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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Medieval Literature in the Contact Zone
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The rare noun and adjective *tramontane* and *tramontain* (“north”), cognates of the medieval Latin *transmontanus*, are Italianisms in Old and Middle French, meaning primarily “Pole Star” and “north wind,” and then, but only very occasionally, simply “north”: indeed, the very formation of the word implies a world view anchored in an Italian perspective, since the mountains in question, over which the wind will blow and the Pole Star may be seen, are the Alps, to the north. The Italian reflex of *transmontanus*, *tramontana*, primarily means simply “north” in early Italian texts. It is surely not, then, coincidental that the earliest attestations of *tramontane* in French are in Brunetto Latini and Marco Polo, two Italian writers of French, and that both use *tramontane* to indicate simply the direction “north,” rather than the Pole Star or a wind. (14)

Gaunt leverages this “apparently trivial example” (15) primarily to make a point about the relationship among manuscripts; he is arguing that a Franco-Italian source influences early redactions of the *Devisement*. But, like many of the small details over which he lingers (this includes acute attention to “tiny variants” in the manuscripts [91]), it does considerable work. Here, it suggests that language, if unable to move mountains, bears the traces of bodies in relation to the world as it shifts across geographic coordinates, to be written or read by those differently oriented by wind, star, and mountain. “Tramontane” means “north” when the Alps are northward (i.e. from an Italian perspective), but usually something else when they are not, unless, presumably, French is operating as a functioning vernacular for an Italian speaker. The word can indicate both an “anchored” worldview and, through its semantic range, eventually the shifting of that vantage point, indexing a world in which people and languages
continually traverse all kinds of borders. Language means different things depending on where one stands, but also potentially encodes a history of multiple positions.

Roughly a century later, a Middle English version of Mandeville’s Travels uses the word “Transmontane” to designate not a cardinal direction but the northern lodestar, situated parallel to the “Antartyk” around which the southern hemisphere turns. In the last extended reading of her monograph, In Light of Another’s Word: European Ethnography in the Middle Ages, Shirin A. Khanmohamadi examines how Mandeville describes those uncannily corresponding halves of the world, antipodes similarly oriented by different skies:

For yee wyten welle that thei that ben toward the Antartyk, thei ben streght feet ayen feet of hem that dwellen vnder the Transmontane also wel as wee, and thei that dwellyn vnder vs ben feet ayenst feet. For alle the parties of see and of lond han here appositees habitables or trepassables . . . For fro what partie of the erthe that man duelle, outhre abouen or benethen, it semeth alwayes to hem that duellen that thei gon more right than ony other folk And right as it semeth to vs that thei ben vnder vs, right so it semeth hem that wee ben vnder them. (142, emphasis added)

Mandeville’s description of an “us” (“vs”) geographically opposite to a “them” (“hem”) seems momentarily to divide a world famously embroidered with evidence of proliferating diversities into neat halves, the balanced syntactic structure reflecting and confirming a cleanly divisible cosmic geography. It appears almost to ratify a kind of binary thinking prone to reductive “othering,” a charge sometimes ascribed to medieval European ethnographers, and one that Khanmohamadi questions throughout her book.

Khanmohamadi’s chapters consistently complicate narratives of unmarked European ethnographers objectifying those whom they encounter beyond their own unstable borders; it demonstrates how certain medieval representational strategies, in Mandeville’s Travels and elsewhere, work to dissolve the contours of the western viewing self, revealing it as similarly vulnerable to analysis and revision. These medieval ethnographers function not as invisible observers, she argues, nor as reassuring opposites of those whom they observe, but as participants in a world of rich and frequently disorienting difference. Regarding Mandeville’s Travels specifically, Khanmohamadi critiques assessments that reduce the narrator’s interest in religious others to an admonishing spur for the self-correction of Christian readers; she argues that to read his positive consideration of “diverse others” as merely producing “objects against which to project an ‘ironic’ or ‘satiric’ image of a sinful Christian self” forgets that irony requires a “stable viewpoint” (115). And if one pays attention to the play of multiple perspectives — including those that are irreconcilable and subject to change — then the ironic must be understood more as a fleeting possibility than a consistent mode structuring a comparative project.

