Orders of Geo-Kinetic Manifestation
in Ivan Doig’s *The Sea Runners*

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Abstract

This phenomenological study presents a map of spatial forces in Ivan Doig’s *The Sea Runners*. The investigation calls attention to forms of space-experience that come across as a sense of embeddedness in environment. Events, places, feelings, and moods materialize as being nested within greater events and places that are likewise nested in even larger ones. The study shows that experience, place, memory, hope, and narrative have nested structures. The embedding of narrated realities within larger realities is identified as a mode of organization central to the text’s complexity. Even the smallest acts, events, moods, and feelings are set within larger ones with greater scope, reach, or extension. The literary force of *The Sea Runners* is made possible by a sustained presentation of complexly interlocking orders of embedding. These orders are co-ordinated and synchronized in terms of movement. The study shows how kinetic systems of circulation, vanishing, encircling, and transformation overlap and reinforce each other so as to create a comprehensive co-ordination effect that colours the presentation of landscape and travel. Movement is highlighted in the essay as a factor that makes it possible for these kinetic structures to be fused in various patterns of co-ordination. In *The Sea Runners*, place and motion complexly combine to shape the narrated flow of lived experience. In its various orders of fluctuation, space-experience flows in intimate association with life-feeling and movement-sensation. Certain basic kinetic categories are delineated as being at the heart of the text’s overall structure. The study brings its findings to a conclusion by discussing these kinetic categories of lived space as running parallel to categories of lived temporality.

Keywords: Ivan Doig, *The Sea Runners*, Pacific Northwest, phenomenology, landscape, movement, space, embedding, gyration, place, cartography, New Archangel, Sitka, Astoria, paddling
Introduction: Topic and Aim

Ivan Doig’s *The Sea Runners*¹ is a dramatization of pioneer experience in the Pacific Northwest. It is the story of four Swedes—Melander, Karlsson, Braaf and Wennberg—who in the nineteenth century make their escape from bleak labour in Russian Alaska by paddling a canoe in dangerous waters along a thousand miles of Pacific coast all the way to Astoria. The purpose of the study is to map the spatial forces at the heart of the text. We shall see that space-experience materializes in correlation with life-feeling. Since the sea runners keep paddling most of the time, and since paddling is *lived motion*, life-feeling is for the entire duration of the text also movement-feeling. Always pushed to the limit, the sea runners undergo certain ever-recurring modes of space-manifestation. By means of phenomenological exploration, these are defined as *geo- gyrating*, *geo-vanishing*, *geo-morphosis*, and *geo-enwrapping*. The thesis of the study is that *The Sea Runners* arranges itself as a geo-kinetic manifestation-field by actualizing and re-actualizing these specific modes of space-presentation.

The method used is derived from the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. In studying literature, phenomenology is committed to *close reading* as a way of avoiding any firmly pre-given milieu other than the literary text as such. Phenomenology wants to avoid ‘explanations’ that lead away from the primary text to something outside it that is supposed to be able to account for it. In seeking to discover how something comes to light in the literary text, the phenomenologist does not try to convince by means of ‘arguments’ but by analytically combining pieces of evidence found in the literary text itself. This is the way to uncover its intrinsic deep-structures. One shows (rather than argues) how something specific works in a text by calling attention to a configuration of textual phenomena that come to light in very similar ways. The point of phenomenology is thus to discover units and sets of textual evidence that support each other. Phenomenological analysis demonstrates that a certain factor or feature in the literary text keeps recurring. Patterns not easily discerned in the course of ordinary reading-acts are uncovered. This essay shows what sort of landscape *The Sea Runners* presents by bringing together numerous pieces of

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¹ Ivan Doig, *The Sea Runners* (Orlando: Harvest, 2006; first published 1982); in parenthetical documentation hereafter abbreviated SR.
evidence that make evident exactly how movement and space jointly shape the world in which the fugitives find themselves immersed.

Since phenomenology is committed to study things from ‘within,’ the primary text is presented in a way that allows it to throw light on itself. This means that things external to The Sea Runners are viewed as secondary. Facts, information, and considerations exterior to the primary text are side-lined to comments in footnotes. As Edmund Husserl pointed out in his summer lectures of 1925, the purpose of phenomenological analysis is to focus on those immediately-given things that are “included” in the immediate field of awareness “belonging to the personal surrounding world.”\(^2\) In literary analysis, this “immediate field” is the literary text only. There is in other words a reversal of the common procedure of first presenting a ready-made, socio-historical context.\(^3\) Phenomenologists like to deal directly and immediately with what is directly and immediately given.\(^4\) Phenomenological inquiry tries to get to a point that is as free as possible from ready-made reality-pictures, whether social, historical, cultural, philosophical, or psychological.

In The Sea Runners, events and feelings are embedded in their world of movement and landscape. But from the holistic viewpoint of phenomenology, this does not mean that it would be wise to look at the ‘environment’ first, and then ‘explain’ things ‘inside’ this ‘environment.’ That would be to presuppose a ready-made world in which smaller realities are ‘contained’ inside larger ones like objects in a box, or goods in a container. That commonplace inside/outside perspective has nothing to do with the principle of embedding that this study uncovers in The Sea Runners. When realities are nested inside each other, it may often be the case that

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\(^3\) The assumption made by Nicholas O’Connell that “Doig approaches the subject of landscape through the conventions of Realistic and naturalistic fiction” may be true; *On Sacred Ground* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), p. 91; yet from a phenomenological standpoint this sort of assertion is likely to push analysis off course by introducing the bird’s-eye perspective favoured by the historical and natural sciences. An investigation that started off with a pre-given framework such as ‘The Northwest School’ would be making the error that Martin Heidegger identifies at the temptation to “abruptly demarcate” fields of phenomena from each other, “divide them into separate genera and species, etc”; *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, translated by Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 9. Such a temptation means surrender to “today’s fury to understand cultural forms, the fury of classifying life-forms and cultural epochs—a typologization that goes all the way to the belief that […] one enjoys the diversity of life and its forms” (p. 23).

