J. G. Ballard’s ‘Elaborately Signalled Landscape’: The Drafting of *Concrete Island*

Chris Beckett

As we drive across a motorway intersection, through the elaborately signalled landscape that seems to anticipate every possible hazard, we glimpse triangles of waste ground screened off by steep embankments.1

When J. G. Ballard came to write the ‘Introduction’ to the Vintage edition (1994) of *Concrete Island* some twenty years after the novel’s first publication, he pointedly re-inscribed the phrase ‘elaborately signalled landscape’ from the period in his writing career in which the novel was written. The phrase does not appear in *Concrete Island* itself, but Ballard – who characteristically employed repetition as a cohesive stylistic device – had used it twice previously in *Crash*, the novel that immediately preceded *Concrete Island* (and the book with which it is, in many respects, twinned):

Vaughan’s body, with its unsavoury skin and greasy pallor, took on a hard, mutilated beauty within the elaborately signalled landscape of the motorway. The concrete buttresses along the base of the Western Avenue overpass, angular shoulders spaced at fifty-yard intervals, brought together the sections of Vaughan’s scarred physique.2

Ballard’s surreal unification of man and motorway in multiple planes – a sharing of shoulders in yellow sodium light, as if the concrete buttresses were supporting Vaughan’s ‘scarred physique’ – is echoed in *Concrete Island* in the way that the body of the marooned architect, Robert Maitland, quickly becomes at one with its waste-land garden environment: ‘It was now little more than twenty-four hours since his accident, but the skin of his arms and chest had blossomed into a garden of bruises, vividly coloured weals and markings.’3 Soon, Maitland will declare, with a bewildered assurance, that he and the island are one: ‘I am the island.’4

In the second instance of the same phrase from *Crash*, Ballard gestured beyond the motorway to a more broadly signifying landscape, adding a mercantile aspect:

Somewhere in this nexus of concrete and structural steel, this elaborately signalled landscape of traffic indicators and feeder roads, status and consumer goods, Vaughan moved like a messenger in his car […]5

---

1 J. G. Ballard, ‘Introduction’, *Concrete Island* (London, 1994), p. 5. All further page references to the novel are to this edition. *Concrete Island* was first published in 1974.
3 *Concrete Island* (1994), pp. 47-8.
4 Ibid., p. 71.
This ‘nexus’ of modernity encompasses not just the elaborate road system but also the consumer goods that are transported through the system, and the nuances of social status they communicate. The throbbing ground note of the motorway’s traffic – punctuated, as Maitland discovers, after some initial confusion, by regular periods of relative silence – is the sound and rhythm of urban transit and distribution, and forms the background soundscape against which all other sounds on the island are heard.⁶

In fact, Ballard’s phrase appeared in yet a third passage, in a contemporaneous article he was commissioned to write, in 1971, for Drive, the magazine of the Automobile Association (AA). He would therefore have written the article (entitled ‘The Car, the Future’) in the midst of drafting Crash. The somewhat ironic occasion was a veteran car rally across Germany organized to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of Mercedes-Benz and to promote a new model (the sporty 350SL). Ballard was invited along as a guest passenger in the AA’s 1904 Renault (fig. 1).

In the article for Drive, Ballard proposed as a ‘mental picture’ most representative of the twentieth century:

a man in a motor car, driving along a concrete highway to some unknown destination. Almost every aspect of modern life is there, both for good and for ill – our sense of speed, drama and aggression, the worlds of advertising and consumer

---

⁶ The many sounds of the island were considered in a paper by Jeannette Baxter also presented at the conference ‘Archiving the Future: Concrete Island Forty Years On’, University of York, 3 July 2014.
goods, engineering and mass manufacture, and the shared experience of moving together through an elaborately signalled landscape.\footnote{J. G. Ballard, ‘The Car, The Future’, \textit{A User’s Guide to the Millennium} (London, 1996), p. 262. If the driver is the problem, perhaps the driver can be taken out of the equation. ‘The Future’ that Ballard envisages (‘2050’) is one in which all road traffic is controlled by computer and all vehicles are self-driven (pp. 265–6). Recently, the Department of Transport sought views (August-September 2014) on a regulatory framework for the safe testing of self-driving cars on UK roads, which is expected to happen in 2015. In the U.S., driverless cars have been tested on public roads in some States since 2011. See ‘Driverless cars get green light for testing on public roads in UK’, \textit{The Guardian}, 30 July 2014, available at: \url{http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jul/30/government-driverless-car-self-driving-car} (accessed 7 January 2015).}

Cars represent, Ballard continued, ‘the speed and violence of our age’, an age that is pursuing ‘a strange love affair with the machine and, conceivably, with its own death and destruction.’\footnote{Ballard’s alliterative pairing of ‘death and destruction’ seems to deliberately echo the alliterative title of Andy Warhol’s \textit{Death and Disaster} (1962–63), a series of silk-screen prints that incorporated repeated photographic images derived from newspaper reports of fatal accidents, many of which were car crashes.} Driving a car at speed along a modern road system – ‘the shared experience of moving together’ – involves risks that we seem able to easily discount. ‘Yet the rough equivalent of speeding on unchecked tyres along a fast dual carriageway at the end of a tiring day at the office’ – enter architect Robert Maitland – ‘is lying in a hot bath with a blazing three-bar electric fire balanced on the edge below a half-open window rattling in a rising gale.’\footnote{A \textit{User’s Guide to the Millennium}, p. 263.} The experience of a car crash is said to be ‘the most dramatic event in most people’s lives apart from their own deaths, and for many the two will coincide.’ When Ballard then asks if ‘we are merely victims in a meaningless tragedy, or do these appalling accidents take place with some kind of unconscious collaboration on our part?’\footnote{Ibid.} he is asking a question that Maitland asks himself immediately after crashing his Jaguar, although, in 1971, \textit{Concrete Island} was some twelve months away from being first drafted. The reader of \textit{Concrete Island} is soon left in little doubt, however, that Maitland is on the island of waste ground because he wants to be. The island, for its part, is presented as an animate kingdom that seems to want him too, to judge from the inviting behaviour of the enveloping grass: ‘The grass rustled excitedly, parting in circular waves, beckoning him into its spirals.’\footnote{Concrete Island (1994), p. 68.} But Maitland must first pass through the motorway’s crash barrier, a barrier which proves to be at his particular point of impact – a section under repair – not a barrier at all but a gateway (or, perhaps, a rabbit hole): ‘A defective tyre-wall, a bang on the head, and he had suddenly exited from reality.’\footnote{Ibid., p. 24.}

