

Turning Tides, Changing Times: Sea in *Evil Under the Sun* and *Journey to the South*

Jiří Jelínek and Jana Jelínková

HJEAS

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to compare two murder mysteries in which the sea plays a key role—the Golden Age mystery *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) by Agatha Christie and the postmodern novel *Journey to the South* (2004, in English 2023) by Michal Ajvaz. It is argued that both novels present the sea/water as an element that incites transgression, yet simultaneously facilitates the solving of the crime, thus tying the image of the sea to the notion of unpredictability and chaos. The paper further shows how, in *Evil Under the Sun*, the twentieth century cultural transformation of the sea is depicted in its early stages, with the penetration of the social type of tourists into a space archaically connected to danger. Meanwhile, Ajvaz already regards this as the default attitude—seeing the sea as a domesticated place of leisure, with evil, dangerous, or even supernatural elements in tense moments of conflict. While *Evil Under the Sun* works with a more traditional struggle between order and chaos, Ajvaz's novel appeals to postmodern thinking by treating the ambiguity, the diverse interpretations of the world, and the chaotic nature of the sea as stimulating. (JJ&JJ)

KEYWORDS: Agatha Christie; *Evil Under the Sun*; *Journey to the South*; Michal Ajvaz; sea in fiction



Introduction

Since its conception, murder mystery fiction has made use of almost every possible milieu and place. Some, however, are recurring—be it the old family mansion, the close-knit village community or, indeed, the sea, with stories set on the coast, on an island, or on a ship. The sea, with its pivotal yet complicated position in the history of Western literature and culture, serves not only as a popular backdrop, but also as a potent symbol. In crime fiction, but especially in detective fiction, the presence of the sea often creates tension, representing an indomitable mystery and a power that cannot be tamed by human means and, thus, forming a natural antithesis to crime solving, *ratio*, and deduction. In order to explore possible approaches

to this phenomenon, this paper compares the role of the sea in two seemingly disparate murder mysteries: *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) by Agatha Christie, and *Journey to the South* (2004) by Michal Ajvaz. Even though the texts are not directly connected, save for the fact that Ajvaz admittedly draws his poetics from various established genres, including crime fiction, their comparison offers striking similarities in some areas. As shown further on, these texts not only combine murder investigation with the highly popular sea motif, but also provide commentary on the contemporary art of holidaying and tourism, thrown into sharp relief against the backdrop of danger and violence.

The first of the analyzed novels is *Evil Under the Sun*, a whodunit written by Agatha Christie and first published in 1941. It features a murder on a secluded beach on an island off the Devon coast, with the vacationing Hercule Poirot having to step in to untangle a web of deceit. In many ways, it is the prototypical “technical” mystery of the Golden Age of detective fiction—the crime occurs at an isolated location among a limited pool of suspects; the murder is committed via elaborate body swaps and time shifts; and the perpetrator is ultimately unmasked and brought to justice by the all-knowing Poirot, in line with the Golden Age “world of radical rationality, in which the chaos and senselessness associated with crime are vanquished by the exercise of the investigator’s transcendent reason” (Shiloh 12).

Elaborating on the setting, Lee Horsley accentuates the fact that Golden Age narratives take place in a pleasant, well-known environment that is not shattered, but rather reinforced by the murder: “a comfortably recognizable pattern (a highly wrought version of the death-detection-explanation model) is acted out in a familiar domestic setting, with the restoration of reassuring orderliness guaranteed. Readers return compulsively to the intimately known, ultimately reassuring dining rooms and libraries of the detective-story house” (38). In *Evil Under the Sun*, the peaceful seaside hotel with its regular schedule represents a suitable variation of the country house, the signature haven of domesticity in the Golden Age. J. C. Bernthal further notes that the holiday setting of the novel serves as a counterpoint to the ongoing World War, prominently featuring “sunbathers and celebrities” whose glamor is brought out even more in the 1982 movie adaptation (163–64).

The second text, *Journey to the South*, first published in Czech in 2004 as *Cesta na jih* and translated into English in 2023, is a postmodern novel by Czech author Michal Ajvaz. Befitting a work of postmodern literature, it is not an unadulterated mystery story, but rather a novel that combines many

other genres and modes of writing, while “employ[ing] the traditional tropes of the [detective] genre in order to problematize its tacit philosophical assumptions” (Shiloh 34–35). At the heart of the plot lies a puzzling case of two murders: a man named Petr is shot during an opera performance and his half-brother Tomáš’s long-dead body is fished from the sea somewhere near Turkey. The sea plays a crucial role in the narrative, beginning with the narrator “watch[ing] the surface of the Libyan Sea” (n.p.), which is referenced throughout and finally deemed the single most fateful entity, “the worst of all the drugs by which [the characters] had been intoxicated on the journey, and . . . the essence from which all the other drugs were made” (n.p.). At the same time, the novel performs an analysis of the very nature of storytelling, serving as a formal experiment with each subsequent part of the text delving into deeper levels of fiction. The story is framed by the meeting of two young men, the unnamed narrator (loosely based on the author’s persona) and Martin, who have been independently investigating the cases in a seaside tavern in Greece. Both storytelling and murder are, in the thoughts and dialogues of Martin and the narrator, closely connected to the sea by which they are sitting. Even more importantly, Martin’s attempts at solving the murders are linked to an almost mystical journey through Europe to the enigmatically beckoning south, a voyage following the flow of rivers and finally arriving at the seashore.

