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Water and Romanticism: A Conversation with Steve Mentz

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The following conversation took place at Friedrich Schiller University Jena on June 6, 2024. The transcript has been shortened and edited for clarity.

A.A: To start us off, could you say a few words about the genesis of the Blue Humanities, and your personal relationship to bodies of water? You are a passionate swimmer, correct?

S.M: Definitely. I learned to swim as a young child; I spent a lot of time at the Atlantic coast of New Jersey, and I still take my family back to that same beach today. I think a lot about the way I have been acculturated to a particular kind of enjoyment in relationship with the water, primarily as a swimmer. Among other people who engage in this kind of scholarly work, particularly on nineteenth-century American and European literatures, there is a lot of interest in sailing, in the technologies and the cultural symbolism of the sailing ship. But there is also this significant distinction between people who primarily encounter the water, large bodies of water, through sailing and through technology – through the creation of tools of buoyancy and transportation that hopefully get you more or less where you are trying to go – and people, on the other hand, who encounter the water as I do: as a swimmer.

We swimmers are in – or even slightly under – the water, rather than floating above it. Even if you swim quite far, it is not nearly as far as a sailing ship can go, and swimming is primarily solitary. It remains quite a dangerous thing, even if you are a good swimmer on a calm day. In the act of swimming, you are reminded that it is an unnatural practice for a terrestrial animal, that, unlike whales and dolphins and seals, we are not really at home in the water. In some ways, that is the primary tension at the base of the Blue Humanities. The field grows out of the Environmental Humanities, and in significant ways it is a kind of counter-turn to the dominant green sustainability culture of environmental studies and environmentalism in the U.S. and Western Europe. I wanted to make the case that we have this long tradition of a deeply unsustainable relationship with nature, of recognizing that there is on our planet – in fact, most of the surface of our planet consists of – this inhospitable space. We can make use of it; it is essential to economies and ecologies,

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but it is also a space that is dangerous for humans and that is always on the margins of human culture. The Blue Humanities runs counter to that green ecological vision: the blue in a sense is not sustainable or post-sustainable, but dynamic as opposed to static, blue being, on some fundamental level, less welcoming. There are some real connections between that and the tradition of Romantic revolt.

Moreover, I am an Early Modernist. I come out of the study of sixteenth and seventeenth century, mostly English and European literatures, with a special focus on the influence of late classical and mostly so-called 'Byzantine' or 'Greek romance' from the early centuries of the common era. What I draw from this is a desire to think backwards from the questions of the present. Environmental humanities, of course, is a deeply presentist discipline. But, being a trained expert in writings that are 500 years old and sometimes older, I think it is useful for confronting essential questions in the world around us today to have a bit of a longer perspective about how humans understand their relationship with the non-human. That kind of slight displacement from Romanticism has been important to me, even though I think it is easy to hear the Romantic impulse in much of my writing.

A.A: Some people in the past have drawn explicit equivalencies between water and Romanticism, perhaps most notably W. H. Auden. In his lecture series *The Echarfèd Flood* (Random House, 1950), he claimed that Romanticism all but invented our contemporary conception of the ocean, imbuing it with all sorts of spiritual, poetic, and artistic meanings as it was typical for Romantic encounters with nature at large. How do you stand on this proposition?

S.M: I have a complicated relationship with that particular claim of Auden's. For many years, I wanted to say that what he gets wrong is that he forgets the way in which the Romantics were taking their own understanding of the sea from Renaissance texts, who were influenced by classical writers like Virgil, or Lucan, or Homer in turn. Nowadays, I think I have a more flexible idea of what Auden means by 'a habit of mind,' and I think it is also possible to invent something which then creates its own precursors, that the thing that Auden imagines as being generated by Romanticism – or, perhaps, by his mid-twentieth century lectures on the sea – is a particular attitude toward it as a source of meaning. Arguably, that is also present in the *Book of Jonah* and in some of the songs in the Hebrew scriptures, so it is not quite true that it only shows up in nineteenth century Romanticism, and I think that maybe Auden overstates that point, but there is also a way in which the consolidation of Romantic sentiment in the nineteenth century did call into cohesion a set of ideas that have been present in squishier, more fluid form centuries before that.