It is not only the motorway, moreover, that is governed by elaborate signalling. Maitland abruptly leaves one world of signs – the road system above – and plunges into a marginal and forgotten non-space that is equally encoded: the triangle of waste ground at the foot of the embankments. He soon discovers that this apparently ‘meaningless soil’,\footnote{Ibid., p. 32.} as he first describes the island in anger and frustration, is also bursting with signification. He stumbles upon residual traces of the past, physical signs of displaced habitation and community invisible from the motorway above: the buried remains of former buildings, the basement of a small cinema, World War II air-raid shelters, ‘the ground-plans of Edwardian terraced houses’, an abandoned churchyard with a hidden crypt, and – like a poignant symbolic detail in a surrealist canvas – ‘a flight of steps that lifted into the air from the remains of a garden path.’\footnote{Ibid., pp. 38–41. \textit{Concrete Island} may be a psychodrama enacted inside Maitland’s exploding head, but there is sufficient detail in Ballard’s description of the island’s location for it to be identified precisely, including its Edwardian terraced houses. See the mapping analysis by Mike Bonsall, ‘The Real Concrete Island?’ available at: \url{http://www.ballardian.com/the-real-concrete-island} (accessed 7 January 2015).} Among these ruins – among these inhabited ruins – Maitland discovers...
yet another realm of signs and symbols, the symbolic world of his unconscious, which becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the island and its many manifestations, including, perhaps, its two inhabitants. If the purpose of the elaborate signalling of the motorway system is to guide the traffic, the purpose of the signification that Maitland discovers on the island – which seems nothing less than a bespoke terrain – is also conductive, guiding his psychological passage to isolation and marking the progress of his ‘terminal delusion’. Maitland’s crash has ‘jolted his brain loose from its moorings’. The island stage on which Maitland’s psychodrama will be played is a pit with a wardrobe of costumes (dinner jacket, circus leotard, and a ‘tart’s outfit’), lit by sunshine and sodium lights, and accompanied by an unrelenting motorway soundtrack.

The text of *Concrete Island* – that is to say, its verbal landscape – also signals. The narrative calls up other fictional worlds, particularly Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. The magical island of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is more lightly in evidence, but there are, as many have observed, patterns of loose correspondence between Maitland and Prospero and Maitland and Antonio (when Maitland sees his reflection in the car mirror he sees a ‘psychotic twin brother’), between a naive Jane and Miranda, between a witch-like Jane and Sycorax, and between Proctor the beast and Caliban, and Proctor the would-be circus acrobat and Ariel. However plausible Maitland’s fellow island-dwellers are as marginalized social misfits in a changing and challenging urban environment (for David Pringle, writing in 1979, Jane was ‘the nearest thing to a “well-rounded” female character in all his novels’), they are also figures in a symbolic fiction that maps Maitland’s disturbed state of mind. A retrospective authorial signal to this effect seems implicit in Ballard’s remarks (1987) on the science fiction film *Forbidden Planet* (1956), a film that was itself modelled on *The Tempest*:

The film’s real originality, however, lies in making the brutish Caliban figure an externalization of Morbius’s own libido. This gives an unsettling force to the final confrontation, as Morbius’s lustful id, never seen directly, throbs and oozes along in full Oedipal splendour, melting down steel doors on its way towards a quivering Anne Francis.

Are, then, Jane and Proctor ‘externalizations’ of Maitland’s unconscious?

---

15 *Concrete Island* (1994), p. 83.
16 Ibid., p. 37.
17 Ibid., p. 134.
18 Ibid., p. 9.
19 Early observers were David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet: J. G. Ballard’s Four-Dimensional Nightmare* (San Bernardino, 1979), and Gregory Stephenson, *Out of the Night and Into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (New York, 1991). After *Concrete Island*, Ballard wrote the novella ‘The Ultimate City’ which again takes *The Tempest* as its model. ‘The Ultimate City’ was published in *Low-Flying Aircraft and Other Stories* (London, 1976).
20 Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet*, p. 43.
21 ‘A User’s Guide to the Millennium’, first published in *American Film* (1987), reprinted in *A User’s Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (London, 1996), p. 18. The American television series *Lost in Space* (1965-68), in which Robby, the popular robot from *Forbidden Planet* (1956) was reprised, appeared on British television in the late 1960s. Ballard saw the original robot of 1956 on display at the exhibition ‘This Is Tomorrow’ at the Whitechapel Gallery (August 1956). Like *Concrete Island, Lost in Space* (originally entitled ‘Space Family Robinson’) is a ‘robinsonade’. For a discussion of *The Tempest* as a generic source for science fiction (and a source for *Robinson Crusoe*), see Ruth Morse, ‘Monsters, Magicians, Movies: *The Tempest* and the Final Frontier,’ *Shakespeare Survey*, liii (2000), pp. 164-74. Morse argues (p. 173) that ‘Ballard uses explicit literary references, but not always to an obvious end.’ He is ‘ringing his changes not on Shakespeare, but on himself. On the concrete island there is a mental defective, who might, if one were looking for Caliban, fit the bill, but the subterranean reappearance of a Shakespeare play is something it would be hard to argue for if the motifs could not be traced through Ballard’s career.’
Ballard’s ‘Introduction’ to Concrete Island does not touch upon Shakespeare’s play; instead, Robinson Crusoe is placed squarely at the forefront of our reading. Defoe’s novel provides a persistent narrative counterpart to Concrete Island, as Maitland finds himself confronted by the same fundamental problems of food, shelter, and rescue that had beset Crusoe. There is only one explicit reference in the novel to Crusoe – ‘Maitland, poor man, you’re marooned like Crusoe’ he says to himself as he surveys the island for the first time – but there are many specific points of correspondence with Defoe’s story, and all are heavily ironical. According to Ballard’s ‘Introduction’:

