

Although fully half of the world's peoples now live within a hundred miles of an ocean, few today have a working knowledge of the sea. As a science, oceanography is still in its infancy. "More is known about the dark side of the moon than is known about the depths of the oceans," writes the sea explorer David Helvarg. Yet, large numbers of people know the sea in other ways, through the arts and literature. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, fiction has been imagining underseas worlds that explorers were unable to reach. Rachel Carson, who did as much as anyone to open up the marine sciences, was inspired by the arts and literature. She wrote in 1951 that humans were destined to return to the sea from which they had emerged eons earlier, but this time they would do so "mentally and imaginatively." This cultural turn to the sea began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and by now there is a vast trove of writing, painting, and music that awaits examination under the rubric of what English Professor Steve Mentz would like us to call the "blue humanities."

A shift in attention from land to sea is under way in several different fields simultaneously. Archaeology has moved offshore, revealing previously unknown aspects of prehistory lost to sea_level rise. Anthropology, which got its start on islands, now focuses on the seas between them. Maritime history, once largely about what has taken place on the water's surface, is now concerned with life in the ocean itself. It is rapidly merging with marine biology, becoming indistinguishable from natural history. What had been a blue hole in environmental history is beginning to be filled by studies of particular species of fish and marine mammals. Even more recently, we have begun to explore the history of ocean currents, tides, and even waves, phenomena once thought to be timeless, like the "eternal sea" itself.

The historicization of the oceans is one of the most striking trends in the new blue humanities. History no longer stops at the water's edge. The Mediterranean Sea has long been an organizing concept for ancient historians, and now Atlantic History is an established part of the early modern studies, with the Pacific looming large in contemporary studies. But some global historians now chafe at oceanic as well as continental divisions, arguing that our globe is dominated by one great seamless body of water, covering 7/10ths of the planet's surface and affecting weather, climate, and life on land as well as at sea. Geography has finally begun to take an interest in the oceans. Beginning with Philip Steinberg's The Social Construction of the Ocean (2001), a vast area of exploration has opened up. Historians of science have come to recognize how the voyages of the early modern period produced what the environmental historian Richard Grove showed were the first glimmerings of ecological thinking, when mariners discovered the damage that invasive species of plants and animals could do on small islands around the world.

Sea stories, chanties, and marine painting are by no means new, but it is only recently that they have been subject to academic scrutiny. The seascape, once a minor genre in art history focused mainly on ships and harbors, took on new interest when nineteenth century painters like J.M.W Turner and Winslow Homer were recognized as having pioneered in the representation of light and movement on canvas, "pure seascape" as some critics have called it. Comparative literature scholars like Margaret Cohen have shown sea stories, concerned originally with the mechanics of sailing, came in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to focus

on the ocean itself, turning it into a space within which to imagine modernity itself. The modern novel was born at sea with Robinson Crusoe, reaching a new level of metaphysical sophistication with Moby Dick, and carried forward by the watery science fictions of Jules Verne. Melville's observation that "meditation and water are wedded forever" anticipated by almost a century Carson's evocation in The Sea Around Us (1951) of humankind's mental and imaginative turn to the sea. In what is now being called "ecoliterature," we are discovering the scientific side of writers like John Steinberk, whose close collaboration with the naturalist Ed Ricketts in The Log from the the Sea of Cortez, published in the same year as Carson's classic, can be seen as one of the first examples of this genre.

The emergence of blue humanities is a belated recognition of the close relationship between modern western culture and the sea. Before the nineteenth century, attitudes toward the oceans were more utilitarian than aesthetic. Then the sea was portrayed as dangerous and repellant, ugly and unfit for literary or artistic representation. Oceans were initially explored as a means to reach distant lands, and little attention was paid to the waters themselves. It has been said that "the deep sea made hardly an impression...Even ocean_going explorers were more land than ocean oriented; they used the sea merely as a highway to get to the next landfall." This was a discovery more *by* sea than *of* the sea.

Early modern science knew much more about the heavens than about the oceans; and more attention was paid to extracting the wealth of the seas, namely fish, than to the waters themselves. All that lay beneath the surface The Deep was thought to be an unfathomable abyss, impenetrable and unknowable, a dark dead zone that trapped all that sank below the surface, never revealing its secrets. Until the nineteenth century, notes writer James Hamilton_Patterson, our understanding of the sea was "literally superficial, ...a navigable surface, obviously, above the abyss." Early modern sea fiction and painting were surprisingly impoverished when it came to oceans themselves. The focus then was almost entirely on the ships and the skills of the men who manned them, with the sea itself almost an afterthought. In early modern marine painting interest dwelled on the details of ships rather than on the waters

they navigated.

What might be called the second discovery of the sea, beginning in the late eighteenth century and accelerating in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, produced a vast expansion of scientific and humanistic knowledge of the sea as a three-dimensional living thing with a history, geography, and a life all its own. Modern times accomplished what no other era had even attempted, namely the discovery of the temporal and spatial depth of the sea. Darwinian evolutionary science came to recognize that waters gave birth to all life on earth, including our own. Archaeology would explode the finite chronology imposed by Biblical orthodoxy and ultimately trace the original Homo sapiens back to the African shore, from which they began their remarkably rapid colonization of the world, as much alongshore as inland.

Ironically, it was when nations turned away from the sea as a place of work that writers and painters turned their full attention to the sea itself. They turned it, as never before, into a place of spiritual and physical recreation. In what Margaret Cohen has called the "sublimation of the sea," they gave it new cultural status, a higher aesthetic power. The ocean became a fountain of images and metaphors -- the shipwreck being only the most prominent ___ that have continued to influence western culture to the present day.