\(^4\) Martin Heidegger states that the task of phenomenology is to clarify ”the immediacy of flowing factic life”; Steven Galt Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. 122; emphasis added.
what is inside is ‘bigger’ than the outside. Thus the eggs in a nest are ‘bigger’ than the nest, in the sense that the nest will never learn to fly, whereas the life inside the eggs will spread itself out over a vast territory. In that territory further nests will be built. Unlike ‘containing,’ embedding is thus a living complexity that is based on principles of movement.

We find in *The Sea Runners* that embedding in this way is a perplexing phenomenon that cannot be understood through a static model of boxes ‘contained’ in each other. In *The Sea Runners*, feelings come to life as part of existence as a whole. When Michel Henry’s phenomenology discusses feeling as something “constructed from within,” thus belonging to “the radical interiority of life,” what he has in mind is the ‘inner’ feel of life as a whole. In *The Sea Runners*, feeling is presented as a wavering complexity that has to do with landscape and weather, with the gigantic moods of the whole Pacific coast. From a phenomenological, holistic viewpoint, it is impossible to discuss landscape as something separate. It cannot be seen just as setting or background.

1. Geo-Gyration

Right from the beginning, the canoeists find that movement stands under the command of the shape and direction of the coast rather than under their own command. In making their escape from New Archangel, the sea runners are forced to closely follow the outline of the coast, since an inland-directed escape-possibility is ruled out by factors such as the density of the coastal forests, the altitude of the coastal mountains and the hostility of the local tribes. The natural route to be taken is “the magnetic direction” of the southeast (SR, 243). When the narrator highlights Alaska as a territory that on the map looks like a “colossal crude crown” that is “tipped sharply […] away from London to the direction of Siberia” (SR, 8; emphasis added), directions immediately get be presented as both geographic and kinetic-experiential. Each geographic outline is a felt kinetic reality that has to do with the men’s sensation of moving or being-moved. The sense of the Kuroshio ocean-current

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as “something like a permanent typhoon under the water” (SR, 88) is one of many huge kinetic factors of the Pacific coast. The four Swedes have before them a solitary journey of more than a thousand miles. The “tracery of bright embers southward from New Archangel” left by their order of campsite-fires is a record of the direction of their movements (SR, 103).

The discovery during the second half of the journey that the map for the last leg of the journey is missing comes as a shock. Fortunately, however, the sea runners have at this time managed to get navigation and directedness in their bones. To “point the prow of the canoe into maplessness” (SR, 161) is no longer madness, for somehow “the canoe sensed out its own course” (SR, 152). Maps become increasingly unimportant as means of navigation, being finally used only to fuel a “smudge fire” (SR, 275). Maps thus finally serve for something other than guidance. Their lasting contribution has been that of anchoring the men in the hope of one day getting to Astoria.

The “thousands “of “engraver’s strokes” on the marvellously detailed Russian charts had given the initial leader of the group, Melander, a thrilling sensation that a map is capable of disclosing “the truth” of the coast (SR, 111). The Tebenkov maps seem to reveal the coast’s very “bone and muscle and ligament” (SR, 111). The charts are “extra eyes” that give access to “the intentions of this coast” (SR, 160), saving voyagers from the fallible “intentions of man” (SR, 58). Yet there is a limit to the power of maps. In order to survive, one must trust something deeper than the charts. Indeed, Melander’s map-worship never gets him more than part of the way to Astoria.

It turns out that there is something more precious than mind and representation; and that is kinetic reality. The gyrating movements of coastal air and coastal water constantly give lessons that teach mapless men how to face the next challenge. This occurs half-way into their journey when the paddling-movement has “worked its way into” them (SR, 145). It is by being fused with the canoe as something immersed in the Pacific waves that the sea runners finally come to know how to best make their way.

Maps are systems of representation. They have a fixed, unchanging form that might seem to contradict movement. But the gyrating kinetic realities of the coast cannot really and fully be translated into any sort of representation whatever. Maps conceal something dynamic that is stirring and churning beneath them. There are hidden suggestions of this in the circumstance that some of the marks on the
Tebenkov maps look like alarmingly mobile little sea-organisms. The map-reader finds it hard “to believe” that these “breathing” little “sea things” will “hold motionless, either on the map or in actuality” (SR, 112–13). Deep down, below his trust in maps, even Melander knows from years of experience (SR, 58) that it is not enough to “see” water or a representation of it; one needs to feel one’s way visually “into it” (SR, 168).

The sea runners quickly discover that all they will be able to look forward to is an “uncountable total of instances of monotony” (SR, 187). As a space too gigantic to fathom, the Pacific coast is only in map-theory a line that can be followed in a single, reassuring, south-easterly direction. It turns out, however, that the coast’s aquatic reality is a swirl of incongruous currents, vast loops of gyrating seawater and directed tides. Everything is a massive system of aquatic circulations. Great ships making “slow white wakes” in their straight “sea-lanes” have linear “energies” that are inferior to the energy-loops of nature (SR, 20). These dynamic energy-loops are a form of geo-gyration, i.e., circular energy-momentum of the kind we see in the great pulsations of natural forces. Geo-gyration is a central factor in the text. It is not fathomed by maps.

The circular “now—now—now—now—now” of paddling is the rhythm of the gyration of the paddle (SR, 76). It is a miniature version of the vaster rotations of weather systems and ocean currents. The paddling hand seems caught in a kinetic circuit from which there is no escape—the alternative being immobilization, death. Viewed from afar, the canoeists would seem to be “running on the sea,” the craft presenting itself as “a dark sharp-snouted creature stretched low against the gray wavescape, four broad-hoofed legs striking and striking at the water” (SR, 131). But in the canoe, the freedom of movement felt by runners is not to be found. Unlike each “loop” of water in “the ocean currents” (SR, 76), the loop of each paddle-stroke seems to be condemned to a repetitiveness without variation.