A.A: One of the shifts that did certainly take place – maybe not due to but around the same time as Romanticism – was a changed interest in the sea, and in waterways in general, as tourist destinations. The beginning of the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of tourism, particularly within Europe. People suddenly went

swimming and sailing recreationally, which they had done in much lower numbers in previous ages. In the book *Ocean* you wrote for the Bloomsbury “Object Lessons” series (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), you also claim that, within Romanticism, the sea “changed from horror into truth.” This seems to imply that a different kind of accessibility and an altogether less antagonistic relationship emerged which, I would claim, characterizes the encounters with the sea we predominantly have in Western twenty-first-century culture. However, do you think the horror that the sea as a categorically inaccessible space held up until Romanticism is still discernable in some of our contemporary narratives, that in some ways it has been repressed rather than replaced altogether?

S.M.: One excellent example of the classic narrative in which the sea goes from a space of pleasure, and even bacchanalian enjoyment, into horror is of course the movie *Jaws* (Universal Pictures, 1975), which opens with skinny-dippers who then get chomped by the giant shark. It is horrifying even to think about it. I saw it as a child and was kind of scarred by it! So, in all those conceptions, there is the idea that the sea is both beautiful, recreational, a source of truth and of health – there is a lot of interest in the contemporary world, some of it medical and some of it more new-age, in the effect of water on human health, both swimming as a form of physical therapy and also this exposure to water as a natural form of psychological medicine – and then the possibility of the things that lurk beneath. This becomes visible even in our metaphors of the structure of the unconscious, which are built on ideas of placid surface – frightening depth. It seems to me that this is very much a Romantic image we have inherited.

A.A.: One anecdote that fits wonderfully to this intersection of water and Romanticism, as well as to the duplicitous nature of the sea, is that Percy B. Shelley drowned in the gulf of La Spezia because he was a passionate sailor but was unable to swim. When he was washed ashore about a week later, his friends were only able to identify him because he was carrying a volume of John Keats’s poetry in his pockets: The body was no longer recognizable, but people knew that he had purchased this volume shortly before and was probably reading it just before the storm capsized his boat. Do you think we might be witnessing a re-surfacing of the more treacherous, or uncontrollable, aspects of the sea in the context of the Anthropocene? After all, floods, storms, high tides are becoming ever more frequent and severe. Beachfront property is changing from a valuable asset to a liability because the beaches might not be there much longer ...

S.M.: ... or the houses might not be there much longer! The beach will be there, it will just move places.

A.A.: Exactly! Do you see this as an older paradigm that is coming back, or a genuine paradigm shift in our experiences of the sea that is brought about by the Anthropocene?

S.M: I think a lot about sea level rise and also about the consequence of warmer air temperatures ... One of the generating forces for these increased floods is the simple fact that warmer air holds more water vapor, and so we get tropical-style rain events in places that are not engineered to respond to it. The Anthropocene is a time in which we are going to be brought into intimate contact with more water, and in places we do not expect it to be: through sea level rise, through storm surge, through increased flooding, in our streets, in our basements, in our city centers ... One of the real challenges is to find a way to respond to that water, both conceptually and through things like civil engineering and collective political action. How do we deal with this excess of water in places we do not want it to be?

A.A: On a more mundane, but equally significant note: Something that has similarly caught my attention is just how differently we experience different types of water. Part of the problem in our engagement with environmental issues such as water pollution, and also water scarcity, seems to be that tap water, which switches off and on effortlessly and – at least in this part of Europe – is always of perfect quality, feels like a whole other element from the water of a river, which is sort of there, ornamental but rarely interacted with, and which in turn is not intuitively connected to the oceanic currents in the Arctic, or a plastic-polluted beach in Papua New-Guinea. You write a lot about how the Blue Humanities aims to connect different spaces, different bodies, different artistic movements *by* looking at water. But what can we do to connect different types of water in the first place, to wrap our minds around the fact that all of this is one globally connected system that we – among other reasons due to our technological infrastructure – only experience as fragmented?

S.M: Right. I recently wrote an introduction about the poetics of planetary water in an attempt to think about water on our planet as a single coherent project, encompassing both the vast amount of salt water – which is the majority of water on the planet – and the fresh water, most of which exists in the form of ice in high altitudes or in the poles. A vanishingly small amount is potable water that we need to sustain our own bodies and, in much larger quantities, for agriculture. We have all these systems for separating different kinds of water, including desalination plants and sewage treatment plants, which are designed to turn water from one form to another. But there is a useful conceptual exercise in thinking about the continuities between, for example, the water on the Greenland ice sheet, the water in this glass, and the water in the tissues of our body. After all, each of us, as a human being, is mostly water!

