Embarking with Martin Andersen Nexø

On a November day in 1902, after having traveled around Italy for some months, the Danish author Martin Andersen Nexø set off from Sicily toward the south coast of Spain by sea. Although it was the penultimate month of the year, the sun continued undeterred to emit rays of heat upon the Mediterranean. With a temperature ranging from 15–17° C, this sea, whose name literally means “between land,” was still relatively friendly to swimmers. Its color expressions oscillated alluringly between shining opal, the shade of pale milk, warm indigo, the black of sluggish tar, shimmering crystals, and “a sullen green, opaque and viscous, like molten bottle-glass.” The crew and passengers sometimes glimpsed the gleaming back of a shark from the ship’s rail, or blooms of transparent jellyfish moving rhythmically and synchronously forward below the surface of the water.

Instead of traveling with a passenger steamer, to save money Andersen Nexø traveled on board a dirty Dutch freighter laden with raisins, prunes, oatmeal, and dried fish. However, shortly after departure he realized he had been cheated by a Sicilian “king,” who had arranged the trip for the Dane. The three hundred marks Andersen Nexø paid for the journey by cargo ship turned out to be twice the fare of a passenger steamer. Andersen Nexø had made his first trip to Southern Europe in 1894–96. The primary purpose of that twenty-month journey was for convalescence, but during this journey Andersen Nexø’s career as a writer gathered pace, as we can read in the fourth and last volume of his memoirs, Vejs Ende (1939; End of Road). This time, the author was on an educational journey through the poorest regions of southern Europe to collect impressions and gather new fuel for his gradually growing authorship. His experiences from the two journeys were transformed into the travelogue Days in the Sun (orig., Soldage, 1903).

Andersen Nexø’s farewell to Italy was dry-eyed, not only because of his unfortunate experience with the deceitful Sicilian. Italy was, despite the nation’s unquestionable beauty, “a little too picturesque, a little too idyllic” for the Danish author’s taste. “The countless tourists,” Andersen Nexø further remarked, “have transformed it into something resembling a bedraggled

1 Martin Andersen Nexø, Days in the Sun, trans. Jacob Wittmer Hartmann (1903; New York: Coward-McCann, 1929), 3.
poodle performing idiotic tricks." In addition, he found the land “embroidered over, bedeviled, as it were, by all the painters, poets and philosophers in the world. [...] As in China, you dare not spit for fear of hitting an ancestor, nor draw a breath freely for sheer tradition.” So, Andersen Nexø looked forward to the more virginal and anarchic character of Andalusia. The more rebellious nature of the population appealed to Andersen Nexø (who was inspired by the radicalism of figures such as Georg Brandes and Friedrich Nietzsche) and was aligned with his socialist temperament and ideals. In Italy, the poor may have been visible and vocal to some extent, but they were also half-buried under and drowned out by high culture. As a result of the comparative cultural “nudity” of the landscape and the population, the lower classes of Andalusia were much more noticeable, clear, and authentic. Before revisiting Spain, Andersen Nexø had to undergo a sea voyage of several days. Despite the high fare and less comfortable conditions where travelers slept “in little canteen rooms right over the screw,” and the author’s sleep was often disturbed, because his head collided “with some sharp projecting iron,” the voyage was a pleasant and inspiring experience for Andersen Nexø.

On a general level, *Days in the Sun* and his other works are focused on other and more pressing topics than depicting maritime existence and grappling with the poetics of the ocean. The travel account in *Days in the Sun* is a symbolic *Bildungsroman* in which Andersen Nexø discovers an ideal type of human, the heroic, fully molded, and pure Alfonso M., who was based on a true person. In that sense, *Days in the Sun* anticipates the author’s subsequent multi-volume novels about Pelle (1906–10) and Ditte (1917–21), both of which were terrestrial, had a didactic tone, and showed a blend of social realism and idealistic utopianism with their empathic portrayal of two heroic landbased workers. Nevertheless, *Days in the Sun* contains ten pages that arguably emulate some of the best in the Nordic tradition of sea literature, from the sagas of Icelanders and Jens Munk to Jonas Lie, Holger Drachmann, Amalie Skram, and Aksel Sandemose and, more recently, to Jens Bjørneboe, Jón Kalman Stefánsson, Morten Strøksnes, Maja Lunde, and Siri Ranva Hjelm Jacobsen. Arguably, these passages from *Days in the Sun* come close to emulating those by hypercanonical maritime writers such as Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad in aesthetic quality and nautical sensibility. In addition, they comprise a high concentration in a very limited space of two significant and complex

---

3 Andersen Nexø, *Days in the Sun*, 1.
4 Andersen Nexø, *Days in the Sun*, 3.
histories, the *history of ideas* and the *history of technology*, at a time when both these histories were undergoing radical changes.

1.1 *The Strait of Gibraltar*

During the passage to Cadiz, the Dutch steamer called in at Port of Málaga to load figs, raisins, and sweet Málaga wine. The crew and passengers were supposed to pick up their first mail in three weeks, but that turned out to be in vain. The seafarers crossed the narrow Strait of Gibraltar, “the submarine threshold that connects the ranges of Andalusia with those of North Africa, erecting an invisible but effective line between two seas,” the Mediterranean and Atlantic. After having been underway a week or so, the steamer reached the bay of Cádiz. The city of Cádiz is located on the southern coast of Spain between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. In the three decades prior to Andersen Nexø’s journey, the status of this borderland area had changed significantly due to the rising hegemony of steam power.

It is possible to visualize this change by comparing Vilhelm Melbye’s painting *A Spanish xebec* (1873) (Figure 1) and the following passage from *Days in the Sun*:

---

Far out ahead of us stand countless columns of smoke rising skyward like great pines; hundreds of factories could be located there. But this is one of the highways of the ocean. Under the smoky pine nearest us rises a hull coming our way, it passes us and disappears in the strait—and another, and another, and so on, forever. Black ten-thousand-ton steel monsters push forward with the aid of twin-screws steamers, gasping, spewing forth ugly yellow water from the side and leaving behind a wake of cinders, kitchen waste and glistening coal dust over which the choking smoke pall hangs suspended, bluish black like a stormy sky. These great coal steamers are heading for Gibraltar, Malta and Port Said. […]

Steam has given the ocean trodden paths. As far as the eye can reach backwards and forwards—all the way to the faintest traces of smoke from steamers still many miles off in the horizon—a straight, endless line of ships all plow the same narrow strip. It looks as if they were going around the earth in single file.

But further out on the great watery mirror sailing vessels are moving arbitrarily in all directions. Far away, a majestic ship sails past with white sails billowing from all four masts; sky-high it rises and skews toward us like a dazzling iceberg. Little cutters with lateen sails cross the ocean in all directions; they look like white birds skimming the surface of the water with the tip of one wing.⁶

These passages in Days in the Sun constitute a literary snapshot condensing the tense relationship between the old era of sailing ships and the new era of steamships. To paint it with a broad brush, it was a time of transformation from a fading anthropocentric world of adventure, contingency, and daring, to an emerging technocentric world of calculation, realism, and routine.

Possibly inspired by Melbye’s journey to Spain in the 1850s, A Spanish xebec shows the Strait of Gibraltar as a world of sail with numerous vessels cutting through the lively waves, whereas Andersen Nexø’s 1902 tableau freezes a state of transition between two worlds, the world of sail and the world of steam. Andersen Nexø’s perspective from the Bay of Cádiz extends back to the Mediterranean and its ancient history of myths, coastal seafaring, and Non Plus Ultra, and forward toward the Atlantic and the New World, oceanic seafaring, and Plus Ultra. We sense the future of global modernity through the implied mapping, routinization, and systematization expressed through “trodden paths,” “straight, endless line,” “plow the same narrow strip,” and “in single file.”

⁶ Andersen Nexø, Days in the Sun, 11, 13; translation modified.
Yet traces remain of the world of yesterday with its greater contingency and planlessness ("arbitrary directions") and its multitude of sailing ships, tellingly compared with phenomena in nature, an iceberg and white birds. In contrast to the gracious sailing ships, Andersen Nexø emphasizes the monstrous aspect of modern technology, when he mentions "gaping" "Black steel monsters," "ugly yellow water," “cinders, kitchen waste and glistening coal dust,” “the choking smoke pall.”

But is it not strange that Andersen Nexø, previously so critical towards Italy, because it had developed into a series of tableaus, creates a tableau himself with this snapshot? The Italian tableaus were idyllic, a series of excessively romantic paintings, but his tableau of Cádiz is an explosive, vibrating, and contrasting image that fuses the organicism and romanticism of the near past with the automatism and industrialism of the near future. With this tableau, and with his description of the life and traffic of the Bay of Cádiz, Andersen Nexø invites us to witness the inner contrasts and tensions of his era and of modernity at large. Despite great tensions and conflicts, the two worlds did coexist from the early 1800s to the early 1900s. On the one hand, the birth pangs of the emerging steamship epoch were arduous yet representative of an irreversible process of increased mechanization; on the other hand, the death cramps of the sailing ship epoch were endlessly protracted. Even when the balance between sail and steam had indisputably tipped to the latter’s advantage around the mid-nineteenth century, the old world of sailing ships, seafarers, and distinctive nautical practices refused to die in real life and in the imagination.

But why was that? Firstly, the maritime world with its organization, technology, and infrastructure was a heavy organism to transform. One example is the resilience of the commercial sailing ship amidst the steady development and perfection of the steamship, a resilience that was financially motivated and premised on speed that was faster than many steamships. Considerations of higher speed often outweighed those of higher risk. The transition from sail to steam was also hampered when steamship sailors started to establish unions. Sailing ship sailors had never done that and only began forming unions after steamship sailors set the example. Shipping companies generally avoided unionization for as long as possible, since it introduced friction into an unregulated system that favored owners and merchants.

Secondly, those involved in this world of sail—shipowners, officers, ordinary sailors, dockers, office clerks and more—were quite conservative when it came to embracing the new technology. For ordinary sailors, life on a sailing ship was hazardous, whereas steam technology contributed to securitizing working at sea. However, with the new technology new dangers emerged,
such as the risk of explosions, and that, together with the monotony of work and the claustrophobia of working in the engine room, made some sailors shy away from steamships. Shipowners were annoyed with the increase of control, regulation, and legislation that accompanied steam technology. On July 7, 1852, the US Senate discussed a bill entitled “An act to provide for the better security of the lives of passengers on board of vessels propelled in whole or in part by steam.” As Senator Davis of Mississippi pointed out: “Life in steamers cannot be better secured without measures which [...] excite the distrust, if not the hostility, of the owners of such vessels. They prefer the unrestrained liberty of managing their affairs according to their discretion, though a mercenary spirit may, and often does, triumph over all sympathy for those exposed to destruction from explosions and other causes.”

Thirdly, authors writing about life at sea often had personal experiences with the world of sailing ships. By writing about sailing, the writers kept the image of the world of sail alive in the imagination of their readers, even when that world was disappearing. Authors who had experienced both worlds, including Melville and Conrad, as well as Drachmann and Sandemose, had deeply felt and nostalgic sentiments for the old world, and often felt antipathy towards the new world and its transformative practices. It is no coincidence that Melville's last work, the posthumously published *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, begins with the nostalgic phrase “In the time before steamships ...”

1.2 Transition and Simultaneity

Andersen Nexø's Cádiz tableau is a snapshot that captures an irreversible transition between two historical epochs, the past of sail and the future of steam. The two world pictures of the tableau were interlocked throughout most of the nineteenth century and constituted an epochal tension. In that sense, the snapshot and the image it evokes of the nineteenth century calls for two different readings of time and temporality. On the one hand, the tableau exemplifies “historical time,” the historical consciousness that according to Reinhart Koselleck emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century and


8 Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative), Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Uncompleted Writings*, *The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 13, eds. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, Robert A. Sandberg, and G. Thomas Tanselle, historical note by Hershel Parker (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 2017), 3.
dominated the era in which Andersen Nexø lived. Here, the tableau points to a historical process that leaves a useless past behind and promises a future of new possibilities. Progress is inevitable, and sail will eventually make way for steam. On the other hand, the image is an example of “broad present,” the temporal consciousness that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht describes as the way in which we conceptualize time, present, and history today. “Broad present” differs from “historical time” in that we are now flooded with past epochs no longer discarded as useless. Instead of being an open horizon of possibilities, the future has now become closed and menacing. Read through the temporality of “broad present,” Andersen Nexø’s snapshot of his own present condenses not so much a transition between two epochs as the continuous simultaneity of the two epochs. The tableau encompasses both temporalities.

