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SAFETY IS IN OUR SPEED.' READING BAUMAN READING EMERSON

Giorgio Mariani
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In an essay published some years ago, John Tomlinson calls attention to the fact that most studies of cultural globalization, even when wishing to qualify or criticize the cultural imperialism thesis, often end up

> reproducing a style of thinking about culture in terms of these compelling spatial power metaphors: metaphors of territory and borders, of flows and the regulation of flows, of invasion and protection (ism). Even the most sophisticated cultural-critical discourses that have emerged around the ideas of hybridity or transculturation … fail to break with the dominant imagery of cultural territories, liminalities, cross-border flows, fusions, and so forth (Tomlinson, 2003: 49–50).

This means, in Tomlinson's view, that despite all the talk about *deterritorialization* as a key feature of global modernity, we have often failed in the attempt 'to detach culture from a fundamentally territorial imagination' (50). While Tomlinson does not argue by any means that reasoning in terms of flows, transnational border-crossing, and cross-cultural formations is necessarily 'misguided or wrongheaded' (49), he does believe that there may be undiscovered virtues in 'another way of thinking about the cultural implications of globalization—a way that associates cultural phenomena less with territorial influences than with shifts in the *texture of the modernity* that has become globalized' (50).

Like Tomlinson, I also do not wish to call into question the importance of 'transnational flows' of people and cultures to the study of 'modernity's modernisms', but I would like to suggest that the relation between modernity and the cultural responses it has elicited can also be fruitfully investigated by exploring the impact of certain 'universal' traits of a modern, global modernity on the cultural imagination. In particular, I would like to take up the invitation formulated in the Call for Papers for this issue of *RIAS* to reflect on the way 'the relation between space and time' may appear 'in a reconfigured notion of modernism and modernity' by focusing on *speed* as both a factual reality and a cultural principle of globalized modernity, at least from the invention of steam power onwards. It goes without saying that even a tentative and sketchy analysis of the relations between American modernism and the notions of velocity and acceleration would be virtually boundless. My scope will be, instead, a rather limited one. Following the lead provided by one of the most interesting studies of modernity to appear of late (Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*), I will mainly concentrate on a few passages from Ralph Waldo Emerson in order to show how ambivalent, problematic, and often outright paradoxical the relation between the lived experience of modernity and the literary response to it is. My task will be somewhat facilitated by a happy coincidence. In an appendix in which he goes over some of the major points discussed in his book, Bauman inserts a quotation from Emerson's essay 'Prudence'—'In skating over thin ice, safety is in our speed'—which I have taken as the title of the present essay. Unfortunately, Bauman is not really interested in exploring in any detail to what extent Emerson may, or may not, be considered as a theorist or critic of modernity. Yet a scholar of American literature can hardly fail to register the appeal of the tentative and loose connection established between Emerson, on the one side, and the notions of fluidity, lightness, and velocity which, according to Bauman, are crucial components of the socio-cultural galaxy of liquid modernity, on the other. But before moving on to Emerson, it may be worth offering a short summary of the thesis that Bauman puts forth in his study.

While not advancing any rigid periodization, Bauman is convinced that we should distinguish within modernity at least two phases that are linked by common traits, but also marked by significant differences. Early modernity, though interested in transforming and indeed melting down the solid bodies of inherited social and cultural traditions, was also very much animated by a desire to replace old with new, durable forms. The capitalism of such an early phase of modernity was of a 'heavy' kind, and was embodied in a 'Fordism' representing, according to Bauman, 'the self-consciousness of modern society in its "heavy", "bulky", or "immobile" and rooted, "solid" phase' (57). The capitalism of our current, late modernity is of a different type. Our world is a 'post-Fordist', 'fluid-modern' (61) one, in which a 'light' modernity has replaced, or is fast replacing, the old, heavy kind. Software triumphs over hardware and, what is most important for our purposes, 'it is the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today—not the durability and lasting reliability of the product' (14). 'Liquid modernity' is therefore a universe in which solidity, durability, and stability are no longer culturally and practically as valuable as they were in the past. We are instead invited to embrace fluidity, flexibility, and an endless mutability as the new distinguishing traits of the modern individual. 'People who move and act faster, who come nearest to the momentariness of movement, are now the people who rule. And it is the people who cannot move as quickly, and more conspicuously yet the people who cannot leave at will their place at all, who are ruled' (120).