The day-dream of being marooned on a desert island still has enormous appeal, however small our chances of actually finding ourselves stranded on a coral atoll in the Pacific. But Robinson Crusoe was one of the first books we read as children, and the fantasy endures. There are all the fascinating problems of survival, and the task of setting up, as Crusoe did, a working replica of bourgeois society and its ample comforts. This is the desert island as adventure holiday. With a supplies-filled wreck lying conveniently on the nearest reef like a neighbourhood cash and carry.

Beyond food, shelter and rescue (yet more signalling), Robinson Crusoe is echoed in Maitland’s bout of fever and delirium, in his discovery of Proctor’s footprints on the embankment, and in the manipulative mis-teaching of Proctor to read and write. The boot of Maitland’s car, to which periodic trips are made, mainly to obtain intoxicating wine, is the wreck to which Crusoe returns to retrieve all manner of useful things. Whereas Crusoe obsessively counts time, Maitland soon learns to forget time – or to forget the time of the clock – and quickly loses his watch to Proctor, who cannot tell the time anyway and only values it as a trophy trinket. Reference to Robinson Crusoe might be said to begin – perhaps less obviously – on the very first page, as Maitland ignores the regulatory signs of the motorway. Like Crusoe, Maitland’s fictional fate is, as it were, sealed because he has wilfully ignored cautionary signs. Crusoe defies his father’s wishes by seeking his fortune at sea, and then defies the sage advice of a shipmaster who warns him, following his first shipwreck off the coast of Yarmouth, that he is a Jonah and should not put to sea again. Maitland, for his part, is tired and detached, exceeds the speed limit, and wears no seat belt: ‘he had almost wilfully devised the crash.’ Thus, both narratives begin with transgressive actions. The first physical sign of Maitland’s transgression is the bold black mark made by his car’s shredding tyre, a ‘black diagonal stroke across the white marker lines that followed the long curve of the embankment.’ The carbon-black stroke of the tyre is a sign of cancellation, a striking-through, and a defiance of the authority of the white line.

Robinson Crusoe and Concrete Island are situated at opposite ends of a continuum that stretches from the origins of the novel form itself. At one end, Defoe’s journalistic plain-style delineation of an emergent mercantile middle class in which the individualism of the bourgeois merchant – man as Homo economicus – is first sketched and celebrated. At the other end of the capitalist continuum, the architect Maitland, a figure as solitary as Crusoe, but neither provident nor repentant. Maitland is a damaged and alienated descendent, a flawed designer of the modern urban environment, who has been flung – or who has wilfully flung himself – from the ‘elegant sculpture’ of the Westway’s

---

22 Ibid., p. 32.  
24 Ibid., p. 9.  
25 Ibid., p. 7.  
26 Ibid., p. 143. For Reyner Banham (a contemporary source for Ballard), ‘the Santa Monica / San Diego intersection is a work of art, both as a pattern on the map, as a monument against the sky, and as a kinetic experience as one sweeps through it.’ Banham, Los Angeles (1971; Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2009), pp. 71-2, including two photographs. The ‘motion sculpture’ of the Westway is a repeated motif in Crash (1973), pp. 11, 48. When Ballard subsequently revisited the motorway structure, in Iain Sinclair (ed.), London: City of Disappearances (London, 2006), p. 497, he seemed to nod towards Concrete Island: ‘Rising above the crowded nineteenth-century squares and grim stucco terraces, this massive concrete motion-sculpture is an heroically isolated fragment of the modern city London might once have become. There are few surveillance cameras and you can make your own arrangements with the speed limits. Corbusier remarked that a city built for speed is a city built for success, but the Westway, like Ankor Wat, is a stone dream that will never awake. As you hurtle along this concrete deck you briefly join the twentieth century and become a citizen of a virtual city-state borne on a rush of radial tyres.’
sweeping curves. In contrast to Crusoe, who never once questions his identity or the basis of his relationship to the world and to God, Maitland has embarked on an introspective journey into an unmapped, un-modelled, interior world. As he psychologically regresses – a typically Ballardian direction of travel – his world becomes ever more emblematic. ‘More and more’, he reflects, ‘the island was becoming an exact model of his head.’

It is as if the island had been lying in waiting for him. It is as if Maitland – or his unconscious – had been lying in wait for himself. His car comes to eventual rest nestling neatly within a semi-circle of five dead cars rusting in a forgotten breaker’s yard that the ever-growing grass is swallowing. The cars might have been especially pre-arranged to meet the exact trajectory of the Jaguar’s flight path as it bursts through the side barrier. If Crash is a novel of collision as baroque repetition and darkly lyrical excess, Concrete Island is the stripped-back collision aftermath, written in clipped and simple sentences that re-fashion the children’s versions of Defoe’s book to which Ballard alluded in his ‘Introduction’ (one of our ‘first books’, he says). Whereas Crash seems motivated by an aesthetic of expansive and conjoined surfaces, Concrete Island is inwardly ruminative: the island is a place of tunnels and burrows and dens and nests and hidden chambers. Ballard’s car crash, near Chiswick Bridge, in the first months of 1972 – caused, like Maitland’s crash, by ‘a front wheel blow-out’ – is a biographical hinge between the two books: Crash was completed shortly before Ballard’s Chiswick crash, and Concrete Island was first drafted in the months that immediately followed.