Previously in Days in the Sun, there is a description supporting the idea that the dominating historical consciousness in Andersen Nexø’s maritime world, “historical time,” was challenged, or even supplanted, by the temporality of “broad present”:

It is lovely to be sailing, with ocean and nothing but ocean on all sides as far as the eye can see. Mile after mile of watery surface passes under the ship’s bow and glides past astern, but far off on the horizon new wastes of water appear as fast as we can put them behind us. It is as if we are going nowhere, and yet the ship is pounding undeterred, and the screw turns—wading through eternity must be something like this.

Andersen Nexø describes the ship’s journey as a struggle without movement. The Dutch cargo steamer crawls monotonously forward, but because the ocean appears to be infinite, the journey does not seem to be making progress despite concepts of transition such as “passes under” and “glides past astern.” On the contrary, and anticipating the closed futurities later conceptualized by Sartre as closed doors, by Camus as the ceaseless toil of Sisyphus, and by Beckett as a waiting for Godot, the crew and passengers were seemingly going “nowhere.”

---

11 Andersen Nexø, Days in the Sun, 2; translation modified.
In *A Poetic History of the Oceans*, the temporal configurations of “historical time” (irrelevant past, transitory present, open future) and “broad present” (engulfing pasts, broad present, closed future) are important tools for analyzing humanity’s varied entanglements with the technologically mediated and mysterious world of the sea. They are useful when examining nautical sources from the period when steam replaced sail. As Carl Schmitt observes in *Land and Sea* (orig., *Land und Meer*, 1942), the nineteenth century was a time during which the ocean was metaphorically transformed from a large fish into a machine.\(^\text{12}\) Arguably, this period represents the heyday of maritime fiction, certainly in novelistic form, including authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Victor Hugo, Jonas Lie, Jules Verne, and Joseph Conrad. But “historical time” and “broad present” are also relevant when we discuss writers from earlier epochs (e.g., Homer, Horace, Camões, and Jens Munk) and the two directions taken by writers in the post-Conrad era, the one *nostalgic* and oriented towards the sea of the *past* (e.g., Aksel Sandemose, C. S. Forester, Jens Bjørneboe, Patrick O’Brien, William Golding, Amitav Ghosh, Carsten Jensen, and Franzobel, of whom we shall read a few cursorily), the other *dystopic* and oriented towards the sea of the *future* (e.g., Alfred Döblin, J. G. Ballard, Morten Strøksnes, Maja Lunde, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Siri Ranva Hjelm Jacobsen, of whom we shall focus on Ballard and Jacobsen).

The reader familiar with the field of Blue Humanities will recognize some of the above names, but probably not all of them. Blue Humanities, Oceanic Studies, Maritime History, as well as the other disciplinary labels employed to describe the history of human interactions with the oceans have experienced an upsurge in recent decades. Also characteristic of this fertile development is that it has unfolded predominantly within the scholarly communities of the Anglophone West. More recently, there is increasing interest in the maritime global south, including the Indian and Pacific Oceans and their roles in the societal history of the East. *A Poetic History of the Oceans* has its emphasis on Western sources and material, but one of its primary innovations in the Blue Humanities discourse is to tell the story of Western sea literature and culture through a Nordic lens. One contribution is through the analysis of Scandinavian sources in a Western or global context alongside more well-known and canonical sources, thus introducing these texts to a readership to whom they have been relatively unknown; the other is by insisting through a reading of an early Nordic saga on a softening of the temporal break around

---

traditionally associated with the oceanic turn, since Vikings were forerunners of transoceanic voyaging several centuries before Columbus, da Gama, and Magellan set sail for distant shores. Through the perspectives provided by Nordic writers and sailors, it is my hope that *A Poetic History of the Oceans* serves not only an introduction to oceanic literature in the West, but also an intervention in and contribution to the expansion of the scholarly discourse concerned with this literature.

1.3 *Maritime World Pictures*

In my analysis of the selected nautical sources, whether written texts, paintings, a film, novels, logbooks, poems, or history books, my intention is to extract from them their *maritime world picture*. This world picture is made up of the following elements: a temporal configuration (the figure of time and the conception of past, present, and future); an articulation of a distinct relationship between gods, humans, nature, and technology; an image of the ocean; and poetics. What are the implications of a sea ruled by gods in *The Odyssey* as compared to the powerful presence of a writing and acting “I” in Munk’s *Navigatio Septentrionalis* (1624) and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)? In the shipwreck of the *São Joāo* in 1552, what role is attributed to technology as compared to the role of modern technology when Captain MacWhirr leads the *Nan-Shan* safely through a hurricane in Conrad’s *Typhoon* (1902)? In what ways do nature and the Earth’s history return with a vengeance in Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) and Jacobsen’s *Havbrevene* (2018; The Sea Letters), and where does this leave humanity? Why does Melville resort to lyricism in ecologically sensitive passages and use descriptive realism and encyclopedic forms at other times in *Moby-Dick* (1851)? And why do we find aesthetic strategies similar to Melville’s in Michelet’s *La Mer* (1861), Hugo’s *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866), and Verne’s *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1869–70/1871)?

Questions such as these indicate some of the topics I address in this book about the poetic history of the oceans. In the following, I discuss why the ocean is important for the writing of cultural history and in the ways in which a Blue Humanities approach is a relevant and crucial method, given that we inhabit what Melville called “this terraqueous globe.”

---

I call an amphibian comparative literature. This method is characterized by its capacity to accommodate “both kinds of life” (ἀμφί, amphí, “of both kinds,” and βιος, bios, “life“): life above water and life under water, the human and the nonhuman, even the organic and the inorganic, and the prehuman and the posthuman. This capacity is crucial in the encounter with literary works that depict an increasingly wet and unstable world in which humans are powerful agents yet also increasingly impotent creatures. Specifically, amphibian comparative literature succeeds at zooming in on components other than human characters and anthropogenic plots. It also focuses on and embraces nonhuman actors, objects and hyperobjects, and terrestrial as well as aquatic life. For amphibian comparative literature, the novel is for example not merely “the modern bourgeois epic” (Hegel) and a biographical form (Lukács), it is also a geographical form and the epic of the whale (e.g., Moby Dick) and the steamship (e.g., La Durande).

While the chapters on history, rhythm, and technology focus on representations of sailors and their seagoing vessels and what is usually referred to as maritime history, the chapters on history, materiality, and the Anthropocene epoch venture into oceanic history by turning this “longstanding historiography of humans, vessels, and exploration toward an analysis of complex relations between elements (winds, tides, currents), ocean life (mammals, fish, crustaceans, birds, plants), and human activity in and on the seas.” If the former is primarily defined by a lateral perspective focusing on the horizontal movements across the ocean’s surface, the latter is characterized by its vertical approach. However, in our case the well-known critique of the vertical perspective as being potentially imperial and disembodied is countered by the fact that the perspective from outer space—the one usually associated with a vertical methodology—is replaced by a perspective from the undersea: animal, vegetal, and mineral instead of imperial, and a space of immersion and entanglement instead of a space of disembodiment. It is perhaps symptomatic that the editors of Oceanic Histories (2018), all historians by training, leave out aesthetic representations when they emphasize that oceanic historiography “overlaps with geographies, cartographies, astronomies, ethnographies, climatic studies and natural histories.”

14 A Poetic History of the Oceans is an attempt to supplement omissions of the endlessly rich and varied archive of how humans have engaged poetologically and epistemologically with the ocean.

Amphibian Comparative Literature on a Terraqueous Globe

It has become common to state quantitative facts when attempting to convince readers of the importance of the ocean and the relevance of Blue Humanities. So as not to disrupt that tradition, here are a few of the most referenced facts: over seventy percent of Planet Earth is covered by oceans, less than thirty percent by landmasses; like Planet Earth, nearly seventy percent of the human body is composed of saltwater; half of the world’s human population lives within one hundred miles from an ocean; and roughly ninety percent of our planet’s biosphere lives under water. The French historian Jules Michelet summed it up in *La Mer* (1861): “On the surface of the globe, water is the generality, the earth is the exception.” As early as 7–23 AD, the Greek geographer Strabo acknowledged in his *Geography* that “we are amphibious, and belong no more to the land than to the sea.” Recently, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk called the uneven balance between land and sea “the fundamental globographical fact of the Modern Age,” observing that the Magellan expedition’s logbook by Antonio Pigafetta helped bring “the Ptolemaic belief in the predominance of land masses, to a sensational end.” Sloterdijk adds that “it never became clear whether it was an evangelical or a dysangelical one,” thus indicating that we are yet to come to terms—historically, culturally, philosophically, existentially—with living on a blue planet.

Historiography, for example, continues to be primarily a terrestrial practice executed *on* and conceived *from* land. But perhaps this is only logical if we stop to think about it. Is it not true that history, cultural history, and literary history are all historiographical practices *by* humans *about* humans? And although we humans may still sense a genetically informed evolutionary intimacy with marine life forms, an intimacy stretching back into deep time, we have gradually and irreversibly morphed into land creatures. From our present rung on

---

15 Jules Michelet, *La Mer* (Paris: Librairie L. Hachette et Cie, 1861), 9–10. To my knowledge, there are three English translations of *La Mer*: an anonymous from 1861 (New York: Rudd & Carleton), which is very liberal in its approach; one by W. D. Davenport Adams from 1875 (London: T. Nelson and Sons), which is better than the anonymous one, but still problematic; and one by Katia Sainson from 2012 (Los Angeles: Green Integer), which I haven’t had the chance to consult. But as a consequence of the questionable quality and fidelity of the two early translations, I have chosen to refer to the French text and translate quotations myself.


the evolutionary ladder, there is no going back. The sea has become an inhospitable and uninhabitable place for humanity, at least for humanity in its current form of *homo sapiens*. However, the imbroglio between humans and oceans, a relationship of both *intimacy* and *separation*, implies that the ocean is both the condition and boundary of our lives.

Although humans live on land and write cultural histories, novels, poems, and stories about their life on land, we must insist on two important corrections to the above. First, despite their terrestrial starting point, human history and culture, including literature, are profoundly entangled with the watery world. For eons, the oceans have connected countries and continents, provided food and other material resources for humans, spawned the cultural imagination of humanity, and offered their coastal regions to humans, who have been strongly inclined to build their residences right at the edge where land and sea meet. Even if we were to keep insisting on an anthropocentric and terrestrial focus when writing cultural histories, these histories would be highly inadequate and incomprehensive if they did not respect the human-ocean entanglements: “Living on land we sometimes forget the sea’s dominance of our physical and cultural histories. We should remember,” Steve Mentz reminds us.18

Second, it is too constricted to postulate that the historiographical practices of historians and scholars in cultural and literary studies focus exclusively on humans and their terrestrial existence. The history of the planet and the history of literatures across epochs and languages include both the nonhuman and the aquatic. However, our understandings of history and of literary and cultural history are too often terrestrial rather than terraqueous or aquatic, and human-centered rather than amphibian or nonhuman, because our historiographical practices have been too anthropocentric and terrestrial. A Blue Humanities approach not only “names an off-shore trajectory that places cultural history in an oceanic rather than terrestrial context,” it also turns “to the sea to place human histories in more-than-human contexts.”19

*A Poetic History of the Oceans* moves geographically between land and sea and between human and nonhuman perspectives and contexts. I examine the role of the oceans in planetary and human history, and I explore how writers, artists, sailors, philosophers, and historians have attempted to negotiate two of the most pressing challenges of the ocean, one epistemological, the other poetological: *How to know the unknowable? How to give shape to that which is*

---

18 Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 97.