The arms of the canoeists keep moving like machines, making the sort of “ponderous thwacking motion” typical of the “paddlewheels” of a Russian steamer (SR, 9). In their canoe, the four Swedish fugitives are in a sense back in the sort of circular existence they wish to leave behind. The order of things back in New Archangel had already given an outline of existence as a closed circle. Having fled from the “waterwheel” of the industrial production circle of New Archangel (SR, 165), the fugitives find themselves trapped in a new gyration-mystery. Their gyrating
arms ought to give a sense of moving forward in the direction of Astoria, but the circularity of paddle-work keeps wiping out this sense of progression by giving priority to the feel of a treadmill. They are not even permitted to take a straight route due south, always “sidestepping east” in tricky zigzags (SR, 159). But this zigzagging may after all be a “trick” with a certain magic; especially if the whole globe is one great mighty geo-gyration:

Perhaps bring to thought that trick done with apple and knife—the fruit to be peeled in one stopless cutting, down and down the pare of skin coiling from the blade’s glide, the red-white-red-white spiral stair ever more likely to snap away: but yet is it, for each shaving of coil twirls a bond with all the others, the helix holding itself together, spin on spin, by creational grace. (SR, 181; emphasis added)

The circular vanishing-act that takes the peel away from the apple now introduces us to the whole issue of vanishing in *The Sea Runners*.

2. Geo-Vanishing

The sea runners undergo a sense of the withdrawal of the world. The sensation of withdrawal is tied to the way in which landscape presents itself. The coast has a double impact, giving an impression of constant change as well as of constant changelessness. The canoeists nearly always have land (something static) on their left side and the ocean (something dynamic) on their right. The densely forested mountains that rise steeply inland are awesome on account of their fixity; in contrast, the waves and winds of the Pacific are awesome on account of their lack of fixity. We turn to this fixity-absence first.

The physical efforts that the canoeists make with their arms do not produce fixed results of the kind that materialize when a labourer’s arm strikes an object that is being manufactured or refashioned. A paddle cannot really do anything to water in the way that a hammer does something to iron. For Wennberg, this difference is highly noticeable. As a blacksmith, he is accustomed to the dramatic changes that the strength of his arm imposes on metal. Nothing like that happens to water when he strikes it. When his paddle hits a portion of the ocean, that piece of water seems to vanish from the tip’s hitting-point. The paddle’s impact gets lost in the pliant fluidity
of water. Force seems to disappear into the ocean, as if most power gets absorbed by it:

Forest you can thread your way through, sort for yourself as you go. [...] Toss one foot in front of another, you know you get somewhere. But water, can’t keep a fix on water. Only keep after it, stroke and stroke and stroke. Say this paddle work was ax strokes, how many trees’d been brought down by now? How many forests, more like. (SR, 169)

In *The Sea Runners*, water is an element associated with vanishing. Water makes the moon’s appearing-power second to its vanishing-power. The moonshine on the waves is “a soft dazzle that *began to be gone even as it showed itself*; an eye could not help to wonder where that flitting sheen had been borne from” (SR, 203; emphasis added). Darkness intensifies the sense of vanishing: “The night Pacific is little at all like the day’s. With the demarking line of horizon unseeable the ocean draws up dimension from its deeps, sends it spreading, distending, perhaps away into some blend with the sky itself” (SR, 225).

Like the Russians of New Archangel, the hostile tribesmen that unsuccessfully pursue the sea runners would like to see them vanish into nothingness: “Let the sea eat them” (SR, 82). Their wish is partially fulfilled. Melander’s death, like Braaf’s later, is a disappearing-act on the level of geo-vanishing. Geo-vanishing is vanishing seen as a factor at work everywhere on the planet (sea, land, air, etc.). The sudden vanishing from life of a canoeist is for the ocean just one of many inevitable, recurring, unpredictable geo-vanishings. At first the remaining three sea runners feel that Melander’s body is a “deadweight” slowing and “clotting” their progress (SR, 151); but as time passes, Melander is, like Braaf later, raised from the dead in moments of humid coastal mystique. Fog and drizzle create special atmospheric effects that emphasize the possibility of vanishing-effects. Accustomed as they are to the “dim” light of wintry New Archangel, the canoeists are able to use their eyes even when visibility is so low that something like “night vision” is required in the misty air of a humid day (SR, 77). When Melander is “gone from life” (SR, 151), his vanishing adds itself to the vanishing of the fourth Tebenkov map (SR, 161), producing a sense of oceanic geo-vanishing in the next appointed canoe-navigator: “The sensation going through Karlsson now was of being emptied, as if his body from the stomach down had vanished, the way the bottom of the fourth map dissolved their route of escape” (SR, 161-62).
Vanishing is so dominant in *The Sea Runners* that it can constantly be heard, the everlasting noise of the Pacific surf materializing as the “grave” sound of each wave “collapsing” into its extinction (SR, 205). The “surprise explosions” in which the reefs “fling up” great volumes of water that quickly “disintegrate,” almost “as if the edge of the world were flying apart” (SR, 238), are a reminder of violence, death, and struggle. But the surf is also a helpmate. As the canoe is brought along the shore of Baranof, the paddlers are able to “estimate” the distance to the coastline “by the surf sound, and occasionally by a moving margin of lightness as a wave struck and swashed” (SR, 77).