And so, by the time a reader encounters Mandeville’s description of a world balanced between lodestars at the end of Khanmohamadi’s study, it has become easier to recognize how such a passage participates in destabilizing a singular, authoritative, western Christian perspective — one that would neatly divide an “us” from a “them” — and more possible to read it as conjuring a multifarious world continually opening onto more details, including those not discernable from certain vantage points. The narrator does not simply oppose the “Transmontane” to the “Antartyk”; importantly, “alle the
parties of see and of lond han here appositees habitables or trepassables,” and wherever it is that a people dwell, “it semeth alwayes to hem that duellen that thei gon more right than ony other folk” (142). The globe divides into infinite halves. And the countless phantom bodies that embellish such a schematic design suggest a world of walkers faintly alert to the nevertheless obscured presence of others uncannily like themselves, also potentially on the move and refusing stable perspectives.

Such an understanding of Mandeville’s passage better accords with Khanmohamadi’s description of medieval ethnographers pondering the messiness and opportunity of a world learned about incrementally and falteringingly. It suggests the vulnerability and uneasiness associated with insufficiency and uncertainty: the continual sense that it always will take an unknown more in order to sense that one’s world is whole, and the sensation that all thought functions on the basis of mere “seeming,” whose provisional truths might shift depending on where one stands. Even the description of balance itself hazards a vaguely unsettling effect, since Christian sacred history posits its own center without mention — without seeming awareness — of a southern lodestar, just as numerous bodies appear oblivious to the “Transmontane” around which spins the world from which Mandeville supposedly departs (143). Mandeville’s description, argues Khanmohamadi, rejects the possibility of a world without blind spots. It boldly admits uncertainty into faith and perhaps even tacitly acknowledges, as Mandeville does more explicitly elsewhere, the fact of every person’s fragile relationship to geographic, cultural, or religious centrality, for “wee knowe not whom God loueth ne whom God hateth” (130).

“Tramontane”/“transmontane” is, admittedly, an idiosyncratic link — really, a felicitous echo — between two very different projects; Gaunt is invested in how attention to language mobility expands interpretive possibility in relation to medieval texts, and Khanmohamadi nuances oversimplified narratives of medieval ethnographic writing. But I begin with the word — at once Italian, French, and English, naming wind, direction, and star — as a kind of homage to the sustained attention each of the works under review pays to language, and to indicate the luxuriously fine-grained close reading that they employ in order to reveal a medieval world always in a state of exhilarating motion. Along with Jonathan Hsy’s Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature, the studies by Gaunt and Khanmohamadi participate in a loose affiliation of relatively recent work interested in intersections among language, poetics, and geography, as well as the question of how various “contact zones” — a term each borrows from Mary Louise Pratt (1992) — mediate the collision of cultures, perspectives, and vocabularies. They thus participate in the investigation of a Eurocentric interest in a more expansive world, examining twelfth-through fourteenth-century texts that record and reflect upon European travel to Jerusalem, north Africa, India, China, and Russia (much of which was then consolidated under the Mongol empire), as well as multilingualism generally. For the past two decades, such subjects have been influentially inflected by postcolonial theory, whose lessons are also present here, but whose general applicability to medieval studies — and the limits of such applicability — have been debated extensively elsewhere.¹

In this review, I consider more specifically how research on a geographically and culturally expansive medieval past situates its inquiries in questions of language and form: how, for instance, representational strategies worked to decenter western Europe as an
unmarked interlocutor of the rest of the world, and how accounts of cultural encounter were written in languages untethered from nations whose histories of formation had yet to be written. These approaches seem to me related in their efforts to narrate a medieval world in motion; they challenge anachronistic associations among culture, nation, and language that too often work to construct a static past that forecloses all futures but one, and upon which we then layer narratives of our own historical moment. Such narratives in turn risk subsuming and overgeneralizing the overlooked realities of medieval centuries.

