**THE OCEAN: A HISTORY OF IDEAS**

**A Voyage Among Colonists, Yachtswomen, Sea Monsters and Oil Tankers**

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published by Kagge forlag

translated from Norwegian by Rachel Rankin

with support from NORLA

Represented by Northern Stories Literary Agency

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**INTRODUCTION**

The United Nations General Assembly in New York is known as one of the most important meeting places in the world. The speeches that take place there are usually held by prominent world leaders and revolve around pressing global challenges such as peace, safety and human rights. Yet some speeches are more memorable than others. The one that was held on Wednesday 1st November 1967 is one such example. It was about the ocean.

The speaker was Arvid Pardo, who since 1964 had been the UN ambassador from the tiny island state of Malta. On that Wednesday, he took three-and-a-half hours at the lectern to share his worries about and visions for the ocean. That which made the ocean a matter of pressing global concern could be found at its very depths. Or, more precisely: the new opportunities that would allow the technologically strongest states and actors to access resources down there. This concerned Pardo. In his speech, he tried to redefine the ocean and the ocean floor once and for all – as a commons, as opposed to an area to which only the most powerful had a right.

As the representative for Malta, Pardo referred to the ocean’s significance for the island group in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, “which surrounds us and through which we live and breathe.” At the same time, he reminded the assembly that all life had once come from the ocean. And that all humans still carry it inside them: “in our blood, in the salty bitterness of our tears – the marks of this remote past.” This human species who for a long time had conquered the earth’s crust were now in the process of turning back towards the ocean. The once so enticing, yet inaccessible ocean was opening up to us.

In other words, science and technological innovations had progressed to the point that that which could be found on and below the ocean floor – yes, even far out on the open sea – was within our reach. And this could be enormously significant. Conquering the depths could mark the beginning of the end for human beings and “for life as we know it on this earth,” claimed the Maltese UN diplomat from the lectern. Precisely the great opportunities on and beneath the ocean floor, especially in the form of what he believed must be at least 358 billion tonnes of manganese, rendered it essential to ensure that any utilisation could happen “in a peaceful atmosphere” and “within a just, legal framework”. According to Pardo, it was urgent to assign the ocean the status of “the common heritage of mankind.”

Introducing the idea of the ocean as the common heritage of mankind was groundbreaking in 1967. It was also an idea which had deep roots. For the question of the extent to which the ocean could actually be owned by anyone, and whether the ocean should be thought of as a commons, can be traced back to antiquity. And it was a question that took its modern form after the publication of Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius’ controversial pamphlet Mare Librium (‘The Freedom of the Seas’) in 1609, to which many people in the 1960s still referred. For UN ambassador Pardo, the suggestion of defining the ocean floor as the common heritage of mankind meant that an international body must be established to ensure that the resources were utilised in a way that didn’t solely serve the already rich and technologically developed nations, but rather mankind as a whole. Profits should be shared in a way that benefited developing nations. The body should also protect archaeological discoveries and the marine environment from overfishing and pollution. The dumping of atomic waste was what Pardo was particularly concerned about. In addition, the body would protect the ocean floor from the threat of individual nations occupying it for military ends.

Many elements of the political and intellectual climate of the 1960s are reflected in Pardo’s speech. The arms race of the Cold War and the different fears surrounding the “Atomic Age,” concerns surrounding population growth and scarcity of resources, ideas about global justice and increasing climate awareness, along with an incredible technological optimism, were all elements which characterised this period. The explorations of the deepest ocean trenches and of outer space were often linked because they represented the extreme outer limits of human curiosity, technological progress and victory.

Parts of Pardo’s almost 50-year-old speech can come across as outdated nowadays. Fears surrounding the dumping of atomic waste have long been replaced by other ecological concerns. It was the extraction of oil and gas on the continental shelves – which Pardo hardly mentioned – which transformed the ocean floor into a lucrative area for extraction not long after. However, the very notion of the open ocean as mankind’s great treasure chest, which required international legal protection if global superpowers’ militarisation and technological annexation were to be hindered, is something that resonates even nowadays. The promising deep-sea mining industry that he spoke of, which had indeed been a kind of techno-utopia since manganese was discovered by the British Challenger expedition in the 1870s, has in recent years returned both to the horizon of expectation and to the drawing board. In 2024, Norway opened for deep-sea mining far out on what is now defined as the Norwegian continental shelf.