Although the cases are eventually solved and the murderers identified, the characters and events in *Journey to the South* are constantly presented as ambiguous. Even a seemingly incorrect reading of some of the clues, such as the one connecting the murder to the writings of a Renaissance magician, forces the protagonists to perceive the world in new and different ways, and is therefore as important as the murder mystery itself. John Scaggs ties the postmodern skepticism of “absolute and unquestionable facts and truths of history” to the genre of the anti-detective story, with *The Name of the Rose* (1980) as a prime example (139). *Journey to the South* fits this definition easily, especially because Scaggs also states that “these postmodern anti-detective novels, characterized by the profound questions they raise ‘about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge,’ have also been termed ‘metaphysical detective stories’” (Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney qtd. in Scaggs 141). *Journey to the South*, however, does not blindly conform to prevailing trends in postmodern fiction, but strives to justify its choice of writing style. Throughout the novel, the skeptical, playful postmodern approach to the world and to the limited scope of human comprehension

of reality is closely linked to the sea, which is described as the source of tales, an “endless labyrinth” (n.p.), and an originator of a language that “[tells] only of itself,” yet “everything that is was created by its play (the regrouping of its letters)” (n.p.).

A direct comparison of *Evil Under the Sun* and *Journey to the South* might provide insight into some of the veiled, less self-evident qualities of the texts, especially in relation to the discourse and ideals of their respective times. Even though both novels comment on the emerging role of the sea and tourism, using similar motifs and imagery, the conclusions that they ultimately draw differ vastly. Through a detailed analysis, the paper aims to prove that while both novels work with the conception of the sea as chaotic and related to criminality, the chaotic nature of the sea is linked to two very distinct worldviews. In *Evil under the Sun*, it is a source of danger to peace, normalcy, and domesticity—the proximity to the sea allows the murder to create a more close-knit circle, and as Alison Light posits, a shared intimacy of the suspects, typical of Christie’s settings. The ordinary, domestic experience—usually offering an *intime* crime of quiet domestic life, un-exotic and un-melodramatic, as Poirot famously puts it in *The ABC Murders* (1936)—is turned into its very own uncanny and subverted reflection (Light, *Forever England* 90–92). *Journey to the South* offers a reverse take, in which the sea becomes a source of capricious delight and creativity, setting the characters free and ready to embrace the exotic in the long run.

The Transformation of the Sea

To provide a literary and cultural context for the analyzed works, we need to introduce the function of the sea in crime fiction first, shifting from a potential threat into the holiday destination of the postmodern tourist, with murder becoming just one of many experiences. Although the sea has been a seemingly unchanging part of reality, an invariable in human thinking and imagination for thousands of years, with the transformation of society its status has gradually changed (Anderson and Peters 3–4). For pre-modern civilizations, the sea was first and foremost a place of danger and terror, “a quintessential wilderness, a void without community” (Mack 17). In modern times, it began to be seen primarily as a medium of colonization and an opportunity for expansion or trade, “the space of anarchic competition par excellence” (Steinberg 17). During the twentieth century, a further transformation took place: the sea became the ultimate holiday destination, a place of tranquility and recreation. This is not to suggest that perceptions of the sea as a place of danger or opportunity completely disappeared from

human thought. They became more covert and, in the manner of the palimpsest, overlaid and thematized only in certain contexts, such as in tense moments of love, religious ecstasy, or when crime is afoot. The French cultural historian Alain Corbin captured this transformation in *The Lure of the Sea*. He dates the “invention of the beach” to the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, suggesting that by the mid-nineteenth century, English seaside resorts were already being sought out not only by the aristocracy, but also by the working class (277–78). The ideological bedrock of “holidaying” and mass beach tourism can certainly be found in the Victorian era, but the actual mainstreaming and incorporation of the seafront into people’s lives is, arguably, of a later date. In the inter-war period, the increasingly crowded beaches still held the promise of adventure, exoticism, and conquest—as Laura Chase puts it, “the [inter-war] beach hut can also be viewed as a little colonial outpost, on the boundary between the manmade and natural worlds” (214). In later years, however, the conceptualization of the beach as a vacationscape gradually “acquired particular dominance” (Richter and Kluwick 14) and the symbolic geographies shifted: from the territorial “center” and coastal “rim,” modern society has turned its attention to the seaside, transforming the members of said society into “creatures of the edge” for whom the seaside is a fairly humdrum affair (4).