Navigators, pilots, and scientists used lead lines to sound the depths of the fathomless ocean. Writers, driven by the alluring yet impossible fantasy of knowing what is unknowable, used their lead pencils (of graphite) and their quills and ink in their ambitious attempts to both *match* and *figure* the vast waters and reach into (physical and psychological) bottomless spaces, where human bodies and minds had never before ventured. From these depths, they brought back strange things and visions—what Hester Blum has labelled a specific “model of knowledge” rooted in the material world and in which imagination always has an “empirical basis”—that demanded a new aesthetic grammar and vocabulary emphasizing obscurity over clarity and process over progress. To Conrad, the central imperative of the writer was thus to make the reader see: “To see, to see!” This aesthetic challenge and the ability to see were for Conrad intimately linked with going to sea. Life at sea resulted in a productive distortion of landlocked epistemologies of clear vision. It also led Conrad to elevate the sailor’s epistemology of embodied vision to a metaphor for a “beclouded” humanity. This theory of an oceanic thinking applicable to humanity as such is captured by Gaston Bachelard’s formula, “the true eye of the earth is water.” To Holger Drachmann, the Danish writer and marine painter, the sea has an eye that is “wet,” and in an early text, an obituary to his teacher C. F. Sørensen, Drachmann speaks of “‘salty’ water” and “‘wet’ water” when characterizing Sørensen’s painted images.

### 2.1 The Forgotten Sea

But why this blue-green and amphibious comparative approach? What insights will it yield? These questions are not simply rhetorical. They are legitimized, because the facts evidencing planetary oceanic primacy are counteracted by a development of even greater importance. During the twentieth century...

---


23 Holger Drachmann, “Havets Sang,” in *Ungdom i Digt og Sang* (København: Gyldendal, 1879), 204.

century, especially after World War II, the advent of diesel engines, airline travel, aerial warfare, space travel, containerization, and the automation of ports gradually led to what artist Allan Sekula has labelled “the ‘forgetting’ of the sea” in our cultural imagination.\(^\text{25}\) After having been perceived as a theater of divine forces to be feared and avoided in ancient times, a glimmering surface promising new lands and riches during the age of sail, and a place of fascinating depths partly familiarized by scientific discoveries and controlled by humans through technological inventions from the mid-nineteenth century, the sea gradually transformed itself from a powerful presence in human history to a place of personal recreation and impersonal containerization. To Mentz, in the post-World War II era, the ocean was left in the care of “maritime museums, the novels of Patrick O’Brian, and sentimental films.”\(^\text{26}\) There is not necessarily something wrong with, say, a sentimental movie such as The Blue Lagoon (1980), a novel such as Master and Commander (1969), or a museum such as the twentieth-century version of the Musée national de la Marine in Paris. But Mentz’ constellation of maritime museums, O’Brian’s novels, and sentimental films arguably signal a somewhat “antiquarian” approach to the sea in history.\(^\text{27}\)

In 1947, when the forgetting of the sea was already well under way, it was still possible for the American poet Charles Olson in Call Me Ishmael, a short and elegant meditation on Moby-Dick, to imagine a world history whose central topics, geographies, and structure would comprise the Mediterranean (Homer), the Atlantic Ocean (Dante), and the Pacific Ocean (Melville).\(^\text{28}\) Only half a century after Olson, Michael Taussig regretfully pointed out that such a historiographical vision now seemed almost unthinkable.\(^\text{29}\) If we momentarily accept the Eurocentrism in Olson’s vision and suspend the knowledge we now possess of how the Polynesian “sea people” four thousand years ago ventured out into the Polynesian Triangle, then the problem with Olson’s dream was not so much the chronological imagining of the vision (from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic to the Pacific), nor was the principal problem his list of Euro-American male authors associated with a specific geography. Although the Polynesian explorers-turned-settlers had a complex and varied nautical vocabulary in terms of natural and technical phenomena bearing witness of their

\(^{26}\) Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean*, ix–x.
highly developed seafaring culture, it seems they had no name for the ocean as a whole, no concept of a high seas zone beyond their immediate environment and possession, and no knowledge of writing. They were a prehistoric people with no literature as we know it from the likes of Homer, Dante, and Melville. Despite their impressive place sensitivity and conception of the ocean as “road map” divided into a web of distinct places and differentiated pathways,\(^30\) they did not possess the global vision, with which the Pacific experiences endowed Melville.\(^31\) As Taussig saw it, the actual problem was the very topic of Olson’s dream: the ocean.

To some extent, Taussig was right. Even Olson’s magnificent vision could be rubricated as “antiquarian” in the decades that followed its publication, a mere attempt to write history for the sake of history. In 2000, when Taussig published his fantasy, and today as well, very few people have firsthand experiences with ships and the sea. Airspace has not only replaced the sea as the medium through which ordinary people travel but has also become the space used by nation-states to protect and expand territorial sovereignty and where empires exercise world dominance. In addition, the sea and its resources provide a livelihood for fewer and fewer people, yet not many of us consider that many of our material possessions were at some point inside containers aboard the colossal ocean freighters that cross the seven seas relatively unnoticed despite their monstrous size. However, is it not characteristic of these times that water plays an increasing role in the self-understanding and branding of many cities, and that we appreciate living close to water? Yes, this may very well be true, but the urban harbors and canals are merely domesticized and tamed versions of the great ocean: “In New York, as in major ports from Liverpool to Los Angeles, the ocean isn’t the heart of the city anymore.”\(^32\) Mentz mentions specifically how the Port of New York has been relocated from downtown Manhattan (the harbor area where Ishmael meditates on the necessity of going to sea to prevent a potentially suicidal melancholy from getting the better of him) to Newark, New Jersey. The sea is no longer interwoven with our lives in any “elementary” sense. We do not live on the sea, but distant from it or on the edge of it.

---


\(^32\) Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean*, x.
2.2 Revision, Actualization, Crisis

So why insist on the centrality of the sea? Why ask what insights will emerge from a combined Blue Cultural Studies and Amphibian Comparative Literature approach? A response can be divided into two main strands, one historical, the other contemporary, and each with multiple sub-answers. The first answer emphasizes that the sea has played an immensely undervalued role in history, especially in the history of modernity. If modernity has traditionally been framed through progress, rationality, and the freedom and autonomy of the individual, an oceanic perspective enables us to discover a “shipwreck modernity” defined as “a catastrophe-ridden epic of ocean-fueled expansion and its attendant disasters.”

The second answer underlines that we are now living at a point in time when the sea, after the “hydrophasia” of much of twentieth-century humanities scholarship, once again assumes a crucial role in the planet’s history, although our awareness of this have come about under sinister omens of plastic oceans and rising sea levels. So, paradoxically, what Olson dreamed of in 1947 but Taussig did not believe possible in 2000, an oceanic world history, is in fact in the process of materializing through numerous important publications in different fields such as history, cultural studies, literary studies, science and technology studies, and environmental studies. I call it a paradox, because Blue Humanities is born out of the climate crisis and forecasts of flooding, and this negative premise was never part of Olson’s historiographical dream. However, in terms of relevance, a crisis is never a bad starting point for any scholarly method.

Let us begin with addressing the historical argument, which is grounded less in crisis than in revisionary ambitions and a prospective actualization of certain structural, epistemological, and poetological characteristics of maritime history that resonates particularly well with our fluid modernity. From the time of Homer’s Ulysses and Vergil’s Aeneas to the beginning of the twentieth century, when people looked at the sea from the coast or the harbor, the sight they saw was very different from ours. What we see nowadays is a blank surface or one with a solitary vessel or a couple of insignificant dots spotted in the distance occasionally. Back then, as evidenced by scenes of the waters outside Cádiz depicted in Andersen Nexø’s Days in the Sun and Vilhelm Melbye’s A Spanish xebec and other commercial craft, visions bursting with life and movement and crowded with sailors and ships, with schooners and steamers.

---

33 Mentz, “Blue Humanities,” 72.
Bearing in mind the radical shift that the maritime world has undergone since the beginning of the twentieth century, it is no wonder that we came to suffer from a very specific type of Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Seinsvergessenheit* or “the forgetfulness of Being”: *Meeresvergessenheit* or hydrophasia.

When the twentieth-century forgetting of the sea develops into a general blindness towards the sea’s historical role, we face a genuine problem: *To us, modernity is terrestrial, not nautical.* This is true whether we consider modernity to begin with the Renaissance, the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment, or the Industrial Revolution. The developments traditionally related to modernity, here summarized by Michel Foucault, are all predominantly terrestrial: a questioning or refutation of tradition; the valorization of individualism, personal freedom, and formal equality; a confidence in social, scientific, and technological progress; rationalization, standardization, and professionalization; a movement from feudalism or agrarianism toward capitalism and the market economy; industrialization, urbanization, and secularization; and the advance of the nation-state, representative democracy, the bourgeoisie, and public education.\(^{36}\)

However, nautical modernity prioritizes the ocean instead of the urban, and this makes possible a series of revisions of how we traditionally frame modernity. On ships, education was practical, not intellectual, and took place on the masthead and on the deck, not in lecture halls or at a desk: “a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard,” Ishmael claims in *Moby-Dick*.\(^{37}\) Life at sea was everything but democratic, often dictatorial, or at least strictly hierarchical and feudal. The regularity and orderliness of bourgeois life stood in stark contrast to the exceptional and often brutal living conditions on board ships. And if maritime nationalism is an integral part of the seafaring world, this world was fundamentally global, transnational, or stateless. While landlubbers became increasingly secular and rational, sailors remained superstitious and open to the mysteries of the (divine) mechanisms of the sea. Admittedly, with the advent of steamships and the subsequent division of labor between sailors on deck and engineers and stokers in the engine room, the maritime world followed the path of industrialization and, over time, professionalization, but despite safer conditions, ship life remained very different from the monotony of factory life. The maritime world was no doubt a driving force in the development of global capitalism, but in some areas of commercial shipping more collective principles of solidarity reigned. Faced with the immensity of the

---


ocean, eternal in its substance when perceived with human eyes, sailors were less inclined than humans on land to subscribe to the idea of progress. And while the ocean with its vast horizons lured with promises of freedom and escape from the strict conformity of social conventions on land, sailors soon discovered that ship life was a collective phenomenon, and that any hopes of individual autonomy and personal freedom were subjected to mightier forces, not least the powers of nature and the captain. Finally, if land people questioned and rejected traditions, life and labor on board ships were largely based on the transfer of experiences, practices, and traditions from one generation to the next.

In some historical sources there are glimpses, also well-known ones, of insights into a modernity that is not exclusively terrestrial, though. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon listed in a now famous passage in *Novum organon* (1620) gunpowder, the printing press, and the compass as three technological inventions that had “altered the whole face of things right across the globe.” According to Bacon, there was “no empire, no sect and no star,” which had “exerted a greater effect and influence on human affairs than these mechanical innovations.”  

The compass was actually a Chinese invention dating back to the middle of the third century BC, and it was initially used as a harmonizing tool in line with the principles of *feng shui*. It was probably not until the eleventh century that the compass was employed as a maritime navigational instrument and made possible what Carl Schmitt has called “that elemental turn towards the sea that was completed in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.”  

The first known reference to the compass as a navigational instrument is in Zhu Yu’s *Pingzhou ketan*, written between 1111 and 1117, in which we learn that the ship’s pilots “are acquainted with the configuration of the coasts; at night they steer by the stars, and in the day-time by the sun. In dark weather they look at the south-pointing needle.”

