

2014

Crafty Sailors, Unruly Seas: Margaret Cohen's Oceanic History of the Novel

Colin D. Dewey

California State University Maritime Academy, cdewey@csum.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Dewey, Colin D. (2014) "Crafty Sailors, Unruly Seas: Margaret Cohen's Oceanic History of the Novel," *Criticism*: Vol. 56: Iss. 4, Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol56/iss4/10>

CRAFTY SAILORS,
UNRULY SEAS:
MARGARET
COHEN'S OCEANIC
HISTORY OF THE
NOVEL
Colin Dewey

The Novel and the Sea by Margaret Cohen. Translation/Transnation, edited by Emily Apter. Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 2010. Pp. xiii + 306, 30 illustrations. \$39.50 cloth.

Maritime studies, as traditionally practiced by naval historians and marine archaeologists, concentrates its efforts on battles, cargoes, and coastal events. But the more recent development of an interdisciplinary *oceanic studies* has sought to place continental issues in the background, focusing instead on the space between the mariner's departure and arrival. Part of the argument for oceanic studies is that the experience of being a voyaging culture indelibly marks other—terrestrial—expressions, such as national philosophies, literature, and art. However, until recently, as Hester Blum argues, “[t]he oceans comprise a realm in which cultural exchange, whether dominant, resistant, or just circulatory, has not been of primary concern in its own terms—that is, independent of the seas’ function as a passage for travel.”¹ Still developing as a field, practitioners try to understand the importance of oceanic space and history to modern culture; the particular experience of maritime laborers, passengers, and captives; and the significance of transported and transplanted people, crops, and animals to biological and ecological environments. Margaret Cohen’s recent monograph *The Novel and the Sea* (2010), a relatively early work in this fluid discipline, makes a strong case for the value and promise of oceanic literary studies.

This ambitious book can be separated into two broad hemispheres that contain the main argument, and an “Interlude.” The first main section examines the early modern period and a longish eighteenth century to 1824. The second covers roughly 1824 to the early 1900s but concludes looking toward the twentieth century and beyond. The intervening “Interlude” is concerned with developments during a long Romantic period.

The book opens with two lengthy chapters, “The Mariner’s Craft” and “Remarkable Occurrences at Sea and in the Novel,” and a slight third, “Sea Adventure Fiction, 1748–1824?” which examine early modern treatises on seamanship and narratives written following Captain James Cook’s voyages as precursors to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and the eighteenth-century maritime adventure novel. Cohen imaginatively and convincingly proposes a relationship between the technical and traditional lore of the pragmatic seafarer, his “craft,” and the influence of maritime fiction and nonfiction on the development of the novel over the eighteenth century. By reproducing the rational logic of the early modern sea narrative, the maritime adventure novel produces what Cohen calls a “cunning reader” (79), who imaginatively

enters the voyage narratives, novels, and explorers’ reports to enact a readerly “mariner’s craft,” or “a poetics of problem-solving” (86).

The “Interlude,” titled “The Sublimation of the Sea,” addresses the fascination with the sublime that for many characterizes a long Romantic period from Milton to Byron. This chapter’s “sublimation” insists on the depopulation of the sea as it is reimagined by poets as an empty aesthetic space devoid of craft. Cohen provides compelling readings of Milton, Byron, and—especially welcome—John Falconer’s long poem *The Shipwreck* (1762), as well as reviewing the aesthetic works of Edmund Burke, Lord Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and John Baillie. The contrast of Dutch maritime genre painting with Turner’s later works is particularly rewarding. However, her assertion that during “the eighteenth century, the qualification of sublime was increasingly applied by philosophers and writers to the ocean cut off from work” (115) is incomplete. Cohen does not read the nautical panegyrics of Edward Young that sought to render mercantile achievement in terms of aesthetic sublimity or the renewed popularity of the georgic during the period. The georgic is a poetic form dedicated above all else to depicting work, especially agricultural labor, although eighteenth-century

poets expanded the definition to include other trades. Cohen's otherwise excellent reading misses the opportunity to discuss Falconer's *Shipwreck* in terms of its close relationship to the georgic and to broaden her Romantic period to include James Thomson and other eighteenth-century poets deeply concerned with Britain's "peopled ocean." While Romantic literature most famously turns toward contemplation and the pleasures of the imagination, the view that the Romantic lyric effaces labor is an oversimplification. What these observations point to is a sense that the material warrants a fully developed chapter or book of its own; nevertheless, the "Interlude" serves as a suggestive bridge between the broad periods discussed in the main parts of the book.