So there is a continuity, and all this water is wanting to move out to the next place. This is really the burden of the argument of the “Seep” article I wrote for the book *Veer Ecology: An Ecotheory Companion* (eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, University of Minnesota Press, 2017). A glass is a very effective tool for

keeping water in one place. If I poured it onto the table, this napkin would be a less effective tool. The paper would try its best to hold the water together, but before long it would spill out to the rest of the table. In similar ways, human bodies are pretty good containers: Not that much water gets out of our bodies – we at least do not expect it to – but a little does through various ways. There is a way in which water is always wanting to transgress boundaries between coherent systems. Whether it is the coast line, a river bank, or any kind of container you put water into, it is constantly working – through polarity, tidal forces, and many other kinds of movement – to get out of the boxes we put it in and to transform itself from one kind of water into another.

A.A: Do you see parallels between these dynamics of water and the *modus operandi* of literature? Is there a specific affinity between water and the medium that we primarily investigate as literary scholars, or could similar approaches be taken in any number of arts, not just those that are primarily text-based?

S.M: I certainly think it is worth examining the ways musicians, plastic arts, and visual artists respond to water. Theater artists are also very interested in how you might use water on stage, water in performance ... Despite that – or maybe in dialogue with that – I am first and foremost a literary person. It seems to me that the fundamental project of literary culture, both in its narrative forms and outside of them, is trying to build a system through which humans can understand change: change in time, change in space. And water, both physically and culturally, is the great symbol that we have of something in a spectacle of transition. Water is the only substance that we commonly encounter as a liquid, a solid, and gaseous vapor. The way it is present on a common, everyday level across multiple phases, and that we habitually get to observe its transition from one into another, is a unique quality of water. It functions as a constant reminder of how we deal with change, how our culture represents it, and how we understand the painful consequences of dealing with change, including impermanence and mortality. Through water, we can try to figure out how to think ourselves into alignment with changes that we cannot fix or stop.

A.A: It also seems a fitting metaphor for what texts themselves tend to do. After all, a book or a poem is a relatively solid container that keeps the word in, but something constantly seeps out in all directions, into our minds, our culture, and onwards from there. It makes me think of how Jacques Derrida allegedly responded to the question “What is a poem?” He said: “A poem is a hedgehog,” because of how its quills jut outwards in all directions. Maybe it would be more accurate to think this in less solid metaphors, and to say that a poem is a glass of water, or a puddle, or a cloud?

S.M: Yes, the project – the goal – of a literary text is to get out and propagate, to move into the imagination of human readers or through performance or into other

genres, other modes. Literature is a kind of telephone game: It gets out, and it gets changed in the process of getting out.

A.A: We could then further extend this metaphor, not just by looking at different phases – the solid, the liquid, the gaseous states of literature – but also at the affinity between water and electronic currents that play into your analogy to a telephone game ... However, I would still like to return to the question of radically different encounters with different forms of water:

Romanticism is oftentimes conceived of as a global phenomenon that manifested not just in Jena, Heidelberg, and Berlin, but also throughout France, Italy, the British Isles, the Americas, and beyond ... However, each of those regions at the beginning of the nineteenth century had very different relationships to water, depending on what bodies of water they were close to and how they used them. In Germany, there were of course maritime cities, but the most prominent body of water in German Romanticism is the Rhine – a river. England, at the time the world's dominant maritime power, turned water into the understructure of a colonial empire, and in the United States, whaling was the first industry in which it became a global leader. Furthermore, in the process of westward expansion, the sea was an ineffable *telos* that was projected at the far side of masses upon masses of land. Do you think this also maps onto differences in cultural production, particularly in the context of Romanticism? Or is it rather the case – given that water affords so much abstraction and such effective cross-cultural transfer – that it matters little in which actual form nations encountered it?

S.M: That is a really interesting question, because on the one hand it is fairly easy to map the particular ways that the geographies of the Rhine river, the Lake District in England, Concord, Massachusetts, and Melville's Pacific all shaped the particular representations of the central figures in German, English, and American Romanticism. It makes a lot of sense: Melville obviously was writing a different kind of water narrative than Thoreau, even when Thoreau had his own maritime moment in Cape Cod. But I would also want to say, without stretching the point too much, that there are affinities across all those places, also visible in the way a river operates as a cultural symbol.