---

Bacon, who had adorned the title page of *Novum organum* with two sailing ships, on their way from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, passing through the Pillars of Hercules at the Strait of Gibraltar, did not overestimate the importance of the roles played by the compass and the maritime transportation networks in the development of global modernity. Nor did G. W. F. Hegel, when, two hundred years later, in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821) he distinguished sharply between “the earth, the firm and solid ground” as “a precondition of the principle of family life” and the sea as “the natural element of industry”:

for the ties of the soil and the limited circles of civil life with its pleasures and desires, it substitutes the element of fluidity, danger, and destruction. Through this supreme medium of communication, it also creates trading links between distant countries, a legal [*rechtlichen*] relationship which gives rise to contracts; and at the same time, such trade [*Verkehr*] is the greatest educational asset [*Bildungsmittel*] and the source from which commerce derives its world-historical significance.

It is worth noting that rather than considering the sea as a barrier, Hegel emphasized its *connective potential*. Rivers and oceans “are *not natural boundaries*” but “link humans together.” Also, his chosen concepts resonate with the way we today speak about the World Wide Web. In the last part of the important § 247, he attributed the blossoming creativity and growing wealth in nations such as Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and England to their openness toward and active exploitation of the sea, whereas hydrophobic and navigation-frightened countries such as Egypt and India had sunk into superstition.

From the time of Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Ferdinand Magellan, a time during which Western man became restless and showed transgressive propensities, and “the notion of a largely terran earth was

---

41 According to myth, the pillars originally bore the inscription “Nec Plus Ultra” or “Non Plus Ultra,” which means “no(thing) further beyond.” This was a warning to seafarers not to venture into the Atlantic. After the “discovery” of America, the pillars were used in the Spanish Coat of Arms, but the motto was now changed by Charles V into “Plus Ultra” meaning “further beyond.”


44 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 268.
replaced with that of the oceanic planet,” to the beginning of the twentieth century—an era that stretched over more than four centuries—the maritime world played a key role in the development of mercantilism, capitalism, and colonial expansion. Prior to the emergence of the railroad networks in the beginning of the nineteenth century, merchandise, humans, and information had already been travelling across the seven seas for three centuries, thus emphasizing “the considerable predominance of sea voyages over those on land” during the early accelerations of globalization.\(^\text{45}\) They had benefitted from what the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius called “mare liberum” (the freedom of the sea or the free ocean) in a book by the same title, published for the first time in 1609.\(^\text{46}\) Admittedly, nations such as Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, and later the United States also fought against each other’s military and mercantile fleets for the purpose of controlling trade routes and securing access to important coasts and harbors.

*Mare liberum* provoked immediate counter-reactions in what came to be known as the “Battle of the Books,” for example Seraphim de Freitas’ *De justo imperio luistanorum asiatico* (The Imperial Right of the Portuguese in Asia) (1625), whose title conveys its main argument, and John Selden’s *Mare Clausum* (1635), which argued for the English crown’s legal jurisdiction over maritime routes and resources in the waters surrounding England. While de Freitas agrees with Grotius that the ocean is a distinct space that cannot be possessed and endowed with all the rights of exclusion that are usually claimed by a sovereign, he differs from Grotius by asserting that navigation is not a right bestowed upon everyone by natural law, and that sovereigns may rightfully exercise their power in adjacent waters in ways that limit the freedoms of navigation and trade. So, while Grotius acknowledges that stewardship over ocean-space might theoretically be proclaimed by individual states but that it must in such cases be executed on behalf of the community of states, because access to ocean resources is guaranteed to all under natural law, then Freitas proposes that the right to command over the deep sea should be shared among competent sovereigns. These sovereigns gain exclusive *usufruct* rights but not property rights over specific long-distance trade routes.

Selden focuses on demonstrating the legitimacy of states claiming their neighboring waters as fully incorporated territory within the state. To Selden, and seemingly in opposition to Grotius and Freitas, a state may possess

\(^{45}\) Sloterdijk, *Spheres II: Globes*, 804, 804.

ocean-space. In fact, however, he is arguing for a set of rules similar to those advanced by Grotius for situations in which a state or sovereign could, in effect, own a portion of the ocean. Grotius and Selden both propose systems in which rights to private property are superimposed by regulations preventing usurpation of rights to common usage. These systems then contrast with Freitas, who argues that the sea is common property but susceptible to private usufruct. Philip E. Steinberg sums it up: “Freitas envisions a world in which competing powers claim quasi-sovereignty over specific ocean routes and take on responsibility for policing these routes; Grotius implies that this quasi-sovereignty belongs to the community of nations; and Selden—by implication of omission—suggests a laissez-faire regime in which states may cooperate or compete freely, so long as they do not hinder navigation.”

During the mercantilist era of channeled circulation and trade control, the dominant construction of ocean-space was closest to the one promoted by de Freitas, since states, including the Dutch and the English, continued to assert exclusive rights to parcels of the ocean. Eventually, a resolution to the “Battle of the Books” was reached that combined Grotian mare liberum in the deep sea with Seldenian mare clausum in coastal waters.

The seafaring world was alluring with its promise of stimulating the emerging human curiosity through geographical exploration. It also made promises of wealth and power: “From the start, the oceanic adventure entangled its actors in a race for hidden chances to access opaque distant markets.” The adjectives are important here, for with “hidden” and “opaque” Sloterdijk emphasizes a new risk mentality that, together with curiosity, spurred Western man on. Governments and trading companies invested enormous sums of money in exploration, research, and development, thus contributing to making the maritime world into a technological and scientific frontline of modernity. “During that time, anyone who claimed to understand the world had to think hydrographically.”

Although ocean-space was uninhabited by humans and functioned for them primarily as a surface across which extensive trade happened between nations on land, Steinberg regards it as “a unique and specifically constructed space within society.” From a spatial-juridical perspective, it could be claimed

47 Steinberg, The Social Construction of the Ocean, 98.
48 For an examination of curiosity’s importance for Modernity as an autonomous period significantly distinct from Antiquity and the Middle Ages (characterized as they were by theological absolutism), see Hans Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, trans. Robert M. Wallace (1966, 1976; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 227–453.
49 Sloterdijk, Spheres II: Globes, 812, 811.
that the oceanic precedes the terrestrial. As a result of *Mare liberum*, Grotius is considered the founder of the law of the sea and of modern international law in general. It is also important to bear in mind that this treatise, motivated by legal questions concerning the high seas, appeared four decades before the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which served as a blueprint for the modern political system of multiple, sovereign, territorially defined states: “If global politics and law simply are rules that emerge from anarchic interactions among pre-defined state-actors, ‘international’ law could not have been conceptualized prior to the formalization of the states that allegedly are the essential units of the system,” Steinberg points out. During the early modern period, fluid ocean-space played a key role in the subsequent imaginary and judiciary conceptualizations of societal space during the eras of mercantilism and industrial and postmodern capitalism, not least as a spatial alternative to what is termed the “territorial trap.” This concept signifies a conception of the world as naturally divided into preexisting, territorially defined nation-states in which the ocean is reduced to a secondary status as an extra-state space.

There is a significant discrepancy between this brief account of genuine maritime importance and the blindness towards the sea expressed by some of the most influential cultural theorists from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. Philosophers and thinkers such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and Michel Foucault all contributed to delineate what Margaret Cohen has called “a geography of modernity that was primarily land-based” characterized by a focus “on *terra firma*, on territorialized spaces like the nation state, the city, the colony, the home, and the factory.” If Simmel paved the way for the Mobilities Studies of today, his groundbreaking analysis of sensuous stimuli, fast movements, and the need for punctuality was based exclusively on the urban environment of the new metropolises. And if Foucault produced an influential paper on sea and ships, he ultimately consigned the ship to a marginal (heterotopic) position in the cultural history of the West, instead emphasizing terrestrial places such as the prison and the asylum. In short, theoretically and rhetorically, the sea was considered an extra-societal, anti-civilizational, and void space. In reality, of course, both deep sea and coastal waters have provided societies with crucial

resources—not least connectivity, fish, and minerals—which gradually made active stewardship and governance necessary.

The cultural theorists were not alone in their attempts to marginalize the sea. The majority of literary historians in the twentieth century were their accomplices. The hydrophasia in literary studies, perhaps we could even call it the *thallasophobia* (not merely a forgetting of the sea, but a fear of the sea with its uncertain moorings), meant that scholars often overlooked the important role played by the ocean in literature and literary history as the *concrete place and medium* for 1) narrative action, 2) the unfolding of historical, national, and political conflicts, and 3) global communication and exchange. But is this a problem? Perhaps the marginalization of the ocean in literary historiography is merely a natural consequence of literature being fundamentally earthbound. Come to think of it, was it not Hegel, who in his lectures on aesthetics in the mid-1830s (and despite his highly developed oceanic sensibility in 1821) characterized the novel as “the modern *bourgeois* epic,” thereby implicitly excluding the ocean, industry, the fluid, and the ship from the sphere of the novel?53

2.3 Saltwater Literatures

In Denmark, Holger Drachmann implicitly echoed Hegel’s conception of the novel in his story “Ørnen” (The Eagle), but at the same time he expressed a heartfelt desire that Danish literature would break with the yoke of the bourgeois ethos:

rather than the persistent spinning of a tale's thread in a web around “the family’s” dinner table or supper table, one should once try to relocate one's weaving industry out into the open air where the wind blows and where the web is swung up and down by light, elastic threads that are infinitely extendable and receptive to the enveloping influence of free nature in the guise of fresh and full colors [...] And maybe the time will come when the writer becomes more of a traveler who sees and experiences than a mere writer who writes.54

Nordic writers such as Jonas Lie, Alexander Kielland, Amalie Skram, Johannes V. Jensen, and Aksel Sandemose responded to Drachmann’s wish for a windy and colorful literature in a series of fine maritime novels and stories.


Internationally, the maritime world had stimulated the imagination of writers and readers, and a wide range of saltwater books and stories were in circulation from the sixteenth century and onwards. Sea journeys unfolded in environments that only few had access to but which influenced the lives of so many people and aroused the curiosity of the reading audience of landlubbers. In addition, the global sea journeys converged historically with the invention of the printing press, and many pseudo-sailors combed maritime travel literature, fictional and factual, to find exotic adventures and specific information about new worldly events and developments.

Based on such observations, it is problematic that writers who have included the sea as an elemental component of human existence and planetary history in their works have been met with a critical-analytical gaze more oriented towards the earthly soil than towards the sea and the ship. Let me mention four examples of such optical distortions. First, the canonical studies of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), subsequently influencing many later interpretations, read the eponymous hero as an iconic figure who heralds or even incarnates a new type of human: *homo economicus* (Karl Marx, Ian Watt) or the colonizer (James Joyce).\(^{55}\) Second, if James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote the first genuine maritime novel in literary history, *The Pilot: A Tale of the Sea* (1824), is remembered at all in this age of hypercanonization, he is more remembered for his novels featuring Native Americans set in the wilderness and forests, the Leatherstocking Tales, than for his eleven nautical novels, which earned him the most praise in his lifetime. Third, readers of *Moby-Dick*, especially those taking a Marxist approach, translate the maritime constellation *Pequod*-Ahab-crew into a terrestrial constellation of factory-managers-workers. According to Saul Bellow, the reason for this is a tendency among many readers to over-interpret and read symbolically when there is no reason to do so. This manifests as a problematic will to territorialize the oceanic and transform a fish into a dog.\(^{56}\) Fourth, Jonas Lie is best remembered in Norway


\(^{56}\) Saul Bellow, “The Search for Symbols, a Writer Warns, Misses All the Fun and Fact of the Story,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1959. Melville does in fact describe the *Pequod* as “a floating factory,” and American whaling in the 1840s could rightly be called an industry, but the point is that life on board the *Pequod* is much more than a factory-like life. As Carl Schmitt observes in *Land and Sea*: “A ship is no swimming piece of land, just as a fish is no swimming dog,” 51; translation modified.
for the bourgeois novel *Familjen paa Gilje* (1883; *The Family at Gilje*), whose subtitle *Et Interieur fra Firtiaarene* (*A Domestic Story of the Forties*) emphasizes its domestic topography. When scholars direct their attention towards Lie’s *Lodsen og hans Hustru* (1874; *The Pilot and His Wife*), it is more often referred to as the first novel of marriage in Norwegian literature than as the first maritime novel in Scandinavian literature.\(^{57}\) In sum, a series of reading strategies has dominated the reception of maritime writers: 1) forgetting the sea, 2) prioritizing land over sea, and 3) translating maritime matters into familiar earthbound matters.

