1993, p. 307). ‘I sincerely hope,’ Lightoller goes on, ‘that your efforts may be successful in clearing up the mystery of which you speak. That another ship or ships might have

been in the vicinity is quite possible ... ’ (Lightoller 1912). Lord, then, was already trying to establish that some ship other than his own was the ship seen from the sinking *Titanic*. The extraordinary concordance between what Stone saw and what the *Titanic* did – the eight rockets – is nothing to Lord. There are other ships; the whole thing is a ‘mystery’. One can only wonder what Lightoller – or his wife – must have made of such tactics.

The letter from Captain Rostron provides a glimpse of another – perhaps more insidious – strategy. ‘Anyway Lord,’ Rostron writes, ‘you have my sympathies. I understand more than I can say, especially about the calling business’ (Rostron 1912). By ‘the calling business’ Rostron is referring to the fact that a shipmaster must rely on the officer of the watch to call him to the bridge if there is a problem, and the implication is that Lord must have complained to Rostron that he had not been called properly. In short, he is trying to blame Stone. It is only an implication – as I say, the actual letter is absent and its contents exist only as a trace or echo in the archive – but there is support for my conclusion in other parts of the archive, where Lord’s strategy appears more explicitly. There is a letter, for instance, from Lord to the Board of Trade in which he sets out various factors in his defence and then, in his neat, careful handwriting, says: ‘If you consider there was any laxity aboard the *Californian* on the night in question I respectfully draw your attention to the information given here, which was given in evidence, which also proves was not on my part’ (Harrison 1992, pp. 126-127; Lord 1912). He is saying: it was Stone’s fault, not mine. As I have said, as I trawled through the documents, I felt Lord slowly becoming closer, and as the psychology of the man began to clarify, I did not always like what I saw. Stone, after all, did call his captain – three times – a fact which I doubt made its way into Lord’s letters to Lightoller or Rostron. Of all of Lord’s strategies following the night of the disaster – silence, denial, falsehoods – these attempts to blame Stone are to my mind the least honourable of all.

What makes such tactics sadder are the documents that *do* exist in the archive – not as traces or absences, but concretely and in great number – which provide testimonials and references in support of Lord. They tell a consistent story of a diligent and dutiful seaman. As a young officer, his employer wrote of him, ‘He has always been reported favourably by the various masters he has sailed with as being sober,

industrious, and a good seaman and navigator. From my own observations I have always found him most attentive to his duties and at all time gentlemanly and courteous' (Bridgewater 1904). Lord, showing this reference to Harrison many years later, was particularly proud of the underlining of 'always' – it set it apart from the usual standard form of reference (Harrison 1992, p. 37). The Master of the SS *Colonian* wrote that Lord was 'a keen and highly intelligent officer' who 'kept the ship in a high state of efficiency and ha[d] admirable control over the crew' (Bullock 1912). Even after the inquiries in London and Washington had found against him, and the Leyland Line felt compelled to 'let him go', they farewelled him with a positive reference: 'We have always found Captain Lord a sober, industrious and careful officer, good navigator and disciplinarian, and whilst he has been in command of our steamers, they have run free from accident' (Roberts 1913). During the Great War, Lord acquitted himself with courage and honour, earned the thanks of the Royal Navy and in 1922 was awarded the Mercantile Marine Medal (Harrison 1992, pp. 150-152; Merseyside Maritime Museum 2002). At the end of his career his employers were able to say that for the entire period of his employment 'he had our entire confidence, and we regard him as one of the most capable Commanders we have ever had' (Latta 1928). This reference, Harrison tells us, gave Lord the 'keenest pleasure and satisfaction' was one of his 'most treasured possessions' (Harrison 1992, p. 155). There are other testimonials, and I could imagine the warm glow Lord must have felt when, as an old man, he showed them one by one to his patient and loyal friend, pointing out the underlining of 'always', chuckling at the warm praise in the Nitrate Producers' letter.

And yet all of these documents showing diligence and professionalism solve nothing and serve only to deepen the mystery. There is a sense in the archive of a man trying to prove something that nobody denies – that he was an honourable, dutiful shipmaster. But it all came to nothing at the time it was most needed. Why, when the *Titanic* called for help by firing her rockets, didn't he go?

When I tired of the documents I walked the streets of Liverpool to see whether some sort of answer might come to me from the air and streets and buildings. The historical referent, after all, does not only exist in documents. Many researchers have sought the sense of a historical person by visiting their home or other significant site.

