

Spatial Practices

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18

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Navigating Cultural Spaces: Maritime Places

Edited by

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When China's Trade all Europe Overflows: Edward Young's Naval Lyrics, Critical (Mis)Fortune, and the Discourses of Naval Power, Trade, and Globalisation

Jens Martin Gurr

Abstract

This essay argues that Edward Young's naval lyrics – especially "Imperium Pelagi" (1730) – which have justly been regarded as poetic failures, can nonetheless be shown to be highly revealing documents in the eighteenth-century rivalry between the opposing trade philosophies of mercantilism and free trade. "Imperium Pelagi" is revealed to be highly conflictive in that it oscillates between celebrating trade as being beneficial to all, and a proto-nationalist discourse of competition and British naval power. In contrast to Young's professed originality in treating this topic, the texts are shown to be part of an ongoing discourse. Moreover, "Imperium Pelagi" is shown to contain what appears a prescient anticipation of Chinese dominance in international trade. In discussing these issues, the essay argues that historicising and presentifying approaches must by no means be mutually exclusive if the roots of present-day concerns can be traced to intellectual contexts of the text in question.

Key names and concepts: Harold Bloom – Edward Young – Adam Smith – economic globalisation – anxiety of influence – mercantilism – poetic theory – eighteenth-century philosophies of trade.

1. Introduction: Young's Naval Lyrics

What can one reasonably do with an obscure eighteenth-century poem that has justly been forgotten because it has always been judged a complete poetic and intellectual failure – what is more, a poem by a poet who has been distinctly 'out' for a century and a half? Does a critical engagement with such a text necessarily mean blindly rummaging in the dregs and remnants of an irrelevant past?

My discussion of Young's "Sea Odes" in this essay engages with the theoretical issue of historicising versus presentifying readings, ar-

to Ode, which few of Young's readers will regret" (Croft 1905: 377).⁶

In John Doran's 1854 "Life of Edward Young", the Sea Odes, "laborious triflings of mistaken genius", are singled out for particularly damning criticism: "Young thought well of his Odes; but posterity will refuse to endorse the sentiment" (xxxvii f).⁷ Mistaking "The Foreign Address" for Young's last attempt at the naval lyric, he calls it "a long and wearying ode, in which he takes as long and wearying a farewell of the [genre], never again to torture the patience of the public with parodies upon Pindar" (Doran 1854: vii). Among twentieth-century critics, Harold Forster in his excellent biography of Young laments "the singular depths to which he sank in his series of 'naval lyrics' [...], his deplorable sea-pieces" (1986: 124, 301).

In sum, the main argument against Young's naval lyrics was one he had himself invited in his Preface *On Lyric Poetry*, in which he had warned: "[As the Ode's] subjects are sublime, its writer's genius should be so too; otherwise it becomes the meanest thing in writing, viz., an involuntary burlesque" (Young 1968: 1.416). Unfortunately, this is precisely what his naval lyrics did become.

While it is hard to defend their poetic merits, I will argue that Young's Sea Odes have various fascinating stories to tell, especially with view to the topic of sea voyages, more specifically, regarding discourses incited by the opportunities sea voyages opened up for trade. I will here focus on the longest of them, "Imperium Pelagi" with its 170 stanzas and its short prose Preface. Where relevant, I will point to parallels in the other texts, particularly in "Ocean: An Ode" with its accompanying "Discourse on Lyric Poetry". "Imperium Pelagi" is a revealing document on the contemporary controversy between mercantilist philosophies of trade and the new doctrine of unrestrained international commerce. Secondly, the texts can be read as revealing early eighteenth-century suspicions about an earlier phase of economic globalisation.⁸ And finally, they afford interesting case studies of poetic theory under the "anxiety of influence" (*sensu* Bloom) and its contribution to public discourses. Making use of key notions of the theory

6 Speaking of "Ocean: An Ode", Croft is withering, singling out a number of stanzas for particular criticism. Croft's comments on Young's other naval odes are hardly less sarcastic.

