

Conference Report on "Mobility in English and American Literature and Culture, 1500-1900"

Rauschholzhausen Castle, Germany, November 30 – December 3, 2011

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Mobility has recently become a transdisciplinary catchword. Examples of its prominent use include sociological studies such as John Urry's *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-first Century* (Routledge 2000) and publications in cultural studies such as *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (Cambridge UP, 2010). To address the usefulness of mobility concepts for literary and cultural studies, an international conference on *Mobility in English and American Literature and Culture, 1500-1900* was held at Rauischholzhausen Castle, near Giessen, from November 30 to December 3, 2011. Sponsored by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the Giessen University Association, the conference assembled 19 talks which were organized in chronological order of subject and dealt with topics ranging from mobility in medieval pilgrimage and Samuel Pepys' diary to Herman Melville's carpetbag. As the conference organizers, INGO BERENSMEYER (Giessen), CHRISTOPH EHLAND (Paderborn), and HERBERT GRABES (Giessen), outlined in their opening remarks, the conference was to examine the claim that literary and cultural history cannot be written without concepts of mobility.

Pilgrims, Pirates, and Red Herrings: Perspectives on Early Modern Mobility

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Opening the first and largest historical section of the conference, on early modern literature and culture, INGO BERENSMEYER (Giessen) laid out the conceptual possibilities of mobility studies by means of a short history of mobility "From Pilgrimage to Picaresque". Of the many (often only loosely connected) strands of contemporary mobility studies, Berensmeyer



focused on cultural ecology (Peter Finke, Hubert Zapf), on genre studies (Franco Moretti), and on transnational and transareal mappings (Ottmar Ette). Drawing on examples in English literature from the middle ages to early modernity, Berensmeyer himself suggested the notions of situatedness and portability as a potential framework in the study of mobile texts, objects, and artefacts, notions which enable a perspective on literary and cultural

discourses that views them in terms of their cultural sustainability. In the discussion of Berensmeyer's paper, HERBERT GRABES (Giessen) raised the issue of how to differentiate sharply between a specific concept of mobility in contrast to a general notion of change, suggesting that they differ in their metaphoricity (spatial vs. temporal) and possibly also the extent to which they are connected to agency. The latter raises the problem of the agency of (mobile) material objects such as books, which could be thought of as having agency in the framework of Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory, as Berensmeyer pointed out. The question of the specificity of mobility was to remain a continuous thread throughout the discussions of the conference.

One of the papers focusing on mobility in the form of travel was ANDREW HADFIELD's (Sussex) "Mobility in the Works of Thomas Nashe". As the title of one of Nashe's novels, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, implies, travel is always associated with hardship or misery in Nashe's works. Hadfield investigated a debate between Nashe and his arch enemy Gabriel Harvey on the value of Richard Hakluyt's popular *Principal Navigations*, in which Nashe strongly opposed Hakluyt's promotional and self-fashioning collection; Harvey countered by speaking of Nashe's travel literature as 'phantasticall bibble-bables.' Nashe's *Lenten Stufe*, a reaction to Harvey's taunts, was a successful parody of early modern English overseas mobility, and satirically criticised the patriotic self-fashioning and promotion of English explorations. Hadfield argued that the central personification of a red herring going on a journey not only transforms the herring into an object representative of the importance of sustenance in foreign travels, but it also turns it into a mobile and expedient object which indirectly draws the attention towards socio-economic conditions at home, thus ultimately criticising the exploitative aspects of English mobility in the early modern period.

TOBIAS DÖRING (Munich) brought up the question of theatrical mobility, which was also at the heart of CHRISTOPH EHLAND's (Paderborn) presentation "The Stage is Not Enough". In his paper on "Magic and Mobility: Theatrical Travels in Marlowe and Shakespeare", Döring examined English Renaissance theatre not only as a site of social mobility and cultural exchange but also as a medium for the staging of contingency, an element of mobility that Greenblatt views as its central characteristic. Speaking mainly about *Othello* and *Doctor Faustus*, Döring elaborated on the metatheatrical foregrounding of the performative power

of words, a power predicated on immobilizing the spectators of the play. At the same time, the theatre of Marlowe and Shakespeare contrasts with the earlier medieval theatrical tradition where the journeys from heaven to hell are conceived in terms of physical movement; in Renaissance theatre, the actors move within the small space of the stage and yet this stage is everything by way of the rhetorical and dramatic, indeed magical, power of words. The uses of theatrical mobility, Döring concluded, lie in its power to redefine the local as a space where the spectators can meet again despite all the hurly-burly of contingency. In the discussion of Döring's paper, MARSHALL BROWN (Seattle) suggested that, instead of opposing mobility and change in terms of agency, researchers might rather look at the difference between mobility and mutability in terms of identity. To identify mobility, the thing or person that is mobile has to have a stable enough identity, otherwise one could not speak of the mobility of the entity. What lies at the origin of the undoing of this identity is mutability. As Brown phrased it, mobility and identity are dialectically inseparable.

In her two-part paper on "Piracy and Mobility in English Renaissance Literature", CLAIRE JOWITT (Nottingham) examined how pirates were connected with and challenged ideas about mobility and how literary depictions of pirates can be regarded as generically mobile. Drawing on *The Fair Maid of the West*, *The New Arcadia*, and *Hamlet*, Jowitt outlined how pirates are physically, socially, and culturally mobile: beside the obvious movements of pirates on sea, their social mobility was highly flexible and depended on circumstances or interests of individuals, larger groups or even nations. Hence, Jowitt explained, piracy generally counted as a criminal act, but at the same time was also a useful means to control foreign policy which was beyond the limits of geographical jurisdiction and later became known as 'privateering.' Jowitt then established a connection between the fictional counterparts of pirates and the generic boundaries of epic and romance. Literary figures of pirates, she argued, operate with features of both registers and unite aristocratic patterns of behaviour with romance values, and thereby confront, push, and modify the generic limitations of epic and romance. Jowitt's outline of the mobility of pirates and the implications of depictions of pirates in literature illustrated the mobile and adaptable attitude to what constituted piracy in the early modern period.