These ‘passionate pilgrims’, as Michelle Mendelssohn calls them, will often go to great trouble to get close to their subject (Perkin 2010, p. 127, note 10). Kristel Thornell describes how she not only took a research trip to St Kilda – the physical space where Clarice Beckett once lived – but also sought to inhabit her subject’s temporal space by reading literature of the period, listening to its music, cooking from its cookbooks, holding its objects and wearing its clothes (Thornell 2010b, pp. 27, 28, 31). These ‘strategies and rituals for facilitating narrative telepathy’ were Thornell’s way of channelling Beckett; of summoning her from the ether; of being uncannily haunted by her; of achieving the ‘particularity of character’ and ‘sustained psychological intimacy’ that Thornell craved for her novel (Thornell 2010b, pp. 26,17).

So I too became a passionate pilgrim and aimed for my own narrative telepathy with Lord. In London, as well as reviewing the *Californian* documents in the British Library and National Maritime Museum archives, I visited the same docks in Woolwich from which Lord’s ship departed on Good Friday, 1912. I breathed in the damp mists, videotaped the wharves and took notes. In Boston, as well as reviewing the newspaper reports of the *Californian* affair in the Boston Library, I took a tour of the harbour and saw the wharves where Lord’s ship arrived only days after the *Titanic* had sunk. I ate clam chowder and listened to the mournful tolling of the harbour buoys at sunset. But perhaps most importantly of all, in Wallasey, across the river from Liverpool, I walked the streets that the captain walked and visited the addresses where he had lived. I found the Wallasey library where, if ever Lord picked up a book about the *Titanic* he would put it straight back down again (Harrison 1992, p. 155). Some buildings from 1912 remained: the pretty clubhouse of the Wallasey Golf Club, of which Lord was a member ‘but only for the game, not its social side’ (Harrison 1992, p. 155; Reade 1993, p. 323), and the elegant Parish Church of St Nicholls, consecrated in 1911 and in which Lord may or may not have begged forgiveness for his sins. I was surrounded by pleasant people with pleasant manners; in the local area were parks and woodlands and walking trails. But when I caught the ferry back across the Mersey to Liverpool city centre, the mood seemed to change. The people and buildings seemed harder. St George’s Hall, the Brown Library and Picton Library were sombre buildings of a monolithic scale. This was not a place, I thought as I strolled about these imposing

buildings, for cowardice or dereliction of duty, especially from one of its own sea captains. In 1912 Liverpool was the finest port in the world – a city whose men sailed the world's oceans and upheld the finest traditions of the sea. Men built ships here, White Star and Cunard had their headquarters here, this was the port of registration of the *Mauretania*, the *Lusitania*, the *Olympic*, and the *Titanic*. The greatest ships in the world were Liverpool's ships. Lord Mersey himself – the wreck commissioner – was a Liverpool man. So what must it have been like, I wondered, for Lord to walk about in such a city? How could he have met the gaze of men with whom he had once worked, laughed, and talked? I sat for hours in the vast Brown Library and read through the Liverpool newspapers that reported Lord Mersey's findings against him: 'Blame for the *Californian*', '*Californian* Captain Criticised – Truth of the Matter is Plain – Might Have Saved Many Lives' (*Liverpool Echo* 1912; *Liverpool Weekly Mercury* 1912). As I sat, I tried to feel what Lord would have felt: the shame, the humiliation, the dishonour. I tried to imagine his wife talking to her friends, trying to convince them out of loyalty that Lord Mersey had got it all wrong. I thought of Lord's sensitive little three-year-old son trying, in the years to come, to resist cruel taunts at school. I remembered what Lord's friend Harrison had written about him – that 'he had little need for outside activities or social contacts', that he had 'no specially close companions' and that he spent his time 'reading and touring by car with his wife and son' (Harrison 1992, p. 155).

Thornell describes her attempts to 'confuse the division', to create 'a strangeness of borders' between her own self and that of Clarice Beckett (Thornell 2010b, p. 29, emphasis in original). In Liverpool I tried to do the same with Lord. I tried to achieve the deepest level of empathy I could, to feel the shame that he must have felt and to sense at least a little of the burden for all those lost lives. He must, I thought, have almost suffocated under its weight.

But as I left the library and took in again the air of the city, I began to experience something which was not shame or regret or disgrace. I began to feel his anger. I sensed his resentment that fate could have dealt him such a blow, and his outrage and indignation that this could have happened to him of all people. If a storm or hurricane had threatened his ship he would have been on the bridge at once, staring down the gale, doing what he could to keep his ship and men safe. If it had been his own ship

that had hit an iceberg he would have calmly and professionally supervised the evacuation and been the last one to leave. These would have been straightforward challenges and he would have known what to do. As I have said, Lord did not lack a sense of duty and he was no coward.