The second hemisphere, "Sea Fiction in the Nineteenth Century: Patriots, Pirates, and Supermen" and "Sea Fiction Beyond the Seas," returns to "mariner's craft" and the Anglo-European and American novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as industrial modernity threatens to push traditional "craft" to the margins. Readings of James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Victor Hugo, Joseph Conrad, and others chart the reemergence of the maritime novel and the inward turn of seafaring works with the arrival of early modernism. Finally, an afterword seeks

to propel the study into the future while looking forward to increasing scholarly interest in oceanic literary studies.

* * *

Cohen's articulation of the mariner's craft—especially as a means to approach the history of the novel, is the book's theoretical centerpiece. The term is borrowed from Joseph Conrad, but Cohen needn't have freighted her usage with Conrad's grumpy, nostalgic disappointment over what he saw as the decline of seamanship during his time. The explication of craft evolves over the first half of the book and is difficult to summarize succinctly. Significantly, aside from being a sound account of historical practice, Cohen's "craft" is, according to the opinion of experienced modern seafarers, an accurate and nuanced representation of the ways that sailors continue to approach their work.²

Craft is an *ethos*, a "practical necessity for oceangoing survival" and a "cultural myth" (15). Far outside the control or protection of the home port, successful mariners required both self-sufficiency and a means to carry the administrative and disciplinary structures of their nations with them. At its best, craft is the ability to plan thoroughly, to accurately assess

difficult, seemingly impossible, situations, and to draw on generations of lore and tradition, but also to recalculate and improvise with fluidity and confidence without being bound to past practice. Craft is rooted in the experience of physical labor, of “know-how” rather than pure theory³ but operates on an intellectual level that accepts and acts on information from all sources without prejudice. As an example, Cohen cites Cook’s giving credit to one of his midshipmen for suggesting the novel method whereby the *Endeavor* was saved from stranding; rather than relying on a single person’s experience, the “collectivity of craft” (34) insists on collaboration among all members of a crew even if it seems to transgress a hierarchy as strict as the Royal Navy. Craft is an ethos born of necessity, and one that does not deviate from expediency to consider questions of morality. Thus, craft’s “ethical instability [includes] its potential to be used for good, bad, or amoral action outside the law” (88). As Cohen admits, such an “amoral” craft has sailed murky historical waters of enslavement, colonization, and ecological devastation, as well as served pirates and buccaneers, but its pragmatism is shared by modern science, beginning with the Royal Society. Cohen notes that in the early modern period traveling over the horizon in fragile ships could not have been considered “prudent,” yet “spaces

at the edge of experience and even imagination are the theater for the consummate display of craft. They exceed the known technologies with which they are accessed, just as they threaten to exceed the mariner’s craft that made them practicable in the first place” (50). Both the development and exercise of craft depend upon negotiating these extremely dangerous spaces.

The first chapter, “The Mariner’s Craft,” focuses on the experience of Captain Cook and his crew aboard the *HMS Endeavor* when, in 1770, they “discovered” the Great Barrier Reef by running up on it and found themselves hard aground in the southern ocean. Striking the unknown reef, the *Endeavor* and crew were in a kind of watery aporia, “on dangerous, uncharted, indeed hitherto unimaginable terrain” (19). Close readings of Cook’s *Journal* (1768–71) bring the historical, material experience of early modern seafaring to literary history, but Cohen is careful to acknowledge that her interpretation is mediated through Cook’s imaginative representation: the “journal is the record of events, but it is also Cook’s own effort to fix his legacy. It affords the compelling view of a premier mariner during the global age of sail detailing his craft to claim his place in the pantheon of masters” (18).