Other papers on early modern mobilities focused on John Donne (JAN BORM, Versailles), the relation of mobility and autobiography (TILL KINZEL, Braunschweig), and the mobility of political pamphlets (HERBERT GRABES, Giessen). After HASSAN MELEHY's (Chapel Hill) paper on "Literary Transfers of Sovereignty: Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Lipsius", the conference moved beyond the 16th and 17th centuries.

Mobility, Mob, and Migrant Fictions in the 18th century

The 18th century was represented in five papers which covered wide-ranging topics such as the relevance of travellers' spatial practices for the notion of the nation (STEPHAN KOHL, Würzburg) and the intersections between mobility, sensibility, and (gendered) individuality in 18th-century sentimental travelogues (BIRGIT NEUMANN, Passau). The section also produced

unexpected semantic insights such as PASCAL FISCHER's (Würzburg/Stuttgart) explanation of the opposition between nobility and mobility, the latter of which we have come to know as the 'mob' ("The Conservative Distrust of Movement in the 'French Revolution Debate'"). One of the most important configurations of mobility within American studies, namely transnationality and transatlanticism, was dealt with by OLIVER SCHEIDING (Mainz). In his paper on



"Migrant Fictions and the Early Story in North America", Scheiding criticised the restriction of the concept of literary globalization to the novel and outlined how the notions of textual travel and transformation can change our predominantly national understanding of the American short story. Scheiding showed how the first so-called American short stories emerged from complex transcultural exchanges and the material constraints of magazine publishing in 18th-century America, using the example of "The Child of Snow". In this tale, an adulterous wife tells her husband that she was impregnated by a snowflake, a story which the husband seemingly accepts, only to later sell the boy as a slave and to tell his wife that he melted in the sun. The story is usually identified as an 'authentic American tale', yet Scheiding traced its textual mobility through an 18th-century French predecessor back to an 11th-century collection of *Carmina* in which the equivalent story is set in Southern Germany. The fact that it came to be perceived as American is – among other reasons – the result of the work not of an author, but an editor, Isaiah Thomas, who omitted the source reference in the story's publication in the *Massachusetts Magazine*. The transnational journey of "The Child of Snow" is only an example, Scheiding argued, of the necessity of transnationalizing the emergence of the short story prior to Washington Irving, showing that the early American story is a result of iteration rather than origination.

That the mobile and changeable evaluation of writing was at the heart of canon formation in 18th-century America was shown by JULIA STRAUB (Berne) in her talk on "Early American Literature and the Canon: The Mobility of Literary Value in the Eighteenth Century".

Social and Individual Mobility: 19th-Century Travels with a Carpetbag

The papers on 19th-century literature and culture ranged from MARSHALL BROWN's (Seattle) talk on "Austen's Immobility" and STEPHEN PRICKETT's (Canterbury) examination of authorial mobility in his talk on "Exile as an Existential Condition: Kierkegaard, Conrad and Kipling", to epistemological and social mobility. In her talk on "Social Mobility and Female Agency: The Case of Jane Morris", WENDY PARKINS (Dunedin) outlined the relationship between literature and social mobility in the 19th century through the example of the Victorian model Jane Morris. As an icon of Pre-Raphaelite art, Morris became an important figure in the aesthetic movement and her embodiment of high art widely circulated in Victorian culture. As the "face of aestheticism", Parkins argued, Morris provides an example of the mobility of an image

associated with the expansion of print culture, the development of new forms of visual technology and the rise of celebrities in the early Victorian period. Parkins went on to juxtapose the historical figure of Jane Morris with a literary depiction of her in Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown*, in which a Morris-like figure is confronted with aestheticism, positivism, and socialism. The novel reflects upon Morris' transformation from working-class girl to intellectual woman, not only through an upgrading marriage, but also through the self-acquisition of cultural capital, such as music and languages, and, most importantly, reading. Liberation through literacy, Parkins argued, was associated with the attainment of an internal and emotional emancipation, which made it an important premise for successful social mobility.

The last day of the conference also saw a paper which added the notion of a movement-based epistemology being one of the foundations of Victorian writing (PHILIPP ERCHINGER, Exeter). The conference came full circle when DENNIS BERTHOLD (Texas A&M), in the final paper, took up the question of literal rather than literary travel, in the example of an indeed well-travelled American author, when he spoke about "Melville's *Carpetbag*: Nautical Transformations of the Authorial Self".

Travelling Further



As the conference papers (to be published in *REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* with Gunter Narr Verlag in autumn 2012) as well as the closing discussion demonstrated, concepts of mobility can indeed contribute significantly to our understanding of literary and cultural history. While the term 'mobility' tends to oscillate between literal and metaphorical uses, and hence remains, one might say, a mobile concept, it does offer the opportunity

to think of travelling, in the sense of physical mobility, together with textual and social mobility. To trace these lines of connection between otherwise distinct dimensions, rather than eliding differences in a single overarching concept, seems to be both the promise and the challenge of future mobility studies. The Giessen conference pointed out some viable ways for travelling further.