There are some universal physical characteristics of the relationships between humans and water. These characteristics work across very different kinds of water, across salt and fresh, across domesticated or 'civilized' space and wilderness. One of the things that I would like to see Blue Humanities scholarship continue to do is to think about water on global comparative scales. I certainly cannot do all of that myself, but I am excited about an emerging generation of scholars in this area who are taking a toolkit of ideas that some people of my generation have developed, and using them to do very different kinds of things with very different bodies of water, including icebergs and glaciers and swamps. The possibility of drawing multiple

kinds of water into this conversation, I think, is the most interesting thing that is happening now in this ‘current’ of thought. This, by the way, is a very deliberate choice of words: Of course, when you work with water, you endlessly fall into these kinds of puns, but in academic culture we also often talk about ‘fields of study.’ A ‘field’ is very much a terrestrial metaphor, and it implies that you can put fences around it, that you can weed it, and that the thing that grows in it is the thing you plant there. I have no problem with agriculture *per se*, but the idea of a ‘current’ of thought is not just a water-based metaphor but also one about movement, a kind of movement that is rarely controlled by the person inside of it. If you have ever been caught in a riptide or a fast-moving river, you know you can still move yourself and navigate a little bit, but you have to take strong count of the current as it operates, and as a result, you are limited in your directions.

A.A: Which brings us to the question of who controls how much of the current’s overall course, intensity, and content. Particularly in literary studies, which in the past decades has done really significant work in questioning processes of canon formation, we should ask: “Who gets to narrate water?” A lot of our aquatic ur-texts, especially in Romanticism, were written by people like Herman Melville, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Heinrich Heine and Clements Brentano in Germany: All upper-middle or downright upper-class White men from merely a handful of locations. The uncontrollability of water and its tendency to inevitably transcend its initial placement and limitations would be an encouraging thought, in that sense: It would speak to a desire to continuously expand that rigid original canon.

S.M: Exactly. One of the things that Blue Humanities literary scholarship, especially in English language works, is trying to both take on board and also move beyond, is a very traditional kind of royal-navy-structured ‘literature and the sea’ approach, which is very masculinist and very White. Where are the traditions of African American mariners, including figures like Olaudah Equiano and Paul Cuffe, who were abolitionist sailors and ex-slaves, who used their maritime skills to escape, and to subsequently to support the abolitionists’ cause?

Regarding gender, I have written about John Everett Millais’ painting *Ophelia*, that famous, horrifying image of drowned innocence. Remarkably, there is a line in *Hamlet* in which, at the moment of drowning, Ophelia very briefly becomes a mermaid: Her clothes – which are about to sink her to the bottom of the river – are floating to the side and look like wings or a mermaid’s tail. Shakespeare – through the voice of Gertrude telling the story – momentarily imagines her to be native and endued to water. It is obviously not the story that Shakespeare ends up telling, but in that brief tangential reference to the mermaid, he nonetheless acknowledges this long tradition of mermaid as a particular kind of part-human who has a fully aqueous existence. So when I wanted to write about that moment in *Hamlet* and that painting, I ended up writing about *The Mermaid of Black Conch*, which is a novel by

the Trinidadian born writer Monique Roffey (Peepal Tree Press, 2020) about a mermaid who lives in the Caribbean. I tried to think about ways in which Indigenous mythologies about mermaids, both in Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, provide for us a kind of structural relationship that is different from the old White male ‘captain on the quarterdeck’ kind of narrative. Of course, I do think it is still a challenge: In historical terms, it is always a challenge to write oneself out of the traditional canon, but as much as I like Melville and Shakespeare and Percy Shelley, I also think it is really important that we – as teachers and readers and thinkers – try not to keep ourselves in that same box.

A.A.: It seems that water and especially oceanic water, due to its connotations of uncontrollability and sheer vastness – especially the vastness of the submerged world – in our cultural imaginary affords space and therefore also at least the fantasy of escaping terrestrial power structures. This idea of liberation through transformation into a mermaid makes me think of the figure of the Drexciya, which have become a common trope especially in Afrofuturist narratives: Countless enslaved people, while being shipped from Africa to the Americas, were dropped overboard because they grew ill and died during the passage, or for various other horrifying reasons. That experience of ancestors lost to the Atlantic engendered stories of underwater cities, of the people thrown into the ocean and their aquatic offspring building a new home under the sea, outside the colonial control associated with landmasses. That subversive potential appears to be a kind of flipside to the more fearsome and obscure associations of the ocean with inaccessibility, uncontrollability.