But Lord's test was a more subtle one, coming upon him slowly and quietly during the calmest night anyone had seen on the North Atlantic. It was a cruel trick, having him told tentatively of white rockets while he was half asleep, and it was a crueller trick still having those rockets come from the largest, safest ship in the world, nearby and slowly sinking. For whatever strange thoughts were in his mind that night, I reminded myself repeatedly that Lord could not have had the faintest inkling of the staggering enormity of the tragedy unfolding only a few miles away.

I am sure that if he had known, he would have done everything humanly possible to help the thousands in peril. But he did not know and the trick, once played, could not be undone. It could not be undone by Lord, no matter how hard he might try in the half-century of his remaining life; nor could it be undone by the extraordinary, unrelenting efforts of his friend Harrison; nor by the minute calculations and vociferous declarations of his later supporters.

To Lord, at the time, it must have seemed all so dreadfully unfair, and how burning must have been his sense that none of it was his fault.

As I thought these things, I had walked north along Scotland Road a mile or so, and, consulting my map, found my way to Bootle, a northern suburb. Lord was not the only revenant I was trying to conjure; this city was the home of Herbert Stone too. As I stood outside the house at Stone's address on Wadham Street, I felt him uncannily close. It was a quiet street with neat, brick houses jostling up against each other in a friendly sort of way. But it was a gloomy place too – with no trees or flowers or children at play – and I tried to imagine what it would have been like in 1912 when Liverpool was at the height of its industrial power. It would, I think, have been a hard, bleak place – and a sad place, too. In the years just prior to the *Titanic* disaster there had been a series of murders in Bootle: Maggie Donoghue had been beaten to death by a fireman; six-year-old Tommy Foy had been murdered and dismembered; and most notoriously, two sailors had carried out a series of prostitute murders known as The Teapot Murders. The street where these latter killings took place came to be

known as ‘the street that died of shame’. Much later, in the early 1990s, Bootle became notorious as the place where the toddler James Bulger was abducted, tortured and murdered by two ten-year-old boys. It was a crime which horrified the nation; it was an event of indescribable sadness.

This was where, in 1912, the young Herbert Stone lived with his new wife. Stone had less of a presence in the documentary archive than Lord but I still knew much: that he had run away to sea at 16 to escape a ‘difficult’ father (Reade 1993, p. 325); that he had originally wanted to be a school teacher (Molony 2009, p. 110); that Charles Groves, the third officer with whom he sailed on the *Californian*, thought him stolid and ‘possessed of little self confidence’ (Groves 1957). The more I read about Stone the more I thought of him as a soft, sensitive man who perhaps should not have gone to sea. He never rose to command, and in due course left the sea to become a storeman in Liverpool until September 1959 when, one morning on his way to work, he died of a stroke (Butler 2009, p. 51; Reade 1993, p. 327). Reade tells us that for years after Stone gave his evidence in London rumours persisted around Merseyside that he had confessed that he knew he had seen distress rockets (Reade 1993, p. 319).

Stone is a historical figure for whom I have always had great sympathy, even as I encountered in the transcript of his London evidence what Reade calls his ‘evasions and exasperating stupidities’ (Reade 1993, p. 73). I felt I knew what caused them: a conflict between his desire to tell the truth and his loyalty to his father-figure captain. Stone was forced to say in London that what he saw that night was the very thing he had been taught meant distress, but what his loyalty would not let him say was that the captain had been taught it too. The captain knew his regulations and knew that Stone was reporting white rockets to him but he seemed not at all worried about them. So Stone – prone to self-doubt and with utter faith in his captain – would have thought that there must have been good reason for the captain’s lack of worry. The captain must have known something that he did not know. ‘I informed the master,’ Stone said, ‘and left him to judge’ (*British Inquiry* 1912, question 7853). It was the best he could do. I remembered his son’s plea to Leslie Reade: ‘I hope ... my father’s part in the Titanic affair will be treated fairly, as he deserved, and sympathetically’ (Reade 1993, p. 320). It seemed to me that fairness and sympathy were what Herbert Stone deserved.