To delineate a maritime ethos from Cohen’s historical and cultural position requires a fair

amount of imaginative work on the part of the critic, a point that Cohen admits early on: "I focus on the character traits of those who excel in work at sea [rather than] the specific kinds of expertise that also comprised craft, including navigation, seamanship, maritime warfare, and managing ships and supplies" (17). Her search for these traits is more fruitful in imaginative literature than practical treatises, although her book explores early seafaring manuals: "Practical treatises straightforwardly describe maneuvers and recommend techniques, but the human agency that performs them must be read between the lines" (17). The interdisciplinary methodology suggested by this combination of maritime history with literary criticism is the heart of oceanic studies and is a welcome approach.

In addition to Cook's *Journals*, Cohen reads between the lines of Samuel de Champlain's *Traitté de la marine et du devoir d'un bon marinier* ("Treatise on Seamanship and on the Duty of a Good Seaman" [17]) (1632) and James Atkinson's 1744 *Epitome of the Art of Navigation; or a Short, Easy and Methodical Way to become a Compleat Navigator*. Atkinson describes the peculiar narrative style of the ship's log: "Know that a *Journal* or Sea-Reckoning, is a punctual writing down every Day of . . . all Accidents, and Occurrences that happen" (quoted in Cohen, 22). Cohen associates the

style of seaman's manuals and log-books—which avoid ornamentation, figures of speech, and textual ambiguity—with the "plain style in eighteenth-century English fiction" that, according to some critics of the novel, resulted from "the new spirit of scientific observation pioneered by . . . the Royal Society," pointing out, however, that "the Royal Society took plain style from the world of work" (43).

In the next chapter, "Remarkable Occurrences at Sea and in the Novel," *Robinson Crusoe* demonstrates the continuity of maritime plain style—the ethos of practical reason and problem-solving, evocative of craft—with the Anglo-European novel. Defoe's "structure of adventure fiction as problem-solving" (78) finds application in *Robinson Crusoe* as "Defoe applies a . . . process of collapsing philosophical questions into Crusoe's practical problems and then having Crusoe come up with a practical solution which he offers simultaneously as a philosophical answer" (79). The "cunning reader" participates in Crusoe's problem-solving by navigating Defoe's strategically withheld and released information. Cohen settled on "cunning" to describe her readers because of the word's etymological relationship with the verb "to cun," which she defines as "the term of art for the activity of steering a ship" (81); in modern usage, "to con." She explains, "[T]he skills of mariner

and reader meet in the organization of partial information by the pragmatic imagination to come up with a best guess about outcome. . . . When she finds the solution to a problem on her own, she simulates in thought the mariner's performance" (81).

Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader* (1974) illustrates such reader involvement for Cohen. For Iser, gaps of information are entry points into the text that present ethical challenges for readers. Unlike the engagement required by early biographies of saints (for instance), which led the reader to doctrinal conclusions about the morality of characters and situations, Iser argues that "novels . . . encourage people to process complex, ambiguous information and draw independent conclusions[:] to understand morality in action" (80). Whereas Iser's implied reader is tasked with ethical judgments, Cohen's "cunning" reader of Defoe is called upon to share the pragmatic decisions that exemplify the mariner's craft. She continues,

[A]s the cunning reader intimates the form of a problem out of a wealth of information, the goal heaves into view, and it is then a question of how to reach it. Defoe's cunning reader is making practical judgments, not the ethical determinations educating the novel reader

according to Iser. . . . As the reader makes conjectures involving practical matters, she, too, joins craft's collectivity beyond good and evil. (81)

Having argued her definition of mariner's craft and the ways in which a maritime ethos permeates the early English novel, Cohen's literary history traces the rise of the maritime picaresque, a subgenre of the seafaring novel that blossomed in the 1720–40s in Great Britain and France and included many short-lived or little-known volumes. Pirate stories, warrior tales, and finally and most famously Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random* (1748) all fall into this category. Unlike his piratical fictional companions, *Random* serves honorably, reviving craft's nobler side. However, Cohen argues that his fate is to close the first era of the sea novel in English, as in the second half of the eighteenth century novelists and readers turned away from the sea for novels of manners or adventure set on land. Not until James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pilot* (1824) would the mariner's craft again inform a novel of adventure at sea.