Even though Bauman's tone is less apocalyptic than the one to be found in the work of another contemporary theorist like Paul Virilio (1997), who has written extensively on the likely catastrophic consequences of 'dromospheric' pollution, as our planet increasingly falls prey to an 'immediacy' that devours both spatial and temporal distances, there can be no doubt that also Bauman foresees many dangers in the increased velocity characteristic of the age of liquid modernity. It is precisely with the intent of underscoring such perils that Bauman mentions Emerson:

> Fragile individuals', doomed to conduct their lives in a 'porous reality', feel like skating on thin ice; and 'in skating over thin ice', Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked in his essay 'Prudence', 'our safety is in our speed.' Individuals, fragile or not, need safety, crave safety, seek safety, and so they try, to the best of their ability, to maintain a high speed whatever they do. When running among fast runners, to slow down means to be left behind; when running on thin ice, slowing down also means the real to threat of being drowned. Speed, therefore, climbs to the top of the list of survival values.
>
> Speed, however, is not conducive to thinking, not to thinking far ahead, to long-term thinking at any rate. Thought calls for pause and rest, for 'taking one's time', recapitulating the steps already taken, looking closely at the place reached and the wisdom (or imprudence, as the case may be) of reaching it. Thinking takes one's mind away from the task at hand, which is always the running and keeping speed whatever else it may be. And in the absence of thought, the skating on thin ice which is the fate of fragile individuals in the porous world may well be mistaken for their destiny. (Bauman, 2000: 209–10, emphasis in the original)

Here Bauman, frankly but sadly acknowledges that it is virtually impossible to resist the acceleration imposed on our lives by liquid capitalism, though he simultaneously tries to resurrect the virtues of slowness. His appeal to take time, to 'recapitulating the steps already taken', and so on, is at one with a certain instinctive antipathy a great deal of critical thinking has always shown towards a universe marked by a tendency to 'shrink' the spatio-temporal dimension.[1] But where and how does Emerson fit into all of this?

It is quite clear from Bauman's text that he has no interest in an analytical appraisal of Emerson's relation to modernity. Bauman uses Emerson's metaphor because it is suggestive, but he does not explain what role the figure plays within the original discourse. On the contrary, by building on Bauman's incursion in a text which, though it predates by decades the advent of liquid modernity, it does provide us with a wonderful metaphor of both the euphoria and the danger marking this era, I would like to explore in greater detail how Emerson responds to the technological, social, and cultural accelerations of his own time. Let me begin by providing the context in which Emerson's image appears (the concluding paragraphs of the essay 'Prudence'). Emerson begins his argument by defining prudence as a quality that concerns 'the world of the senses' and by rebuking the young American civilization for displaying an excess of this 'base' kind of prudence,

> which is a devotion to matter, as if we possessed no other faculties than the palate, the nose, the touch, the eye and ear; a prudence which adores the Rule of Three, which never subscribes, which

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[1] Indeed, speed might well appear as a rather un-literary subject. We are all of course familiar with the interest that scores of modern authors have displayed in speed, especially as it is embodied in mechanical velocity. The Futurists', and in particular Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's, fascination with fast cars, motorcycles, and airplanes is only an extreme example in what is a long series of "odes" to the newly-discovered energies that would reshape the modern world. And yet we also know that speed as such has always been perceived as a deadly enemy of literature. From Romanticism to deconstructionism, the emphasis has always been on *slow* rather than *fast* reading. Nietzsche was fond of describing himself as a master of 'slow reading' in an era obsessed with velocity, thus anticipating the New Critics' insistence on *close reading* as a form of resistance vis-à-vis an increasingly technological and frenetic society. In short, slowness, not velocity, is what the literary text traditionally demands of its readers.