The methods frequently showcased by these authors (close reading, philology, manuscript studies) have, at times, been jettisoned or underemphasized in favor of others that attempt to engage literature and geography on a larger scale, the premise upon which “distant reading” and “world literature” have been linked (Moretti 2004). The works under review do not explicitly engage such debates about the efficacies of close or distant (or surface and symptomatic) reading, but one can see how the effort to expand our own understanding of the medieval world, or to better discern medieval efforts to acknowledge, understand, and participate in a more extensive geography, intersect with questions of how to depart from narrow modes of critical engagement in order to see as much and as clearly as possible. Suzanne Akbari, in a recent essay on the relationship between medieval studies and world literature, proposes a multi-pronged approach that explicitly engages distant reading strategies associated with Moretti, while continuing to “make the most out of approaches rooted in Medieval Studies,” in the hopes of “avoid[ing], to the extent we can, the apparently inevitable consequence of saying ‘goodbye’ to close reading” (2017, 6, 8). And it is hard to argue with Geraldine Heng, who, in a special issue of this journal responding to debates over reading methodologies, suggests that “in the recovery of the global past, many forms of attention are needed” (Heng 2014, 246). Unlike Akbari, whose proposed methodology includes by definition and employs as case studies texts composed in European vernaculars as well as those produced in the Middle East and in Arabic, Khanmohamadi, Gaunt, and Hsy all primarily engage texts belonging to the former category. But their studies demonstrate the enduring usefulness of approaches traditionally associated with medieval studies and how they might be refitted for the investigation of a more culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse Middle Ages.

To be clear, despite the emphasis I have put upon close reading, the works under review hardly champion an anti-theoretical approach (whose opposition to considerations of form and language is outmoded; an “impoverished dichotomy,” Said [2004, 70] calls it in a partially related context). Gaunt’s major interlocutors are Derrida and Homi Bhabha, and Khanmohamadi turns helpfully to Bakhtin in her emphasis on dialogism and representations of engagements that recalibrate understandings of both self and other. But there is a satisfying reminder throughout these works of how difficult the act of simply reading medieval texts can be: how such work must engage with Latin as well as multiple vernaculars in flux, manuscript variations, the maritime mélange of foreign tongues that punctuate the most bureaucratic of documents, and even simply place names whose unstable orthographies require tracking down. It is a delight to experience recalcitrant medieval passages and have their knottier features untangled, and to leisurely pause over apparent nonstarters: single words or turns of phrase in which the discomfort and excitement of writers and narrators long ago on the move seem
briefly to break free from their amber. One understanding of philology foregrounds its tendency to fix a text or language in place, but the kind of attention paid to multilingualism in Gaunt’s study of Marco Polo’s *Le Devisement* and in Hsy’s *Trading Tongues*, especially, illuminates another, as it works to free words not only from singular meanings, but also from overly narrow understandings of culture and language, permitting speakers, readers, and vernaculars to move across borders constructed by disciplinary divisions that at times have threatened to obscure medieval realities (Warren 2010, 285–6).

These works join in a general renewal of attention to language and form in literary studies to demonstrate how such an emphasis might help medieval studies to avoid the kind of reifications — of “east” and “west,” say, or of political, linguistic, or professional boundaries — that the passage of time has helped to build; they also work to extricate a more particular medieval history of cultural encounter from paradigms that better reflect the circumstances of later centuries. Khanmohamadi, for instance, suggests how the investigation of an “ethnographic poetics,” a form of description that registers both multiple perspectives and self-reflexivity, can demonstrate how medieval texts fail to hew to anachronistically imposed patterns of the unquestioned self and examined other, a dynamic more closely aligned with a later “consolidation of European cultural identity . . . or self-confidence prefiguring that to come in the era of New World conquests” (5). (This is a point the historian Kim M. Phillips [2014] also has made, differently and elsewhere.) Gaunt resists traditions of privileging “content over form” (10) and investigates vocabularies that register hints of both foreignness and nimble adaptability, keeping in mind throughout that language “bears its own ideological and cultural freight” (28).