7 For *Imperium Pelagi*, Doran has a mere seven dismissive lines.

8 For a fascinating discussion of earlier stages of globalisation, cf. Osterhammel and Petersson 2003; for an account of how remarkably close even the ancient world came to practices associated with present-day economic globalisation, cf. Moore and Lewis 2009.

of interdiscursivity as developed by Jürgen Link and others, this essay provides a reading especially of "Imperium Pelagi", discussing Young's politics and aesthetics of semanticising contemporary sea trade and relating them to present-day discussions of this topic.

2. "Imperium Pelagi: A Naval Lyric" (1730)

The full title of Young's second Sea Ode is "Imperium Pelagi: A Naval Lyric. Written in Imitation of Pindar's Spirit. Occasioned by his Majesty's Return, September 10th, 1729, and the succeeding Peace".

In the course of 1729, George II had personally taken part in continental negotiations to avert a war. When the later Treaty of Seville, to be signed in November 1729, had substantially been negotiated, George returned to England on September 10. In order to celebrate the reopening of the Seas for British trade, Young began work on "Imperium Pelagi", which was published on 6 April 1730 (cf. Forster 1986: 130), when enthusiasm over the treaty had seriously abated. The ode was thus simply published too late to still fit its occasion, the return of the king.

In five "strains", each prefaced by an "Argument", Young celebrates the new liberty of commerce and trade and elaborates on British naval supremacy, liberty, and the ennobling qualities of international trade. In the short prose "Preface" and throughout the text, he repeatedly points to Pindar as his great model and prides himself on the novelty of his theme – the glory of trade – and on its treatment in rhyme. The choice of stanza pattern was far more successful than in "Ocean: An Ode" and here does produce a number of rather impressive aural effects, though "Imperium Pelagi" is still far from a successful poem.

2.1. Young and Originality: Classical Models versus Immediate Predecessors in Celebrating (Naval) Trade

Although "Imperium Pelagi" and the other naval lyrics reveal a strong interest in classical models, and although two of them are accompanied by more or less extensive poetological prefaces and treatises placing them in the tradition of classical and neo-classical poetry, this is hardly the dominant influence on them. Throughout the texts, Young frequently, almost obsessively highlights the originality of his theme and his

imitation of classical models.⁹ The preface to "Imperium Pelagi", for instance, which is concerned with defending the relevance, poetic dignity, and originality of his theme, is permeated with notions of originality and poetic rivalry:

This Ode, I humbly conceive, is an original, though it professes imitation. No man can be like Pindar by imitating any of his particular works [...] The genius and spirit of such great men must be collected from the whole [...] Pindar is an original; and *he* must be so, too, who would be like Pindar in that which is his greatest praise. Nothing so unlike as a close copy and a noble original. [...] Trade is a very noble subject in itself, more proper than any for an Englishman, and particularly at this juncture. We have more specimens of good writing in every province than in the sublime [...] I was willing to make an attempt where I had fewest rivals. (Young 1968: 2.1f.)

The theme of rivalry with Greek and Roman poetry also occurs in the "Ode to the King" prefixed to "Ocean: An Ode":

Great monarch, bow Thy beaming brow:
To thee I strike the sounding lyre,
With proud design In verse to shine,
To rival Greek and Roman fire. (4.1–4)

This theme of rivalry with the ancients is frequently coupled with claims to absolute originality among the moderns as far as the choice of his subject matter – the great benefits of trade – is concerned. It is in "The Close" to "Imperium Pelagi" that Young once more repeats the claim to originality in poetically treating the subject of trade:

Thou art the Briton's noblest theme;
Why, then, unsung? ("The Close" 2.1–2)¹⁰

A final example out of many more¹¹ occurs in the "Discourse on Lyric

⁹ The "Discourse on Lyric Poetry" prefixed to "Ocean: An Ode" mentions "Pindar, Anacreon, Sappho, and Horace [as] the great masters of lyric poetry among heathen writers" to be imitated and surpassed, cf. Young 1968: 1.417.

