theories and methodologies

Sea Power

CHRISTOPHER CONNERY

THERE IS NO MORE SEA POWER.[1] WHAT KIND OF AWE CAN A FLEET OR AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER INSPIRE IN THE NUCLEAR AGE, WHOSE BLASTS have given a new character to military majesty and sublimity and whose marine vehicles are hidden beneath the waves? Nor do the ocean-girding voyages of global commerce offer a sense of majesty, the neat stacks of containers rising high above the decks being mere floating versions of the endless stacks at the prosaic, crane-filled ports of Busan, Long Beach, Elizabeth, or Singapore. The sea is full of transport, labor, and industry, but spectacle has moved elsewhere: what remains of the nautical in the visual media is the nostalgic sublimity of sinking ships or historical reenactments of blue-water glory. As if to underscore this vacuum of hegemonic maritime power in an age of shock and awe, the pirates of Puntland and Sulu still have their way in the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Malacca, as they have for centuries. Latter-day posturing by the epigones of interstate maritime power contenders approaches farce, as in the struggle for the Arctic, joined by Russia, Canada, the United States, Denmark, and Norway, punctuated by Russian flags at the bottom of the sea and by the specter of Danish military incursion into what Canada claims as its sovereign territory (Craciun).

Not that all is lost at sea. The *pwo*—the initiation ceremony for masters of traditional Caroline Islands navigation—is bigger than ever. A number of Hawaiian navigators trained in the older craft received the *pwo* on Satawal during the 2007 "Sail On, Sail Always, Sail Forever" voyage of the *Hōkūleʻa*, the best-known symbol of the modern revival of indigenous Pacific long-distance navigation. The *pwo* represents a relation to the sea that is neither mastery over the element nor spectacle. It is a mode of a new Pacific adequate to, in Epeli Hauʻofa's words, "our sea of islands." Perhaps the *pwo* had to wait until that older, Euro-American kind of sea power was no more before it could spread again throughout the Pacific. For the Western discourse of sea power was central to the West's self-definition in the age of world conquest. The ocean, as I have written elsewhere,

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has long functioned as Western capitalism's primary myth element, establishing a relation to oceanic space found nowhere else in the world ("Oceanic Feeling" and "Ideologies").

Carl Schmitt proclaimed the supersession of sea power in the mid–twentieth century. World conquest had been pioneered by whalers, pirates, and freebooters, who took to the ocean with daring and force in a spirit of triumph over the element that retained only residual form in the later era of the champions of technologically based sea mastery, foremost of whom was Alfred Thayer Mahan, whose *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* was published in 1890. Mahan's book was rapidly translated into all the major European and Asian languages and became a global best seller. It enabled tacticians and historians to write of the "Mahanian" worldview when justifying greater expense on navies, for example. But Mahan, according to Schmitt, had made the case for sea power as the key to world history at the dawn of a changed elemental relation between land and sea, when the leviathan was turning into a machine. The new element—fire, or air—was bringing about a new spatial order (98, 106–07).

Schmitt acknowledges the geopolitical tradition that had long posited sea power as central to world hegemony. This *translatio imperii maris*, versions of which we find in G. W. F. Hegel, Ernst Kapp, Friedrich Ratzel, Schmitt, Mahan, William Oliver Stevens and Allan Westcott, and many others, holds that sea power, having been grasped in concept by the Greeks and achieved by the Romans, reappears in Genoa and—much more important for the mythography of sea power—Venice, before passing into the world ocean, successively mastered by Portugal and Spain, Holland, and, finally, England. This historical arc is punctuated by the great sea battles—Salamis, Actium, Lepanto, Reimerswaal, the sinking of the Armada, Schooneveld, Toulon, Pondicherry, the Nile, Trafalgar. . . . Walter Raleigh's line, widely reprinted in Restoration England and now quoted in almost everything written on sea power, makes the stakes clear: "Whosoever commands the sea, commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world and consequently the world itself" (qtd. in Pincus 336). But in what registers did sea power exist? What disjunctures can we trace between the operationality and the discourse of sea power? How does the performative character of sea power—and in this essay I focus on theatrical representations of oceanic space and control—shape the discourse?