In *An Autobiography* (1977), Agatha Christie repeatedly brings up the transformation of sea-bathing in the early twentieth century. She describes the “great social change” that came with the shift from gendered beaches and the removal of “bathing machines” when she was about thirteen (145). Later, bathing places were taken by storm by a massive, almost industrial influx of holidayers: beaches were now full of “girls in bikinis,” which made one realize “how far one has gone in fifty years” (226). This “great social change” is, more briefly and in slightly different words, captured in the opening paragraphs of *Evil Under the Sun*, as well. When the setting is first introduced, the sea is described, hyperbolically speaking, as going from being the wife of one man to the flirtatious mistress of many. The house near which the crime occurs is the “child” of Captain Angmering, who never married because “the sea was his first and last spouse” (9). After his death, the heirs decided to move with the times and sold the mansion to be converted into a hotel, and the sea is now enjoyed by the be vies of the greater public. This major transformation is accurately dated: “In 1922 when the great cult of the Seaside for Holidays was established and the

coast of Devon and Cornwall was no longer thought to be too hot in summer” (9).

In this respect, *Evil Under the Sun* is not an unusual occurrence among Golden Age whodunits. Analyzing *Have His Carcase* (1932) by Dorothy Sayers, Brigitta Hudácskó pinpoints the sea’s “ability to present a group of loosely connected people to enact the classic clue-puzzle mystery,” such as in Gladys Mitchell’s *The Twenty-Third Man* (1957) but Christie’s *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964) could also exemplify this idea. Hudácskó’s assessment implicitly presents the seaside both as an escape from chaos, with the holidaying working-class “leaving behind the grime and chaos of their urban neighborhoods,” and as a potentially confusing, chaotic place, an “ideal location for the oddest of cases,” such as the one in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane” (50). Wading further into the waters of *Evil Under the Sun*’s contemporaries, comparisons can also be made with Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938), an extremely influential novel combining gothic romance with a crime narrative; it is, as Light puts it, “a tale in two genres” (*Inside History* 21). There, the gothic quality of the sea as a place of danger and tragedy, where Rebecca drowned and another ship ran aground, is somewhat undercut by the presence of tourists spending their summer on the Cornish coast. Some of them observe the stranded ship from the cliffs, others even hire a boat and watch the rescue operation from the sea. Indeed, unlike the anemic modernity of the south, represented by the coast of Monte Carlo and other unnamed places where the couple spend their later summers in the boredom and emptiness of Mediterranean hotels, the sea in Cornwall as featured in *Rebecca* still stands on the brink of two worlds and is distinctly two-faced. While the protagonist enjoys walking on the seashore, finding solace in the domesticated quiet of the sea, at certain points, its voice scares her nearly to tears—this is the loud, primordial sea, expressing a clamorous desire to tell some kind of secret: “I began to understand why some people could not bear the clamour of the sea. It has a mournful harping note sometimes, and the very persistence of it, that eternal roll and thunder and hiss, plays a jagged tune upon the nerves” (134).

One may wonder whether there is any difference—other than quantitative and local—between the tourist enjoyment of the seaside a hundred years ago and today. Tourism has undoubtedly become a large-scale business, a must for the majority of the Western population, and the particular locations, modes of transport and leisure activities that people indulge in have changed; but all this can be seen as an extension of an

existing trend. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, a more fundamental ideological transformation can be observed—above all, in the severing of the bond between people and the environment that they are visiting. Polish postmodern thinker Zygmunt Bauman saw the persona of the unattached tourist as one of the defining and unprecedented personality types of postmodern times:

The hub of postmodern life strategy is not making identity stand—but avoidance of being fixed. The figure of the tourist is the epitome of such avoidance. Indeed, the tourists worthy their salt are the masters supreme of the art of melting the solids and unfixing the fixed. First and foremost, they perform the feat of not belonging to the place they might be visiting; theirs is the miracle of being in and out of place at the same time. The tourists keep distance, and bar the distance from shrinking into proximity. (89)

In other words, a return to stability and a static world seems to be impossible in postmodern narratives, as, in fact, there is no such situation to revert to. While the hotel in *Evil Under the Sun* provides a kind of temporary, second home for the characters, *Journey to the South* depicts, in a literal sense, a constant journey—from experience to experience, from story to story. Although the denouement and climax of both texts lie in the revelation of the murderers and their motive, *Evil Under the Sun* ends in a return to normalcy and domesticity, with the two lovers “going to live in the country” without paying the sea any further notice (217). Conversely, *Journey to the South* concludes with a yearning for further unraveling, travel, and discovery, with the narrator watching “a small boat . . . just pulling out [of the bay],” while the shine of the sea is so powerful that he has to squint (n.p.). Thus, the novel accommodates the aforementioned postmodern “anti-detective” sentiment, entailing that the protagonist ultimately fails to disclose all of the facts, punish the criminal, or go back to the mundane routine of the ordinary world.

Pirates and smugglers

Radical differences in worldview between *Evil Under the Sun* and *Journey to the South* emerge more clearly when we consider the motifs of piracy and smuggling. Their role in both novels, however minor, is no mere coincidence: one only needs to recall how seminal the two motifs are for adventure stories as well as gothic narratives, and how crime fiction has its

roots—as Maurizio Ascari highlights, among others—in the latter (xi–xiv). Corbin calls attention to the “[r]omantic literary figures of the corsair and the pirate,” sublimely pictured in paintings of Salvator Rosa or the works of Ann Radcliffe, while he observes that the “powerful figure” of the pirate “made a profound and rich contribution to the imagery of coastal shores and caves, and nourished the reverie of walkers fascinated by the mystery of these exceptional beings, who were both terrible and liberated from the weight of the ambient animality” (228–29). Whereas Christie’s novel draws on the romantic sea criminality trope, treating it as nothing more than a backdrop and a red herring, Ajvaz explores both its adventurous and realistic side, emphasizing its ambiguity.