Pardo’s speech also had direct consequences. The speech is considered a decisive turning point in the development of modern law of the sea, which was negotiated as part of the UN’s law of the sea convention in 1982. This determined the different sections into which the ocean is now divided, and defined the seabed beyond national jurisdiction as “the common heritage of mankind” as a founding principle. One of the concrete ways in which this principle was implemented came in March 2023, when the UN concluded negotiations on a framework for the protection of the ocean’s biological diversity, and where decisions were made regarding the redistribution of profit from the utilisation of marine DNA materials.

This legal framework by no means solves all of the current conflicts of interest, paradoxes and contrasting ideas relating to the ocean. The ocean’s ability to function as a mirror for our hopes and worries has not diminished since Pardo’s speech in 1967. Most people have long become accustomed to the idea that the ocean is in deep crisis as a result of pollution, acidification, climate change, bottom trawling and overfishing. At the same time, we have become more and more familiar with the idea that the oceans will play a key role in helping human beings in the future, with everything from food and medicines to energy and storage of carbon dioxide. Blue economy, blue transition and blue concerns exist side by side.

Behind these blue contrasts and paradoxes lies a long history: a history of ideas of the ocean, to which this book offers an introduction. It is the history of perceptions and imaginaries, knowledge and experience, terms and practices, pictures and feelings, all of which have shaped how we humans think, dream, speak of and, not least, struggle over the power to define the ocean. And which impacts how we use, exploit and exert pressure on the ocean, now and almost certainly far into the future as well.

This book is a history of the ocean within us. Not in the sense that we cry salty tears, which Pardo referred to in order to remind us of the role the ocean played in the history of evolution. But because it directs our attention towards the ocean in our thinking and our imagination. The ocean which takes centre stage here is not a place. This book is not about a specific body of water, such as the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean or the Norwegian Sea, but rather about the ocean as a category, which has been conceived, explained, discussed and assigned value to in many different ways. It is a history of how seafaring peoples and jurists, statisticians and artists, authors and admirals, diplomats and theologians, economists and dreamers, tradespeople and researchers, collectors, journalists and whalers, and a whole load of other people, have thought and written about the ocean, often in vastly different ways.

But this is not only a history of the ocean within us, of the ocean as a category. It is also a history of the oceans surrounding us. This book is not only about the numerous and contrasting meanings and expectations invested in the ocean. It also does not solely explain why the ocean can be such a source of conflict – politically, judicially, economically, scientifically, existentially and symbolically. It also contributes to an understanding of how the oceans that surround us have changed. The ways in which humans have thought about the ocean have had consequences for how the ocean has been used. And how the ocean has been used has shaped our thinking. Notions and ideas about the ocean have been woven together with behaviour, activities, projects and operations at sea and on land, individual and collective. How we think and write about the ocean cannot be separated from how the oceans are used, treated and managed. Understandings of the ocean have transformed our surroundings and created ecological crises. This is the history of how we humans have perceived the ocean, both as a prerequisite and as an integral part of the changes that have taken place in the oceans around us over time.

Over the course of the last 500 years, from the period when knowledge about and use of the oceans expanded in the 1500s, the ocean has been understood in many ways: as threat, power and hope; as a religious symbol and aesthetic object; as life, death and recreation; as lawless and free; as property and an arena of power; as a medium of transport; as a dinner plate and rubbish bin; as a controversial resource; as fragile nature; and not least as something that can be handled, exploited and comprehended, both in its concrete individual parts and as an entirety. Ideas about the ocean are wide-ranging. It can be anchored in the existential experience of raging waves on a ship far out at sea, in everyday dreams about sailing holidays, but also expressed in theories about the history of the planet, or illnesses among coastal populations, or in statistical models of whale stocks. Our thinking about the ocean has been associated with both individual and collective conduct, with concrete events, with institutions, practices and technologies of different kinds. The ocean inside us is bound with the ocean in front of, beneath and around us.

The four sections of this book explore the threatening ocean, the free ocean, the rich ocean and the comprehensible ocean, respectively. Each of these parts show how ideas of the ocean have been formulated and expressed, but also how they have been used, and the consequences which have arisen as a result. None of these four themes are simple or unambiguous. Notions about the threatening ocean have been closely connected with a long history of techniques for achieving greater security and control at sea. Ideas about the ocean’s freedom have paradoxically often resulted in varying forms of oppression. Concepts of the ocean’s riches are often found intertwined with concerns regarding the scarcity and vulnerability of resources. And our attempts to comprehend the ocean, and the increased scientific knowledge of it, has not stopped our human contribution to rendering it in critical condition.