¹⁰ cf. also "The Close", 1.1–3: "Thee, Trade! I first – who boast no store, / Who owe thee nought – thus snatch from shore, / The shore of Prose, where thou hast slumber'd long ..."

¹¹ cf. also "To the King", 10.3: "Hail, subject new!"; and stanzas 3–5 of "Ocean": "Who sings the source / Of wealth and force?" (3.1f); "Where, where are they Whom Paeon's ray / Has touch'd, and bid divinely rave? – / What! none aspire?

Poetry": "My subject is, in its own principle, noble; most proper for an Englishman; never more proper than on this occasion; and (what is strange) hitherto unsung" (Young 1968: 1.419).

What is interesting here is the way in which Young's text deflects attention from contemporary models and influences to ancient models and rivals. Quite in contrast to what he so insistently claims, trade is by no means so innovative a theme in English poetry. Rather, British naval power and the benefits of trade and global expansion are celebrated in a multitude of poems ranging all the way from the several versions of Denham's *Cooper's Hill* (1642, 1655, 1668) via Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), Tickell's *On the Prospect of Peace* (1712) to Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713).¹²

Writing of London and the Thames as the center of British trade, Denham already enthuses about the "blessings" of trade, which "[f]inds wealth where 'tis, bestows it where it wants", and celebrates London as "the world's exchange" (Denham 1969: 179, 185, 188). Brown speaks of a "global vision of prosperity, exchange, and political stability" in *Cooper's Hill*, centered on London and with the Thames as its access to global trade (2003: 110). For Dryden, too, "the sea is the medium of economic and political expansion", of a "global 'emporium'", a "benevolent system of commerce" (Brown 2003: 111). Brown cites further comparable passages from Tickell and Pope and even speaks of an expansionist philosophy of global trade as virtually "a commonplace in British poetry in the first half of the eighteenth century" (Brown 2003: 113).

What, then, about Young's claim to absolute originality and his frequent references to Pindar as his great model? Pindar, I would provocatively argue, is a mere smokescreen diverting attention from the more immediate sources also celebrating naval trade; and all the forced and continual insistence on originality is little more than whistling in the dark. The real models and rivals are his direct English predecessors – though in more successful poetic form. One may even want to read this as an indication that the "Anxiety of Influence" Bloom postulated for Romantic and post-Romantic writers was at work even in the early eighteenth century.¹³

I snatch the lyre, / And plunge into the foaming wave." (4.1–4), cf. also stanza 60 and throughout.

¹² For an enlightening reading of key passages in this tradition, cf. Brown 2003.

¹³ For a pragmatic application of Bloom's notion to a Romantic text and the misreading of its key intertext, cf. Gurr 1998.

2.2. "Knotted Discourses": Mercantilism, Free Trade, and Globalisation

In her enlightening discussion of Young's "Imperium Pelagi" in this tradition, Brown states that "Young echoes the commonplace contemporary notion that trade benefits the world by distributing goods and uniting people in its shared cause" (2003: 116). She even writes that "The story [of naval power and trade] collectively told here [in the poems from *Cooper's Hill* to "Imperium Pelagi"] takes on the transforming power of capitalist economic expansion, attempting to understand its nature and to project its effects" (Brown 2003: 118).

Brown brilliantly summarises her findings as follows:

The story of torrents and oceans tells us as much as it told its contemporary audience. It tells us how the distinctively modern experience of global economic expansion was understood at a time of dramatic and explosive growth. It demonstrates the intimacy of that experience with the material conditions of contemporary life, and it shows us how a culture might grasp the complexities and explore the contradictions of a historical transformation imaginatively, even as it clings to a simple, celebratory, or apologetic rationalization. (2003: 120)

What Brown does not remark on, though she perceptively speaks of the "tensions and contradictions of this cultural fable's implications" (2003: 119), is the tension between different conceptions of trade – mercantilism versus free trade – in the poem, and the 'free trade' stance Young's poem ultimately does take. What she also fails to see are the subtle hints at fears that global naval trade may be threatening to Britain's economic power and ultimately its naval dominance and thus signs of suspicions against the potentially detrimental effects of global sea trade during an earlier stage of economic globalisation.