In order to strengthen the holidaying atmosphere, *Evil Under the Sun* presents these elements as relics of the past that are no longer taken seriously, they serve merely as tools of a cheap romance for tourists: the novel takes place on Smugglers’ Island, while the hotel where the characters are staying is called the Jolly Roger Hotel, after the pirate flag. One of the characters, sailor Horace Blatt, proclaims that he came to the island because “[i]t sounded *romantic*. Jolly Roger Hotel, Smugglers’ Island. That kind of address tickles you up, you know. Makes you think of when you were a boy. Pirates, smuggling, all that” (45, emphasis in the original). However, real criminal interests lie behind Blatt’s dismissive statement: he turns out to be a dope smuggler, storing contraband in a semi-secret cave on the island, although his unlawful activities have nothing to do with the murder that occurs nearby.

In *Journey to the South*, the position of the smuggling and piracy motifs is reversed. A lone mention of smugglers appears in one of the nested stories, a narrative detailing the conflict between two fictional countries, North and South Floriana: “Arms were smuggled from neighboring South Floriana, on paths that wound through the jungle or, at night, on fishing boats by sea” (n.p.). Even though smuggling is bound to warfare and grave animosities, it remains safely tucked away in the web of stories and serves as a light-hearted distraction. By contrast, piracy is real—one of the characters in the main storyline is Alexis, a luxury yacht-owner, who has led “a colorful life” and now adroitly protects his ship from criminal attacks: “The luxury yacht attracted robbers, and there had been several attempted break-ins. Once, near the island of Patmos, there had been something resembling a pirates’ raid. Alexis did everything himself, sticking to a principle instilled in his youth: Never involve the police” (n.p.). Here, the threat of violence is palpable, overlying the individual cases of

murder investigated in the main storyline. Moreover, the mention of Patmos fills the pirates' raid with the possibility of a higher meaning—as documented by Ian Boxall, this island has for centuries served as a cornerstone of Christian imagination tied to apocalypticism and mysticism (1–2), a transitional place from “ordinary reality” to “transhistorical reality” (16). Cheap “Jolly Roger” romance for tourists is not present in *Journey to the South*—the sea is either described as a soothing, magical force, or acts harsh and cruel in the archaic way.

However, in both texts, “sea criminality” serves more as a distraction from murder than an excuse to imbue the text with an adventurous flavor. In the case of piracy, this is not very surprising—its Romantic, pre-modern form was already a matter of deep past when the novels were written, its golden age having come to an end hundreds of years earlier. The position of smuggling, however, was different during Christie's lifetime. Smuggling had ceased to be an adventurous undertaking and became a nest of profit-driven pragmatism around the 1930s. The works of the popular writer and smuggler Henry de Monfreid, such as *Pearls, Arms and Hashish* (1930) and *Hashish: A Smuggler's Tale* (1935), bear witness to this shift (Harvey 149). In *Evil Under the Sun*, the dichotomy seems to be very much alive: smuggling makes for the “kind of address [that] tickles you up,” and yet, Arlena Marshall “could have been killed as a result of her having stumbled on the secret of the dope smuggling” (208)—this being a simple, boring explanation of the crime, a red herring for the police. *Journey to the South*, in contrast, offers a typical postmodern ambiguity. Both piracy and smuggling can be present in people's lives as part of thrilling tales of fictitious countries, but also as part of a cynical and cold reality—and the sea is a space of chaos where reality and fiction gladly couple and fuse.

Sea, chaos, and secrets

An even more striking difference between the analyzed texts lies in their disparate approach to the chaotic nature of the sea, seen as danger or as a creative impulse, respectively. The association of the sea with the primordial chaos that needs to be split is well known, especially in the mythologies that shaped European culture. The image of God creating an ordered world by “parting the waters” is familiar to modern Westerners from the Book of Genesis in the Bible; Jewish mythology, in turn, borrowed this notion from Mesopotamian culture. Yet the image of the sea as evil, menacing, and untamed is common to many other archaic

worldviews. In the Sumerian *Enuma Elish*, the primordial goddess Tiamat represents the sea or cosmic waters that have to be divided by Marduk so that the world is created in its orderly form (Clifford 11). Mircea Eliade couples the “victory of the divinity over the marine monster” with Creation, repeated in various cultures through reenactment. This allows him, in turn, to interpret acts such as the symbolic New Year carnival or baptism as equivalents to the deluge, the “abolition of contours, fusion of all forms, return to the formless” (59). While land is perceived as a place of clarity and order, the sea in its chaotic nature always contains all contradictions simultaneously. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun perceive this feature as a consequence of earth-centric European modernism and are critical of it, contesting “the cultural myth that the ocean is outside and beyond history, that the interminable, repetitive cycle of the sea obliterates memory and temporality, and that a fully historicized land somehow stands diametrically opposed to an atemporal, ‘ahistorical’ sea” (2).