> never gives, which seldom lends, and asks but one question of any project, – Will it bake bread? (Emerson, 1983: 358).

This is not to say that Emerson's argument has no place for practical or material worries. It is precisely while describing how prudence works on a practical level that the philosopher ends up praising the virtues of velocity. And no matter how that may seem contrary to common sense, which sees prudence as a form of caution, providence, and attention to detail—attitudes that do not easily square with speed—Emerson realizes that within modernity stasis might be fatal:

> Strike, says the smith, the iron is white; keep the rake, says the haymaker, as nigh the scythe as you can, and the cart as nigh the rake. Our Yankee trade is reputed to be very much on the extreme of this prudence. It takes bank-notes, – good, bad, clean, ragged, – and saves itself by the speed with which it passes them off. Iron cannot rust, nor beer sour, nor timber rot, nor calicoes go out of fashion, nor money stocks depreciate, in the few swift moments in which the Yankee suffers any one of them to remain in his possession. In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed (364).

Here Emerson's voice is that of the enthusiast fascinated by the rapid growth of the United States; the admirer of the American genius and of the audacity of its capitalism. Even though, as we shall see in a moment, this is by no means Emerson's last word on prudence and its relation to modernity, these sentences seem to trace a sort of allegory of the development of American capitalism from its pre-industrial origins to a stage which closely resembles that of liquid modernity as described by Bauman. In particular, we may note how the concept of prudence changes as a consequence of its new relation with time. In the world of artisans and farmers time has a measurable quality. Prudence, meaning not only caution but, as its Latin roots suggest, also providence, the ability to imagine what the future might look like, may be embodied mainly in the capacity of seizing the right moment—of knowing that you must make hay while the sun shines and you must strike the iron while it is hot. But what Emerson chooses to call an 'extreme' case of this kind of prudence works in quite different ways. Now it is no longer a question of choosing the right moment; what counts is only the speed of your performance. While in an earlier period one could distinguish within time the right moment from the less favorable one, in a risk-laden economy—what we may well call 'thin ice economy'—time simply vanishes. The speed of Yankee finance is predicated on a flat time in which—analogously to what happens in Bauman's liquid modernity—the lighter you are and the faster you move, the greater the acceleration and the smaller (supposedly) the risk you take. The Americans' frenetic activism had of course often been noted by the observers of the US scene, but speed as such—in horse races, for example—was fascinating because *it was* dangerous. Emerson turns such point of view completely around by re-imagining velocity as a form of *protection* from the surrounding world. (Lienhard)

If we pause for a moment—let's slow down!—we must ask ourselves what dangers speed is supposed to protect us from. It is obviously supposed to keep us from sinking, because our weight may eventually crack the thin ice over which we skate. But we must also ask ourselves, why do we choose to skate in such perilous conditions? Why don't we look for better surfaces to move on? Velocity may provide an anchorage in a world that tempts us to make moves it may be wiser to avoid, or that perhaps is directly responsible for making unsafe the surfaces we must walk over by, say, digging tunnels underground—after all frozen rivers were also used as means of communication for lack of better routes, and ice-skating was not so much a leisure activity as a normal and necessary means of transport. The paradox, therefore, is that we resort to speed … in order to resist speed itself. As time inexorably flows onwards and makes everything impermanent since there is no cloth that sooner or later will not cease to be fashionable and no iron that will not eventually fail to rust, the 'light individual' responds by trying—though perhaps it would be more correct to say by deluding him or herself—that time can be annihilated. One protects oneself from the unwelcome consequences of the passing of 'natural' time by trying to invent a super-natural (mechanical) velocity to overcome its consuming, world-altering effects. Speed, in the last analysis, is nothing but an instrument to fight another kind of speed.