All in all, these poems are an expression of imperialism and confidence in British naval superiority, a spirit close to Thomson's *Rule Britannia*. Trade, like war, is a matter of power and of British superiority, and that is the dominant theme of all the odes.¹⁴ But while the general drift of "Imperium Pelagi", like that of Young's other naval lyrics, is thus fairly clear, there are a number of contradictory discourses

¹⁴ König already remarked that "naval trade and war are the major themes of all Young's Odes": 1954: 79; my translation. "Seehandel und Krieg sind die Hauptthemen aller Youngschen Oden".

at work in these texts: there appears to be a constant clash between a benevolently inclusivist discourse of celebrating trade as being liberating and enlightening for all and a proto-nationalist discourse of naval power that regards trade as competitive and even celebrates war and British naval power.

Without entirely adopting the methodology, my analysis of these contradictory discourses takes its cue from the theory of interdiscursivity and the related method of analysis as developed by Jürgen Link, Ursula Link-Heer, Rolf Parr, and others.¹⁵ Link and Link-Heer introduce their concept as follows:

We suggest calling any historically specific 'discursive formation' in Foucault's sense as a 'specialized discourse' and then designating all interfering, connecting, integrating etc. cross-relations between several specialized discourses 'interdiscursive'. (Link and Link-Heer 1990: 92; my translation)¹⁶

Literature, of course, thus features as an interdiscourse *par excellence*. What I do not agree with is the authors' assumption – ultimately also derived from Foucault – of a shift around 1800 in the course of which literature *became* interdiscursive in the first place. If literature in a very broad sense always aimed to make sense of the world or to project a world for any society at any given time, this was only ever possible by bringing together the major concerns, questions, and discourses at any given moment. It therefore seems more plausible to regard literature as always having been fundamentally interdiscursive.

A central aim of the analysis of literature as the analysis of interdiscursivity can then be formulated as follows:

It studies (from a generative perspective) the origin of literary texts from a specific historic play of integrating discourses. [...] The theory of interdiscursivity allows one to reconstruct the totality of interdiscursive forms and elements of a given culture and epoch as a kind of networked ensemble, which – materially as well as formally – proves to be an essential condition for the production of literature. The interdiscursive

¹⁵ For an introduction cf. especially Link and Link-Heer 1990 as well as Link 1992.

¹⁶ Link and Link-Heer 1990: 92; my translation. "Wir schlagen vor, jede historisch-spezifische 'diskursive Formation' im Sinne Foucaults als 'Spezialdiskurs' zu bezeichnen und dann alle interferierenden, koppelnden, integrierenden usw. Quer-Beziehungen zwischen mehreren Spezialdiskursen 'interdiskursiv' zu nennen".

ensemble may be said to supply the semi-finished materials for literature. (Link and Link-Heer 1990: 95, 97; my translation)¹⁷

In a comparable vein, in a 1987 essay John Barrell and Harriet Guest explore the latent contradictions in selected eighteenth-century long poems. Taking their cue from a key passage in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderni del Carcere*), they attempt to take the multiplicity of – partly contradictory – discourses in eighteenth-century long poems such as the *Essay on Man*, *The Seasons*, *The Task*, *Night-Thoughts*, and others as “manifestations of the intimate contradictions by which society is lacerated” (Gramsci as qtd. in Barrell and Guest 1987: 123) and at the same time propose to analyse “the *ensemble* of discourses [as] a means of masking those contradictions” (Barrell and Guest 1987: 123).

In their conclusion on ideology and contradiction in the eighteenth-century long poem, they write:

The enunciation of the contradictions of ideology may not be the function for which long works of mixed genre, the characteristic production of eighteenth-century poets, were invented. But it is certainly one of the functions which they performed. (Barrell and Guest 1987: 143)

In what follows, I would like to isolate two such contradictory strands in the discourse of trade as they appear in Young's poem, and read them in the light of the contemporary discourse of mercantilism versus free trade, and finally to comment on early traces of a fear of global trade in Young's text. While these are by no means the only discourses in latent or open contradiction in the text,¹⁸ they are certainly the dominant ones.