This said, an oceanic turn within literary studies is unfolding, exemplified in books by literary historians such as Ian Baucom, Josiah Blackmore, Hester Blum, Wolf Burkhardt, Cesare Casarino, Margaret Cohen, Bernhard Klein, Gesa Mackenthun, Steve Mentz, and John Peck. Earlier, scholars such as Monique Brosse, Robert Foulke, and Thomas Philbrick have published substantial works on maritime literature, but despite their obvious qualities, these publications remained relatively peripheral in their time because of the general atmosphere of hydrophasia in the Humanities. Within historical and cultural studies, recent decades have also offered a series of important publications documenting the central role of the sea, by scholars including David Abulafia, David Armitage, Thomas Benjamin, Paul Butel, Alain Corbin, John R. Gillis, Paul Gilroy, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, John Mack, Philip E. Steinberg, and Christina Thompson. Prominent philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has returned to the ocean its historical, conceptual, phenomenological, epistemological, and poetic importance in the development of globalization.

---

\(^{57}\) In the first English translation of the novel, *The Pilot and His Wife*, the translator Mrs. Ole Bull for example adds without evidence in the original the subtitle *A Norse Love Story* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs and Company, 1876). In Arne Garborg’s biography, *Jonas Lie: En udviklingshistorie* (Kristiania: H. Aschehoug & Co. Forlag, 1893), the ocean is assigned a considerable role in Lie’s life and work, but the author nonetheless ends up focusing his reading of *Lodsen og hans Hustru* on the marriage, just as he in his description of the novel as a threshold novel between past and future refers the ocean to the past while the question of woman’s role in marriage is considered an element of the future, that is, as the novel’s “modern” impulse. In *Essays on Scandinavian Literature* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), Hjalmar Hjort Boyesen characterizes *Lodsen og hans Hustru* as “an everyday story in the best meaning of the word, a story about marriage between ordinary people […] and what makes it even more interesting is that it also has a certain significance in regard to the question of women’s role,” 143. However, Boyesen also acknowledges Lie’s treatment of the maritime as an important factor behind the fact that Lie gradually became known in Norway as “the poet of the sea,” 144.
2.4 Geographical Scales

It is time to redirect our attention from the problems associated with hydrophobia to the benefits of wearing maritime lenses. In what ways can the view from a ship’s deck disclose suppressed histories of modernity and reconnect us to existential dimensions that we thought we had lost? How can observations from a masthead qualify the discussions of highly topical challenges such as ecology and the climate crisis and create the foundation for a genuinely new methodology? In other words, how can the maritime lenses help us reach new understandings on both the level of description (knowledge) and the descriptive level (method)? In terms of our revisionist purpose, such nautically oriented histories offer new spatial and geographical scales as a supplement to the well-known territorial spaces of the nation and the colony, the city and the countryside, the factory and the household, and the public and the private. Through the maritime perspective, these earthbound places are supplemented with spatial components such as oceans and continents, islands and archipelagos, and coasts and ships. Introducing these spaces makes it possible to 1) connect old and familiar landmasses in new ways, for example, the Finnmark and southern Europe with the Gulf Stream acting as a medium of connection as in Jonas Lie’s *Tremasteren “Fremtiden”* (1872; The Barque “The Future”); 2) connect new and different spaces, for example whaling ship, Nantucket, the United States, and the Pacific as in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*; and 3) to discover alternative historical timelines.

If the nineteenth-century historical and realist novel—examples include Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814), B. S. Ingemann’s *Valdemar Seier* (1826), and Alessandro Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi* (1827/1842)—contributed decisively to nation-building through the creation of imagined and symbolic national communities, nautical novels of adventure—Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Verne’s *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, and Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (1900)—mapped and explored some of the planet’s more distant regions. Their spatial elephantiasis meant that these novels and others like them replaced the historical novel’s centripetalization of the nation with centrifugalizing forces emphasizing each nation’s entanglement with other nations, with an outside, and with alterity. As Mentz observes, the appreciation of alterity in the form of the posthuman and nonhuman is made possible by a Blue Humanities approach, which transforms traditional maritime history—characterized by “its passion


for technical exactitude and [...] conservative historiographical methods”—
into a posthuman oceanic history: “Literary critics, environmental scholars,
sea-level activists, poets and artists are turning to the sea to place human
histories in more-than-human contexts. Oceanic perspectives replace stories
of national expansion or decline with multiple vectors of movement, so that
human history becomes a story of multiple estrangements rather than progres-
sive settlements.”

A Nordic example of multiple estrangements and national borders being
penetrated or flooded by global waves consisting of foreign impulses is found
in Lie’s *Tremasteren “Fremtiden”:*

> By its thousands of ships, the sea supplies Norway with a jetsam of ideas
> of our time from all countries [...]. Just as the warm Gulf Stream carries
> wreckage and jetsam up north, the currents in human affairs in the past
centuries have also sat down the most different sorts of wrecked lives
from life in the south on the coasts of Nordland and the Finnmark.

In this passage, Lie stresses how the northernmost region of Norway, tradition-
ally considered isolated, is to be conceived as a contact zone in which human,
material, and immaterial elements come together. It is a peripheral zone, but
it is also an absorbing sponge, which, at the northernmost turning point of the
Gulf Stream, is in a position to enjoy the benefits of being part of a planetary
oceanic system of circulation.

It is also characteristic of the maritime novel that it rarely represses the
brutal traces from European imperialism, as has been claimed about Jane Austen’s
domestic novels. Instead, it explicitly confronts the inner tensions, con-
flicts, and paradoxes of modernity. Chinua Achebe accused Conrad of being
“a bloody racist” in his 1975 lecture on *Heart of Darkness* (1899),
but in this novel Conrad nonetheless allowed Marlow to overtly reflect on the brutality of contemporary Western imperialism, just as he suggested that London,
England, and Western civilization have an equally primitive and “dark” origin
as the African continent. One further example from Conrad’s work is the tale

---

60 Mentz, “Blue Humanities,” 70.
“Falk” (1903) in which Conrad thematized cannibalism. Through his protagonist Christian Falk, Conrad showed that cannibalism is a practice that we can ascribe to both the so-called barbarian and the so-called civilized white man. That it has become custom to brand Conrad reactionary, conservative, and old-fashioned does not change the fact that the dark sides of imperialism and colonialism—for example racism, exploitation, and violence—are addressed directly and with no attempt to shy away from these themes in many of his works.

Finally, the nautically oriented history can also offer us new and more dynamic maps of the literary market, of authors, readers, publishers, booksellers, and critics connected through the circulation of books, poetics, and genres. As Margaret Cohen has shown in “Traveling Genres,” it is only possible to grasp the significance of the maritime novel as one of the most important genres in the nineteenth century, if we employ an Atlantic lens. The maritime novel emerged in the United States and then traveled across the Atlantic, first to Great Britain and then to France, before it returned to the United States. These crossings happened from the beginning of the 1820s to the end of the 1840s, from Fenimore Cooper (USA) to Captain Marryat (England) and Eugène Sue (France), and from there to Edgar Allan Poe, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., and Melville (USA). Later, the genre travelled back to France, where Victor Hugo and Jules Verne contributed to the genre with important novels, and to the Nordic countries, Spain, Italy, and South America. What is interesting about such a transoceanic perspective is that it offers a potentially fruitful counter-narrative to what literary historians traditionally label as the nationalist novel of the nineteenth century. It is not only the maritime novel’s themes and geographical universe that are inevitably transnational, global because oceanic, the same is true of its form and poetics, which developed in a tense space of appropriations, imitations, and ruptures—with national refractions of course—on its journeys across the seven seas.

2.5 Historical Timelines

The maritime perspective helps to make spatial revisions and create new geographical constellations of a more rhizomatic character. In a cultural-theoretical sense, this results in an emphasis on the interstices and (open or blocked) connections between nations and cultures, which therefore cannot be considered autonomous and sealed-off islands: multi- is replaced by inter- and trans-, the national by the regional and the global, the singular by the plural.

---

By evading the logics of the “territorial trap” and sovereignty as markers of geographical and historical distinctions, oceanic histories can be not only transnational, transareal, or translocal but also transtemporal and transtemporal in scope. The deep histories of oceans and seas provide alternative and arguably better frameworks for historical understanding than such Eurocentric categories as modernity and the Enlightenment. Deep time, understood as both past and future and materialized through the ocean, is a significant engine behind the watery visions we encounter in *The Drowned World* and *Havbrevene*, which I will analyze in chapter five. To Ballard and Jacobsen, adopting an aquatic standpoint, the ocean *is* (in) history, not outside history, it *is* (within) time, not beyond time.

Staying on more familiar ground, the maritime perspective also makes possible a revision of the traditional timelines of modernity that we usually divide into periods such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the Democratic Revolutions. In the maritime world, this same period, between the early 1500s and the mid-1800s, converges with the period beginning with the first transoceanic sea journeys made by European explorers towards the end of the fifteenth century and ending with the shift from sail to steam in the mid-nineteenth century. In one sense, we can regard this period of almost four hundred years as a continuity. In terms of transport technology, it is united under what we can call the Global Age of Sail. The continuity does not imply that we cannot divide the age of sail into different periods, though. The maritime timeline of Age of Sail has its own important events. It is different from, yet closely interwoven with, the traditional timeline of modernity. The two timelines both stabilize and reconfigure each other.

As Margaret Cohen has taught us, the years 1759, 1795, and 1807 are each associated with an important invention that helped make life at sea safer. In 1759, the English carpenter John Harrison succeeded in optimizing the chronometer he had first begun to develop and build in 1730, so it was now precise enough to keep track of time on longer sea journeys and thus made it possible to calculate longitude during a crossing. In 1795, the Scottish doctor Gilbert Blane, the chairman of the British Navy’s “Sick and Hurt Board,” persuaded the British Admiralty that lemon juice should be a mandatory part of sailors’

---

66 The prehistory of the chronometer can be traced back to the Dutch scientist Christian Huygen’s first attempts to construct a chronometer in 1673, just as both Jeremy Thacker and Henry Sully, both English watchmakers, in 1714 and 1716 respectively had tried without success to construct a chronometer that was precise enough and could resist the vicissitudes of the sea.
daily food ration to avoid scurvy, then the most frequent cause of death among sailors. And in 1807, the American engineer Robert Fulton’s steamship *North River Steamboat* made its first journey on the Hudson River. This journey not only marked the beginning of a commercially successful ferry service between New York City and Albany, NY, a distance of 240 kilometers, it also launched the proliferation of steamship transportation during the nineteenth century. The consequence of the three inventions was an increased routinization of ocean traveling. The chronometer, the intake of vitamin C, and steamship transportation are scientific and technological developments, which we on land categorize under period concepts such as the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. In that sense, these maritime inventions and dates contribute to a stabilization and strengthening of the traditional and general history of modernity.