It is therefore not surprising that Emerson opens the paragraph immediately following the one we have just discussed not by inviting us to continue skating over thin ice, but by abandoning completely that scenario. Now Emerson asks his readers to 'learn a prudence of a higher strain' (364): a prudence that—as he writes a few lines below, as if to distance himself from the skating metaphor—

> does not consist in evasion, or in flight, but in courage. He who wishes to walk in the most peaceful parts of life with any serenity must screw himself up to resolution. Let him front the object of his worst apprehension, and his stoutness will commonly make his fear groundless (365).

Exactly like Bauman, Emerson, too, invokes the courage of slowness. Here prudence no longer consists in running at breakneck speed so as to avoid the worst, but in 'walking', in facing reality with a tranquillity and a peace of mind that is miles distant from the desperate velocity of the ice-skater. Emerson's language itself rediscovers the virtues of heaviness, as shown by the choice of a term like 'stoutness', which evokes the idea of something corpulent, bulky, and heavily built. Maybe, therefore, we should say of Emerson something analogous to what Bauman argues in relation to the celebrated image from Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, where they describe a world in which 'all that is solid melts into air.' According to Bauman, if it is true that modernity was from the very beginning a process that aimed at dissolving consolidated realities, 19th century modernity had no intention 'to do away with the solids once and for all and make the brave new world free of them for ever, but to clear the site for *new and improved solids*' (3, emphasis in the original). Even though he looks at the world from an idealist and not a materialist viewpoint, also Emerson sees in the restlessness of the Yankee a transformative quality that, he hopes, will not become an end in itself. It is not by skating over thin ice that modern individuals can find the strength to be resolute. It is not by running and endlessly escaping that they may hope to reach what, in the final lines of the essay, Emerson simply defines as 'well-being', insisting of course that the latter is first and foremost an interior not an external, material condition.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, by somehow resurrecting a worn-out and outdated image of Emerson as a thinker who, to the lightness of an incumbent 'liquid' capitalism prefers the solidity of a 'stout' will to 'self-possession' based on an intimate relation to undefiled nature. To begin with, that 'heavy' image is immediately undercut by the notion that the will can celebrate its lasting victory only when 'mountains, on which the eye had fastened, have melted into air' (366). As we can see, the 'pastoral' Emerson is as much in love with liquidity and airiness as the philosopher celebrating the arresting social and material transformations connected to the advance of the American civilization. As Leo Marx had shown already many years ago, Emerson is surprising because he joins 'enthusiasm for technological progress with a "romantic" love of nature and contempt for cities' (Marx, 1964: 252). Thus, to return to the theme of velocity, in a well-known passage from 'The Young American', a lecture delivered only three years after the publication of 'Prudence', Emerson praises the modern revolution precisely for its capacity to accelerate human movement across space, and especially across the vast American spaces:

> This rage for road building is beneficent for America… Not only is distance annihilated, but when, as now, the locomotive and the steamboat, like enormous shuttles, shoot every day across the thousand various threads of national descent and employment, and bind them fast in one web, an hourly assimilation goes forward, and there is no danger that local peculiarities and hostilities should be preserved. (Emerson 1983: 213)

Speed becomes an instrument of national cohesion; the local dimension, as we would say today, is overcome by the global one. Technology here is precious precisely because it brings into being a mechanical velocity without precedent in human history, indispensible to a nation as huge as the American one.

Yet, coherently with his own incoherence, Emerson sees a sort of exceptionalism at work in the way the speed of modernity operates in the New World. In the early part of his lecture, while praising the changes made possible by the railway, the philosopher notes that

> If this invention has reduced England to a third of its size, by bringing people so much nearer, in this country it has given a new celerity to time, or anticipated by fifty years the planting of tracts of land, the choice of water privileges, the working of mines, and other natural advantages (213, emphasis in the original).