Just as Maitland’s body is a garden of wounds, so the island: ‘A thin yellow light lay across the island, an unpleasant haze that seemed to rise from the grass, festering over the ground as if over a wound that had never healed.’ As it crashes, Maitland’s car scores ‘a line of deep ruts’ on the body of the island, ‘like the incisions of a giant scalpel’. The deep ruts continue by extension the lines of Maitland’s transgressive black tyre marks on the road above. Not much grows on the island except a particular indigenous grass, more animal than vegetable. It teases and embraces Maitland like ‘an immense green creature eager to protect and guide him.’

Hungry, Maitland wonders at first if there might be berries growing somewhere on the island, or a forgotten allotment garden with wild potatoes, but the island is not that sort of garden. The island doesn’t produce food; it receives food, in the form of repulsive fatty waste dumped by the world above. As a garden of wounds, it is not a garden of abundance – something that Maitland never seems to have known – but ‘a place of ordeal.’

I want to now introduce into further discussion of this place of psychological ordeal some examples of draft material from Ballard’s archive at the British Library (Add. MS. 88938). The archive contains two Concrete Island documents: an undated typescript draft that is heavily revised by hand (Add. MS. 88938/3/9/1), and a ‘First Draft Screenplay’ (fig. 2), also by Ballard,
CONCRETE ISLAND

First Draft Screenplay

by

J.G. BALLARD

From the novel of the same title

by

J.G. Ballard

Property of Cadence Production

Miss Hazel Adair,
53 Pinborough Road,
London, S.W. 10.

20 September 1972.

Fig. 2. Add. MS. 88938/3/9/2, f. 1.
commissioned by Hazel Adair of Cadence Productions, and dated 20 September 1972 (Add. MS. 88938/3/9/2). I shall comment on the screenplay in a moment, since it has much to tell us about the novel’s sequence of composition, but I begin with the revised novel draft, and with the presentation of the other garden in the novel: the empty garden of Maitland’s childhood.

The quality of emptiness – a quality that Maitland always finds both reassuring and stimulating – pervades Concrete Island from the very first page of the book as he veers out of control across the (surprisingly) ‘empty traffic lanes’ of ‘the high-speed exit lane of the Westway interchange’ and crashes through the side barrier. It is as if the emptiness had been a provocation. The sudden and confusing relative silence of the traffic on his first Saturday morning on the island is a welcome emptying of reality, as if a sound-track had been suddenly switched off. And the cinema basement (to the house of bad dreams) in which Maitland subsequently wakes, mentally dislocated between past and present, and the resonant site of many key events in the narrative, reminds Maitland of ‘sitting alone in the empty circles of huge suburban Odeons.’

The empty garden of Maitland’s childhood is only referred to once, but this single strong image of isolation is a cyphered scene that bears in good measure the burden of supplying a symbolic explanation – the only kind that matters in the novel – of his wilful presence on the island. We recall the vestigial Edwardian garden steps on the island that rise with promise into the air and lead nowhere.

Maitland’s crash injuries have left him with limited mobility. He drinks a bottle of wine to numb the pain, and his reflective mood turns to self-pity. He sits in the back seat of his car, drinking steadily from the bottle, and reviews his relationships with his wife, Catherine, and with his mistress, Helen. He discerns a pattern of personal behaviour that stems from his isolation as a child, concluding that ‘most of the happier moments of his life had been spent alone.’ He compares his marriage to the empty garden of his childhood:

For years now he had mythologised his own childhood. The image in his mind of a small boy playing endlessly by himself in a long suburban garden surrounded by a high fence seemed strangely comforting. It was not entirely vanity that the framed photograph of a seven-year-old boy in a drawer of his desk at the office was not of his son, but of himself. Perhaps even his marriage to Catherine, a failure by anyone else’s standards, had succeeded precisely because it recreated for him this imaginary empty garden.

Compare the published text with this longer draft text, in which the force of the figure of the garden is dissipated:

As a child, without doubt, he had certainly been most happy when playing by himself – with a sister seven years younger than himself, he had effectively been an only child, playing endlessly by himself in a huge suburban garden. Even his first affairs had been curiously ambiguous, each a series of rendezvous placed

35 Hazel Adair was a director of the television and film production company Cadence Productions (set up in 1965; dissolved in 1991). Adair worked in television and film all her life. She was a formative figure in television drama as the script writer for many popular and pioneering programmes of the 1960s and 1970s. Often in association with co-writer Peter Ling, her name appeared daily on British television screens as the credits rolled through for ‘Emergency Ward 10’, episodes of ‘Dr Who’, the short-lived BBC soap ‘Compact’, and the much longer-running ITV soap ‘Crossroads’. She also wrote for the BBC radio soap ‘Mrs Dale’s Diary’. Amongst her film productions, to strike a different note, were the sex comedies Can You Keep It Up For A Week? (1974) and Keep It Up Downstairs (1976). Although I have not been able to trace any further reference to Ballard’s Concrete Island film script for Hazel Adair, Ballard does mention in an interview with David Pringle (1996) that Adair (and the late television presenter and producer David Frost) took out a film option on The Drought in 1969 (SFX, no. 9, February 1996).

36 Concrete Island (1994), p. 91.

37 Concrete Island (1994), p. 27.
like stepping stones between himself and the puzzled young woman. He had always been at ease with self-immersed or self-possessed women. His marriage to Catherine had failed principally because he was unable ever to need his wife enough, just as he had never really needed Helen Fairfax. Always ruthless with himself, he had never expected too much of either himself or others, and at heart had found it difficult to get on with other people, an ugly fact from which the calculatedly civilised style of his life had conveniently cushioned him. Perhaps at heart he disliked other people, and himself, badly enough to try to end his life.38