Rome, though ideologically and aesthetically oriented away from the sea—there was no Roman Thucydides, after all—depended on its hegemony in *Mare Nostrum*, and the unipolar maritime dominance that Rome achieved, post-Actium, was unique in world history. Even as sole power, however, Rome never claimed dominion over the sea itself (Steinberg 64–67). Byzantium, a tremendous naval power, shared the sea with other powers. Venice was a naval power of great consequence until its late-sixteenth-century military decline, at least. But, more important, Venice was the origin of the ideological and spectacular deployment of maritime identification. The winged lion of Saint Mark, with paws spanning land and sea, as in the Carpaccio painting that hangs in the doge's palace, emblematizes the claim for elemental dominion. Spain, Portugal, Holland, and England were all projectors of naval majesty and power, but the extent to which even their power depended on something like "command of the sea" is not wholly clear. Spain and Portugal were the first to conceive of world power as bound by maritime space—the "Spanish Lake" of the Pacific, or the ocean-delivered global dominion celebrated in the *Lusiades*.[2]

According to military-historical consensus, however, sea power was not isolable from a state's overall military capacity and tended to develop in tandem with the state's land-based military power (Gat, *War* and *History* 441–93).

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England, the most emblematic of the great maritime powers, never knew a period when its naval power exceeded its land-based military power. Although pre-twentieth-century navies were long the most capital-intensive and technologically advanced components of a state's military apparatus, there seems to have been no case historically of a sea power without a correspondingly powerful land army. This includes Venice, which, after all, had the combined character of *stato da mar* and *stato da terra*. Globally, the writing of naval history focuses on histories of tactics, of technological, material, and organizational advances and innovations, and of the financial institutions necessary for maritime power projection. Sea power, of course, is a consequential arena of struggle, and the projection of power can have significant strategic and commercial effect. The control of sea lanes and ports can greatly help or hinder trade. But this level of control is difficult to maintain, and even at its strongest it hardly constitutes mastery of the sea *tout court*. The *translatio imperii maris* does identify a discursive tradition of elemental mastery in the Mediterranean and Europe, a discourse that comes to its fullest fruition in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century age of Mahanian navalism.

Predictably, the *translatio imperii maris* story tends to highlight some maritime histories over others. By Hegel's criteria, a list of the many polities whose entry into history was said to have been prevented by a failure to take to the seas would include some of the most important maritime powers in world history: Ottomans, Persians, Arabs, Gujaratis, Tamils, Sri Lankans, and Chinese, among others. Ottoman naval power was the primary threat to Byzantium and Venice (M. Lane 358). Before the Europeans arrived in the fifteenth century and established a hegemonic naval presence based on predation, Persians, Arabs, Indians, and Sri Lankans maintained a flourishing Indian Ocean trade, ranging from the western Indian Ocean into the South China Sea and the western Pacific. Zheng He (Cheng Ho), Chinese Muslim eunuch commander of the early-fifteenth-century fleets—the largest ships the world had yet known—sailed throughout the western Pacific and the western Indian Ocean and is only the best known in a long history of Chinese seamen. Chinese history shows a range of commitments to naval or maritime presence (Schottenhammer; Schottenhammer and Ptak). In many of its wealthiest periods, China turned to non-Chinese carriers for its maritime trade, a fact that makes it difficult to claim, as Mahan did, that power depends on maritime predominance and on the control of one's maritime trade. And if one were to seek the source of the "spirit of exploration" in the daring required for long ocean voyages, as the oceanic mythographers have, why does this story leave out the Austronesians who settled Madagascar in the centuries around the beginning of the Common Era or the Polynesians who explored and populated great expanses of the Pacific over the first millennium CE? A distinct set of orientations toward maritime space did in fact distinguish European expansion into the world ocean, but this did not reflect greater maritime presence. European oceanic space was simply the world's most ideologically overdetermined version of oceanic space (Steinberg; Connery, "Oceanic Feeling" and "Ideologies").