It was here among the sad streets of Bootle and the hard buildings of Liverpool that I at last began to feel I had some understanding of why the *Californian* didn't go to the rockets that night. Like Thornell's revenant emerging from her subconscious, or Jameson's hologram steadily brightening, those few hours on the *Californian's* bridge began to form and clarify in my mind. All of this toughness that surrounded me – this masculinity – made me think that it may have been Lord's own strength that had undone him in the end. He was the youngest of six sons. One brother died as a young child but the remainder were all boisterous and successful – in the army, in medicine, in business, in manhood. Lord would not let them down: as a teenager he went to sea in sail and was battered by Cape Horn storms into a resilient and resourceful man. In time he became, as I have said, one of the Leyland Line's youngest and most respected captains. His was a strange and subtle hubris: he would never say so, but he was proud of his achievements and ambitious, and there are strong hints in the archive that he disliked weakness, hesitation and timidity whenever he saw it in others. Harrison, Lord's prime defender, describes the captain as 'wholly dedicated to his profession as a shipmaster', which I don't think anyone doubts, but the more interesting idea is in the sentence that follows: 'He expected all those who sailed with him to try to match his high standards of efficiency ...' (Harrison 1992, p. 24). He expected others to try to match him – to show initiative, to have ambition, to be manly. And my sense is that he became frustrated and angry with those who failed.

Interestingly, there is evidence that his own son – his only child, whom he named after himself – may have been one of those who disappointed him. Stanley Tutton Lord was a sensitive child who had 'a great affection for his mother' (Harrison 1996, p. 112). He never married, but had a long friendship with Raymond Pugh, with whom he would take regular walks, driving tours and sea excursions to North Wales (Harrison 1996, p. 108). When Raymond arrived at the Lords' house to pick up Stanley for their regular walks, Stanley would often keep Raymond waiting while he got ready – a domestic scene which 'amused' Stanley Lord senior. Harrison, who published Stanley Tutton's letters in his second book, describes him as 'an obsessively reserved individual' (Harrison 1996, p. 135) and later in his life, after his parents had died, Stanley remained in the family home with his dogs, canary and budgerigar. 'A house without dogs is not a home,' Stanley wrote in one of his letters (Harrison 1996, p. 114).

All of this is oddly *un-manly*, and one wonders what Captain Lord's attitude toward his son was. There is nothing overt in the correspondence, but there are hints: 'My father could, when he felt like it, be very severe and intimidating,' wrote Stanley (Harrison 1996, p. 115). And this: 'Father used to say that I would not last long abroad and I was much better to stay put at home' (Harrison 1996, p. 114). Stanley followed his father's advice: he was excused from active service in the Second World War 'on health grounds' and afterwards stayed at home, growing his flowers and indulging his love of literature and opera (Harrison 1996, pp. 109, 125, 114, 112 respectively).

The conclusion of my novel offers a vision of Lord's disgust at his weak and coddled son, and implies that this is where the ultimate solution to the puzzle might lie. Perhaps, in those half-conscious hours when he lay dozing in his ship's steam-heated chartroom and Stone called down to him talking of rockets, Lord sensed something of the same weakness and timidity that he despised in his own son. At this moment, in exasperation, he wanted Stone to 'match his own high standards' and use some initiative; to make his own decisions about what the rockets meant and what should be done; to 'be a man'.

And on the freezing bridge above, perhaps Stone heard in his gruff captain's voice something of his own overbearing father, whom he feared and could never please. In this neat double patterning – Stone's wakeful worrying and Lord's dozing annoyance – each man reverted to type. Each fell back to the essential or natural version of himself, unmoulded by the dictates of seamanship or duty. A gap opened up, and like a snowflake falling gently from the sky, responsibility for action fell between them, touching neither. So, in this concentrated moment in history, nothing was done.

Walking the streets of Bootle, I felt the utter sadness of it all. Perhaps the ghosts of little Tom Foy and James Bulger haunted me, for I was suddenly put in mind of the *Titanic* children and the terrible way in which they had died. It must have been terrifying: most of them had ended up in the open, black water to die of cold with their parents nearby and unable to help. Lord did not know it but while he conducted his test of his second officer's initiative and manhood thousands were crying for help. He chose the wrong moment for his experiment: he should not have done it; he should have gone to the bridge; he should have woken the wireless operator.

I have said that I have a very great sympathy for Herbert Stone. But as the train pulled out of Liverpool's Lime Street Station and I headed back to London, I felt sorry for Lord too. Because it was Lord whose name had appeared in the newspapers throughout Liverpool and the world; and whom history would remember as the author of the *Californian's* ignominy; and who would be the referent sought out by researchers like me. He would always be what he himself said he was when he arrived in Harrison's office asking for help: 'I am Lord, Lord of the *Californian*.'

7. The unyielding referent: Lord's quantum unknowability

But even after all this, Lord resisted narrative. I knew why he didn't go to the rockets, but as a character in my novel he remained stubbornly flat. 'Lord just doesn't have the same energy as Steadman,' my supervisor said. 'He remains impenetrable.' I knew a lot about Lord, I had the essential points of his character, but he would not acquire depth or come to life.