17 Link and Link-Heer 1990: 95, 97; my translation. “[Sie] untersucht (in generativer Absicht) die Entstehung literarischer Texte aus einem je historisch-spezifischen diskursintegrativen Spiel. [...] Die Interdiskurstheorie erlaubt, die Gesamtheit der interdiskursiven Formen und Elemente einer gegebenen Kultur und Epoche als eine Art vernetztes Ensemble zu rekonstruieren, das sich als wesentliche Bedingung (und zwar sowohl in materialer wie in formaler Hinsicht) für die Produktion von Literatur erweist. Das interdiskursive Ensemble stellt sozusagen ‚Halbfabrikate‘ für die Literatur bereit”.

18 One such latent clash is apparent in the curious way in which Young seeks to ennoble trade by frequently claiming that morality on the one hand and acquisitiveness and commerce on the other hand are not only reconcilable but literally necessary complements. This occasionally takes on strong Calvinist overtones: “This truth, O Britain! ponder well: / Virtues should rise, as fortunes swell. / What is large property? The sign of good, / Of worth superior [...]” (3.1.1–4), cf. also 4.15.2: “Why is Heaven's smile in wealth convey'd?” and throughout. For the “knotting” of discourses of morality with those of trade and acquisitiveness

Throughout “*Imperium Pelagi*”, Young celebrates the wonderful benefits of trade, which, it is claimed, not only brings wealth but also civilisation, progress, and virtually universal happiness. The following is merely one of innumerable further passages one might cite here:

Trade barbarous lands can polish fair,
Make earth well worth the wise man's care;
Call forth her forests, charm them into fleets;
Can make one house of human race;
Can bid the distant poles embrace;
Hers every sun, and India India meets.
(Young 1968: IV, 13)¹⁹

It is clear throughout most of the text that all nations involved in trade will reap the benefits; free trade, rather than being a matter of competition in which gains to one country come at the expense of another, “levies gain on every place”, not just on Britain:

See, cherish'd by her sister, Peace,
[Trade] levies gain on every place,
Religion, habit, custom, tongue, and name,
Again she travels with the sun,
Again she draws a golden zone
Round earth and main, – bright zone of wealth and fame!
(Young 1968: 1.10)

“*Imperium Pelagi*”, thus predominantly reads like a poetic endorsement of the doctrine of free trade that was beginning to assert itself against the older mercantilist doctrine in the first half of the eighteenth-century. Celebrating “[t]hat blood of nations, – Commerce and Increase” (1.21.6) and marveling “[h]ow various Nature” (1.22.1), the text goes on to argue that differences in natural resources are the driving force behind trade:

in other eighteenth-century long poems, cf. also Barrell and Guest 1987.
19 For these universally beneficial effects of trade cf. also 3.20.1–3: “High Commerce from the gods came down, / With compass, chart, and starry crown, / Their delegate, to make the nations smile”; 3.26.6: “The whole creation is one vast Exchange”; 2.1: “Commerce gives Arts, as well as gain: / By Commerce wafted O'er the main, / They barbarous climes enlighten as they run. / Arts, the rich traffic of the soul, / May travel thus from pole to pole, / And gild the world with Learning's brighter sun”, and numerous further passages throughout.

Heaven different growths to different lands imparts,
That all may stand in need of all,
And interest draw around the ball
A net to catch and join all human hearts.
(1.23.3–6)²⁰

It is the desire in humans to exchange the benefits of “different growths” which “Heaven [...] to different lands imparts” which makes them trade in the first place. Young thus celebrates free trade in much the same way Adam Smith was to do so some 50 years later in *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith’s groundbreaking work is a polemic against the restrictive measures of the “mercantile system” and, arguing the case for free trade, states that trade will benefit *all* parties involved.²¹ But although “Imperium Pelagi” thus points forward to Smith’s theories of specialisation and ‘absolute advantages’²² from trade, there remain strong traces of the older mercantilist doctrine.

