theories and methodologies

Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe

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AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, THE PHILOSOPHER FRANCIS BACON CITED THE NAUTICAL COMPASS, ENABLING CROSS-OCEAN travel, as one of three technologies that had changed "the whole face and state of things throughout the world," more influential than any "empire . . . sect . . . or star" (the others were gunpowder and the printing press [118]). Bacon was not overstating the importance of saltwater transport networks in the forging of global modernity. Across an era spanning from Columbus and Vasco da Gama to the twentieth century, the maritime world was a frontier of capitalism and colonial expansion. Goods, people, and information moved across the oceans of the globe, exploiting what was called "the freedom of the seas," even as nations warred on each other's ships for control of trade routes and coastal access. The immense wealth and power at stake in maritime transport led governments and companies to pour resources into research and development, making the maritime world one of modernity's ongoing frontiers of science and technology. It was also a great reservoir of books, narratives, and fantasy. Occurring in an environment that few could access yet that affected the lives of so many, sea voyages piqued the curiosity of stay-at-home audiences. As global ocean travel grew up together with the printing press, armchair sailors combed sea voyage literature, factual and fictional, for strange, surprising adventures as well as for information about world-altering developments and events recounted in what was called "news from the sea."

And yet, despite the preeminence of maritime transport in making the modern world, literary scholars across the twentieth century passed over its impact with their gazes fixed on land. Nowhere was this gaze more stubborn than in my own domain, novel studies. Think of the signature twentieth-century readings of novels well established in the literary canon that treat oceangoing themes. Thus, Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange, Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner* was read as the memoirs of a capitalist *homo economicus* or of a colonizer settling new territories; the ship's crew on the *Pequod* in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* offered an image of factory labor; and Joseph Conrad's portrait of

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an inexperienced commander in "The Secret Sharer" limned a narcissist ripe for a Freudian case study.[1] This disregard for global ocean travel even where it is a work's explicit subject matter is so spectacular that it might be called hydrophasia. The syndrome is part of a pervasive twentieth-century attitude that the photographer and theorist Allan Sekula has called "forgetting the sea" (48).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, hydrophasia is starting to ebb. The reasons for this shift are complex and have to do, at least in part, with the resonance of our era of globalization with the earlier global maritime frontier. In our era, as in the era inaugurated by Columbus and da Gama, the transfer of information along with people and goods is paramount to capitalist development—except that our new, glamorous supranational frontiers are on the Internet and in aerospace, even as ships continue to convey over ninety percent of the world's freight. In our era, too, we recognize that nature is not a domain cut off from human practice, an image that was indeed constructed by Romantic philosophy, literature, and art. Rather, we now understand nature as an environment, a *socio-ecosystem* that is both natural and a theater of human action—and, as we are now discovering, a theater where the vast forces of nature not only rule human history but are profoundly shaped by it as well.

Ships belong to a domain of tangible practices, which may seem far removed from the concerns of aesthetics, epistemology, and representation so important to literary scholarship. But literary scholars are pioneering new paradigms and concepts of critical and cultural analysis scaled to what the early modern period called the *terraqueous* globe.[2]

Terraqueous Geographies

One of the most discussed revisions offered by the maritime perspective is an addition of new geographic and spatial scales. As regards modernity, literary studies across the twentieth century preferred scales that came from territory and terrestrial existence. In novel studies, for example, these scales included the city, the factory, and the country; the public and the private; and the nation and the colony. The maritime world, in contrast, introduces oceans and continents, islands, archipelagoes, and coasts, as well as the ship. These spatial scales connect different kinds of landmasses and have histories of their own.

The spatial scales valued from a maritime focus need to be included among the imaginary geographies found in literature, and this connection yields revisionary accounts. If, as Benedict Anderson suggests, for example, realist novels help create the nation as an imagined community, novels of sea adventure, from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to Conrad's *Lord Jim*, chart far-flung regions of the globe. To make sense of their travels hence necessitates expanding our notion of the spaces traversed by the novel form, as well as its cultural work. Novels of overseas adventure by Defoe, Tobias Smollett, Eugène Sue, Frederick Marryat, and Conrad, among many authors, cannot be said to repress a portrayal of European imperialism or its violence, as has been argued of the domestic novels by Jane Austen and others.

In addition, the history and processes of ocean transport give us new maps of writers, readers, publishers, sellers, and critics united by the circulation of books, poetics, and genres. Only using the scale of the Atlantic, for example, can we grasp the importance of sea adventure fiction as one of the major narrative genres of the nineteenth century. This genre flourished first in the United States before traveling across the ocean to the United Kingdom and France and then back to the United States. These travels occurred from the 1820s through the 1840s; later the genre would travel to Spain, Italy, and Latin America. In this transoceanic frame, we thus discover a counterweight to the nationalist focus

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of the nineteenth-century novel extensively discussed by literary critics.[3]

Knotting Together Timelines

Maritime modernity can be dated to the first cross-ocean voyages undertaken by European navigators at the turn of the sixteenth century. The era then spans four centuries, united by what might be called the working age of global sail. That such a vast span is nonetheless a single era from the vantage point of maritime technology emphasizes that maritime developments have their own timelines as well as geographies: timelines with what might be called a semiautonomous relation to other periods essential to Western modernity. Familiar eras in land-based models—eras such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the age of democratic revolutions—are distinct from the working age of sail. Yet their developments are knotted together with maritime modernity, and the different histories of modernity stabilize and reshape one another.