What was happening, then, when western European capitalism married itself to the sea? Could it be that the grandiose claims for oceanic foundationalism in Hegel, Mahan, and others are haunted by the fundamental nature of the oceanic element as Europeans had come to conceive it? Does not that very elemental character, the ocean's inability to be categorized as place or space, its unboundedness, make it fundamentally incompatible with a range of importations from land-based thinking, among them dominion itself? Dominion and domination were originally mastery of the *domus,* after all. How could one

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assert dominion over the sea? For Mahan, as for many champions of sea power, the final proof and demonstration lay in decisive blue-water engagement between rival fleets. Consider, though, this French reservation, from the memoirs of Louis-Philippe, comte de Ségur, historian and aide-de-camp of Napoléon: "'Do you know what a naval battle is,' asked Maurepas. 'Two squadrons sail from opposite ports, they manoeuvre, they meet, they fire; a few masts are shot away, a few sails torn, a few men killed, a lot of power and shot wasted—and the sea remains no less salty than before" (qtd. in Rodger 272). This reveals something at the crux of the question of sea power: the sea remains as it was before, indifferent to and unaffected by contests of naval strength and all those powerful human institutions of control, enclosure, ownership, and boundary marking. There can be no *domus* there, no monumentalism, no stone memorials to the glory of human achievement. In Western capitalist and colonial modernity's dominant imaginary, the ocean's fundamental inappropriability has produced a strange and troubled oceanic consciousness, one disturbed not only by questions of place and substantiality and the categories appropriate to oceanic space but also by unanswerable questions about the meaning of human maritime activity and of the very representation of the maritime. The Western ocean is distinctive in the insistence of its call for attention and in the often melodramatic or banal results of that attention: the marine panorama, the harbor scene, and that most paradigmatic of ocean scenes, the one giving fullest expression to the theatricality of maritime spectatorship, the shipwreck (Blumenberg; Corbin; Sekula).

When European thought turned in early colonial and capitalist modernity to the question of oceanic spectatorship, touristic viewing or visual representation of the ocean was commonly considered in theatrical terms. The Mediterranean and Europe knew another type of maritime theatricality with deep historical roots, one connected neither to the new intellectual position of theorist-spectator nor to the drama of metaphorized capitalist life. This was the theatricalization of naval power itself, whose history ranges from the naumachia of imperial Rome to the fleet review, ship launching, and demonstration voyages of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The spectacular dimension of the projection of military power is nearly universal. There are variants of shock and awe in ancient and modern tacticians, in the West, East Asia, and the Islamic world. But the theatricality of naval power, throughout its history in the Mediterranean and Europe, is distinctive and provides another opportunity for reflection on the strangeness of Europe's oceanic figuration. The history of the naval spectacle is parallel to yet inseparable from the history of naval power itself.[3]

The origin of this staging of power was Roman naumachiae, reenactments of naval battles and other naval scenes from history and mythology that were staged offshore, in the Tiber, in expressly constructed water theaters such as the Aqua Alsietina (Coleman; Taylor; Traversari). The first recorded naumachia was in 46 BCE, part of Julius Caesar's triumph in that year. The record is richest for Nero and especially for Titus, who was, as K. M. Coleman writes,

> [t]he emperor who reversed the fate of mythological heroes and turned back the course of history, whose technology could change land into sea and back again, for whom horses and bulls walked on water and the nymphs of Ocean swam in synchronized obedience, at whose behest the great navies of the past clashed once more, and by whom thousands of superfluous foreigners were despatched in a single extravagant display. (74)

Versions of the naumachia and other forms of naval display spread throughout the Mediterranean, including an extraordinary Ottoman naval parade with choral music on