It would seem that while in Europe speed has the effect of contracting *space*, thereby laying the ground for the crowding of cities so disliked by Emerson, in America speed acts mainly on *time*, by allowing its enterprising citizenry to skip transitional stages and proceed faster in the march of progress. On the other hand, if the extension of the land seems to offer a sort of natural buffer against the collateral damages of mechanical velocity—the rapidity of the modern means of communication bring Americans close enough to make them feel a part of the same national community, but not so close as to deprive them of vast tracts of more or less pristine nature—Emerson realizes that, in the long run, also the temporal accelerations he admires will result in spatial contractions. One of the key themes of 'The Young American' is in fact the necessity on the part of Americans to guard themselves from the negative influence of an impure European modernity, with its courts, its medieval remains, its grey industrial cities. The same mechanical velocity that Emerson has a moment before exalted is now seen in a different light since 'steam has narrowed the Atlantic to a strait'

(216), thus bringing the New World too close to the Old and therefore depriving the former of its original, beneficial distance from the latter.

'Luckily for us', Emerson proceeds, Americans can turn to 'the nervous, rocky West' (216), thereby responding to the acceleration of transatlantic crossing with the rapid movement towards the Pacific, even though in this case salvation is no longer primarily, as in 'Prudence', in our speed, but in the abundance of space—a space apparently so vast that it seems to resist the tendency to erase it prompted by the modern revolution in mass-transport systems: 'I think we must regard the *land* as a commanding and increasing power on the citizen, the sanative and Americanizing influence, which promises to disclose new virtues for ages to come' (217). However, by imagining America as a literal *atopia*—a place that is not a place since it is virtually boundless—Emerson ignores a truth that Bauman is instead careful not to forget. Bauman writes,

> 'Modernity' was born under the stars of acceleration and land conquest… The 'conquest of space' came to mean faster machines. Accelerated movement meant larger space, and accelerating the moves was the sole means of enlarging the space (113, my emphasis).

Within modernity, contrary to Emerson's hopes, the conquest of space is by no means a way to resist the temporal acceleration that makes space contract, but quite the opposite—the inevitable outcome of a world that is running at an ever-increasing fast pace. In sum, unknowingly, also in 'The Young American' Emerson continues to imagine that salvation may be found in speed, because within the modern universe more space inevitably entails a greater acceleration.

I would like to conclude with a postscript that will move my argument from the nineteenth to the 20th century, so as to briefly focus on that historical post-World War Two juncture when modernity finally hit its full-blown 'liquid' stage. Whether one agrees or not with Paul Virilio's notion that our planet has largely turned into an 'endotic' space (Virilio, 1997: 25), deprived of both spatial and temporal exteriority, science fiction, and in particular US science-fiction, has for a rather long time been projecting all hopes of salvation and renewal in the conquest of new interstellar spaces. This fantasy is of course predicated on the dream of building superfast starships that would allow humans to escape from a planet earth that has 'shrunk', ironically, precisely due to an increase in mechanical velocity as well as to the advent of other technologies of speed (internet, cellular phones, etc.) nearly capable of realizing the utopia of immediacy by abolishing the gap between 'departure' and 'arrival' (Virilio, 1997: 56), 'human desire and its fulfilment' (Tomlinson, 2003: 57–8). This paradox whereby the discontents of velocity end up being fought by holding fast to an ever increasing speed is emblematically captured in a text that can be taken to be a surprising continuation of Emerson's ruminations on speed and civilization. I am referring to the theme album with which a great psychedelic rock group of the Sixties and early Seventies marked its transformation from Jefferson Airplane to Jefferson Starship—as we can see the acceleration is already implicit in the name of the band. Appropriately entitled 'Blows Against the Empire', the album goes over some of the great utopias of the Sixties counterculture, by also revisiting some classic themes of both science-fiction and the