What, for example, do 1759, 1795, and 1807 have in common? They are dates that mark decisive innovations in making the sea safer. In 1759 the Enlightenment clockmaker John Harrison perfected a chronometer sufficiently accurate to keep true time over a long sea voyage and hence to permit the calculation of longitude in the course of a traverse (although it would take many years for his chronometer, which was costly, to diffuse through the routine practice of the sea). In 1795 the physician and scholar Gilbert Blane persuaded the British Admiralty to make lemon juice part of sailors' daily rations and thus do away with scurvy, the principal reason for mortality at sea. In 1807 Robert Fulton's steamship made its first voyage on the Hudson River, the prelude to steam transport, which became widespread by the middle of the nineteenth century and regularized ship travel. The marine chronometer, the use of vitamin C, and steam transport all belong to advances in science and technology that we term back on land the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. And yet these innovations mark points of inflection in different histories as well.

To take the case of literary history, these saltwater developments are part of the routinization of global ocean transport, which transformed the novel form, although it takes several steps to perceive the chain of causality. They are as follows. Before the marine chronometer, the conquest of scurvy, and steam transport, the sea was an exceptionally dangerous frontier. The mariner who navigated it safely was a cultural icon, endowed with a heroic practical capacity in situations of immense risk and danger. The heroism of this figure was celebrated across the lineage of modern adventure fiction that descended from *Robinson Crusoe* and other novels of Defoe. This lineage was exceptionally vital in the 1820s and 1830s as practiced by James Fenimore Cooper, Sue, and Marryat, among many other authors in the North Atlantic triangle. But with the routinization of sea travel, achieved by the 1840s, the celebration of the mariner's heroism lost its cultural power. Sea adventure fiction offered a persuasive poetics, but this poetics had lost its raison d'être.

The result of this crisis at the juncture of literary form and maritime modernization was a new narrative subgenre. This subgenre was the modernist novel, which dates to Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) and Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). Both were products of the country that had pioneered sea adventure fiction in the nineteenth century, in conjunction with American maritime nationalism. Poe and Melville seized on the tension between the power of sea fiction and the demise of its cultural work to push the novel toward other explorations, which inherited the pathbreaking work of the mariner. These explorations included delving into the obscure arenas of language, poetics, and hermeneu-

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tics, explorations that would culminate in novels of Conrad like *Lord Jim*.

Such distinctive periodizations from the ship's deck also bring different aspects of modernity's ideology to the fore. One shift, for example, is to emphasize the fascination with high-risk yet potentially productive spaces at the edge of the dynamic present, where knowledge is expanding but incomplete: one of the defining chronotopes (to use Mikhail Bakhtin's term) of Western modernity. Once having conceptualized this chronotope, we might rethink the significance of Robinson Crusoe, standing on the coast of his island, as in the novel's frontispiece in its original 1719 publication. Though he looks quaint in his goatskins, Crusoe epitomizes experimentation at the limits, not a regression to the state of nature. The pristine state of nature fantasized by the Enlightenment turns out to be shot through with another concept of nature: nature as a harsh but fertile zone, to be plumbed through human inquiry and practice.

Modern Practical Reason

To survive in such spaces of dynamic, incomplete, expanding knowledge requires consummate skill in the arts of action. *Practical reason* is the philosophical term for the intelligence distinguishing people who excel in action. The mariner was a hero of practical reason across the global age of sail. As epitomized by the philosophy of René Descartes, modern intelligence was celebrated for its abstract, calculating rationality, epitomized in disinterested scientific knowledge. However, such rationality is only one tool distinguishing those who thrive at the dynamic edges of modernity; others are the senses, intuitions, experience, feelings, and the body.

As a situation-specific capacity, practical reason has historically taken many forms. The secular dependence on human agency alone is one of the features that separate modern practical reason from the practical reason of antiquity. A related feature of modern practical reason is that it thrives in dynamic zones at the edge of expansion, which are zones of great unpredictability but also discovery, profit, and innovation. This work at the edge of knowledge in quest of surplus contrasts with respect for the limits of the human, which stops at the boundaries of the divine. The classical version of practical reason enmeshed in the recognition of human limits is detailed by Marcel Détienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant in their *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*.

Once having restored practical reason to its importance in the intelligence of modernity, we can recognize the specific excellence of heroes of action in literature, too, starting with Defoe's adventurer Crusoe. Crusoe is a character of action, who with limited resources applies his embodied reason to navigate situations of great danger. Overcoming challenges and solving problems to his profit, he calls on his rationality but also his patience, his ingenuity, his creativity, his body, and his daring. The application of practical reason to solve problems and to profit is evinced by protagonists of adventure fiction not just at sea but also on land, across a lineage stretching from picaresque fiction to detective, spy, and science fiction of the twentieth century (more on the concept of adventure itself in the last section).