The history of the ocean can be told in countless different ways: thematically, narratively and, not least, geographically, as well as from a number of different perspectives. The themes, sources, examples and historical impacts included in this book make up just a tiny selection. They come mainly from the western world, and many examples are Norwegian. Nevertheless, this book shows ways of thinking and relating to the ocean that originated in other parts of the world. Some of the themes, texts and examples will be known to many, but this book will also present stories that have rarely been told before. This is our version of the history of the ocean. Its spaciousness – and its patience – invites many others to provide their own.

**PART 1: THE THREATENING OCEAN**

Will it all end in the ocean? In Øyvind Rimbereid’s poem ‘Solaris Corrected’, we meet “Aye”. The year is 2480. This nameless lyrical I addresses us directly in a kind of North Sea language, a hybrid of all the languages and dialects that have the North Sea in common as a traffic artery, resource and workplace. “Aye” is responsible for the maintenance of empty oil and gas pipelines which lie amongst mud, seagrass and abandoned installations down in the depths. In one of the old oil wells, 1,000 metres deep, a new reality is unfurling, “Aye” tells us. Through a self-organised neural network by the name of Solaris, mankind will now be able to live a thoughtful and useful life in safety, protected from the threats on the surface. In other words, the old world above on land is in deep ecological crisis. A series of experiments across the globe have failed. As such, a disembodied existence in “Seifa botten” may be our last chance, thinks “Aye”.

The doubt is there. “Aye” thinks about how the body feels, and physical surroundings, with all its overwhelming forces and sensual, shining beauty. Even though it’s hard to say if the “final vorld” in the oil well will be a paradise or a hell, the decision is made. The lift take “Aye” down through the masses of water of the North Sea so that he can become a part of Solaris. It goes all the way down to the bottom. With a little click, the walls fall down.

ORIGIN, END AND PUNISHMENT

‘Solaris Corrected’ was published in 2004 and speaks to early noughties concerns regarding both artificial intelligence and the consequences of the oil industry. The poem also capitalises on a much older theme: the apocalyptic role of the ocean. When considering the notion of the North Sea and “Seifa botten” in the empty oil well as mankind’s destruction and possible resurrection in a new form, we are dealing with old ideas about the relationship between ocean, origin, destruction and the Last Days.

“Aye” is reminiscent of Jonah from the Old Testament, who was thrown into the ocean: “The waters encompassed me about, even to the soul; the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me forever,” Jonah tells us. But God ensures that Jonah is protected from the threatening water in the giant fish’s belly, for he is thrown up again onto dry land. This was how God “brought up [his] life from corruption.” He was saved from the destruction that would have befallen him within the belly of the beast.

Biblical stories and symbolism have shaped what many believe to be a uniquely western way of thinking about the ocean. This applies not least to the tendency to consider ocean and land as two distinct elements in the world, two fundamental categories, with the ocean being the opposite of both land and civilisation and often appearing as a deadly threat to individuals, local communities and for mankind as a whole.

Older sources from other cultural locations have assigned symbolic and mythological significance to the ocean. The Mesopotamian, Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions are particularly notable. It is difficult to identify a similarly strong distinction between ocean and land, or an equivalent general notion of the ocean as something threatening, in, for example, old Chinese maritime culture. Nor does the idea of the ocean as a homogeneous element of nature exist in the mythological universe of the island dwellers of Hawaii, which is surrounded by ocean on all sides. And not even in the Old Norse mythology which dominated the Nordic region before the introduction of Christianity, in which the goddess Rán drags drowning people into the depths with her net and keeps them there, do we come across the idea of the universally threatening ocean.

The Bible allows us to meet the primeval sea, the waters of the abyss: *tehom* in Hebrew, *abyssos* in Greek. The water in the primeval sea is of a different order than both the dry land and the waters that surround it. It belongs to a boundless, wild and dynamic category which evades human understanding and control. The primeval sea is a threatening and aggressive force, an ocean in singular. There are relatively few concrete maritime references in the Old Testament. The people of the Hebrew Bible belonged to the desert and had little contact with the actual ocean. In Hebrew, the same word – *yam* – is used for both ocean, lake and river. Beside the water and oceans that God creates, controls and rules over, we also find in the Bible this dark chaos, the bottomless abyss, *tehom* or *abyssos*, as an almost independent force of nature, a headstrong monster that even God must fight against.