Hutcheon tells us that the meaning of historical people and events lies 'not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past "events" into present historical "facts" ' (Hutcheon 1988, p. 89, original emphasis). More recently she says that 'historiography ... is an attempt to comprehend and master [the past] by means of some working (narrative/explanatory) model that, in fact, is precisely what grants a particular meaning to the past' (Hutcheon 2002a, p. 61). This, of course, is the very process which Steadman identifies and unsettles: the meaning-making function of the masculine narrative, the suffragettes' narrative, the national narrative. These are the 'systems' or 'models' he installs and then shakes to see what falls. But the problem for him, and for the novel, is that there is no system or model which seems to fit Lord. He is a spanner in the works of the meaning-making machines, he is neither villain nor hero, and at the centre of his story is not an event but a non-event. There is no act of villainy or heroism, only a dozing and a doing nothing

Lord, I thought, had defeated me.

But help was to be found outside the *Titanic* archive – in two novels published in 2004 which, coincidentally, deal with the same historical figure. David Lodge's *Author Author* (2004) and Colm Toibin's *The Master* (2004) each offer a nuanced exploration and representation of the author Henry James, and so present a unique opportunity to compare differing treatments of the same referent. It is something of a controlled experiment – common in science, but not so much in literature.

Lodge calls his book a 'biographical novel' – that is, a 'novel which takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography' (Lodge 2006, p. 8). When I read Lodge's explanation

of his novel's relationship to its historical referent I was surprised. His words seemed perfectly to apply to my own novel:

Nearly everything that happens in this story is based on factual sources. With one significant exception, all the named characters were real people. Quotations from their books, plays, articles, letters, journals, etc are their own words. But I have used a novelist's license in representing what they thought, felt, and said to each other; and I have imagined some events and personal details which history omitted to record. So this book is a novel ... (Lodge 2004, author's note)

In my own novel *Steadman* is, of course, the 'one significant exception' – although the newspaper for which he works is real and the stories he publishes or reads are verbatim transcriptions of real items. Lodge, it seemed to me, although taking 'novelist's license', had the same underlying respect for the historical record that I aimed for in my own work.

But Lodge's fidelity to his sources, according to his critics, has come at a cost. J Russel Perkin, who compares Lodge's novel with Toibin's, suggests that Lodge was in the end unable fully to possess James: Lodge wrote as a 'faithful acolyte' engaged in 'an act of aesthetic devotion', handling James 'like a responsible academic rather than as a novelist'. Perkin concludes that 'Henry does not fully become a David Lodge character' (Perkin 2010, pp. 124,126). In contrast, Perkin says, Toibin's James is 'vividly imagined' – an 'opaque, enigmatic figure, haunted by the ghosts of his past, obscurely Irish, troubled about his sexuality. He is very much Colm Toibin's character' (Perkin 2010, pp. 122, 126). In short, 'Toibin asserts his own authority over the figure of the Master' whereas 'Lodge's mode of devotion to the Master is ... a sign of his defeat by his precursor' (Perkin 2010, p. 126).

Perkin, I think, reads Lodge's failure to possess James as a failure of the novel. I am not sure I agree: the novel seems to me to be a great success. Perhaps it is because I am such a fan of Henry James that a little distance born of respect does not seem such a bad thing. But either way, Lodge's novel, and Perkin's comments about it, helped me reflect upon own 'defeat by my precursor'.

I wondered whether my failure fully to possess Lord was born of my own 'mode of devotion' to shipmasters generally. As a former ship's officer, I have a deep, residual respect for the authority of command at sea and this may have – subconsciously – made me reluctant to represent the intimate interiority of a ship's

captain. But even so, this did not seem to me a full or satisfying explanation of Lord's peculiar resistance to narrative. The problem seemed to lie with him: there seemed to be a limit to knowledge inhering within the historical referent itself – like a theoretical limit in mathematics, or Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in physics. I could not know about Lord all at once: if I knew his momentum I could not know his position, if I knew his position I could not know his momentum.

The more I thought on Lodge's 'failure' to possess James, and my own to possess Lord, the more I began to think that perhaps these were not failures at all, any more than the quantum unresolvability of subatomic particles is a failure of physics. I began to see that my own inability to get at Lord – to 'explore his psyche', as Steadman's daughter puts it, or to achieve Thornell's 'sustained psychological intimacy' – mirrored the real world's inability to get at him. Lord was by all accounts reserved and closed-off; his unknowability is part of his story – part of history. He is a figure who problematises himself. So in a way my novel's narrative 'failure' is its success: the fact that its attempt to possess and interpret Lord is unsuccessful conveys an essential feature of the historical referent itself. Part of what is new about my novel is that it goes beyond (or doesn't quite reach?) Lodge's 'biographical novel', which he defines as having as its subject matter a real person, because my novel has as its subject matter the process of trying to represent a real person. In this sense, the novel is its 'own first commentary' on the process of trying to know Lord; it makes visible the process of exploring and lamenting his inscrutability. The solution to my narrative's inability to offer a sustained and convincing interiority is to make the mechanics of this defeat visible.