However, the three events also function as disturbing interventions in other and more specific histories of modernity. In literary history, for example, we can consider the maritime inventions of 1759, 1795, and 1807 as crucial components of that overall routinization of the global waterways, which led to changes in the poetics of the novel. At first glance, it may seem somewhat bizarre that chronometer, lemon juice, and steamship have played an important role in the evolution of the novel’s form, but this is the case as Cohen has convincingly argued. In the time before the chronometer, before the routine treatment of scurvy, and before the steamship, the sailing ship was one of the most dangerous places for humans to inhabit. The sailor who possessed the abilities to navigate securely on the sea was a cultural icon, gifted as he was with practical skills of heroic dimensions intended to assist in dangerous and hazardous situations. The heroism of this figure was unequivocally praised in a series of modern adventure novels descending from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton* (1720). In the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, and much to the pleasure of numerous readers, many heirs to Defoe’s protagonists could be found in the works of authors such as Cooper, Sue, Marryat, and Dana, but also in works by lesser-known authors such as William Leggett, Captain Frederick Chamier, Edward Howard, William N. Glascock, Édouard Corbière, Émile Souvestre, Théodore Pavie, Lieutenant Murray Ballou, Ned Buntline, and Charles Kingsley.

The Polish scientist Johann Bachstrom and the Scottish surgeon James Lind had already proved in 1734 and 1747 respectively that scurvy could be treated by the intake of lemon juice, but it was not until Gilbert Blanes legal intervention in 1795 that the prevention was institutionalized in the navy.
With the routinization of ship life, which really kicked in during the 1840s, the heroic sailor and the literary celebration of him lost their cultural magnetism and fascination for both authors and readers. With the shift from sail to steam, the heroic sailor was transformed into a museum relic, an anachronistic figure in the age of disenchantment. Until then, maritime fictions had contributed to the literary landscape with a captivating and timely poetics founded on action and adventure, but this poetics gradually lost its raison d’être. A crisis emerged in what had until then been a relatively unproblematic convergence between literary form and maritime material. The crisis was a consequence of the modernization of certain maritime practices, and it resulted in a new narrative genre that Cesare Casarino has called "some form of protomodernism." When Melville published *Moby-Dick* in 1851, the genre became full-blown. Not that Melville's whaling novel did not have predecessors, but neither Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), nor Melville's own *Mardi: and A Voyage Thither* (1849), or Cooper's last sea novel, *The Sea-Lions: The Lost Sealers* (1849), possessed the formal complexities and semantic depths that characterize *Moby-Dick*.

*Moby-Dick*, *Pym*, *Mardi*, and *Sea-Lions* all originated from the nation that in the early 1820s had created the maritime novel in close connection with what Thomas Philbrick has called American "maritime nationalism." Both Poe and Melville, perhaps also Cooper in the last years of his life, understood the tension that emerged between the aesthetic of maritime fiction and its thematic appeal and increasing cultural and historical obsolescence of this genre. Melville in particular twisted the form of the novel out of joint by inaugurating a series of alternative explorations, although he did so without abandoning the sailor and his border-transgressive life and labor. These explorations consisted of diving into the most obscure zones of language, poetics, hermeneutics, and the human mind, but the previous poetic orientation toward the surface of the sea, maritime history, was now also complemented with a curiosity toward the underwater world and *oceanic history*. Modernizers of the poetics of maritime fiction discovered that the human mind's endlessly receding depths and strange life were mirrored in the submarine dimension of the ocean, and they found this to be a vast source of inspiration.

In the maritime narrative tradition, Hugo and Conrad were the next to challenge the Mariana Trench of representation and meaning production. If

---


---
Moby-Dick constitutes the American version of the simultaneous culmination and subversion of the maritime novel, the French and English versions of this concurrence of apex and sabotage are works such as Les Travailleurs de la mer, The Nigger of the “Narcissus” (1897), Lord Jim, “The Secret Sharer” (1910), and Vi pynter oss med horn (1936; Horns for Our Adornment), the latter by Aksel Sandemose. The link between processes of maritime modernization and poetics of the novel not only enables us to explain that Melville, Hugo, Conrad, and Sandemose annexed new territories in the historical evolution of the novel, new territories, which in the cases of Melville, Hugo, and Conrad would later become associated with modernism (and, in the Sandemose example, become an integral part of modernism). It also enables us to explain why they did it; or, perhaps even more precisely, why they felt compelled to do so, and this even ahead of their time.

Such alternative timelines, made possible through the maritime lens, also enable us to accentuate other and possibly even new dimensions of modernity. As noted by Cohen in “Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe,” one of the defining chronotopes of modernity is the extremely dangerous, but also potentially productive places that from a temporal perspective exist at the absolute forefront of a present in constant motion, and from which knowledge is always developing and is therefore incomplete. According to Cohen, the fascination of modernity with this chronotope enables us to re-think the importance of Robinson Crusoe. Instead of connotations of primitivity and a regression to a mere natural state, which are what first comes to mind when we look at the original frontispiece with Robinson depicted in clothes of goatskin, the image also allows for a different interpretation of Robinson as a person who experiments and breaks new ground. The ideas of an unspoiled natural state held by Enlightenment thinkers, not least Rousseau, is supplemented with an alternative vision of nature as an admittedly harsh but also genuinely fertile zone that is available for human explorations and practices.

It required incredible skills in the art of action to survive in such places, where knowledge constantly changed and vibrated in its incompleteness. Philosophers has a name for the particular intelligence that characterizes persons who excel in action: practical reason. The sailor, especially the sailor who knew how to navigate, was a hero because of his practical reason. Thanks to Descartes, modernity has primarily been defined by and understood through an intelligence famous for its abstract and calculating rationality, with neutral, scientific knowledge being the most celebrated form of this intelligence. But this type of reason is just one of several tools of knowledge that characterize those persons who thrive in the dynamic frontier zones of modernity. Other tools and perhaps more relevant ones are the senses, intuitions, experiences,
feelings, and the body. A literary character who embodies the shift away from a Cartesian, disinterested, and bodiless rationality towards a reason based on intuitions, experiences, and embodied local knowledge is Cooper’s John Gray, the protagonist in *The Pilot*, whom we shall learn more about later. The Danish navigator Jens Munk, famous for his North-West Passage expedition in 1619–20, is another example that I also examine more closely.

Practical reason, understood as the ability to act in singular *hic et nunc* situations, has been considered differently in different historical periods. The processes of secularization have resulted in a belief in the efficacy and potency of human action (an important characteristic of historical time’s open future). This differs from the ancient understanding of practical reason. The modern version of practical reason thrives in vibrating border zones characterized by great unpredictability but also by discoveries, profit, and inventions. In contrast, the ancient version is shaped in a worldview that respects the limitations of humans, which at the same time entails the limits of the divine because of a prevailing logic of reciprocity. In those times, the border was an undesirable place to be for humans, even for those who possessed practical reason.

As Cohen observes, the reappraisal of practical reason as a valuable element in modernity’s hierarchy of faculties and abilities enables us to recognize the extraordinary quality and superiority that distinguish literature’s heroes of composed action and cunning deeds. Again, Robinson is the obvious example, but so are Jens Munk, John Gray, Ahab, Gilliatt, Nemo, Salve Kristiansen, Rejer Jansen Juhl, Thomas MacWhirr, Henry Whalley, and Wolf Larsen. Cooper’s pilot is a hero who acts, and with limited technological resources he uses his embodied reason to navigate extremely dangerous and unpredictable situations at sea. By overcoming challenges and solving problems for his own personal gain—not money and wealth as in *Robinson Crusoe*, but personal fame—he mobilizes his reason (understood here as a future-oriented modality of calculation and action), but also his patience and composure, his ingenuity, his creativity, his body, and his courage. The employment of practical reason to solve problems and to profit from it characterizes the protagonists in the adventurous stories that unfold at sea and on land. It is a device that links a variety of genres across history, genres that also share a tainted reputation among critics and academics, including the chivalric romances and the picaresque novels, perhaps even the Greek idealistic novels, as well as spy novels, detective novels, and science-fiction novels in the nineteenth, twentieth, and
twenty-first centuries. The valorization of practical reason invites us to rethink how we estimate the different poetics of the novel.

Among optimistic apologists of Western modernity, freedom of movement is considered one of the decisive premises of progress and perfectibility. From the disenchanted perspective of the Frankfurt School, the project of progress and the freedom of movement are inextricably linked with human dominance over nature, which ends in scenarios of catastrophe. However, Cohen claims that the historical epoch known as the global Age of Sail defined by overseas journeys offers a third (and more morally ambivalent) concept than progress and dominance: adventure. Not exclusively a project (as with progress and human dominance), adventure is also a discourse, a narrative, and (with Raymond Williams) a “structure of feeling.” Adventure understood as a constellation comprising a particular discourse, a narrative practice, practical reason, and a (transindividual) structure of feeling has played an equally important role in modernity as concepts and phenomena such as calculation and scientific reason.

The adventure constellation is yet another example of how Oceanic Studies and Blue Humanities complicate our previous understanding of modernity. In novel studies, the adventure constellation assists scholars in redefining their understanding of the genre. Historically, novels of suspense and adventure have been among the most popular forms among readers but some of the most denigrated by scholars. A probable explanation for this divergence is that adventure novels lack the conflictual and psychologically profound topic and individual that characterize works such as Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and, especially, Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782/1789). Coinciding historically with Rousseau’s commencement of his confessional project in the 1760s are James Cook’s preparations for adventure and ambition to transgress the limits of dynamic knowledge through explorations of the globe’s distant regions. In bestselling narratives about Cook’s journeys, the exploration of biography, inner feelings, and private life promoted by Richardson, Rousseau, and their descendants are replaced by problem solving, observation of the objects and nature in the outer world, and a struggle for survival in dangerous, unknown territory. The history of maritime modernity compels scholars of the novel to reinstate the adventure novel and the adventure constellation on the maps of modern epistemology.

Scandinavian writers such as Lie, Skram, and Sandemose were not the only ones to answer Drachmann’s call for an “open-air” literature as opposed to a “dinner-table” literature. Many internationally established writers had published this type of literature long before Drachmann wrote “Ørnen” in 1874. This implies that the problem of “the ‘forgetting’ of the sea” is not so much a
result of a lack of empirical material as it is a result of a lack of institutional and disciplinary inclination. In *A Poetic History of the Oceans*, I examine some of this empirical material and attempt to counter the forgetting of the sea by adapting the methodology of Blue Humanities and an Amphibian Comparative Literature.

### 2.6 Blue Ecologies

One of the most important implications of adapting a Blue Humanities approach is the transformation of ecology *from green to blue*. The ocean radicalizes some of the dilemmas in environmentalism and makes them stand out more clearly. Ideas of human control, sustainable growth, and harmony between humankind and nature are seriously questioned, when blue ocean replaces green pastures as a starting point for any discussions on ecology and environment. As Mentz has pointed out, “our newer fables of ecological harmony can’t keep us dry.”\(^7\) The wet nightmares of environmental destruction and the instability associated with the stingy saltwater of the oceans inundate any cheerful dreams of environmentalism associated with topoi such as the beach and the park. The beach is a model place for withdrawn contemplation and safe transactions between the ocean and the human as exemplified in Caspar David Friedrich’s *Der Mönch am Meer* (Figure 2), and the park is a traditional place of carefree loafing as exemplified in Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in *Leaves of Grass*.

In his book on Shakespeare’s ocean, Mentz references Pierre Hadot’s distinction in *The Veil of Isis* (2004) between a Promethean and an Orphic relationship to nature: “The ocean epitomizes Orphic nature. An oceanic perspective speaks to our emerging sense that crisis, not stability, defines the world in which we live now. Supplementing our ‘green’ cultural turn with a ‘blue cultural studies’ that looks at our world through the deathly, inhuman, magical lens of the sea can begin rebuilding narrative and interpretive practices to respond to our uncertain future.”\(^7\) Mentz’s interpretation of Hadot—the ocean as epitomization of an Orphic, instable, and deathly nature—is too simple and does not really convey the nuances of Hadot’s definitions of the Orphic and the Promethean attitudes, which both have affiliations with the ocean. Mentz’ description seems to suggest that the Friedrich and Whitman scenes, characterized by their safe distance and jubilant untroubledness respectively, belong to the Promethean discourse on nature. However, this

---

\(^7\) Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean*, 96.