From the very first lines of Genesis, the contrast between land and ocean stands out as the core of a historic drama. On the first few days of creation, before God created light, separated water from water and land from ocean so that the dry earth could display all its green richness, there was only the dark ocean. God created heaven and earth and water, but not this primeval sea. It was there from the beginning.

At the other end of the Bible, where the New Testament ends with the Book of Revelations, which depicts the great destruction and resurrection, we meet a new world. It is a world without oceans. “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.” The battle against the ocean therefore bookends Christian linear world history, just as it bookends the two Testaments of the Bible.

The ocean represents extreme limits, that which exists beyond time, outwith history, an all-encompassing, dark, but also powerful chaos. When God took control of the water and the ocean during the creation, he also established a steady order where both nature and a human civilisation could develop on rich, fertile land. But it is only when this newly created world is destroyed and an entirely new, timeless reality emerges that the chaotic forces of the ocean are completely removed. Beside this resurrection sits an eternal and almighty God on the throne behind a kind of glass ocean, “like crystal.”

In Ancient Greece, Oceanus was the name of the primordial river that circled the whole inhabitable and passable world of land and demarcated seas, as depicted on the first known maps of the world. Authors from Homer to Hesiod referred to Oceanus outside the “pillars of Hercules” – that is, outside the Mediterranean Sea and what we now call the Strait of Gibraltar, which is a place where only the gods resided. This primordial river, which surrounded the world, was the contact point between the kingdom of the dead and the kingdom of the gods, and consequently also the bridge between different planes of existence, between the physical, geographical and spiritual world, the threshold between the worldly and the otherworldly. Oceanus was the boundary between order and chaos, the known and the completely unfamiliar, mortality and immortality.

In the Old Testament, God’s control over the ocean’s violent and chaotic forces is a common motive and stands out as one of the most important signs of His omnipotence. When God reminds Job of His mastery, it is precisely His power over the ocean that He refers to: “Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddling band for it, and brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and doors, and said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?” For humans, on the other hand, the ocean was a mystery. God asks Job: “Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? or hast thou walked in the search of the depth?”

During the creation, God set boundaries for the ocean. God could stop the fury of the ocean and calm its waves, and He could annihilate sea monsters, such as the dragon-like Rahab and the slithering Leviathan with its double rows of teeth. Yet the original, enthralling forces of chaos were never far away. The ocean symbolised death, and the biblical texts are testament to the fact that mankind’s worst fear was going under: “Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul […] Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up, and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me.” The primeval sea was the haunt of these evil forces, and work must continually be done to keep them in check. But in God’s omnipotence lay also the possibility of exploiting these ocean forces to put humans to the test. And to punish the whole of mankind.

Stories of gods who unleash an enormous flood that drowns the world and all life in it as punishment for pride or sin can be found in many historical sources. They appear in Sumerian sources, in the Hindu story of Manu, in the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, in Greek as well as Old Norse mythology. In other words, the Old Testament’s account of the great flood and Noah’s ark is far from unique. Many have speculated whether these stories, which circulated in the Middle East, were based on actual events, such as one or several flood waves or deluges in the area. However, the account in the Book of Genesis portrays an image of the Deluge as an all-encompassing, global event. God was furious at mankind, for now “the earth was filled with violence.” “And God said unto Noah, ‘The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.’” He wants to “destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven.” And so He let the world be flooded with water from both the depths and from the sky. In the end, the water stood fifteen cubits over the highest mountains. Only the honourable Noah, his family and the animals God had asked him to gather in the ark have been saved when “[t]he fountains also of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped,” the water levels decreased and the mountains came into view again after ten months.

The story of how God covered the entire world with water as punishment for all the sins of the living influenced Christmas imagination for centuries. Not only because it taught Christians to fear God’s wrath and power to utilise the death-bringing forces of the ocean if mankind were to be punished, but also because it could be used to explain the destructive natural disasters that people experienced in their own surroundings, such as sudden floods and deluges. These were interpreted as punishment for more local sins, but analogous with the Deluge. Such geographically limited natural disasters were often placed within an apocalyptic framework and interpreted as a warning that the Last Days were approaching. The destructions were not as all-encompassing in scale as that of the biblical great flood. But that the water rose and overstepped its boundaries was never a good sign. It was a reminder of the ocean’s role in the dramaturgy of Christian world history.