Steadman, of course, was my primary tool. He is both my invention and protection. Any mistakes in historical veracity I can blame on him – it is his narrative, after all. He tries his best but might make mistakes. He is my buffer but he is also the reader's guide: an interpretative window, or filtering lens, through which they can see and understand the heterocosm of the novel. As a journalist and narrator Steadman is aware of interpretative possibilities and complexities of representation, and he does his best to construct within his own narrative a vivid and convincing Lord. But from the first time he sees the captain, Steadman – who is adept at 'reading' faces – signals the trouble he is going to have by describing Lord's face as 'glazed porcelain'. And much

later, towards the end of his quest, when he sits down to write Lord's story, he pushes the manuscript aside, defeated by Lord's inscrutability.

Steadman pushes aside his manuscript because I had pushed aside mine. His despair was my despair when, after years of reading and researching, I saw 'no admission from Lord that he had done wrong, only certainty that he had done right. I saw no tormented conflict, no cues that he struggled with a troubling conscience. I saw only a flatness, a polished, hard, nothingness' (*Eight Rockets*, p.163).

But more important even than Lord's unknowability to me, or to Steadman, or to anyone else, was his unknowability to the real-life Herbert Stone. It was Stone who needed – at the critical moment – to interpret his captain and to understand him. So much depended on it. But he was as puzzled by the Captain Lord sleeping below in the chartroom as I was by the Captain Lord I found in the archives at Liverpool, and as Steadman is by the Captain Lord he encounters on the wharves in Boston. For Stone, Lord exists in a rarefied, untouchable world; he is a mystery that cannot be solved. Stone is confused, puzzled and, in the end, paralysed by him. He tells his captain about the rockets but does no more.

My novel mirrors this process. Just as the real Lord refused any attempt by Stone to get close or know him, my Lord refuses any attempt by the reader to experience a 'sustained psychological intimacy' with him. Whereas Thornell might deliberately distance herself from Clarice Becket to give herself imaginative space to invent her own 'Clarice', and whereas Lodge might distance himself from Henry James out of respect and aesthetic devotion, my own novel distances itself from its referent as a deliberate strategy. By representing Lord as remote, impenetrable and unreadable, my novel shows him as he appeared to Stone, and in doing so offers an answer to one of history's most perplexing questions: why the *Californian* did not go to the rockets.

8. Fighting oblivion: the quest for meaning

As I have said, the Herbert Stone of my novel hoped to find in his life at sea something of the wide skies and close friendships he had discovered in the novel *Moby-Dick*. For Stone, Melville's novel symbolised the possibility of a transcendent brotherhood – an idealised masculinity. But there is another symbolism at work here, more ominous and less hopeful: the whiteness of the whale itself. Melville devotes an entire chapter to possible meanings of this whiteness, teasing out the colour's symbolic power in cultures across the ages, but then, in a rhetorical climax, wonders whether 'by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation'. Camille Paglia tells us that 'whiteness or blankness of nonmeaning' is *Moby-Dick*'s 'premiere symbol', and Ishmael recoils from such blankness with a kind of horror: it is a thing 'most appalling to mankind' (Melville 1851, p. 295; Paglia 1992, p. 584).

Ahab's quest for the White Whale is thus more than a monomaniacal desire for revenge. When he throws his harpoon he is taking aim at the great blankness of the universe. It is a desperate and impotent act – nonmeaning always triumphs in the end. Indeed, Ahab is mocked by the White Whale when the animal 'booms his entire bulk into the pure element of air' to show his whiteness in dazzling contrast to the 'blue plain of the sea' and the 'still bluer margin of the sky', glaring and glittering 'intolerably' in a spectacular 'act of defiance' (Melville 1851, p. 667).

Meaninglessness mocks us all. When, in the mid 1990s, a bus full of children from a Roman Catholic school crashed with wholesale loss of life, a cleric suggested that such suffering confirmed the existence of 'real values – positive and negative'. But Richard Dawkins wrote, 'On the contrary ... the universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference' (Dawkins 1995).