The scattering of water into its finest particles is a feature of the surf but also of fog. The vanishing-and-reappearing tricks done by sea mist cause Melander and Karlsson to stand in awe before an extraordinary hump of cliff in the coastscape: “They might have been peering through the dust of eons rather than the morning’s last waft of sea mist” (SR, 134). Fog causes the items of the world to vanish and re-appear. In fog’s “sightlessness,” strange and wonderful things may materialize, powerful enough “to extend time” (SR, 261). As in hallucinations, dreams, and fantasies, the forested shore-line is the “dimmest” of things, “now glimpsed, now gone” (SR, 257). Fog is the intangible “breath” of the coast (SR, 257). The narrator puts the fog-dreaming of the sea runners on a par with “the dreaming” of the aborigines encountered by Cook in Botany Bay (SR, 259). Near the end, the two surviving but utterly exhausted canoeists find themselves in an ancient type of dream-time. They have as it were become aborigines of the North Pacific. In Australia, the aborigines lived their existence in “the dreaming” that was their sense of reality:

Just so, here on their own gable end of the Pacific, was the fog taking Karlsson and Wennberg into a dreaming of their own. Through the hours it shifted, and diluted, then came potent again: the vast hover of coastline north behind them, Alaska to Kaigani to Vancouver to wherever this was, the join of timber to ocean, islands beneath peaks, tsarmen beside seven-year men, Koloshes beside whales; it curled and sought, then to now: […] it gathered, touched its way here in the mind of one paddling man and there in the mind of the other: all a dreaming, and not. (SR, 259–60)

During this entire “spell of houselessness” no dwelling has been sighted (SR, 265); when this finally happens, all is dream, vanishing: “There, there!” (SR, 265). Human life with all its security seems near: “The cabin sat in the mid-distance, on the far side of where the tideflat made a thrust into the beach” (SR, 265). But there is no such thing. All that is there is a drifting lump of cedar (SR, 267). As they move closer, “a
further twenty yards dissolved the cabin details entirely” (SR, 266; emphasis added). This is just another geo-kinetic vanishing-act on the coast, one of many movements belonging to the global movement-choreography of the entire planet. In fact most of the objects that made the men’s escape possible, including the canoe and the maps, had been items of vanishing; pieces of property that vanished almost magically from the lives of their original owners due to the trick “of vanishment” that Braaf had picked up as a Stockholm street boy destined to become a professional thief (SR, 21).

Such deceit is no longer something personal in this part of the world, for this “precipice of coastline” is a treacherous reality prone to theft and deception (SR, 118). Once they get anywhere outside the most “sheltered waters,” the “swells” and huge “swaybacks” keep sending “the strong ancient message: the ocean is waiting” (SR, 179-80). It is waiting to deceive. Maps cannot cope with oceanic unpredictability. The plain of water called the Dixon Entrance is a “calm space” on Melander’s chart, but in reality it is dotted with innumerable islands too small to be cartographically represented (SR, 124). Like the sea, the thief on board had always been deceitful: “Being around Braaf was like being in the presence of a natural phenomenon” (SR, 107). But the “misty terms” of Braaf’s treacherous ego is a limited phenomenon compared with distance as such (SR, 107). Why did the four Swedes get themselves into a horrible place like the camp at New Archangel in the first place? Because they had succumbed to the common delusion that, in life, the transcendent (everything that happens to be far away) has more to offer than the immanent (everything that happens to be immediately at hand and fully present):

Odd, the deceit of distance. How it was that men would brave the miles to a new place, the very total of those miles seeming to promise a higher life than the old, and then find the work dull [...]—the longing to be elsewhere now pivoted straight around. Yes, that was the way for a seven-year man, distance played these tricks as if a spyglass had spun end-for-end in his hands. (SR, 11)

Maps are often as deceptive as Braaf. On one of the precious Tebenkov maps, the words Proliv Kaigani and Kaigani Strait (SR, 122) comprise only “six widths of Melander’s thumb”, concealing the fact that the Kaigani Strait measures “twice the distance of the English Channel between Dover and Calais” (SR, 121). We see then that vanishing and deceit are overlapping factors central to The Sea Runners. At sea, what is “represented” in a map vanishes; what a map cannot represent suddenly materializes as sheer “actuality” (SR, 121).
3. Geo-Morphosis

As may already be evident, geo-gyration and geo-vanishing imply change. As we now turn to examine various forms of transformation in *The Sea Runners*, we shall see that metamorphosis is geo-kinetic change, *geo-morphosis*. Geo-morphosis is metamorphosis as a movement-factor belonging to the global transformation-choreography of the entire planet.

The ‘home’ of the sea runners—their canoe—is itself an expression of metamorphosis. It was once a tree-trunk. One day a long time ago there was “standing cedar tree”; then craftsmen managed “to transform” it into a water-tight, marvellously elegant sea-vessel, into one of “the swiftest of sea creatures” (SR, 37). The feel of this sort of miracle is woven into the text’s rhetoric, as when Braaf’s thievish way of melting into invisibility is presented as a transformation of the night into a human disappearing-act: “A piece of the darkness—its name was Braaf—disengaged itself and instantly was vanished around the corner” (SR, 65). This sort of metamorphosis is not just kinetic but geo-kinetic. Its possibility does not lie just in humanity but in the life of the whole planet (here highlighted by the word “darkness,” with its suggestions of something global, planetary). In certain favourable conditions, anything real whatever can magically slip into the form of something other than itself, accentuating the sense of widespread, global transformation. Such metamorphosis involves the creation or materialization of something excitingly new, as when somehow all at once the canoe had slid them out of winter into not-winter.

No calendar can quite catch the time, and the cluster of moments themselves is as little possible to single out as the family of atoms of air that pushes against the next and has begun a breeze. Yet the happening is unmissable. Out of their winter rust, ferns unroll green. Up from the low dampness of the forest the blooms of skunk cabbage lick, a butter-gold flame and scent like burnt sugar. (SR, 201–202)

Transformations in nature “engendering” things “tiny and mighty” (SR, 202) have their counterparts in the cultural world of geo-political shifts strong enough to compel map-makers to alter a name such as “Isla Dolores” to “Destruction Island” or “Punta de Martinez” to “Cape Flattery” (SR, 200).