Cohen's book tries to swallow all the world's seas in a single gulp. As a result, while the second half of *The Novel and the Sea* continues the argument offered in the initial chapters, it does so at such a pace that examples and texts accrete

furiously, and the terms of the argument for craft and narrative are stretched thin. The sheer number of texts and readings in these chapters tends to crowd out the nuance of the arguments begun in the first half. The section on Cooper is the best realized of the later examples, and it forcefully brings American literature into the conversation. Arguing against those who see Cooper as an essentially terrestrial writer, Cohen adduces the *North American Review's* contemporary comments on *The Pilot*, which “identify republican freedom and the mariner’s craft as the twin foundations of American national values” (152). Captain Frederick Marrayat and Eugène Sue demonstrate the portability of the genre and its adaptability to a wide range of ideological and narrative strategies.

The penultimate chapter, “Sea Fiction Beyond the Seas,” registers the impact of modernization and its discontents. Ironically, just as sailing-ship technology reached its peak, its glory days were over. Bigger, faster ships that required fewer men to sail them represented great strides in naval architecture, but left scores of seamen on the beach. Better chronometers, sextants, compasses, and pilot charts that predicted ocean currents made transatlantic travel comparatively routine. Systematic research into nutrition and better medicine made scurvy and fever less and less a part

of every voyage. In 1840, eleven years before *Moby-Dick*, British steamships of the Cunard line established a regularly scheduled Liverpool-to-Boston crossing (179).

Cohen brings Melville, Hugo, and Conrad together here to illustrate what she sees as a turn away from the sea lanes of the old maritime fiction and toward

[e]dge zones . . . that were qualitatively different: situated at the level of language and the human psyche, rather than the physical world. In such a modernist turn, Melville, Hugo, and Conrad, each in their own ways, framed art and thought as modernity’s incompletely charted frontiers, which it was the novelist’s task to explore. (180)

In discussions of Melville’s *Typee* (1846) and *Redburn* (1849), Cohen points to the novels’ overloaded “picaresque citations” (184) whereby Melville frustrated readers’ expectations by offering sea fiction and delivering sometimes slapstick, sometimes rambling, always discursive texts. Citing Samuel Otter’s description of *Moby-Dick* as “literary anatomy,”⁴ Cohen argues that *Moby-Dick* is two texts: one a novel comprising the rousing sea tale of the chase for the white whale, and another—in which “Melville breaks his contract with the reader

of sea fiction" (186)—a new literary genre "transgressing conceptual categories" in which "the transfer of adventure to the domain of speculation opens the human psyche as one of modernity's new frontiers." Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea* (1866) analyzes "psychic experiences essential to the maritime frontier" (197) by depicting the inner life of his mariner characters in ways never explored by maritime authors concerned with outward physical action. Conrad moved the sea novel toward a focus on the "psychology of mariners aboard a working vessel on routine voyages in the high seas" (203). *Lord Jim* (1900) represents, for Cohen, the tradition's last gasp as Conrad's narrator Marlow relates his search for the residue of "the solidarity of the craft" (206).

The authority of such remarkable readings is diminished by Cohen's insistence on the historical demise of the "mariner's craft" that she worked so assiduously to promote in the beginning of the book. Maritime literature and Atlantic Rim cultures changed dramatically with industrialization, and she argues convincingly for the "modernist turn" (180) in the works of Melville, Hugo, and Conrad. But missing from the last pages of *The Novel and the Sea* is the attention to historical and literary source material that so admirably characterized the first half. The "demise of

craft" (179) is taken as given, and except for a note to the first chapter, which describes a strangely zombified "afterlife of craft for seafarers even today" (234n8) no argument for a similar "modernist turn" (180) or continuity of craft in seafaring technique is admitted.