Mercantilist thinking emerged in England in the mid-sixteenth-century.²³ The Navigation Act of 1651 – partly still in effect until 1849 – which regulated trade with the colonies and restricted the import of goods of non-European origin was an early expression of mercantilist thinking. Opposition against mercantilism began in the early eighteenth century and reached a peak in Adam Smith’s 1776 *The Wealth of Nations*. The essential tenets of mercantilism can be summarised as follows:

The main tenet of mercantilism was that it was in a country’s best interests to maintain a trade surplus, to export more than it imported. [...] Consistent with this belief, the mercantilist doctrine advocated government intervention to achieve a surplus in the balance of trade. The mercantilists saw no virtue in a large volume of trade per se. Rather, they recommended policies to maximize exports and minimize imports. In order to achieve this, imports were limited by tariffs and quotas, and exports were subsidized. (Hill 1999: 124f.)

20 This notion is developed at some length in stanzas 1.22–26.

21 For Smith’s critique of mercantilism, cf. especially book IV.

22 The theory of “absolute advantage” – though not yet directly referred to as such – is very succinctly developed and set forth in book IV, chapter 2 of *The Wealth of Nations*.

23 A good overview of mercantilist doctrines and the later free-trade notions advocated by Adam Smith is provided in chapter 4, “International Trade Theory” in Hill 1999: 120–49, cf. especially 122–34, cf. also Spiegl 1999.

This doctrine was essentially nationalistic and aimed to secure wealth and power for the state by encouraging exports and limiting imports. According to this ultimately antagonistic philosophy, trade was basically a zero-sum game from an international perspective in that benefits in trade for one country were assumed to come at the expense of another country.

Throughout the Ode, there is a curious contrast between the predominant emphasis on the benefits of unrestricted trade and a number of passages in which echoes of the mercantilist doctrine are clearly perceptible. Speaking about Britain’s leading role in international trade, the text asks:

Whence is a rival, then, to rise?
Can he be found beneath the skies?
No, *there* they dwell that can give Britain fear:
The powers of earth by rival aim
Her grandeur but the more proclaim,
And prove their distance most as they draw near.
(Turner 1968: 3.16)

This passage appears to advocate precisely the antagonistic conception of trade as a competitive game, a power struggle. This notion is apparent in a good number of further passages: Speaking about Britain as “the triple realm, that awes the continent” (ibid. 2.2.6), the text goes on to claim that Britain “awes with wealth; for wealth is power” (ibid. 2.3.1). Further mercantilist echoes are to be discerned in the similarly antagonistic and slightly rapacious idea – here declared to be entirely natural – that Britain should “reap the growth of every coast”:

Others may traffic if they please;
Britain, fair daughter of the seas,
Is born for trade, to plough her field, the wave,
And reap the growth of every coast [...] (ibid. 3.6.1–4)²⁴

Even Young’s argument for the necessity of peace in “Imperium Pelagi” has mercantilist overtones in the emphasis on the connection between trade, wealth, and power. Peace, the text argues, is necessary for trade:

Trade springs from Peace, and Wealth from Trade,
And Power from Wealth; of Power is made
The god on earth: hail, then, the dove of Peace [...]

24 cf. also 1.15.1: “All these one British harvest make!”

War is the death of Commerce and Increase.
(ibid. 5.26.1–3, 6)²⁵

Especially line 2, despite the defense of peace here, is clearly another mercantilist echo. One of the clearest instances of this possessive philosophy is the following, a passage which appears twice in the poem, repeated as “The Chorus” at the very end:

Ye winds, in concert breathe around;
Ye navies, to the concert bound
From pole to pole! To Britain all belong.
(ibid. 5.34.4–6)

What is behind this emphasis on the need for naval power – at times virtually a glorification of naval war²⁶ – is an ultimately mercantilist belief in trade as a zero-sum game in which other nations are Britain’s rivals rather than partners in trade to the benefit of both.