\(^7\) Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean*, xii–xiii.
would be a mistake. Although *Der Mönch am Meer* and the green park scenes in “Song of Myself” in no way fit Mentz’s description of Orphic nature, they do both fall into Hadot’s Orphic category, but belong to a more peaceful class within that category.

But how does Hadot define the two different relationships to nature? If the Promethean approach to nature is “voluntarist,” the Orphic is “contemplative.” This is why Friedrich’s painting belongs to the Orphic orientation. It is a contemplation of the relationship between humans and an opaque and mysterious nature, at once fascinating and terrifying, which is immune to human efforts of omnipotence. A crucial distinction between Friedrich and other Orphic works of art and literature—those alluded to by Mentz—is the difference between a safe distance from and an immersion within the potentially terrifying and deathly natural forces of the sea. Examples include J. M. W. Turner’s *Snow Storm* (1842) and specific chapters in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, for example “The Castaway” (chapter 93). Although the experiences of Melville’s

---

Pip and Friedrich’s monk can be regarded as being of an Orphic nature, Pip’s experiences with the ocean were vastly different from those of the monk.

Of the Promethean relationship to nature, Hadot writes: “If man feels nature to be an enemy, hostile and jealous, which resists him by hiding its secrets, there will then be opposition between nature and human art, based on human reason and will. Man will seek, through technology, to affirm his power, domination, and rights over nature.” The Promethean approach to nature is linked to modern technology and is also a metahistorical phenomenon that was characterized by strategies of magic and mechanics that were mobilized to violate, torture, or ruse nature of its secrets or resources. To Hadot, both the Promethean and Orphic approaches to nature have positive attributes. “The moral motive force of the Promethean attitude” is for example “the desire to help humanity,” but there is also the danger that the “blind development of technology and industrialization, however, spurred on by the appetite for profit, places our relation to nature, and nature itself, in danger.”

Prometheus committed hubris by stealing fire from Zeus, and his nemesis consisted of being chained to a rock where an eagle ate his liver by day. The liver regenerated by night and the cycle repeated endlessly. Promethean figures featured later in this book include Captain Ahab and Captain Nemo. Greek theogonies, centering gods (theós) and decentering man (anthropós), warned against Promethean transgressions and human overconfidence. In contrast, the biblical “Book of Genesis” instructed mankind to “subdue” the earth and to “have dominion” over all other living creatures. Historically, but especially by German Romantics such as Schiller, Christianity has been regarded as an accomplice in the mechanistic representation and subsequent desacralization of nature, perhaps most obvious personified by Newton. Following the origin stories of the Abrahamic religions, which gave humans a privileged place at the center of divine creation, “Copernicus and Darwin built new narratives from scientific evidence and humans became just another animal on just another planet orbiting just another ordinary star.” The shifting power relations between gods, humans, science and technology, nature, and planet will be an important topic in several chapters of this book.

Of the Orphic relationship to nature, Hadot writes: “If, on the contrary, people consider themselves a part of nature because art is already present in it,

74 Hadot, The Veil of Isis, 92, 98.
there will no longer be opposition between nature and art; instead, human art, especially in its aesthetic aspect, will be in a sense the prolongation of nature, and then there will no longer be any relation of dominance between nature and mankind. The occultation of nature will be perceived not as a resistance that must be conquered but as a mystery into which human beings can be gradually initiated.” If the Promethean approach is characterized by an artificial modification of perception—experimental physics is an example—then the perception that orients the Orphic approach is “naïve” according to Hadot. Instead of magic, mechanics, and technology, humans here employ “only reasoning, imagination, and artistic discourse or activity to contemplate nature.” Instead of violence, Orpheus penetrates the secrets of nature through “melody, rhythm, and harmony”: “Whereas the Promethean attitude is inspired by audacity, boundless curiosity, the will to power, and the search for utility, the Orphic attitude, by contrast, is inspired by respect in the face of mystery and disinterestedness.” To Hadot, the positive attribute of the Orphic orientation is its fundamental respect for nature and ability to maintain what he calls “a living perception of nature.” If the danger in the Promethean approach had to do with a potential destruction of nature and of our relationship to it, the Orphic approach comprises its own danger of “primitivism.”  

I said before that Captain Ahab and Captain Nemo incarnate the Promethean attitude, but it is also characteristic of both *Moby-Dick* and *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* that they comprise elements of the Orphic orientation, for example in the form of poetic language miming the wonders and generative force of the undersea world. Other works such as Michelet’s *La Mer* and Ballard’s *The Drowned World* are also characterized by the coexistence of scientific and aesthetic perceptions, of a technologically driven quest to unveil the secrets of nature and a poetic ambition to match and figure the mysterious splendor and horror of nature. 

In strong alliance with the ocean, the concept of the Anthropocene—a concept that refers to a new epoch in planetary history during which humanity has become a geological force—profoundly changes our understanding of the contemporary ecological crisis. Not so long ago we still tended to perceive the environment as something external to us, an entity that surrounds us, and a place where humans went to extract resources, deposit waste, or enjoy untouched spots of virginal nature. Any environmental degradations were referred to as externalities. Nature in its various forms—natural parks, ecosystems, environment, and sustainable development—was considered important.

---

77 Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, 92, 95, 96, 98.
but essentially separate from us. The hyperobject of the ocean and the concept of the Anthropocene come together in their dual challenge of our idea of separation and our belief in sustainable growth. The environment has now been replaced by the Earth system. If industrial modernity promised to liberate us from the inertia of nature, of its cycles and its limits, and to empower us in a world of unlimited progress, the limited and self-regulating Earth is now making a somber return. Earth history insistently and violently returns into human history, smashing the distinctions between nature and society and reorganizing the principles of the human condition and human freedom.

Blue Humanities in the age of the Anthropocene view humans not as masters and owners of nature but increasingly as beings entangled within the vast feedback loops of the Earth system. The dominant discourse of sustainable growth based on the deep-rooted and stubborn belief in linear and inexorable progress is being challenged by critics of excessive consumerism and profit-driven enterprises. In turn, the progressionists accuse these critics of wanting to return the world to a bygone romantic era of innocence. If there is a growing sense of crisis in our present, this may in fact be a too vague diagnosis. Why? Because crisis implies a transitory state, but according to Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, the Anthropocene represents a point of no return. They claim that the future of planet Earth, including all its living creatures and species, is at stake, and neither the liberal, nor the social democratic, or the Marxist visions of a bright future bear any similarity with this highly unstable development strewn with so-called tipping points that characterize our contemporaneity. Consequently, we may be forced to think and act outside and beyond those political visions and fiscal systems that we have been used to for almost two hundred years.

The ocean and seafaring are reminders of humanity’s profound entanglements with nature and the nonhuman, of the illusion of any deep, essential split between humans and their environment. If the ocean alienizes our globe, it is in the sense of making it unfamiliar to us, not separate from us. The sea is at the same time the condition (entanglement) and boundary (unfamiliarity) of our human existence. What Melville called the “masterless ocean” constantly reminds us that we control neither ocean nor globe: “It defines the world as it is, not as we'd like it to be. [...] The sting of salt reminds us that the world isn't a happy story,” says Mentz. Indeed, there are beneficial outcomes of our ecological era. The increasing awareness of a greater mutuality between the planet’s

---


different elements and parts, the softening of anthropocentric concerns and the dispersion of agency, and a deepening sense of intimacies instead of separations are potential lifebuoys that we may grab hold of as the inhabitability of the planet increases. However, as Mentz has also pointed out, “hopes for a dry life, an easy, pastoral, sustainable relationship between nature and culture, seem as unlikely as a full season of calm seas. It’s not that we don’t want it. It’s not that we shouldn’t work toward it. It’s that we won’t get it.” As scientists discovered in the nineteenth century, the ocean is the conductor of the planet’s climate, acting both as thermostat and driving force in ways we still cannot accurately predict. In an Anthropocene era of climate change that has left behind the relative stability of the Holocene, the world is becoming bluer, wetter, and messier. This is also why “our newer fables of ecological harmony can’t keep us dry.”

If neither the old nor the newer fables of ecological harmony (say, Virgil’s *Georgics*, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*, and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Pacific Edge*) can keep us dry, then we need what Mentz has labelled wet fables that both match and figure the great oceans and their role in Earth’s history. In addition, we need a method with which to read such fables. The good news is that we have these stories already. Instead of fables of ecological harmony, let us call them fables of blue ecology. While some of them are newer (e.g., *The Drowned World*, *The Sharks*, *Blá*, and *Havbrevene*), some are also old and perhaps in need of new readings (e.g., *The Odyssey*, *The Aneid*, “The Saga of the Greenlanders,” and *Navigatio Septentrionalis*). What I call an amphibian comparative literature within the emerging blue cultural studies offers the proper methodological approach to these fables and to the conceptual, intellectual, and ethical challenges posed by a bluer planet. Just as literature and literary criticism cannot cure cancer, they are likewise unable to shield coastal residences from tsunamis and hurricanes and prevent the melting of the ice caps. However, our Western culture is defined by a persistent struggle with living in dynamic, unpredictable, (semi)aquatic environments. This struggle has been waged on the battlefields of language and narrative forms as much as on the battlefields of science and engineering. Amphibian comparative literature embraces the nonhuman dimensions and scales of literature, the terrestrial and the aquatic spaces as well as the organic and the inorganic actors.

In *Ecocriticism* (2004), Greg Garrard surveys the field’s most prominent metaphors and tropes. Among them are the pastoral, the wilderness, the
apocalypse, and dwelling. It becomes clear from the book’s table of content and the specific content of the chapters that the ocean has only played a minor role in ecocriticism. Ecocriticism has been green ecocriticism, but time has come to turn it blue: “Shifting our focus from the supposed stability of land, with its pastoral and georgic master narratives, to a broader vision that embraces the maritime world and what Melville calls ‘this terraqueous globe’ will mean abandoning certain happy fictions and replacing them with less comforting narratives. Fewer gardens, and more shipwrecks.”81 To Mentz, this means replacing landlocked stories of human struggles to cultivate, calculate, and control nature—that is, agricultural and pastoral visions of sustainability and predictability—with water-logged stories of human improvisations and collaborations with a disorderly world in flux and nautical visions of menacing and capricious environments. Amphibian comparative literature approaches these stories with a belief that they can assist us in welcoming and withstanding saltwater-propelled turmoil.

Oceanic space is more-than-human. As a hyperobject, and despite its contemporary forms of plastic ocean and mounting ocean, the ocean challenges any aspirations of unconditional anthropocentrism. Plastic ocean and mounting ocean result from anthropogenic behavior, but they now seem to strike back against humanity, leaving us impotent in the face of ocean-driven climate change. In the confrontation and entanglement with the ocean, human actors are translocated from controlling and disembodied heights and plunged into the depths of ambiguity, flux, dissolution. Seafaring and maritime existence are, with Sloterdijk’s words, “a resolutely anti-contemplative and deduction-hostile knowledge programme. The experimentum maris provided the criterion for the new understanding of world experience.”82 It is because of this experimental and empirical dimension of the maritime that the nonhuman and posthuman environment of the ocean is of great value in this era of anthropogenic climate change. Since the Earth’s history has fallen back into human history and destroyed the Enlightenment dream of separating society from nature, humans have found themselves living in an increasingly unstable and destructive environment, whose physically overwhelming manifestations resemble the flux and fluidity of the masterless ocean more than the solidity and stability of cultivated land. The ecological crisis resembles a shipwreck in that they both produce feelings of disorientation and disruption. In many of the texts and sources analyzed in this book, the reader encounters

81 Mentz, At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean, 98.
82 Sloterdijk, Spheres II: Globes, 813.
unembellished visions of humans, most of them male sailors, trapped between divine decree, natural forces, and inadequate assurances of individual agency and technological assistance. Nautical tales depicting the practical labors of sailors in crisis—often denigrated in rational modernity yet celebrated by writers from Homer, Munk, and Cooper to Hugo, Conrad, and Bjørneboe because imperative for survival—represent valuable stories of how humans endure when faced with uncontrollable nonhuman powers. As sea levels rise, and numerous hurricanes wreck seaside residences in the Anthropocene, we have become increasingly aware of the upsetting and bewildering entanglements of humans and oceans. No one has been better at depicting and fabricating these entanglements than writers and artists, sailors and scientists, then and now.