Transformation is in *The Sea Runners* set against its opposite—the freezing-up of all motion and of all transformation into the gruesome stillness of Alaskan ice and
Alaskan forest. The frozen landscape of the far north seems at first to have nothing to offer but bleak wintry conditions imposed by nearby Arctic mountain ranges. *The Sea Runners* is packed with terror emanating from space frozen into something hard, unfriendly, and stationary. This sensation is initially set in place by the crescent of great snowy crags at New Archangel, giving that melancholy place the look of a “walled” settlement fenced off by a “stockade” of “tremendous mountains” (SR, 11).

A feeling of claustrophobia prevails—resurfacing in the extremely confined space of the canoe whenever Wennberg, the one most prone to sea-sickness, finds “nausea” to be a “dread building silently toward panic” (SR, 185).

Once they manage to get afloat, what keeps closing in on the paddling men is no longer the horizon of snowy peaks but the thick, massively immobile, band of forest all along the shoreline. An avalanche looks like a waterfall that has frozen up, and the sloping coastal forest seems to rival all of that by presenting itself as an avalanche of trees immobilized by some sort of stopping of time. Beyond forested ridges, forested mountains sit “as if in arrest; awaiting the next flow of existence.

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6 As we have seen, space as confinement is contrasted with space as vast free-space in *The Sea Runners*. The men are confined to their canoe, but are surrounded by the vast, seemingly free spaces of coast and forested mountain slopes. Yet these are in themselves oppressive through their inaccessibility. The author makes interesting remarks about such landscape effects in his autobiographical account of childhood life in Montana; Ivan Doig, *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1992; first published 1973). In the “dry and belligerent landscape of the high-mountain west” (p. 28), where the “very floor of the Smith River Valley rests one full mile above sea level” (p. 22), the school house is a highly confined space in comparison with the great rim of mountains all around (p. 16); yet the severity of winters that may delay the greening of spring vegetation till June (p. 36), and the formation of the landscape as a more or less closed “basin” (p. 32), are factors that nevertheless make vastness come across as confinement. Here people making a hard living on the foothills always risk losing their cattle and all realistic hope of continued subsistence. They are therefore, in the manner of the author’s father, thrown into forms of close teamwork needed for survival. This mix of openness, confinement, risk, fraternity, and suffering seems to be echoed in the basic fabric of *The Sea Runners*.

7 O. F. Bollnow defines free wandering as a situation in which “the wanderer is no longer separate from the countryside, it is no longer an image that passes away beside him, but he actually wanders through the countryside, becomes a part of it, is completely taken up by it”; *Human Space*, translated by Christine Shuttleworth (London: Hyphen Press, 2011), p. 109. Since the forested Alaskan coast is precisely something that “passes away beside” the canoeists all the time, they are arguably not free coast-wanderers. As Martin Heidegger points out: “World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen”; *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 44. By ‘world’ Heidegger here means lived reality as it comes across in the flow of everyday living. A forested coast that one never touches but which is always on display like a screen cannot be a ‘world’ in any full phenomenological sense. It is something rather dead, a sort of representation of the world, an unchanging background without dynamic life, removed from the possibility of engagement, involvement, and authentic intimacy. As T. R. Schatzki points out in his presentation of phenomenology, Heidegger defines living space as something that does not stand opposed to us in a fixed, sterile, abstract object-facing-a-subject manner: “The spatiality of the world is the world’s being around, and not over against, the person in it”; *Martin Heidegger: Theorist of Space* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2007), p. 38.
maybe, the next pose to assume when the geologic clock chimed again” (SR, 175; emphasis added).

Since much in The Sea Runners is on a vast scale, monotony is likewise something gigantic. Tedium does not come across as strictly human; it is rather a part of the great landscape. The men’s weariness is a minor version of the major dreariness of the desolate shoreline. Mile after mile, day after day, they travel along a coast on which “Alaska’s forest stretched like black-green legions of time itself” (SR, 95). The forest is a block of uniform colour, like plain wall-to-wall carpeting: “every tree of the coast was in green touch with every other” (SR, 96). After a certain number of weeks, the canoeists “ceased seeing individual trees” (SR, 176). One tree is all the others, just as one stroke of the paddle is all the others: “The repetition of pattern, each green shape pyring dozens of long branches upward to a thin rod of top, seemed to have no possible end to it, simply multiplied ahead to circle the world and join back on itself” (SR, 176). It is impossible for Karlsson to “sort” the days “in his mind”; “the days of this coast blended like its trees” (SR, 159). Even at the end, the bay that welcomes them to final security is just a monotony of space: “Bay and bay and more of it” (SR, 267).

Yet there is hidden movement in all of this lack of change. Just as the “pit pit pit pit” of raindrops on garments (SR, 95) marks time as a rhythm slowly shifting one drop-instant to the next, and just as the “gray-gray-gray, white-white-white” of the foreshore of Baranof Island marks the pattern of “mile of whitish gray following mile of grayish white” (SR, 94; emphasis added), the units of dark forest-green on the landward horizon establish a sense of progression—theoretically towards Astoria, emotionally towards further effort and further endurance. Change is slow but real. Imperceptibly, the men gradually lose weight, ending up as mere “outlines” of their former selves (SR, 258).

The point being made is that The Sea Runners presents monotony as a specific type of movement that fits into an overall system of kinetic feels. The feel “of the dark world-long pelt of forest” (SR, 197) is not just a datum but a sensation that has its place in a configuration of landscape-feels that also are kinetic feels. We have already seen that the mountain-sides are like avalanches of trees. As the canoeists paddle along the forested slopes, they can “make out that timber still spilled like a dark endless waterfall over the rim of the continent” (SR, 237; emphasis added). The sense of motion is combined with the sense of standstill. Although they feel that they are
making little progress, the canoeists are actually always getting closer to Astoria. Each stroke of the paddle, which in itself is movement, ends up with the feel of coming to a standstill. Yet this feel, as when a vehicle slows down, is actually itself a kinetic experience. An object that looks as if it has *just* ceased to move does not present itself as being altogether foreign to movement. Having immediately originated from movement, even an object in non-motion is somehow charged with kinetic energy. This sensation is highlighted when, having lost sight of the shore in thick fog, Karlsson and Wennberg suddenly find that they are already safely on it: “The canoe simply stopped, as if *reined up* short” (SR, 261; emphasis added). Reining-up is a movement-act.