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bejeweled ships and staged conflict between Muslims and infidels on the eve of Sultan Murad IV's 1635 campaign against the Safavids, a conscious effort to reestablish the tradition of the warrior sultan, exemplified by Süleyman a century earlier (Çelebi 134–35; Finkel 214–15). Mediterranean naval spectacles were concentrated, as one might expect, in Venice, "theater of the imaginary" (Crouzet-Pavan 35). Venetian aquatic theatricality was part of the design of the city itself and informed a range of its civic rituals. Most of the festivals in Venice took place outdoors, on or by the water (Visentini). The Sensa—when the doge, aboard the Bucintoro, threw his ring into the waves to symbolize his dominion—dates from 998. It was a major attraction for travelers and pilgrims and, beginning in the Renaissance, inaugurated the theater season. Early travelers express not only awe but also irritation and sarcasm about a spectacle—and a republic—they considered pretentious and overly theatrical (Crouzet-Pavan 48). Venetian spectacularity extended to its naval power and to the production of that power. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Arsenale—where ships, galleys, and armaments for the Venetian navy were manufactured, now used by the Italian navy and also site for the art exhibitions of the Venice Biennale—was by many estimates the largest industrial facility in the Mediterranean and Europe. The rapid assembly of galleys was an attraction for visitors, including Galileo and Henry III of France, for whose viewing a galley was outfitted in less than one hour (F. Lane 144; Rossi). The Tintoretto and Veronese wall paintings in the Palazzo Ducale commemorating Venetian naval battles, particularly Lepanto, where the assembled navies of the Holy League had defeated the Ottomans, were not only daily reminders of the supposed naval foundation of Venetian power but also did much to mythologize Lepanto as the decisive confrontation between Islam and Christendom, a mythology still repeated today.

Naumachiae spread throughout Europe during the ascendancy of the mercantilist bourgeoisie, their taste for naval-themed painting matched by an interest in naval theatrics. The water spectacle and naumachia performed for Henry II in Rouen in 1550 were of the classic type. The baroque theaters of the seventeenth century were also full of ships, oceans, and water creatures. Aquatic spectacles were mounted theatrically either as integral to pieces with marine settings, such as in Giacomo Torelli's production of Pierre Corneille's *Andromède*, or in the intermezzi, which commonly featured nautically themed interludes centered on special effects. The renowned stage designer Nicola Sabbatini's 1638 *Manual for Constructing Theatrical Scenes and Machines* has a lengthy discussion on techniques for the depiction of waves, the sea, moving ships, and water-spouting sea creatures (Hewitt 130–43). Inigo Jones's design for Ben Jonson's 1605 *Masque of Blackness* gave the play's audience, through the use of perspective, a scene as if viewed from a ship (Peacock 162). Norman Klein's *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* identifies a nautical character common to much of baroque theater's special-effects repertoire—"nods to shipping were everywhere: power at sea, power from ships, power for war." Klein suggests a nautical origin for many of the mechanical apparatuses for effecting quick set and scene changes: windlasses, cables, pulleys, ropes, and cords, "the rigging, the understage trap below, the fly aloft, the ropes and wood, the blocking, even the knots responded like tackling at sea. . . . It was a strange hybrid: filled with grandiose furnishings, with a (feudal) theatricality, but guided by mathematical systems (solid geometry, perspective). It was sculpture set in motion by shipbuilder's mechanics" (87, 30, 33).

By the eighteenth century's end, navalism and maritime identity had become hegemonic in Great Britain, and navalist mythology suffused literature, theater, and

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public pronouncements. The Napoleonic wars only intensified this effort to portray the navy as the savior of the nation and to forge this naval identification in the popular consciousness through theater pieces, public fetes, fleet reviews, and a range of civic ceremonies, including oddities such as "transparencies"—large translucent painted cloths, first used as theatrical backdrops and later hung in town streets for political purposes:

> After the battle of Trafalgar, for example, the town of Titchfield was decorated with transparencies, one of which "represented a Man of War, complete in all her rigging, as at the commencement of an action, with the portrait of the gallant Nelson as standing on the quarter-deck." A house nearby "displayed a ship with masts, yards, and rigging cut to pieces, representing the conclusion of an action." (Russell 64)

This age also saw the ritualized events around the funeral of Horatio Nelson, as well as the Jubilee Fete of 1814, which began in a naumachia staged on the Serpentine in Hyde Park with miniature fleets and in a range of performances on and around ships. Several theaters, Sadler's Wells among them, were outfitted with large water basins, for the floating of ships. Fleet reviews were followed by plays about attending fleet reviews (Russell).