Young thus does have something relevant to say. The whole theme of trade is hardly new, but what “Imperium Pelagi” exemplifies is the contemporary debate between mercantilism and free trade. Half a century before Adam Smith, Young hints at specialisation because of different advantages in the production of various goods as the driving force behind international trade. This points forward to Smith’s theory of the advantage of specialisation. But the text also formulates early

25 This argument for peace concludes as follows: “Then perish War!–Detested War!” (5.27.1)

26 This glorification of war is even more blatant in the other naval lyrics; cf. for instance the “Ode to the King”: “Our fleet, if War or Commerce call, / [It] rides in triumph round the ball.” (8.2+4); cf. also stanza 24: “Our factions end, The nations bend! / For when Britannia’s sons, combined / In fair array, All march one way, / They march the terror of mankind.” (24.1–6); cf. also “The Foreign Address” with its curious call to Britons to fight for peace (not that this curiously distorted call has lost currency since then): “Yet, Peace celestial, may thy charms / Still fire our breasts, though clad in arms: / If scenes of blood avenging Fates decree, / For thee the sword brave Britons wield; / For thee charge o’er the embattled field; / Or plunge through seas, through crimson seas, for thee.” (“Foreign Address”, 25). For a similarly astonishing glorification of battle in the midst of a sustained praise of peace cf. stanza 35: “How the drums all around / Soul-rousing resound! / Swift drawn from the thigh / How the swords flame on high! / How the cannon, deep knell, / Fates of kingdoms foretell! / How to battle, to battle, sick of feminine art, / How to battle, to conquest, to glory, we dart!” (35.1–6)

eighteenth-century fears of the potential threat posed by global sea trade to Britain’s economic power and its role as the dominant naval power: in a passage on the role of trade in other regions of the world, Young first voices the most atrocious orientalist stereotypes about “Afric’s black, lascivious, slothful breed”, who “[t]o clasp their ruin, fly from toil” (Turner 1968: 5.20.3–4):

Of Nature’s wealth from commerce rent,
Afric’s a glaring monument:
Mid citron forests and pomegranate groves [...] Her beggar’d famish’d, tradeless native roves.
(ibid. 5.21.1f., 5f.)

Young then points to China as a potentially dangerous rival in global trade, who, unless – in good mercantilist fashion – barred from trade, will swamp Europe with its goods:

Not so thine, China, blooming wide!
Thy numerous fleets might bridge the tide;
Thy products would exhaust both India’s mines:
Shut be thy gate of trade, or (woe
To Britain’s) Europe ’t will o’erflow. (ibid. 5.22.1–5)

It did not require divinatory powers even in the first half of the eighteenth-century to recognize that trade was by no means something only Britons might be good at or that Britain was the only country that might want to export excess domestic production. But what may have been an incidental insight in the early eighteenth century, merely a marginal note, a passing remark in a poem of over 1,000 lines from our perspective appears a prescient anticipation of economic globalisation – and of the inconsistent strategy of advocating trade restrictions where just the kind of free trade one otherwise so strongly believes in might work to one’s own disadvantage.

3. Presentifying the Eighteenth Century?

Although it has long been shown to be untenable as a general philosophy of trade, mercantilist thinking is alive and kicking. In a 1991 essay in the *Journal of World Trade*, Jarl Hagelstam, then a director in the Finnish Ministry of Finance, commented on neo-mercantilist thinking in present-day trade negotiations:

The approach of individual negotiating countries, both industrialized and developing, has been to press for trade liberalisation in areas where their own comparative advantages are the strongest, and to resist liberalization in areas where they are less competitive and fear that imports would replace domestic production. (Hagelstam 1991, qtd. in Hill 1999: 125)

This is quite obviously still as true in 2011 as it was in 1991 – or in 1730. However, this does not yet answer the question about the relevance of the above findings for present day discussions. How modern can an early eighteenth-century poem be – or rather: how modern can and should we make it?