US literary tradition.[2] Its aim was not only to celebrate the rebellion of a generation but also that of negotiating the sense of frustration and disillusionment which the counterculture had to face once Woodstock was over, the war in Vietnam continued, and Nixon remained entrenched in the White House. As hope for radical change began to wane, the texts and music by Paul Kantner (the leader of the band and no doubt one of the most Emersonian figures of West Coast rock) and other great musicians of the time (Marty Balin, David Crosby, Jerry Garcia, and many others) do not rest content in composing an elegy for the Sixties movement, but also try to keep alive Utopian desire at least at the level of the imagination, by narrating the hijacking of an enormous starship allowing a few thousand courageous hippies to escape from the tyranny of an oppressive, technological and earth-polluting environment that is no longer limited to the USA but has managed to spread to the entire planet. If Emerson could not hide his discomfort at an Atlantic ocean reduced to a strait, and looked West for salvation, at the end of the Sixties Kantner and friends dream of the 'over human':

And more than human can we be
'Cause human is truly locked
To this planetary circle

(Kantner et al., 1970: 'Hijack')

Moreover, the speed of light of the starship allows the Jefferson to present in a different guise the ideal combination of speed and light that Emerson had indicated as the survival strategy of his daring ice-skater:

Spilling out of the steel glass
Gravity gone from the cage
A million pounds gone from your heavy mass
All the years gone from your age

(Kantner et al., 1970: 'Starship')

The Weberian iron cage of triumphant capitalism is broken by an acceleration that annihilates time—the years fall like a serpent shedding its skin—and makes the travellers ultra-light. The Jefferson imagine lightness, liquidity, velocity and immediacy as the traits of a renewed 'more than human' being, and of a new New World. Without being aware of it, like Emerson they too offer us a brilliant metaphor of the movement from heavy to liquid modernity. And like Emerson one hundred and thirty years before them, they continue to dream of 'free' spaces apparently oblivious to the fact that the very superfast machines needed to reach them make the Other world constantly recede from us.

My discussion of Emerson's response to the social and cultural implications of the increasing speed characterizing, according to Bauman and others, the existential and historical reality of modernity may be taken as a rather modest exercise in trying to think of a feature of modernity not so much 'as the original property of any one national culture' but rather as a feature 'of a generalized global modernity' (Tomlinson, 2003: 62). However, as my sketchy analysis has hopefully shown, this does not prevent us from noticing how such global traits of modernity may be differently perceived and culturally constructed within specific geo-cultural spaces. From Emerson to the Jefferson Airplane, for example, a certain strain of US culture has tried to come to terms with mechanical velocity by imagining that abundance of 'free' space could attenuate the more disruptive consequences of the reconfiguration of time and space relations. Emerson, moreover, also chose to interrogate the value and the modus operandi of a traditional virtue like 'prudence' in relation to the fast-paced transformations occurring within the American context. Aware that 'we must not try to write the laws of any one virtue, looking at that only' (Emerson, 1983: 365) Emerson realized that the notion of prudence may need to be reconsidered in the fast world of modernity. Fully sharing the tension between what Marshall Berman, in his celebrated study on the experience of modernity, has identified as the '"solid" and "melting" visions of modern life' (1988: 90), Emerson is visibly excited by the frantic pace of modern life and at the same time wonders about the fate of the 'slender human word among the storms, distances, and accidents that drive us hither and thither' (Emerson, 1983: 365). Perhaps the 'airiness' of his transcendentalist vision—often seen as a sign of an outmoded Romanticism or unrealistic optimism—should be reimagined as a response to the challenges of the 'melting' aspect of modernity—as a way to both incorporate and domesticate the promising and yet menacing facets of an incumbent 'liquid' transformation of our lives. But a more articulate discussion of such a hypothesis will have to await another occasion.

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[2] As a matter of fact, 'the underlying premise of the narrative was derived in part from the works of science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein, particularly the novel *Methuselah's Children*'. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blows_Against_the_Empire.

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