Gillian Russell's *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society, 1793–1815* describes the intensification of mechanisms aimed at fostering a sense of national belonging and ideological solidarity in the symbiosis of war and theater in the era of the Napoleonic Wars. After war's end, military spectacularism in Britain declined, only to revive with great vigor throughout Euro-America in the new Mahanian age of mechanized naval warfare and permanent military preparedness. The number, size, and pageantry of British fleet reviews grew tremendously over the late Victorian era, Queen Victoria's 1887 naval review being one prominent example. As Jan Rüger points out in his study of late-nineteenth-century English and German naval theatricality, the boom in naval spectacularity—the "militarization of civic public ritual"—spread deeply into popular culture and made naval motifs omnipresent in objects of mass consumption (129, 57–67). The global character of the Mahanian spectacle was evident in the world audience for the Great White Fleet of 1907–09, sixteen white-painted battleships that, voyaging with escorts, introduced United States naval power to the world in a frenzy of "White Fleet-fever" (Werry 367). Defending the fleet from critics who had faulted the expedition for excessive aggression or waste, Mahan wrote in *Scientific American* of the fleet's many practical and strategic benefits, adding that the voyage was "an event not only important, both from the professional and national point of view, but striking to the imagination. It carries in itself certain elements of grandeur" ("True Significance" 407). Mahan's work had prepared the way for this spectatorial exuberance, and the Mahanian equation of naval hegemony and world mastery was illustrated in a traveling display, which, in contrast to earlier naval spectacles, emphasized its global, industrial, and mass-mediated character. It was the arrival of American power on the world stage and also a construction of the world as a stage for the display of American power. Half a million spectators were said to have lined the hills of Valparaiso to watch the fleet, and even greater numbers were said to have greeted the fleet's arrival in Sydney. On the fleet's impending visit to Melbourne, following stops in Auckland and Sydney, the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote that it would require "something like genius in stage management to prevent the third act proving a mere anticlimax" (qtd. in Reckner 100).

Rüger hypothesizes that the failure of naval engagements during the First World War to conform to the affective and theatrical character of the prewar naval spectacles led to diminished popular enthusiasm for "naval-

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ism" (251–72). Bolstering Schmitt's claim that the Mahanian vision had been consolidated at the moment of sea power's transfiguration, spectacular world promenades such as the Great White Fleet, intended to present to the world the new hegemon of the seas, were not to be repeated. Sea power and the productions of maritime spectacularity that were its primary medium had declined together. Admiral Tirpitz, Mahan's foremost disciple in Wilhelmine Germany, wrote in his memoirs that the sea was fundamentally "a cultural space" (qtd. in Rüger 5), a late reflection, no doubt, of its mythogenic capacity. Central to the imaginary of Western capitalist and colonial modernity, the sea has long been intertwined with a range of problems for representation and conceptualization. In a manner distinctive in world history, the sea has served as a stage for a variety of performative and spectacular practices. This role will no doubt continue, as new marine fantasies replace older ones, in a wide range of discourses.

Notes

1. This essay shares concerns with oceanic thinking that I have explored in several previously published essays ("Oceanic Feeling," "Ideologies," "There Was No More Sea"), most material from which will appear in my forthcoming book, *The Oceanic Feeling: Aqueous Ideologies and the Geo-imaginary of Capitalism*. The discussion in "There Was No More Sea" develops the allusion to the book of Revelation in my first sentence here. My thanks go to the graduate student members of my seminar The Ocean, in the autumn of 2008, who were a wonderful group to think with.

2. Although some have taken the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, dividing the world between Spain and Portugal in the mid-Atlantic, as constituting some form of oceanic dominion, Steinberg and others have shown that the line in fact demarcated not dominion but rather vectors of exploration (Steinberg 75–90; Spate 25–57; Connery, "Ideologies").

3. Versions of the military water spectacle occurred outside the West, most notably river-borne processions in pre-eighteenth-century Maluku, Siam, and Borneo. But these were not maritime in character, nor did the Southeast Asian states have a discourse of sea mastery (Reid 177–78).

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