Surely, at a time when what we are doing in the humanities is frequently under attack for being irrelevant burrowing in the past, we may occasionally also want to presentify in addition to historicising. In discussing any subject, we may also, in some sense, want to “make it new”. Insofar as the distinction between presentifying and historicising approaches implies a dry and arid aloofness and irrelevance on the part of historicising scholarship and a naïve, unscholarly *aggiornamento*²⁷ on the part of presentifying criticism, that pseudo-alternative disappears in the kind of criticism I propose here.

In an essay on *The Aims and Limits of Historical Scholarship*, Robert D. Hume argues for the non-exclusivity of historicising and presentifying readings:

We need presume no conflict of interest between a ‘historical reading’ and one carried out from a present-day vantage point (whether ‘theorized’ or not). Neither invalidates the other; each has its own processes of validation. Even where they clash most sharply, the conflict should be fruitful, with much to tell us – about ourselves and about the past. Self-knowledge is not best achieved by indulgence in solipsism. (Hume 2002: 417)

But this view still assumes that one will necessarily either be doing one or the other. But merely stating that they do not have to be mutually exclusive is to fall short of what is possible and productive: what if historicisation and presentification occur together, mutually enriching, in one reading? What if they can indeed be shown to be complementary, even to grow out of each other?

27 Frank Kermode uses *aggiornamento* as a pleasant term for “presentification” 2001: 155.

An “applicative reading”, as Hume calls any discussion of a text “with regard to the context and concerns of the present-day reader” (1999: 181) does not have to be ahistorical. In judging the plausibility of such applicative readings, I propose to distinguish between historical and ahistorical presentification.

Genuine ‘historicising presentification’ allows us to trace our own preoccupations back to historical roots. If, in this sense, we argue that an early eighteenth-century poem ‘anticipates’ early 21st-century fear of globalisation, then “anticipation” has nothing to do with divination or prophetic powers. Seen in this way, we do not ahistorically claim Young as “our contemporary”, nor do we have to regard him as a monument to a dead past entirely cut off from the present.²⁸ Rather, we can do justice to the insight that global trade – then as now predominantly by ship – was vital to a nation’s economic livelihood and that concerns about competitive disadvantages and the potential threat of other nations’ economic power are not unique to our own era of economic globalisation but are inherent in the very concept of global (sea) trade.²⁹

This seems to me to be a way of accounting for the relevance of literature and of its presentist aspects without having to be anachronistic or ahistorical in the sense of only seeing those aspects of the past that are relevant to the present.

Young’s conflicted “Sea Odes”, which at the same time celebrate British naval power and dominance in the global sea trade and hail trade as an economically rewarding and culturally enriching exchange for all parties involved are remarkably vague and hardly memorable in their depiction of concrete maritime spaces. The sea itself here predominantly appears as a global arena for economic exchange and competition. As revealingly ambivalent documents in the ideological struggle of two philosophies of trade – mercantilism versus free trade –, as a hint at the potentially overpowering nature of global (sea) trade in an earlier phase of economic globalisation, as interesting cases of poetic theory put into practice, and as case studies in presentifying historicism, Young’s naval lyrics have a fascinating story to tell – although that still does not make them great poems.³⁰

28 For a similar attempt at bridging historicising and presentifying approaches, cf. Breuer 1979, esp. 267f.

29 There is no space here to dwell on the continuities and discontinuities in the development of globalisation since long before classical antiquity (Moore and Lewis begin their account around 3500 B.C.). For this cf. Moore and Lewis 2009 as well as Osterhammel and Petersson 2003.

30 For an earlier hint at an applicative reading of “Imperium Pelagi” in the highly

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charged context of 1942, cf. Robert W. Chapman's short note on "Imperium Pelagi": "The main theme of this remarkable and neglected poem is not Britannia's rule as exerted by ships of the line, but the milder sway of her merchantmen. I question if our nation of traders has ever been more lyrically extolled than in some of Young's stanzas. ... A tract for our own time?" (1942: 343–44). The full name of the author, which was originally abbreviated to the initials R.W.C., is supplied in May 1989: 230–48.

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