In the two novels discussed, the sea represents mystery, not only on a symbolic level, but also on a purely prosaic one. While objects on land provide the possibility to examine their relation and deduce the solution to the crime from their respective positions in space and time, the sea breaks down this rational view of the world, replacing it with chaos. In Christie’s novella “Triangle at Rhodes” (1936), Poirot remarks that human beings tend to reproduce “stereotyped patterns” and that nature “repeats herself more than one would imagine”—while the sea, in his view, “has infinitely more variety” (214–15). The unambiguous values of time, place, and identity, which are uncontroversial on land—and, if they are to be used to baffle the detective, the criminal must confound them with considerable effort—are often shattered spontaneously by the sea. Like in *Rebecca*, the sea first allows the crime to be hidden, although in this case not by literally disfiguring the body, and then to be uncovered.

One way to evoke the elusiveness of the sea and its power to escape the analytical methods of detective deduction is by referring to its constant fluidity. In *Evil Under the Sun*, this is exemplified by a conversation between Poirot and the tough, athletic Miss Brewster, who perceives the world around her primarily in its physical sense. She proclaims that “the sea is as calm as a mill pond today” (15), while Poirot, who understands the volatile nature of the sea, disagrees with conviction: “There is no such thing as a really calm sea. Always, always, there is motion” (15). This aspect of inconstancy lies at the heart of the mystery. Although the sea is not an agent of confusion by itself (like in *Rebecca* and other contemporary mystery

novels and gothic romances), it plays the role of a catalyst and source of inspiration for the murder. In one of the opening scenes, Poirot sees the sun-bathing vacationers and scoffs: “Regard them there, lying out in rows. What are they? They are not men and women. There is nothing personal about them. They are just—bodies!” (13) Poirot’s remark highlights a potential confusion on which the murderer will count—it occurs not because the body of the victim is mutilated beyond recognition, like in *Rebecca*, but because it turns into a stereotype of tourism, sunbathing, and seaside leisure to the extent that all its human individuality is lost.

Indeed, in Christie’s novel the detective and the sea offer two contrasting worldviews, and form natural opposites in how they reflect on the possibility of segmentation and classification. While Poirot embodies order in his stories, and his role is to first categorize the world and then to clearly establish cause and effect relationships, the sea denies this possibility entirely, both on a concrete (or corporeal) and symbolic (or social) level. Throughout the novel, Poirot alludes to his “orderly mind” (135) and repeatedly speaks of segmentation and sorting: “One arranges very methodically the pieces of the puzzle—one sorts the colours” (166). The sea defies this definite order, as epitomized by Poirot’s statement, “here at the seaside it is necessary for no one to account for himself” (17). There are also several scenes in which one of the characters explicitly looks out to sea and feels affected by it. In the case of Linda Marshall, the stepdaughter of Arlene Marshall, who is later murdered, the presence of the sea is linked to the temptation to commit a crime—even if it is ultimately committed by someone else: “A big dark burning wave of hatred against Arlena surged up in her mind. She thought: ‘I’d like to kill her. Oh! I wish she’d die. . .’ She looked out above the mirror onto the sea below” (31). Later on, after the murder, Poirot is looking out to the sea as he discloses his half-formed theories, as if challenging his adversary: “Rosamund flushed. She said: ‘That’s my theory, for what it is worth. Now tell me yours.’ ‘Ah,’ said Hercule Poirot. He stared down at the sea” (171). At the end of the chapter, when the detective’s attention shifts from the hypothetical, as yet unknown murderer to the very specific and physically present female suspect, it is instead emphasized that he is not paying the sea any more heed: “Poirot was no longer looking out to sea. He was looking at Rosamund Darnley’s hands as they lay folded in her lap” (173).

In *Journey to the South*, the sea and its ultimately chaotic essence is not only the catalyst of transgression, but also a muse of artistic creation and storytelling. Yet again, it first serves as a means to hide the crime: the body

of the victim is fished out by fishermen days after the murder, and the protagonists trying to solve the case are led astray by the sea's unanticipated displays of randomness. Probably the most peculiar setback happens because of luminous seaworms that light up and preserve only choice letters of the victim's final message, making Martin, the protagonist, incorrectly think that the incomplete text is somehow connected to Pico della Mirandola, a Renaissance magician, kabbalist, and writer. The sea in *Journey to the South* maintains maze-like qualities, both implicitly and explicitly when it is described as "the endless labyrinth of the sea" (n.p.). According to Ilana Shiloh, labyrinths "simultaneously embody order and chaos, clarity and confusion, unity (a structure) and multiplicity (many paths)" (6). Thus, even though the chaos and randomness provided by the sea serve as elements to divert the plot, they are also the main reasons why the protagonists are motivated to hold on and continue with their journey. One of the conclusions Martin draws is that all their attempted readings of the clues—both the misleading and the genuine ones, the magical hints and the investigative evidence—"could exist side by side, passing one through another without intrusion, perhaps even supporting one another" (n.p.). Allowing so many, vastly different, equally true explanations of events would be unthinkable in *Evil Under the Sun*. In *Journey to the South*, however, the postmodern ethos prevails and the sea, hyperbolically speaking, wins. As Martin puts it:

I'm not saying it doesn't matter whether we read the luminous undersea inscription as a quotation from a Kabbalist of Renaissance times or as a message about a crime. Before he died, Tomáš Kantor wrote about his killing, not magic. Irena's reading of the undersea inscription is obviously correct. But here in Loutro, I've realized that its true meaning is also informed by all earlier interpretations, as these were born out of an interplay of chance and dream, and these are still present in it. (n.p.)