We are told at the beginning of *The Sea Runners* that a line of native huts along the shoreline at New Archangel takes the shape of “a single-file *march of dwellings*” (SR, 14; emphasis added). Later, the canoeists spot “a *caravan* of cliffs and crags *crossing* the canoe’s route. Older than old, as though preserved by the Pacific brine ever since creation’s *boil*, these pyramids and arches of rock appeared” (SR, 201; emphasis added). One can still get an impression of the moving magma being reined up into the standing-still of stone. As Karlsson notes while out on the moonlit beach that holds “the file of seastacks” in view as ships “anchored” close to the beach, there is life to be seen in the frozen but somehow animated appearance of certain intriguing geological formations:

> Out into the water in front of him now the great loaves of stone loomed in succession, until at their outermost a last small whetted formation, like a sentry’s spearpoint, struggled with the ocean, defiantly tearing waves to whiteness. Some mad try here at walling the Pacific, all this looked, the line of rock having been fought by the waves, overrun by them, left in gaps, shards, tumbled shapes, but the attempt of the rocks enduring. (SR, 203)

The geo-morphosis coming to expression in the slowing-down of magma into rock has its parallel in air,⁸ the clouds in the southern sky no longer travelling at any measurable speed at all. Their motionlessness communicates a sense of sublime slowing-down taken to the extreme limit of complete serenity. Clouds in this different climate-zone are “not the ebb and flow skidding about above Sitka Sound, but fat

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⁸ As Joakim Wrethed has pointed out in *Oases of Air: A Phenomenological Study of John Banville’s Science Tetralogy* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2006), air can naturally emphasize a sense of the insubstantial, but less obviously it can do the opposite, so that airy substances like clouds can come across as “materialising in terms of veritable substantiation” (p. 18).
islands that impended on the horizon half a day at a time. Here it seemed, then, that you could navigate according to the clouds’ positions” (SR, 223–24).

There is in other words an extreme type of movement that is an awesome coming of movement to its end. The freezing of motion into fixity is to be counted as a kinetic rather than static event. As Braaf comes to suddenly feel one day, such freezing of motion into standstill is not primarily a human phenomenon, being already present as the aura of certain things. Exploring the inland for a little while, he is abruptly transfixed by “the touch of being watched” (SR, 117). What is observing him, he discovers when turning around, is the completely immobile, completely wooden, and completely inanimate reality of a gigantic totem pole. A “ladder of sets of eyes” is standing there above Braaf, each eye the size of a hand, and each one appraising the intruder (SR, 117). He is an intruder, stranger, and latecomer. Movements (of worship, construction, etc.) have been there long before him. He finds himself encircled by these great, mystical prior motions. This brings us to the phenomenon of enwrapping in *The Sea Runners*.

4. Geo-Enwrapping

We have seen that there is motion in the bringing of motion to standstill. There is a difference between the inertia of any standstill as such and the dynamic materialization of stoppage. In the coming to a standstill there is a becoming, the kinetic birth of something new through an alteration of kinetic reality. When something is made to abruptly slow down, there is a compression of movement-energy. This kinetic compression is an intensification of kinetic forces. It is felt at the beginning of complete immobilization as part of that sudden stillness. Such a kinetic compression-feel, as a form of life-feeling latent in motion as well as tranquillity, is arguably a significant trait of the geo-kinetic layout of *The Sea Runners*. We now turn to this feature as it comes to view in its finest form: geo-enwrapping. Like geo-

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9 Key to the whole event is the circumstance, clarified phenomenologically by Christopher Tilley, of “image fields varying according to body position, motion, or stasis”; *Body and Image* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008), p. 120. It is “through somatic experience” that images make “the impression” that they make (p. 116).
gyration and geo-morphosis, geo-enwrapping belongs to the global movement-choreography of the entire planet.

Before the canoeists set out from New Archangel, we are told that Melander’s considerable experience of sea-faring is “knowledge of water enwrapping the world” (SR, 58; emphasis added). The world is nested in water in the way that an infant is nested in the womb. Water has to do with the very possibility of life itself, as indicated by the reference to the “great over-water passage between one life and another” (SR, 57). When two of the four canoeists finally make it all the way to the outskirts of Astoria after paddling more than a thousand miles, reference is not made only to the large maps they set fire to as a way of signalling their position but also to the “waterproofing” in which these life-giving sheets had been “enwrapped” (SR, 275). Ironically, the watery “geography enwrapped” in the “furl of maps” needs to be protected precisely from water (SR, 112; emphasis added).

During his hours of mid-journey map-contemplation, Melander is mesmerized by the Russian charts, not simply because they are “superbly functional” (SR, 111) but also because the whole living coastscape in a sense fits into them. This fitting-into is arguably a significant geo-kinetic factor in the text. When something fits perfectly into something larger than itself, there is a kinetic sense of wrapping, a recurring sensation in The Sea Runners. At New Archangel, where autumn seems to be perpetual, the “silken rain,” the “dew standing in droplets on clothing,” and “the cloud layer” eager to “immerse every crag” are already there to set this embedding-feel in motion (SR, 29). The text keeps suggesting that, just as the noise of the surf “upon all shores of all continents at once” is the “thunder” of a universally “enwrapping beat” (SR, 205; emphasis added), all ocean-movements fit into a weary paddler’s hand. Despite his rebellious nature, Braaf is wrapped tightly into a stable set of harmless human acts by the great wild elemental forces that encircle him: He is “held into” the various routines of the journey “by the sum of the pressures all around” (SR, 171). Somehow safe inside this cocoon of pressures, Braaf simply lets “the push of it all carry him ahead” (SR, 171). To say that “Braaf had tides in his bones alongside the weather” (SR, 228) is therefore to say that geo-enwrapping materializes on all sorts of levels of ocean-reality. At night, “in the canoe with blackness around,” there is even a sense of enwrapping-within-enwrapping (SR, 225). That sort of embedding is the largest of things, but also something intimate and personal.
Whereas “moods kited in and out” of an irritable person like Wennberg (SR, 172), Melander is a man with greatness of mind and much equanimity. He is different from the other canoeists in that “so wide a thinker” has a mind “spacious” enough to keep his “province of interest” as large as the “entire coastline”, perhaps even encompassing “the bend of the planet” (SR, 166). Yet the “power” of such a “grandness of view” would not be convincing without being pre-correlated to “realms much tinier” but equally enwrapping. In fact the most sublime form of enwrapping to be encountered in The Sea Runners is not something “spacious” or “roomy” but the “circlet of strength” where “the haft of a paddle” fits into “the palm of a hand” (SR, 166).