Ballard crossed out this entire passage, adding by hand the crisper text as published at the top, bottom and verso of his draft page (figs 3-4). What we learn during the course of the novel of what has brought Maitland to the crisis moment of his crash may seem, as reported in the retrospection of his thoughts, an inadequate, or only partial, explanation for the extremity of his actions. We are told, for example, that his parents divorced, and that he felt lonely. If we are dissatisfied by these reported psychological triggers from Maitland’s childhood, it is perhaps because as images they have a detached character, like passing delirious tableaux. The narrative momentum of Concrete Island is freighted by the unfolding logic of its figurative present, by the force of its metaphorical development, fed all the while by Maitland’s deep reservoir of floating visual memories. Ballard’s reductive revision here and elsewhere in the novel draft tends to emphasize this primary metaphorical narrative of the present, which merges together both the overpoweringly physical environment of the island and Maitland’s solipsistic habit of mind as if they were a single account that looked both ways simultaneously, in and out. The narrative pathway is thus carefully poised, standing astride inner and outer realities, such that much of what Maitland sees, or perceives, seems to inhabit both worlds. Maitland is not sure, for example, and neither is the reader, whether he really sees an old man pushing a motorcycle on the horizon, a purgatorial figure that terrifies him: ‘Maitland was certain that this machine he was wheeling was not in fact a light motorcycle, but an horrific device of torture that the old man brought with him on his endless journey around the world, and against whose chain-driven wheels Maitland’s already broken body would be applied in a grim judgement by ordeal.’39

In the typed draft presentation of Maitland’s childhood garden, he plays alone because he is seven years older than his sister. The difference in age between these fictional siblings calls to mind, intriguingly, an identical observation in the autobiography Miracles of Life, written some thirty-five years later: ‘My sister Margaret (now Margaret Richardson, until recently director of the Sloane Museum) was born in 1937, but the seven-year gap between us meant that she never became a childhood friend. When I was 10 she was still a toddler.’40 Concrete Island retains the number ‘seven’ but it has been transferred from the age difference in the draft text between Maitland and his sister (who does not appear in the published text) to the age of the boy in the framed photograph in Maitland’s desk drawer. The photograph is not, as we might have expected, of his son, David, but is a photograph of himself, a seven-year-old Maitland.

In fact, the textual correspondence between the Concrete Island draft and this particular passage from Miracles of Life extends even further in imaginative terms. Arguably, the strongest symbolic presence on Maitland’s island – with its forgotten gravestones and a concealed crypt, bathed in the morbid yellow sodium light of the motorway – is the presence of death. It is the same yellow light in which we see the unsavoury and death-like pallor of Vaughan’s skin as he speeds along the Westway in Crash. In Miracles of Life, Ballard’s childhood garden in Amherst Avenue is also associated, by proximity, with death, with a literal vista of death. The passage quoted from Ballard’s autobiography continues with a vivid description of the Chinese peasant burial mounds on the edge of the paddy fields just beyond his garden:

38 Add. MS. 88938/3/9/1, f. 45.
39 Concrete Island (1994), p. 60.
40 Miracles of Life (2008), p. 32.
He had even mythologised his childhood. We were not entirely certain of his exact dates or
of his parents' names, but he was born in London and lived near the Thames. As a child, without
doubt, he had certainly been most happy when playing by himself — with a sister seven years younger than
himself, he had endlessly played by himself. In a huge suburban garden,
himself, he had effectively been an only child. Even his first
affairs had been curiously ambiguous. Each a series of rendezvous
placed like stepping stones between himself and the puzzled
young woman. He had always been at ease with self-assured
or self-possessed young women, and his marriage to Catherine
had failed principally because he was unable ever to need his
wife enough, just as he had never really needed Helen Fairfax.
Always ruthless with himself, he had never expected too much of
either himself or others, and at heart had found it difficult to
get on with other people, something which the world civilised
his style of modern life had conveniently cushioned him. Perhaps at
heart he disliked other people, and himself, badly enough to
try to end his life.

Fig. 3. Add. MS. 88938/3/9/1, f. 45.
J. G. Ballard’s ‘Elaborately Signalled Landscape’: The Drafting of *Concrete Island*

Fig. 4. Add. MS. 88938/3/9/1, f. 45v.
The mounds could be six to ten feet high, a pyramid of coffins covered with soil that the heavy rains would wash away. Unless regularly maintained, the coffins would emerge into the daylight….One day, on my way back from school, I made a small detour to the mound [three hundred yards from our house], climbed up the rotting pyramid and peered into one of the lidless coffins. The skeleton of a forgotten rice farmer lay on what seemed like a mattress of silk – the soil around him had been endlessly washed and rinsed by the rains.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 32-3.}

The paragraph in Miracles of Life then leaps by immediate association to the memory of the small-framed anatomy skeleton – Asian, Ballard speculates – that he later kept in a coffin-like box beneath his bed when he was a medical student at Cambridge. There is in these passages from Concrete Island and Miracles of Life a clustering of associated memories that folds death into figures of enclosure, signalled by the containment of the coffins, by the island’s steep embankments, and by the ‘high fence’ that surrounds Maitland’s childhood garden. From the two quotations above, we can see that the ‘high fence’ that kept Maitland safely imprisoned in his garden does not appear in the typed draft: Ballard added the detail of the high fence by hand when he revised, as the morbid narrative emphasis of the final text emerged. The steep banks of the island wasteland are the high fence of Maitland’s childhood garden.

The novel draft reveals a fourth presence on the island, although in the course of revision it disappears from view and becomes an absent presence. In addition to the trio of Maitland, Proctor and Jane – the architect, the beast and the prostitute – there is also, Maitland discovers, in the ‘beggar’s nol\footnote{Ibid., p. 76. In the typed draft, in a passage that is struck through (f. 117), Proctor’s lair is described as ‘a lean-to metal shack built against the wall. Faded War Department or ARP lettering still clung to the corrugated iron door.’} that is Proctor’s refuge, a small-framed mummified body ceremoniously arranged on a mattress (reminiscent of the skeleton of the ‘forgotten rice farmer’ in the burial mound near Ballard’s childhood garden). After dragging himself feverishly across the island in the rainstorm, and after scrawling a succession of desperate messages for help, Maitland slips from the roof of an air-raid shelter and slides down into the grass, ‘like a diver vanishing into the deeps of an underground cavern’.\footnote{Concrete Island (1994), p. 74.} or the ‘pelagic’ depths of the unconscious.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 74-5: ‘and he could almost believe that he was lying at the bottom of a calm and peaceful sea, through which a few bars of faint light penetrated the pelagic quiet.’} There, at the lowest point of the island, behind a padlocked door, he discovers Proctor’s concealed ‘lair’; it contains, in neat arrangement, an array of badges and mirrors and shards of shining chrome stripped from the island’s abandoned cars, including Maitland’s Jaguar. In the typed draft (fig. 5), Maitland discovers, in addition to these votive offerings (which survive into the final text) what he thinks is a motionless old man:

\begin{quote}
Maitland stepped forward carefully. The old man had still made no response to this intrusion, his eyes staring straight ahead at Maitland. Clearing his eyes from the fever-sweat, Maitland could see that the old man was not lying in the bed propped up by a large pillow, but sitting upright with his knees raised in front of him like a small idol. His shrivelled body, dressed in an ornate jacket of yellowing lace, was no larger than a six-year-old child’s. His minute hands, like a monkey’s, rested on his knees. Each carried in its precise grip, like those of a monarch at some diminutive coronation, a single windscreen wiper, the chromium shafts extended like an orb and sceptre. Maitland moved forward out of the old man’s unmoving gaze. The bed, he realised, was in fact a crude altar, and the mumified body of this dead old man dressed in his rags of clothing was its idol. Beads and balls of coloured foil, what seemed to be remnants of Christmas tree decorations, were hung about his neck, giving an almost lunatic gaiety to his small precise face with its firm, carping mouth.\footnote{Add. MS. 88938/3/9/1, f. 119.} \end{quote}

\footnote{\textit{Concrete Island} (1994), p. 74.}
Maitland stepped forward carefully. The old man had
to this intrusion
still made no response, his eyes staring straight ahead at
Maitland. Clearing his eyes from the fever-sweat, Maitland
in the bed
could see that the old man was not lying propped up by a large
pillow, but sitting upright with his knees raised in front
of him like a small idol. His shrivelled body, dressed in
an ornate \textit{pajamen} jacket of yellowing lace, was no larger
than a six-year-old child's. His minute hands, like a monkey's,
precise
rested on his knees, each carried in its grip, like those of
a monarch at some diminutive coronation, a single \textit{axaaxma}
windscreen wiper, the chromium shafts extended like an orb
and sceptre.

Maitland moved forward out of the old man's unmoving
in fact
gaze. The bed, he realised, was now a crude altar, and the
mummified body of this dead old man dressed in his tage of
balls of coloured felt,
clothing was its idol. Heads and/what seemed to be remnants
of Christmas tree decorations, were hung around his neck,
gaily
giving an almost lunatic air to his small precise face with
its firm, curving mouth.

Around him, as he squatted at the head of the bed, were

Fig. 5. Add. MS. 88938/3-9/1, f. 119.
In front of the old man, the typed draft continues, is a small plate of food offerings, ‘an unsavoury mash of boiled rice, bacon rinds and an over-ripe banana’. At the sight of the food, Maitland moves to grab it, and it is at this point that the beast of the lair, Proctor, who has been looming unseen in the doorway, suddenly attacks him, his head ‘lowered’ (to take up the words of the published text) ‘like a bull’s between swaying shoulders’. Thrown to the ground, Maitland is ‘only aware of the panting, bull-like figure dragging him up the slope into the last light of the day.’

Every word counts in *Concrete Island*, and at this point Ballard intends that we recall the description of Maitland in his car immediately after his crash: ‘Robert Maitland lay across his steering wheel, his jacket and trousers studded with windshield fragments like a suit of lights.’

‘Suit of lights’ is another signature phrase – like ‘elaborately signalled landscape’ – to which Ballard returned in other fictions. In *Concrete Island*, the shattered windscreen-dressing that Maitland wears after his crash – his ‘suit of lights’ – is the warrior suit of a matador who has yet to meet the island’s bull, before eventually humiliating and defeating him. The pathways around the island are frequently described as labyrinthine (matching the labyrinth of the roads above) and Proctor, who is ‘most at home in the invisible corridors that he had tunnelled in his endless passages around the island’, is thereby likened to the Minotaur. ‘When they built the motorway they sealed him in’, Jane explains, as if the island was a vast tomb.

How does Ballard’s *Concrete Island* screenplay present Proctor’s lair? In the screenplay, Maitland also discovers a mummified old man, but in this version of the narrative he is kept on a shelf in a crypt, concealed and protected in a cello case (suggesting a further allusion – an allusion only present in the screenplay – to Prospero’s musical island). In Ballard’s film, shortly before Proctor the bull makes his charge, Maitland, who is unaware of Proctor’s presence, opens the lid to the case out of curiosity, expecting to see a cello:

For a brief moment, as Maitland holds the lid up, we catch a glimpse of an old man lying in the case. His dead body is dressed in an ornate jacket of yellowing lace, and is no larger than a six-year-old child’s. His minute hands, like a monkey’s, are crossed on his chest. His small frame, like a brown apple that has dried and cracked, is beginning to part around the yellowing teeth.