Unlike the world of *Evil Under the Sun*, with its relatively clear-cut distinction between a dangerous sea and orderly land, *Journey to the South* offers an image of the sea that retains its fatefulness only when viewed from a distance. The narrative, based on an almost boundless insertion of more and more stories within stories, is framed by the meeting of Martin and the unnamed narrator at a tavern in the Greek village of Loutro, where Martin recounts his journey from Prague to Greece and all that he has uncovered on the way. The autoreferentiality of narration, practically non-existent in

Evil Under the Sun, takes center stage, making the reader interact not only with the characters, but also with the sea itself. The position of the sea as an entity that both acts and speaks is thematized explicitly several times. In the narrator's opening reflection, the sea is the originator of strange and fantastic stories: "The mind also had a tendency to hear in these sounds of stillness the whispering of many stories—here on the shore of the Libyan Sea, it occurred to me that the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* and all their wonders and marvelous encounters originated in the murmur, buzz, rattle, and rustle of the stillness of the south" (n.p.). While *One Thousand and One Nights* is a staple of postmodern writing, associating it with the sea is relatively rare; comparison could be made with Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), alluding to the eleventh-century Indian collection *Kathāsaritsāgara* ("Ocean of Rivers of Stories"). In his analysis, Jean-Pierre Durix highlights that Rushdie's text introduces a world where "stories all come from a great sea of material made up of all the literature produced by the previous generations." Durix offers a metaphorical reading, tying the above to the artist's creative process and viewing it as a possible "last by-product of modernism" (348). Even though both the sea imagery and the *Arabian Nights* approach are ancient, their playful combination, as seen in Rushdie and Ajvaz, did not get truly popular until the late twentieth century.

In the pivotal scenes detailing the demise of the exceptionally talented writer Tomáš in *Journey to the South*, the sea becomes the element that brings dark emotions to the surface and allows them to manifest themselves. A group of people find themselves on a remote yacht, and there is no escaping the tension that gradually builds up between Tomáš and the rest of his family. The very setting of the private boat then fulfills all the circumstances a murderer could wish for: there are no outside witnesses, the victim cannot escape, and once the deed is done, the body is simply thrown overboard. In Martin's account of the hunt for the killer of the two half-siblings, the role of the sea is revealed only gradually. The reader learns rather quickly that one of the murders was committed on the seashore or directly at sea, as the body "ended up in a Turkish fishermen's net with thirteen wounds" (n.p.). The investigation itself, however, works its way southwards in stages: from Prague, via Bratislava, Budapest, Ljubljana, Pula, San Benedetto, Rome, Mykon, Chania, and Loutro; the last stop is to be Gavdos, the southernmost point of Europe. Albeit the first few cities are not coastal, the voice of the sea is represented by the rivers that flow through them. The Slovenian Ljubljana, for example, is said to give off the impression that it is "so immensely deep that a dragon might be sleeping on

its bed” (148), a mythological image typically associated with the sea—to hark back to Eliade, the serpentine monster in the sea is the archetypal adversary of the chaos-vanquishing hero (37–39).

In the embedded stories that dominate in the first part of the novel, the sea and its effects play a very similar role to what they do in the main, crime-centered storyline, where the sea gives birth to stories. For instance, the interest in the sudden re-emergence of the fictitious nation of the Lygds is described thus: “He would listen to debates on the Lygdian question as he would [to] the sound of the sea in the port; sometimes he followed the thoughts the students were expressing, sometimes, he allowed their words to dissolve in the vagueness of noise” (n.p.). The sea in *Journey to the South* becomes more and more thematically related to emptiness, which is viewed as a force present inside every true artist, a force that beckons them to be creative. Martin reflects on this idea as follows: “Actually, though, I think I know what I’ll encounter at journey’s end. Whatever form it takes, it will probably be the emptiness that appeared to Tomáš Kantor on that winter morning when he started writing *Damp Walls*; the emptiness his work grew out of, as did his death” (n.p.). Crime and art become explicitly entangled, with the sea-chaos-emptiness being the ultimate source of everything complex that is worth living and dying for.