THE GREAT FLOOD THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

The wrath of God was the most significant explanation for natural disasters throughout the whole of the Middle Ages. Traces of such explanations can also be found long after this time. On All Saints’ Day, 1st November 1755, Lisbon was struck by an earthquake and subsequent tsunami. Large sections of the maritime city’s buildings collapsed, while the church bells rang throughout the tremors. The event became a near-global media event, as well as a starting point for one of the Enlightenment’s great philosophical debates. Was nature, God, or mankind itself to blame for such natural disasters?

The Danish theologian Erik Pontopiddan immediately believed that the event had a natural, not divine, explanation. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s reaction was even more radical. He claimed that just as the term “natural disaster” only made sense from a human perspective, so too had humans sole responsibility for the consequences of such events. If we hadn’t clung on so tightly to those tall buildings in Lisbon, the earthquake and flood wave would have brought about much less destruction, if any at all, he claimed. “All would have fled at the first disturbance, and the next day they would have been seen twenty leagues from there, as gay as if nothing had happened.” In other words, Rousseau thought that if nature itself could not be tamed, it was within mankind’s power to prevent and control the consequences. Yet for many of Pontoppidan and Rousseau’s contemporaries, the flood waves had to be explained as a divine punishment for human pride and immorality. This was particularly widespread among Protestants in Northern Europe, who often viewed the rich Catholic coastal city as wallowing in sin. The local flood was punishment for local sins.

During a winter storm in February 1825, the waves of the Atlantic flooded over the sand dunes which connected Agger and Harboøre in the Danish Limfjord. This resulted in the ocean breaking through the land, and saltwater streamed into the freshwater of the Limfjord. This had great consequences, both ecologically and economically. The freshwater habitat of the Limfjord was swapped out, and those who lived in the Limfjord’s western regions could now reach the Atlantic without having to sail around Aalborg. When the Danish priest Steen Steensen Blicher visited Agger’s church after the storm had collapsed the sand spit, he could attest to all the destruction that had been brought about. He saw how mankind was bound to both nature and God’s will and mercy. For many, it still makes sense to use such religious frameworks to make sense of the aggressive forces of nature, no matter how big or how small the scale.

Was the “Flood of Sin” itself an actual historical event? In the Early Modern period, parallel to the fact that the biblical great flood continued to function as a religious and symbolic frame of understanding for new local floods and deluges, this was a question that occupied many scholars. They discussed how this all-encompassing great flood that God had unleashed as a punishment for all living things, as described in the Bible, could have happened in a purely logistical manner. Many were particularly interested in the material consequences of the great flood and how it could explain historical changes in both the earth’s geography and climate.

According to Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth* from the 1680s, the great flood caused a cataclysmic upheaval of the earth’s surface and natural conditions. It was an upheaval which could solely be blamed on the sins of mankind. From creation to the Deluge, the world’s surface had been smooth and even. No mountains, valleys or great oceans disturbed the stable, harmonious, beautiful and agreeable nature. It was the Garden of Eden that still constituted the framework for mankind’s living conditions. Then came the great flood, leaving behind a scrap heap. The powerful force of the water resulted in dishevelled islands and asymmetrical continents, with jagged mountains and deep hollows, suddenly being strewn across the globe. The inhabitable world that Noah’s three sons were to populate following the extinction had been divided and separated into enormous stretches of ocean. And it was precisely this ocean basin that was the result of the great flood, according to Burnet: “[T]he most ghastly thing in Nature […] as deform’d and irregular as it is great.” And if the waters had not obscured the ocean floor, we would see that it resembles “an open Hell, or a wide bottomless Pit,” writes Burnet. In this way, religion and philosophy became united in an explanation for the disharmonious state in which the world had ended up after that which, for Burnet, emerged as the true fall of man: when mankind challenged God to such an extent that he had to unleash the ocean’s chaotic forces upon us.