S.M.: Certainly. We see this potential in racial as well as in gendered contexts. There are quite a few female writers who think about some of these same tropes. Even though, in the age of sail, many ships in the Anglophone world were all male spaces, there is a smaller tradition of women going to sea with their husbands if their husbands were captains: The captain gets to bring his wife along if he chooses to. And there is actually a subset of these women who themselves became expert navigators. One particular woman whose story has been written about a lot was Mary Ann Brown Patten. She traveled from the East Coast of the United States around South America to San Francisco with her husband many times. One of those times, he collapsed, and she brought the ship safely into port in San Francisco two and a half months later, because she actually was just as good a navigator as he was, and, somehow, she convinced the whole system to function with her in command. But then, because it was nineteenth century America, she returned home to Cape Cod and never went to sea again. Here, we have this incredibly poignant story about aptitude and professional skill and exactly the kind of maritime heroism that gets celebrated in the male tradition, which is employed in a moment of crisis and looked back on with longing ever after. Supposedly, Brown Patten would carry a sextant, a

navigational instrument, with her for the rest of her life, even though she had no occasion to go to sea after that.

A.A: It seems like, in stories like these, there is a constant push and pull – of patriarchal society trying to tame, control, and reign in, and then of water, women, non-White people inevitably seeping through the cracks and evading that containment, at least momentarily. After all, so much of our aquatic architecture is concerned with exactly that attempt to reign in water, but our cultural history is filled with narratives about the hubris of such containment.

S.M: True, this structure of taming is always pretty partial in the context of working with water. But there is also a long tradition in different architectural works where cultures use water in a decorative way, especially moving water, for example in the form of fountains. That is partially a demonstration – if you are really good at engineering, you can make water circulate in a way that is relatively contained and containable – but I also think one of the reasons why this is pleasurable and beautiful is precisely because water is so rarely tamable in its non-cultivated states: in larger moving bodies or non-human-formed bodies. There might be another answer having to do with canals, canals being these artificial rivers that connect a pacified body of water with, ultimately, the whole wide ocean ...

A.A: I keep thinking about the city of Venice in this regard, about whether it represents, at least in our cultural imagination, a way of not *having* to tame water. Venetian canals are not the typical concrete shoots we have built elsewhere to channel water, but the whole city is built *on* the sea. There, the canals are the foundation, and houses are erected on them in a way that actually creates a unique, widely diverse ecosystem. What do you think about this particular vision of co-habiting with water rather than subjugating it, or being subjugated by it?

S.M: Venice is a really interesting example, both on level of ideology and of environmental reality. It was tradition in medieval and early modern Venice that, when a new ruler was elected, they held a ceremony in which the Doge went out into the bay and symbolically married the sea. He would drop a ring into the water, representing that ‘we the Venetians’ were uniquely connected to the power of the sea. But, of course, Venice is also the site of massive flooding, complicated engineering projects that may or may not keep the city from sinking in the next decade or two. There is a constant, really daily and monthly battle between ordinary Venetian streets and the *acqua alta*, which anyone who has been to Venice recently will notice. It is both one of the supreme examples of living in contact with water, and also a pretty clear representation of never quite knowing what water is going to do next. Venice strikes me as, obviously, one of the most beautiful cities in the world, but also one of the most unstable ecologically and physically, partly because of its dependence on water.

A.A: Maybe it is telling, then, that in so many of our stories people go to Venice to die? It is perhaps the city most closely associated with death in our cultural imagination, and that very city is itself constantly on the verge of drowning.

S.M: I do think that this kind of duality of form is a kind of fundamental feature of how humans think imaginatively about water. The line from Melville that I selected as an epigraph to my *Ocean* book is spoken by Father Mapple, who says: “Shipmates, it is a two-stranded lesson.” In other words, there is always going to be something that leaves two interpretative moves that are in tension with each other, in the way the different strands in braided rope are in tension with each other, but also working *with* each other, in opposition and in cohesion. I think about that duology on a very fundamental level: that water is both massively pleasing and necessary, and deeply threatening and deadly. And that kind of fundamental split seems to me to have repercussions in almost any place in which water is employed as a subject, whether that’s Canadian river poets or canonical sea writers or Shakespeare. There is an interesting phenomenon in contemporary literature of memoirs of swimmers, many of them written by women. Leanne Shapton is one, and Jessica J. Lee, who wrote about swimming in dozens of lakes in northern Germany. What undergirds them is both the increasingly popular phenomenon of wild swimming – swimming in open waters – and the particular ways that a human life can be punctuated by training oneself to become, to a certain degree, comfortable in this alien environment.

A.A: I think that is the perfect concluding statement. It makes sense, with a topic like this, to end on a note of ambiguity rather than pretending that we have now solved water and Romanticism, and can add the ‘*q.e.d.*’ Both topics would sooner or later seep out of their container again, anyway.