This interpretation, however, also casts new light on the position of the sea in *Evil Under the Sun* and other Golden Age mysteries. Even though the sea is presented as the enemy and the instigating force behind breaking the law and societal taboos, in the grand scheme of things, it also works as a source of the detective story itself. In accordance with the mythical worldview, order is upheld by first being subverted and then, once again, reinstated—not unlike the ruling order being temporarily overturned by carnival festivities, as analyzed by Mikhail Bakhtin (4–12). This carnivalesque reading of crime fiction has already been proposed by scholars such as Christiana Gregoriou: “if crime is seen as the subversion of the bourgeois order, crime novels can be seen as a presentation of an alternative view of the world, reaffirming the supremacy of the dominant order, just like carnivals” (102). This is, of course, a carnival in the figurative sense of the word, close to Frye’s concept of romance (186–88). However, as Rob Shields argues, sea-related murder mysteries, both traditional and postmodern, seem to demonstrate its underlying principle quite explicitly, as they associate the criminal transgression with the decentralized place on the margin, which is also seen as carnivalesque, a space of pleasure and liberation from the regimes of normative practices (79–94).

Another difference between the two examined novels can be observed in the handling of certain water-adjacent motifs, such as the “appendages” or “tentacles” of the sea in the form of rivers, streams, or, loosely speaking, bathtubs. In *Evil Under the Sun*, much of the killer’s plan rests on bathing: before the murder, Linda Marshall goes dipping into the sea and thus unwittingly provides a fake alibi; after the deed is done, the killer has to go wash off in the bath. Poirot later ponders who and why was running a bath before midday on the day of the murder, and the answer to his questions ultimately yields the solution to the crime. Yet the final piece of the puzzle does not click into place until the suspects are invited on a trip to the mainland and they have to cross a narrow bridge over a stream. Poirot is careful to notice that one particular person, who, for fear of heights, seemingly could not descend the ladder to the beach where the murder was committed, can easily make the crossing. Only the truly acrophobic Emily Brewster is stumped, while “the others [run] across the bridge lightly enough” (191). Thus, time and time again, the culprit’s efforts to emulate the sea and its chaotic nature fall short, as they fail to flummox the detective for long. The use of the bathtub as an “imitation of the sea on land” proves insufficient; while cleansing the killer outwardly, the act also leaves behind a stain of suspicion. In the end, water paradoxically helps the detective catch the murderer both on a physical and a symbolic plane, fully in keeping with its chaotic nature, as every one of its qualities and actions may unexpectedly be met with its contradiction.

In *Journey to the South*, this strategy is present less overtly, but in a more nuanced way. On Martin and Kristýna’s journey to solve the murders, rivers, especially the Danube and Ljubljana, play a key role in each city they visit. When describing Ljubljana in particular, Martin observes:

How strange it was that this river, like the Danube, exhaled peace. Yet it was a peace imbued with a secret of the swampy deep and a vague threat. I asked myself if the tranquility, charm, and coziness of urban spaces that opened like hospitable halls, protecting us from the sorrow of the distant horizon, were nothing but protection from the dark, swampy breath of the river. (n.p.)

Rivers are seen as something that emerges “from incredible depths, from cracks in the Earth’s surface” (n.p.), representing forces of the unknown depths in the struggle between chaos and order—yet, at the same time, they lure Martin and Kristýna to the south and towards untangling the double-

murder mystery. The nature of rivers shifts from the physical to the symbolic, as they flower into beings with agendas or even entities of language and culture.

Linguistic dreaming

A noticeable distinction between the two novels lies in the shift from the tangible world of the classic murder mystery with its physical leads, clues, and firm timelines to the textual world of postmodern fiction—permeating even the seemingly rigid rules of murder mysteries. *Journey to the South* seems to be an extreme case in this regard, even for an explicitly postmodern novel—the mystery is approached not through facts and clues, but through stories and seemingly random remarks, trifling observations, or scribbled words that stir the imagination of the protagonists. Indeed, it could be argued that the sea in *Journey to the South* acts not only through rivers, its literal physical appendages, but also through its linguistic appendages. Martin, for example, hears the call of the sea in the name of the city, Pula:

But before I put this thought into words, I realized that anger wasn't all I was feeling: A quiet, enchanting music had entered my head—and after a moment I understood that it had come to me from the name "Pula." Pula is on the Mediterranean. Suddenly, the prospect of my standing on the seashore seemed more important than any other; more important than the folly of my traveling detective work, than my childish love for Kristýna, than the images that bothered me by whirling around in my head. (n.p.)

This is not to say that *Journey to the South* is completely novel in this regard—a similar type of linguistic dreaming can be found in other texts, with one of the best-known examples being Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927), where the narrator is also compelled to travel simply by the sound of the names of places that evoke pleasant feelings:

I need only, to make them reappear, pronounce the names: Balbec, Venice, Florence, within whose syllables had gradually accumulated all the longing inspired in me by the places for which they stood. Even in spring, to come in a book upon the name of Balbec sufficed to awaken in me the desire for storms at sea and for the Norman gothic; even on a stormy day the name of Florence or of Venice would awaken the desire for sunshine, for lilies, for the Palace of the Doges and for Santa Maria del Fiore. (367)

It should be noted that in this case, too, it is the seaside stirring the protagonist's imagination. *In Search of Lost Time*, however, presents a sharp discontinuity between the dreams of childhood and the reality of adulthood: "The narrator's voyage of discovery, which culminates in the imprudent intrusion into a taboo space, repeats the gesture of Pandora and signals an end to the linguistic illusions and beliefs of childhood" (Ellison 73). While *Journey to the South* could also be described as a voyage of discovery, it offers a very different, postmodern take on names associated with the sea. Here, the ideas sparked by hearing seaside names are not dispelled by the journey; rather, they come to life all the more mightily, as the physical visit of dream locations adds further vivid images of old houses, palaces, streets and hidden passageways, leading to thrilling speculations, and breeding stories of adventure and mystery.