The biblical Deluge was also a turning point for Early Modern discussion about global (and human-made) climate change. Burnet himself lived in a time of climatic challenges, in the middle of what is today known as the Little Ice Age. The cold weather in Europe had not previously been a constant. Originally, before the Deluge, a global water circulation system had ensured stable weather and different functional climate zones on the planet, claimed Burnet. The water that circulated between land and atmosphere came from beneath the earth’s crust, in what he rather biblically referred to as “the Abyss.” When the floodgates of this abyss opened and flooded the world as punishment for the sins of mankind, this stable hydraulic system also broke down. The climate and weather became variable and unpredictable everywhere, as well as colder and more humid. Living conditions generally became tougher and more differently distributed between continents and nations. As such, the biblical great flood could be more than an explanation for the cold European winters. It also became an important element in thinking about the relationship between populations, religion and European colonisation, notes the American historian Lydia Barnett.

Biblically inspired earth theories à la Burnet’s had a great influence. They also appeared in Denmark-Norway in the 1700s. When the aforementioned Danish theologian and bishop of Bergen Erik Pontoppidan wrote *The Natural History of Norway*, which was published in two volumes in 1752-1753, he included several references to the great flood’s impact on Norwegian geography, both above and, not least, below water. Pontoppidan described the high mountain chains and deep valleys in Norway and claimed that they could possibly be caused by “the winds prevailing at the time of the deluge, which gave this position and figure to the matter first hardened.” The consequences of the great flood were not lesser for the ocean floor beyond the Norwegian coast. Reason as well as experience indicated that this too was “full of inequalities,” at parts unfathomably deep, which had to be blamed on the strong currents during “the general deluge.”

The Deluge changed everything – the land itself included – both above and below water. But Pontoppidan’s way of understanding and evaluating this new nature after the great flood was radically different to that of Burnet. Where Burnet saw only a nature in decline and complained of the various irrevocable effects of the Flood of Sin on the earth’s surface, Pontoppidan argued that even this dramatic, singular landscape must be understood as wisely arranged by Providence. Nature was not characterised by decline; there was still an order in what appeared to be brutal, chaotic and threatening. The reefs and rocks that lay strewn along the Norwegian coast might not be beautiful, and they were definitely dangerous if one didn’t take precautions. But islets and shallows were at the same time exactly what ensured that the wild ocean waves broke and lost most of their power in the archipelago. They protected the coastal populations from the threats of the ocean.

Pontoppidan described and discussed many of the particularities of the threatening ocean beyond the Norwegian coast. Among other things, he emphasised the North Sea’s particular “unctuousness,” with the oily saps that could be found on the ocean floor and in the water itself. This unctuousness could result in seawater causing ship fires to flare up instead of extinguishing them, noted Pontoppidan. He was also taken with phenomena such as the famous Moskestraumen outside Lofoten, which could appear particularly frightening as “the roar of its impetuous ebb to the sea, is scarce equalled by the loudest and most dreadful cataracts.” Pontoppidan referred to the Norwegian priest and historian Jonas Ramus, who in a work from 1716 had claimed that Odin and Odysseus were the same person and that Homer’s hero had reached as far as Lofoten on his journey, where he witnessed the maelstrom which in *The Odyssey* went by the name Charybdis. But in reality, the Moskestraumen was neither mythological nor an inexplicable, bottomless ocean gulf that devoured all who came near, as several “earth-theorists” before Pontoppidan had suggested. Quite the opposite – the cause of the powerful whirlpool had entirely natural explanations, such as deep-sea conditions and tidal wave patterns, according to the Danish theologian and natural historian. Yes, even the strangest and most ghastly of sea monsters which were continually being observed beyond the Norwegian coast must have a natural explanation.

For Pontoppidan, the ocean’s curious and formidable riches was the best proof of God’s providence, his particular compassion for mankind. The disorderly topography along the Norwegian coast, with underwater reefs, maelstroms and unfathomable depths from which monstrous beasts could rise, presented challenges for those who would travel there. But there was still no doubt that all of these natural phenomena were blessings, as they contributed to a wonderful diversity and an abundant haul.

The ocean, with all its invisible and powerful relationships, was difficult to understand, a mystery in many ways, beyond human comprehension. The ocean was perhaps the part of creation which, by being so big, inaccessible and opaque for us, most invoked feelings of humility. But the price of knowledge could be great, for the study of the ocean’s peculiarities could give an insight into “God’s wise and affectionate economy,” as Pontoppidan put it. The ocean was part of a creation which we would probably never understand in its entirety, but of which we may gain insight into certain parts. Fear could be converted into understanding, and to a certain extent, self-command. The ghastly could be useful. It was simply a matter of trusting the experience and following the method of the perceptive witness bearers.