Here, Maitland’s curiosity seems to re-enact once again Ballard’s curiosity as a child peering into ‘one of the lidless coffins’ on one of the mounds near Amherst Avenue. The size of the instrument case indicates a small-framed body, like the small coffin-like box beneath Ballard’s Cambridge bed. Although the old man in a cello case is not included in the final draft of the novel, Proctor’s votive assemblage – the shrine of shiny things – is retained, now arranged around an absence. In the course of Ballard’s revision, the island lost its preserved and venerated ancestor figure (at least, that is, for the time being). Later in *Concrete Island*, Maitland discovers another concealed chamber, the island’s hidden crypt. The crypt contains a second shrine, a shrine-in-waiting that is also maintained by Proctor. Like the air-raid shelter, the crypt contains parts stripped from Maitland’s Jaguar, ‘laid out like an elaborate altar-piece on which would one day repose the bones of a revered saint’. Glimpsing the interior in his delirium, Maitland has a frightening vision of himself preserved in death on the

---

46 *Concrete Island* (1994), p. 76 (emphasis added).
50 Ibid., p. 98.
51 A rejected passage in the typed draft lends further support to this view of the island: ‘The white concrete emerged from the dim light like a tomb in a futuristic necropolis, a world of stylised mausoleums built beneath the massive motorways that covered the surface of a dead planet. One day, the coffins of dead drivers would be built into these niches and galleries like cathedral tombs.’ (Add. MS. 88938/3/9/1, ff. 256-7). The passage appeared at the beginning (paragraph three, as published) of Chapter 23 (‘The Trapeze’), in which Proctor meets his death.
52 ‘Concrete Island: First Draft Screenplay’, Add. MS. 88938/3/9/2, f. 60.
island, around him ‘the cuff-links and overshoes that he had given to Proctor, a bottle of after-shave lotion and aerosol of shaving cream, the trinkets with which Proctor would dress his corpse.’

There are other differences between the novel draft and the screenplay. The screenplay does not begin dramatically with Maitland’s crash but begins instead in Maitland’s orderly office on the fifteenth floor of a building in Marylebone Road. His office has a large picture window that frames the Westway, rather like a film-screen. The film opens by establishing the clean lines and detached modernity of the professional world that Maitland is about to leave behind. The final moments of his abortive journey home along the Westway – the opening scene of the novel – are then scripted in fine visual detail. As Maitland’s car speeds towards the moment of the crash, Ballard prescribes a rapid sequence of camera angles, beginning with an aerial shot of the car, before cutting quickly between the road, the car, the tyres, the tarmac, Maitland’s hands, the speed limit sign, the windshield, Maitland’s head, the burst tyre and the embankment (fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Add. MS. 88938/3/9/2, f. 6.

The screenplay also provides more character detail than the novel. Whereas Ballard’s revision of the novel tended to emphasize the hallucinatory present, paring away backstory wherever possible to leave only fleeting images, reveries of scenes fixed in his mind like the steps of a private argument, in the screenplay we learn more about Proctor and Jane. We learn not so much through what they say or do – which broadly reflects the novel – but in the screenplay’s narrative scene-setting and its pen-portraits of the characters. Jane tells Maitland that the old man in the cello case looked after Proctor when he first came to the island (just as Proctor, once broken, serves and cares for Maitland). We are told that the police are looking for Jane because she is in breach of a probation order after being convicted for a drugs offence, and there are hints that she may have had a miscarriage on the island.

Some of this information remained in the novel, but Jane’s miscarriage, for example, only appears obliquely in the final text of the novel. Notable screenplay additions are three flashback scenes that take the location of the narrative beyond the confines of the island, although, like island itself, they are all viewed through Maitland’s feverish imagination. The first flashback (Add. MS. 88938/3/9/2, ff. 36-8) is a scene in Helen Fairfax’s office at her paediatric clinic. Maitland embraces her and they kiss – perhaps their first kiss – before walking to ‘the parking lot’. The scene of the second flashback (ff. 44-5) is a dinner party beside a lake which has – with a pronounced symbolism – an island in the middle. Maitland asks Catherine if she would like to go to the island, but Catherine urges Maitland to take Helen instead. Helen rows the boat as Maitland sits uneasily in the stern (fig 7).

Fig. 7. Add. MS. 88938/9/2, f. 44, cropped.

In the third flashback (ff. 55-6), we see Maitland, six years old, sitting in ‘a stiff suit’ on a hotel bed in New York. His parents have just divorced. Ballard’s direction specifies: ‘During the flashback we do not see Maitland’s face, but his posture on the bed, sitting awkwardly on the large eiderdown,
indicates that someone has just put him there to keep him out of the way.’ In the background to this vignette of family crisis, the young Maitland can hear several voices, including the voices of his mother and his grandmother.

One surprise of the screenplay is its ending, which runs entirely counter to the unresolved ending of the novel. After burying Proctor in a Neolithic-like low cairn of stones and broken bricks (rather than, as the novel has it, burying him in a shallow grave in the floor of the crypt, where Maitland had feared that he would lie), Maitland then leaves the island with apparent ease and resolve and immediately hails a taxi. Jane has already gone, reluctant to have left Maitland behind. ‘There was a chance once of us going away together … wasn’t there?’ she asks. Then, from the taxi, Maitland spots Jane in the distance and stops to collect her. Before getting in, she warns Maitland that she is ‘going a long way’, as if the journey she envisages will involve traversing more than mere miles. The screenplay at this point seems to strike a forced and unexpected note, transforming a fundamentally introspective narrative – that ends, in Concrete Island, at a carefully prepared point of enigmatic stasis – into an improbable story of romantic escapism and renewal for two.

In the light of Ballard’s interest in cinema, and the influence of cinematic narrative on his fiction, Ballard’s Concrete Island screenplay is a unique and exceptionally interesting document in its own right. But the screenplay is also of especial interest in identifying the sequence of composition of Concrete Island. The title page of the screenplay declares it to be ‘from the novel of the same title’ (see fig. 2 above). To be precise, it is evidently based upon the first draft of the novel that is in the archive: the typescript text. A detailed comparison between key elements of the novel draft and of the screenplay suggests the following composition sequence for Concrete Island: the novel draft was typed before the film script was written, but the revision of the novel draft by hand was undertaken sometime after 20 September 1972, the date that is recorded on the screenplay’s title page. The typed novel draft and the screenplay were therefore produced in quick succession during 1972 (commenced immediately after, that is, Ballard’s Chiswick car crash at the beginning of the year). The revision amendments by hand to the typescript were therefore made from late 1972 into 1973. Looking at the development of a number of key elements of the narrative, tracking their inclusion, exclusion and revision – the mummified old man, the crypt, Proctor’s death, Jane’s child, the old man with the motorcycle, and the narrative’s ending – the textual evidence strongly suggests that the screenplay sits chronologically between the typed draft text and its subsequent revision by hand. The screenplay, so to speak, cleaves the novel draft document into two texts, one typed and one revised (and the revised text matches the published text in most important respects).