Although the breadth and depth of her research (carried out over nearly a decade) are impressive—her bibliography is an essential resource for all of the topics she raises—Cohen's cited sources on modern navigation are quite narrow. Edwin Hutchins's fine anthropological field study detailing the minute processes of piloting a US Navy ship dates from the 1990s (*Cognition in the Wild*, 1995), and his observations are particular to military naval navigation, which bears little resemblance to the operation of a merchant vessel. Further, his predictions, cited by Cohen, that Global Positioning System (GPS) and similar technologies would cause traditional terrestrial piloting to "fade from importance" (55) have never come true, to which numerous conferences arguing the place and future of e-Navigation, professional papers, and spirited online discussions can attest.⁵ Technological developments led to arguable improvements in safety, efficiency, and capacity but did not eliminate the seaman's craft. Much has changed, but many of the same material practices of the

early sailors remain; more significantly—and despite spectacular recent failures—the *ethos* of craft is everywhere recognized as essential to the seaman's trade. Today, even the largest modern ships, assisted by sophisticated electronics and powerful tugboats, are in the last instance piloted by eye, experience, and true mariner's craft.

The Novel and the Sea is a remarkable work, being one of the first literary studies to theorize oceanic history and culture. Departing from a tradition, even to some extent within maritime studies, of viewing the vast expanses of open ocean as dead zones, devoid of history or importance to culture, Cohen's book undertakes a difficult approach to literary history by insisting on the centrality of British, French, and American experience as oceanic peoples. Her obsessively detailed, meticulously researched book will be an essential resource for students of the eighteenth-century novel or the culture of the Atlantic world. Margaret Cohen has laid provocative, generous groundwork for students and scholars of oceanic and maritime literary studies to follow.

Colin Dewey is a merchant mariner who has recently completed graduate studies in Cornell University's Department of English. He is now assistant professor of English in the Department of Culture and Communication at the California State University, Maritime Academy in Vallejo.

NOTES

1. Hester Blum, "Introduction: Oceanic Studies," *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 151–55, quotation on 151. Two useful sources are the special sections of *Atlantic Studies* and *PMLA* devoted to oceanic studies: *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013); and *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010). Also see Samuel Baker, *Written on the Water: British Romanticism and the Maritime Empire of Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Hester Blum, *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Christopher Connery, "The Oceanic Feeling and the Regional Imaginary," in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake and Rob Wilson, Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 284–311; Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); and Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005).
2. This essay was written aboard the pilot boat *California* in the Pacific Ocean near San Francisco during the winter of 2011. I have sailed worldwide as Able-Bodied Seaman, Unlimited (any oceans-any tonnage), in ships and seagoing tugs and Master in Pilot vessels; I shared Cohen's argument with several active ship's captains and pilots, who found that, on most points, her assessment of craft was true to their experience.
3. Cohen develops the distinction between *knowing-how* and *knowing-that* in "Traveling Genres" (*New Literary History* 34, no. 3 [2003]: 481–99). *Knowing-how* is "a particular

intelligence, a kind of practical, results-oriented acumen making use of both theoretical and practical knowledge, including the most specific technical detail. This is a kind of knowledge I would call know-how, thinking of the term's associations with practice, skills, and technological savoir faire" (486).

4. Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 186.
5. *e-Navigation Underway North America*, conference held at the California Maritime Academy, Vallejo, California, 3–4 April 2014; *e-Navigation 2014*, conference held in Seattle, Washington, 19–20 November 2013; and multiple authors, "E-navigation, social capital and the theft of a maritime tradition," online discussion posted to the Nautical Institute group, 2 April 2014, accessed 30 April 2014, <http://www.linkedin.com>.