

Trust and Risk in Literature, Meeting 3:

Irvine, California, 5-7 May 2017

Helen's now customary (brief) summary of our discussions

[presented at the end of the meeting with thanks to Joe, to Julia and her team,
and to all fellow members of the network]

1. Risk

Risk was ostensibly our main focus for the third and final meeting of the series, and a variety of definitions and issues concerning risk were raised:

- What is the vocabulary of risk? synonyms/metaphors discussed include venture (ship, merchandise, stock), adventure, hazard, danger, chance, gambling/wagering, games (bias or rub in bowls)
- Risk as a potentially paradoxical phenomenon, dealing in opposites but often merging them – an attempt at controlling the uncontrollable; looking to the future yet reliant on past experience as premise; located both in the centre and at the borders (cf Mary Douglas)
- Inherent in certain situations, particularly in societies scarred by colonial (*Oroonoko*) or post-colonial (*Untouchable*) experiences
- Risk can be both positive (excitement of risk) and negative (danger, loss), as is clear from the implicitly contradictory earliest usages of the word in the 17th century
- Literary emphasis on positive or negative aspects of risk depends upon (and/or defines) differences of genre – for example, risk is treated as opportunity and adventure in early modern comedies and 19th-century boys' stories, whereas it is a given threat and danger in revenge tragedies
- Risk can be seen as gendered in that it affects men and women differently – as also explored in literary texts – and is expressed in gendered terms (motherhood and separation; female empowerment; the dangers of contact and supposed contamination)
- Risk can lead to transformation, but this effect is always unstable and can be transitory
- Risk is not an entity and has no ontology (Giddens) but is a process
- It can take material forms – for example, the risk of physical touching – but also emotional and relational, an opening up and rendering vulnerable to others/experience
- Must be understood in terms of both time and space
- Closely dependent on knowledge, but may also involve the conscious averting of certain kinds of knowledge (agnotology)

2. Trust

As ever, we found that the typology or calculus of risk is bound up with trust:

- Trust and risk are necessary to one another, ‘intertwined’ (Giddens); trust is, for example, the management of loss
- Trust takes account of risk whereas confidence takes no account of risks (and therefore is itself riskier)
- Trust needs equality of power relationships in order to function reliably (thus not applicable in situations of enslavement, for example)
- Can there be such a thing as ‘absolute trust’ (*Macbeth*)? Is trust honourable, or naive folly? Cf the case of the ‘serial truster’, Oroonoko
- Synonyms used for trust in our discussions include hope, faith (a shared and theological version of trust), credit, courage ...
- In what do we place our trust? God, institutions, the law, corporations (a means of sharing risk), family, individuals
- Evidence to shore up trust: documents and other forms of notation (the phenomenon of accountability beginning in the early modern period), the more traditional forms of oral confession or spoken oaths, and material signs of a bond such as rings or seals
- Dangers of trust – including counterfeiting, false coinage, lies and other unreliable language
- Despite sharing their first three letters, trust is not identical with truth

3. Beck and Giddens

This was the first of our meetings with consistent reference to the work of two key theorists of risk, whose ideas we found very helpful in providing a coherent focus to our presentations. However, their work raised some debatable issues, including

- What and when is ‘modernity’?
- Doesn’t the early modern period in Europe have all the hallmarks of a ‘risk society’, caused by (it seems to us) the impact of the Reformation, mercantilism, and (in Britain) the Civil War and Commonwealth periods?
- Key early modern authors recurrently present in our discussions included Francis Bacon (on knowledge of all kinds, and on dissimulation as the mark of a ‘trustworthy man’) and Thomas Hobbes (the first theorist of trust, risk and the quest for certainty)
- Additional later authors added to our reading lists during the meeting included Susan Miller and Mary Douglas

4. Literature, theatre and risk

- Writing or consuming literature is itself a risk; texts and performances are variously described as a disease-like ‘contagion’ and seen as a source of vulnerability on the part of both the author and readers/spectators

- To what extent is the ‘pact’ of literature or theatre, requiring the suspension of disbelief, fundamentally reliant upon trust? – in the writer, narrator, performers, language, and the imagination itself
- Do the rewards outweigh the risks for a theatre audience?
- What do we trust in the process of acting (a question raised by the Japanese production of the *Winter’s Tale*) – the body, gesture, the (dislocated) word and/or silence?

5. Some persistent questions

- Where are trust and risk located / expressed in the individual? Is risk external and physical, while trust is internalised and verbal? Is risk rational, calculated and conscious, while trust is more emotional, intuitive and unconscious? On the other hand, we sensed that trust needs to be embodied ...
- How useful are other pairs of terms in helping us to theorise trust and risk? For example, faith and doubt; optimism and pessimism; hope and despair; security and threat?
- What is the relationship of trust and risk to judgement? There is an early modern concept of minimising the risks of divine judgement through the ‘corporation of heaven’, but here on earth how do we deal with the ubiquitous presence of risk in revenge tragedy, or the sense of opportunity – of seizing a chance – readily associated with risk?
- Are we liberated *from* risk or *through* it?