The intermediary nature of Ballard’s screenplay is best demonstrated by its treatment of the death of Proctor. In the novel, we recall that Proctor, the one-time circus hand and would-be acrobat, dies when he becomes entangled in guy-ropes hanging beside a maintenance workmen’s cradle which has suddenly appeared one morning. He climbs up one of the ropes with ease and is proudly lowering the cradle to help Maitland escape – a virtuoso acrobatic performance (worthy of an Ariel) that brings a pleased smile to Proctor’s face – when the workmen’s vehicle and winch, to which the guy-ropes are attached, pulls away unexpectedly. ‘Trussed like a carcass in an abattoir,’ his body is dragged towards a concrete pillar: ‘When his body struck the pillar it thudded like a punchbag against the massive column.’

These carefully chosen similes – the first bovine, the second pugilistic – concisely encapsulate the presentation of Proctor in the novel. In the typed draft, however, Proctor meets a very different fate. He is accidentally splashed with paraffin and dies in a blaze of signalling fire, like an accidental flare: ‘Before he could move his body had erupted into a glowing torch.’ In the novel draft, Proctor’s death by fire occupies five typed pages. The pages are all struck through, replaced with six pages by hand, which more or less match the published text. In the abandoned version,
Maitland rises just before dawn and after much struggle manages to carry a can of paraffin up to the verge of the road. He pours the paraffin along the gutter and lights it. A lorry passes and splashes a puddle of paraffin onto Proctor, who is tussling with Maitland for the paraffin can (figs 8 & 9).

Fig. 8. Add. MS. 88938/3/9/1, f. 267.
from his huge creased face, looking at the liquid on his thick figures, his body pulsed with a dim blue light. Before he could move his body had erupted into a glowing torch.

Chapter 24 – The Old Men

The rush-hour traffic moved in an ever-moving flow along the eastbound approach of the motorway. The hard roar of thousands of passing engines drummed across the island. Partly shielded by the dense vegetation, the high grass leaped over them. Maitland and the young woman sat together near the entrance to Proctor’s den. The lamps of the air-shafts raid shelters rose around them like the backs of ancient animals buried asleep in the soil.

Between them the body of Proctor lay face upwards, his face and shoulders covered by a patched rose-pattern quilt the girl had taken from her barr. Every few seconds the light
In conclusion, it is evident that as Ballard turned to revising *Concrete Island* after drafting the screenplay a number of changes were made to the text of the novel. Two new elements introduced in the screenplay were taken up (the island’s crypt and Proctor’s acrobatic death by guy-ropes), and another new element was not (Maitland and Jane departing together in a taxi). A long-standing element was removed (the mummified old man), and another became more enigmatic (Jane’s child). The mummified old man was taken out in the revision of the typed draft, and the old man on the bicycle was given a second appearance. Ballard wrote a brief note to himself in the margin as he revised: ‘He thinks he sees old man with bike’ (fig. 10).

Substantially developed, this marginal note became in the published text:

> For a brief moment he had seen the familiar white-haired figure of the old man with the light motorcycle, moving along the eastbound carriageway. His white hair had been bathed by the setting sun as he and his machine had appeared in a gap between two streams of traffic. Maitland tried to find him again, but gave up as vehicles clogged all lanes of the motorway. He remembered his previous state of terror on first seeing the old man. This time, by contrast, he felt reassured.

The reassurance that Maitland now feels, instead of the sudden terror he experienced when he first glimpsed the figure, is an important indicator of Maitland’s altered frame of mind. Just as the first sighting of the old man on the horizon had been fleeting, so it is uncertain whether Maitland really sees anything more on this second occasion than another momentary image in his mind’s eye.

---

58 We can deduce from the typed draft that the two shrines, or concealed chambers, on the island were originally conceived as a single secret space. We know this because, on Maitland’s second visit to an underground shrine, the typed text refers to the mummified old man as being *still there*: ‘The mummified figure of the old man still squatted on his bed, surrounded by his trinkets and food offerings’ (Add. MS. 88998/3/9/1, ff. 242-3). The notion of a ‘crypt’ on the island was not introduced into the narrative until the screenplay. When Ballard revised the novel draft, he added ‘the crypt’ by hand, at the end of Chapter 21 (‘Delirium’), when Maitland is carried by Proctor ‘into the deep underworld of grass and nettle-castles beside the churchyard’ (*Concrete Island*, p. 160).

59 Add. MS. 88938/3/9/1, f. 247.

60 *Concrete Island* (1994), p. 164.
At the close of the novel, Maitland defers leaving. ‘You were on an island long before you crashed here’, is Jane’s insight. Although Maitland’s wife and son are mentioned in the final paragraph, they have been relocated long ago ‘to the dimmer light at the rear of his mind.’ There are matters more pressing to Maitland than Catherine and David: there is food to collect from the perimeter fence, and he should, perhaps, ‘as a gesture in the direction of the old tramp, leave a token portion beside his grave.’ In the typed draft, Proctor left food offerings for the mummified old man; and before Ballard revised the ending of the novel, Maitland was going to do so too (fig. 11).

Now, it is Proctor’s grave, the grave of ‘the old tramp’, a former resident non-person, resident of the no-place that is the island, which receives the ‘token portion’. With Jane departed, and Proctor dead, Maitland is alone again in his garden. He feels ‘a gathering physical strength’, rips off the remains of his ragged shirt to feel the sunlight on ‘the sticks of his ribs’, and ‘a mood of quiet exultation’ washes over him at the thought of his isolation. Maitland’s inner vision is ascendant. He believes in tokens, and he seems a very long way from hailing a taxi.

---

61 Ibid., p. 141.
62 Ibid., p. 92.
63 Ibid., p. 176.