5. Geo-Temporality

We have already seen that fluctuations of geo-kinetic experience often come across as shifts in time-sense. These will now be discussed as geo-temporal phenomena. Like geo-gyration, geo-morphosis, and geo-enwrapping, geo-temporality belongs to the global movement-choreography of the entire planet.

There is a tension in The Sea Runners between the idea that humans can master time or space and the idea that such mastery is impossible. It is possible to see the text as bringing to light a transition from the former conception to the latter. The plan is that the sea runners are going to be able to keep track of time in an orderly, rational way—and that they will be able to navigate space in a coherent, lucid manner. Reliance on maps is to enable the canoeists to maintain control over all advances in space; reliance on a calendar is to make possible a mastery of temporality. A map

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10 In Place and Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), J. E. Malpas discusses enwrapping as embeddedness: “The nested character of places” derives from the fact that they “open out to sets of other places through being nested, along with those places, within a larger spatial structure or framework of activity—within some broader place (p. 105); but this phenomenon of the “nested character of things in the world” does not only involve places but also events and the “experience and memory” of them (p. 101). In fact “the nested structure of memory” is also “a characteristic feature of narrative”; there is in the literary text (as in life) a “nesting of events within a larger event structure” (p. 102). Following Ulric Neisser, Malpas notes that, like things and places, events materialize as located by inclusion within larger events, “just as places are located with reference to larger places” (p. 102). The fact that The Sea Runners moves between very small and very large forms of embedding is accordingly not some sort of eccentricity but a basic feature of lived common experience.
divides space into spatial units, into clearly-defined territorial zones, and a calendar divides time into temporal slots that can be numbered. The line-up of numbered days gives a sense of security as well as a feeling of progression. Mathematically, each day obviously contains exactly the same number of hours and minutes as all the others. But experience is not mathematical, especially not in situations of suffering or crisis. Our sense of time cannot always be controlled. Before they set off, Melander asks Braaf to carve an Aleut calendar—“so we can number our time on the way to Astoria” (SR, 63). To take out the Aleut calendar and move “the peg rightward one hole” is to “pass time by counting time” (SR, 246–47)—but time passes whether one counts or not, and in ways that cannot be foreseen. The act of being every day brought “closer” to Astoria is so slight and intangible that it cannot normally be turned into an object of calculation (SR, 251). As Karlsson notes in one of his last remarks: “There’s no count to what you can’t see” (SR, 251).

The neat little arithmetic of the wooden calendar is overshadowed by forms of temporal experience that are far more intimate and intense, as in the case of the “tick and tock” of the paddle-rhythm maintained under the supervision of Karlsson’s commanding voice (SR, 76), or as in the case of the “geologic clock” that everywhere has shaped the terrain of the ocean shoreline in temporal patterns of alteration between static phases of geological “arrest” and dynamic phases resuming the “flow of existence” (SR, 175).

In The Sea Runners, time eventually becomes a huge waiting-event: waiting for the moment to escape from New Archangel, waiting for the far-distant moment of arrival in Astoria. Time becomes dreamy, internalized. Existence becomes a waiting-game. Right from the very first moments of their initial meetings, the men had found that “time had snagged to a stop within their little radius” (SR, 46). Waiting is the major time-span in which all the others are nested. Sometimes waiting is so prolonged that it engenders an additional self nested within the normal one, an immanent “man in wait” (SR, 60). Even before they set out, this additional person-within-a-person is tangible enough to almost have the feel of a physical entity:

The waiting became a kind of ghost attaching itself within each of their lives, as if a man now cast two shadows and one somehow fell into his body instead of away. The outer man had to perform as ever […] while inside, this sudden new shadow-creature, the one in wait, bided the next six weeks and six days wholly in thought of the immense voyage ahead. (SR, 56; emphasis added)
While still trapped in the Russian camp, the men live their journey imaginatively ahead of themselves. Every day they dream of themselves as paddlers weeks before they start paddling. Thus they come to dwell in a temporality that is not. This time-feel lacks presence. The “days and weeks” of Karlsson’s mind were “always leaning ahead, aimed where the canoe was aimed” (SR, 248). Since the days ahead cannot clearly line up, even in the imagination, in the way that days are “on display” in memory, “foreknowledge” is always dimmed or completely ruled out by the on-going non-existence of things yet to come (SR, 73). Curiously, what the four men kept dreaming about back in New Archangel turns out, when it materializes, to be a sort of continuation of their dreaming. The living “hours” of a particular “day” can be just as “impossible to separate” in the present moment of lived experience as formerly in the anticipated moment of dreamy waiting (SR, 211). The point being made is that dreaminess often determines temporality in *The Sea Runners*. At the very end, dream and reality can no longer be separated: “all a dreaming, and not” (SR, 260).