Homo Viator

The ship was a pioneering technology of mobility. Considering history from the maritime perspective underlines the importance of transportation as a motor of value essential to capitalist modernity, along with the more familiar processes of production, circulation, exchange, and consumption. The dangers of the ocean emphasize that maritime transportation does not occur in a frictionless vacuum. Rather, it is characterized by a thick set of processes, which are an order of causality

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of their own. The complex nature of transport is true not only at sea but across history more generally. It is, indeed, increasingly the focus of an emerging paradigm of interdisciplinary studies with a symbiotic relation to oceanic studies: mobility studies.[4]

Travel is a value in modernity, one that is as important to acknowledge as political enfranchisement or enlightenment. Novels about seafaring certainly consecrated mobility, despite their critics' efforts to reduce their plots to the scales of the land. *Robinson Crusoe*, again, is a perfect case in point. Across the second half of the twentieth century, novel critics followed Marx in identifying Crusoe as the paradigmatic *homo economicus*, benefiting himself through rational scrutiny of his economic interest. But how does Crusoe actually prosper in the novel? Not from his meager though comfortable subsistence on his island, nor anything else that occurs there. Rather, he profits because he is *homo viator*, man the traveler, willing to undertake overseas speculation and commerce, even if it takes twenty-eight years for him to reap the fruits of his rambling disposition. The ability to move freely celebrated in sea fiction is an extension of the freedom to travel unimpeded as long as the intent was not to harm others (at least, so ran the principle). This freedom, now a foundation of international law, was first defined by the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius as "the freedom of the seas" in a 1609 treatise entitled *Mare liberum*, translated into English as *The Free Sea*.

Adventurous Modernity

Optimistic proponents of Western modernity frame it as a project of progress and perfectability. From a disenchanted Frankfurt school perspective, that project is inseparable from human domination of nature, which wreaks catastrophe. But the history of overseas travel in the global age of sail introduces between progress and domination a third term, more morally ambiguous: the project of *adventure*. I call adventure a project, but the dangerous quest into the unknown is more: it is a discourse, a practice, a narrative, and a structure of feeling. What might be called an adventure complex yoking together emotion, discourse, narrative practice, and intelligence has played as decisive a role in modernity as calculation and scientific reason.[5]

The adventure complex is one more way in which maritime studies is complicating our understanding of modernity. In novel studies, the concept of the adventure complex helps scholars reframe their understanding of the genre. Adventure fiction has historically been one of the forms most popular with readers, though it has been denigrated by critics. One reason is that adventure fiction lacks the deep, psychologically conflicted subject epitomized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions*. In the 1760s, when Rousseau started his confessions, James Cook was preparing to adventure at the edges of dynamic knowledge in his explorations of the globe. In narratives of Cook's journeys, which were best sellers of his time, the exploration of biography, feelings, and private life yields to problem solving, observation, and the struggle for survival in dangerous, uncharted terrain. The history of maritime modernity challenges novel scholars to put adventure fiction, along with the adventure complex, back on the map of modern epistemology and aesthetics.

Notes

1. The terrestrial bias of novel studies has never extended to specialists who work on maritime literature, such as Robert Foulke, Thomas Philbrick, and, in France, Monique Brosse. But theorists have not connected such erudition with more general inquiry into the novel's cultural significance.

2. The following are a few among a wave of noteworthy studies published in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Maritime issues figure prominently amid the essays collected in Nussbaum. The contributors to

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Klein use the maritime perspective and a transnational focus to rethink the British literary tradition across its long history. Lamb connects the writings of the mariners who first charted the Pacific with political, epistemological, and poetic discourse being elaborated simultaneously in Europe. Casarino examines the use made of sea novels by modernist writers like Melville and Conrad to expose the contradictions of capitalist modernity. Baucom meditates on the ways that the slave trade shaped a melancholy Romantic lineage. Neill explores how maritime adventurers were recuperated for imperial and capitalistic projects. Blum portrays the variety and cultural significance of American sea fiction in the antebellum period. The global ocean network figures prominently in Miller.

3. To draw together historical formations that reach across the globe poses a particular challenge to scholarship. It entails working in archives that can be far-flung, even on different sides of the ocean, and that can contain materials in multiple languages and from various cultural traditions. In this enterprise, literary critics can learn from the methods of diaspora scholarship. The accelerating availability of data on the virtual seas of the Internet is also helping to make such excavation feasible.

4. See, e.g., such pioneering works as Urry; Cresswell.

5. Vanessa Schwartz has articulated this concept of adventure as an emotional state in the course of her exchanges with me around our collaborative project on "adventures in ungrounded mobility." Michael Nehrlich starts to define the importance of adventure in modernity, although he does not focus so explicitly on the emotional component of adventure.

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