Such nihilistic nonmeaning is frightening. We recoil from it in fear. Ahab threw his tiny harpoon; in 1912, the American and British press threw their own weapon: the power of narrative. After the sinking of the *Titanic* the newspapers sought to reveal its underlying moral meaning, or as Michael Hammond puts it, to show that 'behind these

terrible events a divine hand acts, and eventually reveals, the power of virtue' (Hammond 2004, p. 29). Similarly, Steven Biel points out that, 'The most common way of dealing with the *Titanic* disaster – of moving beyond grief and avoiding a sense of meaninglessness – was to point to the good that had come out of it' (Biel 1996, p. 87). Meaning and purpose abound in press reports; one article in *The Washington Post*, for instance, reported lectures on 'SOS, or the Lesson of the *Titanic*', 'The Teachings of a Tragedy' and 'In a World Full of Sorrows God Can Still Be Good' (1912a). The tragedy was cast in terms of great forces warring against each other – good versus evil, profit versus safety, man against nature. Hubris is punished, mankind is humbled and then redeemed. The lesson of the disaster – in contemporary accounts and in the century of mythmaking that has followed – has never been that random accidents happen; that in an uncaring and indifferent universe 'some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice' (Dawkins 1995, p. 133). The harpoon must be thrown at nonmeaning no matter what. Rhyme and reason must be found somewhere.

Steadman, my invented journalist, does his part. 'If journalism were a philosophy rather than a trade,' says the newspaperman in Doctorow's novel *The Waterworks*, 'it would say there is no order in the universe, no discernible meaning without ... the daily paper. So it's a monumental duty we wretches have who slug the chaos into sentences arranged in columns on a page of newsprint' (Doctorow 1995, p. 25). Steadman does his best to comply with this monumental duty. 'The story of the *Californian* is a story of heroism,' he writes. He slugs the chaos into sentences, and sometimes even into single words: in Harry Houdini's face he sees 'trapped' and in Philip Franklin's 'fear'. This is Steadman's specialty – interpreting, rendering the complex understandable and the chaotic meaningful.

But in Stanley Lord, Steadman meets the same horror that Ahab encounters in the *White Whale*: a blank nothing. Steadman tries to 'read Lord as text' – to decipher his actions, to see meaning in his face – but, as I have shown, he fails. In Washington he encounters 'all that marble, all those hard, bright edges and all that whiteness' (*Eight Rockets*, p.149). Lord resists interpretation. There is a great nothingness at the centre of his story; his stillness and passivity in those minutes when action was most required has its own kind of horror.

And, like Derrida's process of endless deferral, or Foucault's disorderly, unruly buzzing of discourse, Lord subsequently disrupts any attempt to interpret or define him. He is meaningless. Paglia tells us that in *Moby-Dick* the White Whale is the premiere symbol of the heartless voids and immensities of the universe; in *Eight Rockets* it is Lord himself.

The heartless void also shows itself in other, more direct, ways. Early in the novel, Herbert Stone stands the midnight watch on the bridge of his stopped ship, staring out into a cold, still moonless night. There is no horizon; the blackness is uniform and overwhelming. He imagines that he can sense the platform of the ocean rotating away from him, and worries that he 'might overbalance and fall into its infinite, engulfing blackness' (*Eight Rockets*, p.17). The abyss of nothing is horrifying and he steps back from the rail.

The irony, of course, is that against this backdrop Stone sees something that is the very opposite of meaningless: a white rocket. In an inversion of *Moby-Dick*'s colour scheme, the whiteness here is pregnant with meaning. 'Anybody knows what rockets at sea mean,' says Lawrence Beesley, a *Titanic* passenger (Beesley 1912, p. 35) and obviousness of meaning is symbolised by the perfect white-on-black contrast. The rocket is 'perfectly white, clear and startling and unmistakeable against the blackness of the void' (*Eight Rockets*, p.17). And yet Stone, anaesthetised by dread of his captain dozing below, refuses to interpret it. He seems as horrified by meaning as he does by nonmeaning, because again he steps back from the rail. When he is asked in London what he thought the rockets meant, he says he did not know. He 'just took them as white rockets, and informed the Master and left it to him to judge' (*British Inquiry* 1912, q.7853). He passes the task of interpretation up the line to his captain, where meaning – even startling obvious meaning – is absorbed and lost. The reader watches on in horror. She knows that within the 'small, fragile flower' is a very great density of meaning and drama. The white light in the distance is the locus of all the narratives and mythology we now know of the *Titanic* through countless books, songs, poems and films: Astor helping his pregnant bride into a lifeboat, the elderly Strauses choosing to stay together, the band playing until the end. And yet, on the *Californian* it all evaporates to nothing.