It could be argued that by the very end of her career, Agatha Christie partly adopted this mode of writing as well, with novels such as *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968), *Elephants Can Remember* (1972), or *Postern of Fate* (1973). They, too, have their plots start with a random note, picture or phrase—but even then, the imaginative speculation of the protagonist serves simply as a rationale to make the character investigate and find an existing secret from the past, and not to conjure further stories out of the thin air of tales and myths. In *Evil Under the Sun*, a much earlier work, the Proustian take on linguistic dreaming and abstract possibilities is barely present, it merely arouses the reader's imagination with colorful names such as the Jolly Roger Hotel or Pixy's Cave. Every element important to the story, and especially to the murder mystery, is ultimately tangible and physical.

In *Evil Under the Sun*, the case and the story are opened and closed by the sea. Yet there is no place for such a thing as a closed case or story in the postmodern ethos of *Journey to the South*; the idea of a world with a limited number of facts, motivations and characters is completely repressed. The impossibility of getting closure may seem antithetical to the core tenets of the genre. The book, however, works with the assumption that offering several possible explanations is as harmonious for the reader as one definite solution would be.

Conclusion

The image of the sea as an agent of chaos seems everlasting, stemming from archaic layers of Western culture, yet it is still revisited and reinvented in modern contexts. Crime fiction narratives, traditionally

depicting the struggle between law and order, on the one hand, and the chaos of trespassing, on the other, are eager to lean into such imagery, and, as shown in the paper, the classic whodunit *Evil Under the Sun* and the postmodern murder mystery *Journey to the South* showcases this approach. Yet while the sea represents chaos in both murder mysteries, the two texts offer rather opposing takes on the nature of chaos itself.

Evil Under the Sun, as befits a classic detective story, primarily explores the clash of two equally powerful forces, with the detective ultimately triumphant and order restored. *Journey to the South*, in contrast, is a model postmodern work; and while its main storyline features a double murder investigation, the struggle of the protagonists against the sea does not stand out as strongly. In fact, everything in the fictional world is ultimately linked to the sea and its chaos—which, in line with its ambiguous position in mythical thinking, is never just destructive. To quote Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane*: “Water is pre-eminently the slayer; it dissolves, abolishes all form. It is just for this reason that it is so rich in germs, so creative” (135). In *Journey to the South*, it is even seen as a generally positive force, carrying the richness of life and storytelling in its depths and impacting the characters in a very nuanced way.

Thus, where Christie’s novel shows a dichotomous world in which the unwelcome forces of chaos stand in the way of order, method, and justice, in Ajvaz, the struggle against chaos morphs into an embrace of the variety and freedom that it inherently brings. The resolution of the two texts echoes this. The sea in *Evil Under the Sun* serves as a less powerful foil to Poirot, and the novel ends with its defeat and a return to domestic values, the coziness of the hotel, and plans for retirement in the country. In *Journey to the South*, the sea plays a central role, ultimately all but engulfing the characters, who go on heeding its call even after the mystery is resolved, traveling and experiencing more and more, thus conforming to Bauman’s stereotype of the unattached postmodern tourist; in the last chapter, the narrator observes them crossing the sea on a boat.

Apart from the obvious differences between the texts, the paper has also addressed several unforeseen similarities revealing that while the two texts are not directly connected, both authors likely felt the need to look into similar issues: both novels hint at the imagery of pirates and smugglers, adding to the atmosphere of adventure and menace; both make use of the tension between the archaic, mythic, gothic sea and a modern place of leisure, either switching between these modes or reflecting them both at the same time; both closely associate the sea with other sources of water,

depicting it as ever beckoning, captivating, and fateful; and both employ the sea as an agent of crime *and* retribution, underscoring its unpredictable nature. These numerous analogies seem to bear testimony to an intrinsic, albeit only laboriously traceable quality of the genre that transcends centuries, writing techniques, and national literatures. Nevertheless, the most prominent features of the two works place them firmly in different cultural contexts. One of them an exemplary clue-driven detective story and the other the prototypical chaos-worshipping postmodern anti-detective novel, the two texts epitomize the fine line between seeing the chaotic, criminal potential of the sea as unequivocally perilous or, in turn, as an enchanting possibility to live to the fullest the life of a “postmodern tourist.” Postmodern writing, as demonstrated by Ajvaz, thus deftly manages to completely deconstruct the seemingly essential binary of order and chaos, present in Christie’s novel. This is a testament to the fact that crime fiction can easily adapt to new and utterly different worldviews, while it can also retain its well-known motifs, images, and tropes, which makes the genre as rich, puzzling, and fluid as the ocean itself.

Jiří Jelínek is Assistant Professor at the University of Hradec Králové.

Jana Jelínková is a student of English Philology at Palacký University, Olomouc.

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