2.7 Method and Structure

A Poetic History of the Oceans does not perform a deep dive into specific works or authors, nor into any limited historical epoch, nor any national cultural and literary history. If the book dives deeply, it is into a transnational, planetary, and cross-historical phenomenon: the Ocean. I have chosen this approach because we understand this phenomenon not only through Herman Melville's Moby-Dick; through biblical sources such as “Genesis” and “Revelation”; through Jules Michelet’s La Mer; the handwritten diary of Jens Munk; through J. G. Ballard’s The Drowned World; through J. M. W. Turner’s marine paintings; through anonymous accounts of Portuguese shipwrecks; Siri Ranva Hjelm Jacobsen’s fictional letter exchange between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea; and through scientific graphs of CO₂ emissions, deforestation, and global temperatures documenting the entrance into the Anthropocene epoch. No, we understand the Ocean better through the multifaceted combination of all these sources and documents and artworks.

In that sense, and because it incorporates all the above and many more, A Poetic History of the Oceans is deliberately comparative across periods, languages, nations, genres, and disciplines. The book is not an exercise in comparativism for the sake of comparativism. Rather, it is motivated by the aim of mobilizing what have been separated poetological engagements with water, distanced from each other through time, space, and language despite their obvious interrelations, temporal and spatial entanglements, and human and nonhuman networks. Institutionally, the distancing has occurred because area studies and language-based literature studies are naturally rooted in political realities such as nations and empires. The ocean requires a different take.

Admittedly, comparativism may lead to elisions on some levels, but it is hoped that there are gains on others. Suitable to the book’s topic, A Poetic History of the Oceans commits itself methodologically to waves and
geographical continuity more than to trees and geographical discontinuity. Although the tree mechanism of nations plays a role, such as when Jonas Lie Scandinavizes James Fenimore Cooper's form of the American nautical novel (Cooper's *The Pilot* becomes Lie's *The Pilot and His Wife*), the dominant mechanism in *A Poetic History of the Oceans* is the wave mechanism of the world and the planetary ocean, of World Ocean. Methodologically speaking, the ocean as prism and protagonist catalyzes a new operational vocabulary in which territories give way to *relations*, compartments to *entanglements*, earth to *water*, mountains to *oceans*, distinctions to *distortions*, and clarity to *obscurity*.

There are no doubt Americanists with far greater knowledge of Melville than mine, just as there are entire books devoted to *Moby-Dick* alone; the same can be said about Victor Hugo and *Les Travailleurs de la mer* and about Jules Verne and *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* within French Studies; surely, biblical scholars and historians can supplement my selection of only a few ancient sources and two texts by Michelet and Munk with much more additional material, and they would also be able to nuance my readings of the selected sources and texts; scientists would definitely be capable of explaining the mathematical mechanisms and deep data behind their graphs better than I can. However, recalling Émile Durkheim's famous dictum that *comparison* may be to the social sciences what *experiment* is to the natural sciences, I want to transplant that idea into the humanities. By bringing these varied sources and approaches together and comparing them (that is, performing what Durkheim labelled an “indirect experimentation”87) and by applying a distinct epistemological and poietological framework through which to read them (How to know the unknowable? How to give shape to that which is shapeless?), I hope that Melvilleans, scholars of French literature, biblical scholars, historians, and scientists as well as many other experts and scholars may learn something new from the relations and entanglements forged by this book between their respective fields of expertise and other fields, whether these are literary works, authors, periods,

---

or disciplines. And, as once reasoned by Fernand Braudel with a reference to Henri Pirenne, as a work of *synthesis* and an attempt at a “new thalassology,” my book will hopefully inspire new crops of specialized research.88

The comparative approach fosters different questions. How does a reading of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* benefit when its final apocalyptic vision of a flood is compared with a biblical deluge, and with the flood scenarios in Hugo’s *The Toilers of the Sea*, Ballard’s *The Drowned World*, and Jacobsen’s *Havbrevene*, and what insights will emerge by performing such a comparison within a framework of the Anthropocene? How can a reading of Michelet’s *La Mer* profit from a poetological and aesthetic sensibility and a comparison with the oceanic visions in *The Toilers of the Sea*, Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*, and Carson’s *The Sea Around Us*? How do different generic modes in Munk’s *Navigatio*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, and Jacobsen’s *Havbrevene*—diary, fake diary, anthropomorphized epistle—influence their epistemologies, their oceanic thinking? How can an eyewitness account of a Portuguese shipwreck in the sixteenth century not only inform readings of that same nation’s heroic epic, *Os Lusíadas*, but also of later works of technological crisis such as Conrad’s *Typhoon* and Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues*?

*A Poetic History of the Oceans* comprises five chapters with three longer chapters on history (chapter one), technology (chapter three), and the Anthropocene (chapter five) punctuated by two shorter chapters on rhythm (chapter two) and materiality (chapter four). There is alternation within and between the chapters of human and nonhuman scales. The chapters on history and technology primarily activate human perspectives, whereas the chapters on rhythm, materiality, and the Anthropocene address the sea and maritime existence from perspectives less human and more nonhuman, prehuman, and posthuman.

“History” examines how Western humanity has perceived the ocean from ancient times to the present. In this chapter and drawing from a wide variety of sources from the Bible, Homer, and Horace to Jens Munk, Herman Melville, Jonas Lie, Jens Bjørneboe, and many more, I outline four so-called maritime world pictures that also represent four historical periods: theocentrism (–1450), anthropocentrism (1450–1850), technocentrism (1850–1945), and geocentrism (1945–). Each maritime world picture comprises a certain perception of the sea, a distinct relationship between gods, humans, technology, and nature, a specific temporal configuration, and to some extent also a particular poetics.

of the sea. While the above periodizations signal a historical framework that is valid in its overall structure and content, two comments are appropriate: first, the temporal boundaries between the periods are flexible just as the specific characteristics of one period may appear in moderated form in other periods; second, the world-picture constellation comprising ocean perception, figure of time, poetics, and the gods-human-technology-nature relationship is also conceived as a general analytical tool—a methodology—with which maritime sources, especially literary ones, can be approached. At the end of the chapter, I read *Moby-Dick* as both a summation and deconstruction of the preceding (self-consciously simplified) stage-by-stage historical narrative of sea writing.

In “Rhythm,” I examine how oceanic and maritime rhythms embrace humans in a bodily and affective sense, making them feel and experience the sea and maritime existence. Analyzing rhythms entails a shift from meaning to presence. Rhythms are not meant to be hermeneutically interpreted. There are no hidden meanings beneath a surface. Instead, they can be analyzed as phenomena that temporally structure our experiences and bodily affect us, and instead of asking what they mean, we should ask whether or not they function and how they work. Ship life is a privileged place from which to analyze rhythms because the sailor is highly exposed to winds, waves, and currents, to sunrise and sunset, and to the seasons; besides such natural rhythms he is also subjected to stringent cultural rhythms and protocols. Rhythmanalysis is reciprocally a relevant method with which to examine the cosmic and cultural rhythms of seafaring. Examples could be a burial at sea in Jack London’s *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), the monotony of steamship life in Malcolm Lowry’s *Ultramarine* (1933), the militaristic discipline in Jens Bjørneboe’s *The Sharks* (1974), a calm sea in Samuel T. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” (1798), the furious weather in Joseph Conrad’s *Typhoon*, and the psychological disharmony in his *The Nigger of the “Narcissus.”* Rhythmanalysis assists us in getting a better sense of how it feels to be on board an ocean-going vessel by drawing us closer to the physical and empirical dimensions of the mariner’s life. The natural and social rhythms of life at sea are supplemented by the aesthetic rhythms of language, form, and style, with which writers attempt to mime and produce oceanic life, which is itself a profoundly rhythmic phenomenon. So, in addition to the cultural and natural rhythms of oceanic existence, I explore the aesthetic rhythms of maritime literature.

Assisted by philosophers and scholars such as Martin Heidegger, Don Ihde, Peter-Paul Verbeek, and Langdon Winner, “Technology” discusses the historically diverse human engagements with the sea, as they have been mediated through different premodern and modern technologies. The central argument of the chapter is that maritime existence is per definition technological. This
was the case, when humans ventured out in canoes using muscles and paddles as propellers of motion, and it also applies to the sixteenth century when Portuguese carraca, large merchant sailing ships, sailed between Lisbon and India. I analyze an anonymous eyewitness account of the shipwrecking of one such carrack, the São João, which foundered because of an unfortunate combination of technological breakdown and critical weather conditions. At the time of Jules Verne and Joseph Conrad, the maritime world had become intensely technological. While the Frenchman is traditionally considered a writer hailing the possibilities of scientific and societal progress as well as geographical advancements made possible by the invention of new technologies, Conrad is regarded the archetypal reactionary critic of modern technology as it leads to alienation, disenchantment, and moral corruption. We see how these perceptions of Verne and Conrad are only partly correct, and I give nuance by showing how Verne exhibits ambivalent and complex attitudes to modern technologies in Vingt mille lieues sous les mer, and how Conrad finds positive human experiences on board a steamship in distress in Typhoon.

The chapter on “Materiality” focuses on the intense maritime entanglements between humans and nonhumans and between organic and inorganic matter. An initial discussion of the aesthetic strategies of maritime immersion in the experimental documentary Leviathan (2012) by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel frames the subsequent analysis of Victor Hugo’s ode to the sea and the abyss, Les Travailleurs de la mer. Drawing on theories on vibrant matter by Jane Bennett, the dissolve by Stacey Alaimo, stone by Jeffrey J. Cohen, things by Bill Brown, and stuff by Maurizio Boscagli, I situate Hugo’s proto-modernist novel in the context of the new materialism. This context allows for an informed discussion of some of the novel’s most important themes such as the relationship between gods, humans, technology, and nature, the status of work and workers in society and nature, and the tension between creation and effacement.

In “Anthropocene,” I examine the role of the ocean and how writers have imagined it in different ways in the age of the Anthropocene. The chapter comprises a longer discussion of different theories and poetics of the novel—including those by Franco Moretti, Amitav Ghosh, Thomas Pavel, and Ted Underwood—and of the genre’s (in)capacity to embrace and match the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, on the one hand a new world order produced by a powerful humanity, on the other hand a condition in which humans have now been left impotent in the face of potentially catastrophic Earth system processes run amok. I have selected three primary sources for discussion: Aage Krarup Nielsen’s travelogue En hvalfangerfærd: Gennem troperne til Sydishavet (A Whaling Voyage: Through the Tropics to the Antarctic Ocean),
published in 1921; J. G. Ballard’s science-fiction novel *The Drowned World* from 1962; and *Havbrevene*, an epistolary novel by Siri Ranva Hjelm Jacobsen published in 2018. The generic variety is intentional as it allows me to show the representational limitations and strengths of different formats when confronting the maritime Anthropocene. Regarding Nielsen’s travelogue, a work that celebrates human endeavors and technological development and envisions nature as stock and resource, we can now read it as an early warning of species extinction and fossil fuel-driven climate change thanks to our growing awareness of having entered the Anthropocene. In Ballard’s novel, rising sea levels have led to a flooding of the planet, and humans—not the cause behind this new water-world—are now trying to come to terms with their new watery environment. To Ballard, a transformation of the human species in such conditions of inundation is preferable to attempts of species preservation. Finally, in Jacobsen’s book, the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean are sisters sending letters back and forth to each other. *Havbrevene* is also a book about the climate crisis and rising sea levels, but as in Ballard’s novel, the role of humans is downplayed, allowing instead for a master plan on a higher level to appear. The plan’s outcome is a posthuman blue planet on which the saltwater ocean is envisioned as a fertile incubator for new life.