I am reminded of my own time above the *Titanic* wreck site. As I have said, at 2.20am on 15 April 2012, one-hundred years to the minute after the *Titanic* sank, I stood with hundreds of others on the aft deck of our own ship in quiet contemplation. The moment resonated with profound meaning. I have described how the historical referent – the event itself – seemed close and alive in the darkness, and how we felt that we were experiencing it as directly as we ever could. The *Titanic* herself lay directly beneath us – shattered and broken, decaying slowly to nothingness – but curiously, wonderfully close and present. There we all stood, reliving the event, interpreting and reinterpreting it, feeling once again its lessons of courage and cowardice, hubris and humility, human strength and frailty.

But then, as I leaned dangerously over the rail to get even closer to the ship, to peer downwards and imagine it more intensely, I began only to see the horrifying blankness of the water. The sea was as calm that night as it had been on the night of the disaster; it was a polished, flat blackness. The *Titanic* began to recede from me; it seemed utterly and forever hidden behind that unforgiving surface. I began to see instead her passengers and crew floating in the water – 1500 people kept afloat by their lifejackets to give them time to think and wonder. I imagined them looking into the mystery of things, like Steadman's newly dead son, seeming to gaze from one world into another. I began then to think of myself in that water and to wonder what it will be like when I grow 'quite quite warm' in my own transition to death. I tried to see something transcendent, to hope for something 'beyond', but all I could see was a horrifying nothing. There before me was the heartless void and immensity of the universe, and I was stabbed through with the thought of my own annihilation. The futility of existence is truly a thing most appalling to mankind.

I did the only sensible thing I could do: like Herbert Stone, I stepped back from the rail.

9. Conclusion: meaning in the pursuit

Perhaps, after all, this is what my novel offers to the theory and practice of creative writing: a model for seeking and representing a historical event by stepping back from it and knowing it only imperfectly. Like Ahab's quest for the White Whale, my novel's narrator seeks out Stanley Lord, but unlike Ahab, in the end he is content to stand back and let his quarry be. Certainly, Steadman is slapped hard across the face by Lord's wife – whose stinging hand is like the flukes of Ahab's whale, perhaps – but Steadman retreats and lives on to fight another day.

This, I think, is the essence of Hutcheon's historiographical metafiction. All art in one form or other grapples with the question of what it is to be human in a vast, indifferent universe, and historiographical metafiction turns our attention to the modes and strategies of that grappling, rather than despairing at the lack of any transcendent final answer. Narcissistic narrative looks back on itself so it doesn't have to stare into the abyss of nonmeaning. The solution is to step back from the rail and not to stare too hard into the darkness. Historical truth is out there, but it is like the invisible whispering presence of Herbert Stone's icefield: if you try to look straight at it, it vanishes. You have to use your peripheral vision.

Professor Felicia Huppert, in recent theorising about the nature of human happiness, argues that the endpoint is less important than the pursuit. 'We achieve wellbeing as a result of the things we do. Happiness itself is something of chimera. The important thing is not the pursuit of happiness, it's the happiness of pursuit' (Hamilton 2011 at 17:20). The same could be said of the historical referent and of meaning generally. After all, it is during the *Pequod's pursuit* of the whale – the 130-odd chapters before the whale and its paralysing whiteness is even seen – that we learn about the startling courage of men and their infinite capacity to love and be loyal.

It is process that matters. Turning away from the paralysing whiteness of nonmeaning – what Albert Camus calls the 'act of eluding' – can be a celebration rather than a defeat. To elude can be as valuable an act as to confront. Camus tells us that it is wrong to assert that 'Refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no necessary common measure

between these two judgments' (Camus 1942, p. 7). Existence is as it is. Even Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, waiting endlessly for a Godot who never comes, do not abandon their waiting. They do not suicide. They do not give in to nihilistic despair. Indeed, it has been said that their waiting 'transmute[s] the destitution of modern man into his exaltation' (123HelpMe.com).

It is with notions such as these that I hope my novel resonates, even if only faintly. You don't despair – as Jameson seems to do in a reverie of nostalgia, and as the modernists seem to do in a reverie of destruction, and as John Steadman almost does in a reverie of exasperation – just because the historical referent, like Godot, never comes. Instead, you become exalted by that knowledge. Vladimir and Estragon remind us of the 'real need to face existence "knowing the worst", which ultimately is liberation' (123HelpMe.com).

Which, I suppose, is what we who participated in the *Titanic* memorial voyage did after leaving the cold, black water of the wreck site. We stood back from the rail, drank our mulled wine and the next morning steamed off for sunny New York. We knew the black water was still there, waiting to claim us all eventually, but we danced and laughed in the meantime.

There is a certain exhilaration in 'knowing the worst' but steaming on anyway.

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