The dreaminess of waiting and of its dreamy extension into dreamy months of dreamy paddling enables the whole coast to take the form of dream and dreaming. There is dreaminess in the feeling that “Alaska’s forest stretched like black-green legions of time itself” (SR, 95). This dream-temporality is geo-temporal. As the men move downcoast, they enter a time-feel that is larger than anything human. Depending on its moods, landscape shapes itself as dream, reverie, or nightmare. The coastscape *itself* assumes the form and feel of dream-time, as in the notion entertained by sailors that certain small islands are so narrow that with a bit of luck they “could be put through an hourglass in half a day” (SR, 99). The sensation created is that when the southbound canoeists wind their way in slim straits between narrow islands they are entering snaky channels of coast-water that also are snaky channels of a time-sense that has belonged through the ages of history and pre-history to the planet itself.

When time and space seem to possess the quality of dream, landscape may come across as a factor involved in dreaming, alive and semi-conscious. “Something of the landfall nudged at Karlsson” when they finally manage to get to the very threshold of Astoria (SR, 262). This feel is produced not by his mate Wennberg but by the specific configuration of water and land at hand. Depending on its moods, landscape transmits its temper at every point along the coast. When Karlsson had taken time to enjoy the slow-motion descent of droplets from the limb of a tall tree, the beads of water falling only “two, three to the minute” (SR, 135), there had been a
sense of relief at the possibility of conforming to a rhythm that, unlike that of wearisome paddle-work, did not have its source in human effort. In waves, tides, and falling droplets, the coast had presented a set of rhythms that belong to its own sense of timing. With spell-bound upturned face, under the magically falling beads of water, Karlsson had taken a step aside just in time for each seemingly “slowed-down” droplet to miss him (SR, 135). It could be said that in this “slow-dancing with water,” Karlsson’s footwork was actually bringing the slow-pulling labour of all the paddle work into a larger frame of rhythmic experience that retrospectively cancels all pain and dejection: “nothing existed” (SR, 136). All that Karlsson wanted to enjoy was pure time—free from canoe, journey, goal, paddling, waiting, disappointment, and even hope.

Final Remarks

Our phenomenological exploration of The Sea Runners has highlighted the fact that kinetic force—whether gyrating, vanishing, self-transforming, or enwrapping—tends to be presented in a manner that calls forth the geographic totality of a region’s life, giving a sense of the very “breadth of existence” there (SR, 116). From this broad viewpoint, the history of the four canoeists is more moving than the escapades of Captain Cook,11 who in 1778 “explored north through these waters” (SR, 193). His role in “the unending windstorm of history” (SR, 154) is to some extent limited in scope by being part of the colonial enterprise of multiplying “the slow white wakes of sailing ships” that expand the reach of “imperial energies” across the oceans (SR, 20). The sea runners never belonged to any of these “sea-lanes” (SR, 20). They had not measured and mapped the expanses of water they crossed. In fact what they constantly discovered was that a map of a part of the ocean really tells us nothing about the kinetic reality of maritime life. We come to understand in The Sea Runners that although possession of reliable charts is advantageous, any crew exposed to innumerable “hillocks of water” (SR, 124) will come to feel mapless no matter how many maps they happen to possess. As the canoeists discovered when they ran out of

11 It would be simplistic to lump all explorers together, in order to imply that map-making itself is some sort of act of imperialistic objectification. Matthew Flinders, the explorer who made the first comprehensive map of Australia, was quite unlike Cook in many respects. As an “entirely self-taught” man, he was driven by scientific interest in discovery as such rather than by colonial forms of motivation; Marion Body, The Fever of Discovery (London: New European Publications, 2006), p. 2.
charts, the danger-sensation associated with “the expanse beyond the edge of the map” (SR, 182) is by no means excluded from the seemingly secure spaces on the hither side of that edge. What looks serene on a map does not usually look quite so reassuring in reality. The “calm space between shorelines on Melander’s map” is confusion and turmoil as soon as the map’s represented world has translated itself into the fully presented reality of “miles of breakers” and wild tidal surges (SR, 124).

The lasting impression is arguably not adversity and setback, however. Nor is it the overcoming of adversity and setback. What The Sea Runners probably celebrates is instead the sheer wonder of automatically remaining-afloat—on the ocean but also in life. Even when the ocean is all confusion, the canoeists enjoy the benefits of a secret poise that has nothing to do with human heroism or with anything else that human agency could achieve. This beautiful mystery is the miracle of floating as such, its remarkable possibility. This possibility has little to do with the fact that the sea runners finally managed to synchronize their paddle-movements, that they finally were able “to cohere in ways they had never dreamt of” (SR, 101). It is the canoe, not the canoeists, that most forcefully brings the miracle of flotation to expression. When Melander, Karlsson, Braaf, and Wennberg set out from New Archangel, they are inclined to believe that their night-time plunge into the chaos of currents and waves in Sitka Sound will cause the canoe “to buck, slide down nose first, rock to one side and then the other, then start over, on and on in a nautical jig horrifying to join in the wet dark” (SR, 76). To their surprise, “the canoe rode steady, almost with nonchalance, in the night water of Sitka” (SR, 76; emphasis added). Thus the ultimate saving power, at least for the two of them who survive, is “bouyancy,” the strange capacity of a vessel to stay afloat (SR, 131).

The Sea Runners can be seen as a work of praise directed at the sea, and implicitly at creation. The sea is capable of taking lives but also of preserving forms of vulnerable life embedded in its surface complexities: “Afloat you exist in balance between unthinkable distances. Above, the sky and the down-push of all its vastnesses. Under, the thickness of ocean with its queer unruly upward law of gravity, buoyancy” (SR, 130–31).

Events, acts and feelings in The Sea Runners are defined by “unthinkable distances” (SR, 130). It has been the aim of this essay to demonstrate that these, like most things in the text, have a geo-kinetic frame of reference. Gyration, vanishing, transformation, and temporality always come across as phenomena caught up in a
comprehensive, global movement-choreography. This comprises a vast range of forces at work in landscape and experience. On the wild, cold coast of the North Pacific, the horizon of anything that comes to appear belongs already to the totality of existence in which it is nested.

Works Cited


