

Introductory Comments

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Let me first introduce the authors of these two papers. Sean Silver from the Department of English at the University of Michigan is the author of *The Mind Is a Collection* (Penn, 2015), which approaches seventeenth- and eighteenth-century metaphors of mind from a material point of view. Jonathan Lamb advertises it as “Latour with a spice of Shandeism,” which is certainly enough to recommend it to me. His contribution to our workshop is “Cognitive Crusoe,” on mind and environment in *Robinson Crusoe*. Melissa Sodeman is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Coe College (Iowa). Her *Sentimental Memorials* was published by Stanford last year. Her contribution to the workshop is “Affective Observation” on Gilbert White’s *Natural History of Selborne*, asking us “to reconsider not only the relationship between the naturalist and his objects of study, but also the intertwined histories of natural science, sympathy, and domesticity in the eighteenth century.”

“Who Cares?” We have already rung many changes on that question, and I will leave it to Michael [Meranze] in the next—and *final*—session to parse them all, but I will pick a few points here about which I would welcome more discussion: indifference; purpose; the Anthropocene.

We have on numerous occasions touched lightly on the question of whether or not the kind of work we do—the kind of work this workshop seeks to generate—matters to anyone beyond this room, has consequence for any beyond ourselves. Less directly engaged in, but certainly felt, is the institutional question: should universities still care about our subject? And if so, how can we convince them of this? Because they obviously—and materially—have answered that question in the negative. Sgt. Phil Esterhaus used to conclude every *Hill Street Blues* roll call: “Hey, let’s be careful out there”—are those words we need to heed now?

Sean reminds us of the connections between “economy” and “ecology.” Robinson Crusoe has often been taken as the archetype of “economic man,” and Silver’s paper acknowledges this. But he also writes that “lurking in Defoe’s portrait of a man alone upon an island is a working theory of thought as an ecological property.” We can do more with this. When Sean discusses how “one of the reasons that literature of the sea-adventure type seems to reflect a computer model of cognition is that the most cerebral maritime activities (especially when it comes to navigation) function in and through the transformation of data,” I want to add to the discussion that follows the longstanding etymological connection between “steersman” and “cybernetic.” The latter was intended from the outset to indicate *both* “command and control” (which was very big for Wiener) and also “environmental feedback.”¹ The pilot of even a small boat steers with one hand on the rudder (or motor) and an eye on the horizon, responding through touch to the signals that the water transmits about his orientation moving through it. And this might take us all the way back to Palinurus in the *Aeneid*. What might that story say that might be helpful in thinking about Crusoe (about one being killed to save the many, or about carelessness, or about false allegations of carelessness and the malign influence of divine forces, or etc., etc.)?

“My . . . point . . . is essentially an ecological one, in which Crusoe functions as a curator or caretaker of that island that gives him, in return, his sense of himself” (Silver, 351). A few pages later, Sean writes “Crusoe in general clings to a distinction between head and hand, thought and labor, and this causes him, despite repeated misgivings, to claim as his own accomplishments

¹ Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (MIT, 1948).

most of the transformations of the island ecosystem in which he dwells. Again this is despite his sense that the island often returns something in excess of what he puts in . . .”. Crusoe’s own misreading of his own text reminds me of an instance of Nick’s “intrusive narrator” from our first session—for behind this doctrine of excessive return that underwrites Crusoe’s colonial survival is the invisible hand of a Providential design that has marked Crusoe as elect: a novel of unabashed American Exceptionalism before America. And I am also reminded that Crusoe’s misreading of his own text is also the misreading that my university president is selling to my legislature about the future of higher education: we will become builders and makers of a new world of prosperity and plenty. Who cares that Crusoe misread his own story?

In Sean’s account, the discovery of the footprint is a destabilizing moment, not only for the novel’s plot, but for Crusoe’s imagination: his “experience of the island is thrown into confusion because his faculty of imagination is on the fritz, and his goal is to correct or to return his imagination, if not his island, to its former state” (355). Pivoting on this moment of observation, I want to swerve, partly in the interests of time, partly in the interests of connection, and partly to keep my auditors off balance, to Melissa’s paper on Gilbert White’s “Affective Observation” in *Natural History of Selborne*. With what I consider to be admirable care, Melissa notes in a variety of ways the extraordinary care with which White observed his environment. I will call attention to a particularly nice articulation of this: “White occasionally draws upon an Enlightenment understanding of nature as a system *maintained in perfect equilibrium*, though his close observations of natural interactions also disrupt this picture of serene balance. His *painstaking attention* to birds, in particular, reveals competition among individuals and species...” From this observation, Melissa unfolds in various ways how White’s “scrupulous record keeping” and “close and sustained observation” give texture and force to his efforts to shore up the “foundation of local observation” that in many ways “the universalizing systems of Enlightenment science” required.

Famously, if apocryphally, Newton is said to have remarked that if he saw further than others, it was because he stood on the shoulders of giants. One gets the image from Melissa, of lonely Gilbert White wandering onto the scene late and saying “if you boys want to see as far as you claim to see, you need someone like me to get down in the mud and prop you up.” I am a big fan of people like White, and I admire the attention he justly receives from Melissa.

Now, in one sense we have two lonely buggers attending to their environments. But they attend to those environments quite differently, even though each can be said (justly) to care *for*, as well as to care *about*, those environments. Crusoe is quite instrumental in his approach to his environment, caring primarily (even exclusively?) about how the management of that environment threatens or contributes to his own well-being. He finds it helpful to hamstring his goats and drown his kittens, whom he considers to be of his family (ah, domestic care in the wild!). Melissa’s description of White builds a narrative of affective sympathy for the creatures of his environment, which achieves its own emotional climax when she quotes the playful letter that White writes from the perspective of Timothy, the tortoise. This letter concludes with a “confession” of Timothy’s that anticipates from a reptilian perspective one lodged by Elizabeth Bennet after first meeting Lord Darcy: “These matters displease me; but there is another that much hurts my pride: I mean that contempt shown for my understanding which these *Lords* of the *Creation* are very apt to discover, thinking that nobody knows anything but themselves.”

“Who speaks for the tortoise?” This is one of the vexing questions of ecological criticism. The affective sympathy that Melissa rightly finds so charming in White is, I think, also problematic. This is not just giving voice to nature, but giving *human* voice, albeit a particular register of human voice. Like the foundlings in Coram’s hospital, Timothy’s care comes at a cost.