Gaunt’s monograph seems partially positioned in response to a review essay, “Can the Middle Ages be Postcolonial?” that he published four years earlier, in which he called for more attention to languages in contact (critiquing, in particular, the Anglophone bias of many postcolonial approaches to medieval literature) and suggested that too many studies were circumscribed “within the framework of a linguistic/literary tradition, some describing the representation of one culture by another, but rarely the phenomenon of contact per se” (Gaunt 2009, 165). The book itself begins to redress the retrospective divisions produced by latter day philological assumption by offering numerous close readings of “Franco-Italian,” “French,” “Tuscan,” and “Venetian” redactions of Marco Polo’s travels. The first, proposed as the earliest version behind the others, receives the most attention. Gaunt emphasizes the *Devisement’s* interest in and representation of diversity (or “diversités,” to emphasize its crucial plurality), a feature which subverts critical narratives about how medieval texts construct reductive binaries (88, 146). He builds his argument largely through attention to “formal properties (narrative voice, language)” (166) which, in the case of the Franco-Italian redaction especially, involves engaging a vernacular that is often “unstable” (91) and prone to exceptional “mobility” (92). Gaunt’s examination of such linguistic dynamism offers, in turn, another key intervention, as it challenges post-medieval assessments of linguistic correctness, conditioned more by philological codifications than the circumstances of a medieval world continually crisscrossed by various kinds of travelers. For Gaunt, French (and, importantly, various versions of French) functioned as the primary vernacular of the “translation zone” or “contact zone” (110). Its virtue inhered not
simply in an abstract sense of grammatical purity, but in its versatility, a versatility perhaps thematically linked to representations of that consistently nimble communicator, Marco Polo, himself.

Though punctuated by careful close readings of multiple redactions of the *Devisement* — individual chapters explore the representation of authorial collaboration; the *effet de réel* of a travelogue that narratively unfolds along the pathways of its purported geographical routes; and the subject of proliferating *diversités* — Gaunt’s study also offers a meditation on the condition of medieval multilingualism in general, the status of translation, and the relationship between a speaker or composer and the language(s) in which he or she thinks and creates. And although he spends a considerable amount of time pointing out the exhilarating mobility of medieval vernaculars, he also lingers over the inverse of the potentially dexterous communication associated with them: that which eludes complete understanding, the radically untranslatable, and words that never shake their sense of partial unknowability. Here, Gaunt turns to Derrida and, through Derrida, to Babel, the locus of much medieval thinking about language. Language, Derrida writes in *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre*, “exists asymmetrically, always for the other, from the other, kept by the other. Coming from the other, remaining with the other, and returning to the other” (Derrida 1998, 40). For Derrida, the essential foreignness of language is exacerbated and revealed by his condition of being cut off from other languages spoken in the country of his birth (Algeria) and by the denial of citizenship from the country most primarily associated with the language he speaks (France notoriously revoked the citizenship of French Jews living in Algeria during the Second World War). Such a condition, Gaunt admits, would seem to be far removed from that of the composers of the *Devisement*, capably embedded in their own multilingual environment. But two kinds of connection might nonetheless be forged. First, although the composers of a Franco-Italian redaction are not constrained by a frustrating or politically precarious monolingualism, their composition, the *Devisement*, might nevertheless be approached as a translation from inception, crafted in a French that is not their “mother tongue” and pervaded with Italianisms that mark, for us, the foreignness of the language to them. Its redaction into Franco-French then completes that work of translation (89). But this perhaps is already to invest French, or a more “correct” kind of French, with the function of a “regulatory monolingualism” (90–91), and thus to align with the sensibilities of certain French speakers — but also with post-medieval scholars, invested in the rise of French literature — rather than with those of Italians writing French in medieval Italy. And so secondly (or instead), one might say that, beneath both the brutal asymmetries of power effected by medieval and post-medieval historical specificities, and beneath the linguistic estrangements, adaptations, or collisions of a medieval world in motion, there exists a more basic condition of alienation from language, in which, as Gaunt puts it, via Derrida, “we are all to some extent speaking a language that does not belong to us” (89).

The other side of useful, agile, pleasurable multilingualism, then, is the loss of linguistic wholeness, which would obviate the need to translate or to understand doubly. God, writes Gaunt, “instantiates linguistic difference as both a punishment and an injunction to translate” at the fall of Babel, a dividing up that, as in a previous episode of transgression and retribution (the fall and the inception of non-Adamic language), offers both a pleasurable, creative resource and the mournful reminder of
prior unity. That unity then is retrospectively recognized and belatedly valued only from the position of fragmentation (106–7). This is the scattered world that gives rise to languages in flux, not prestige languages that must guard their purity — or whose perceived purity philologists in turn must assess and value — but languages continually extending toward the contact zone, toward one another (or, according to mythic logic, toward re-encounter), to be remade in service of further encounters and the texts that record them. Gaunt’s reading of “tramontane,” an “Italianism” retained in a “French” redaction of the Devisement, thus indicates the cosmopolitan medieval writer’s access to or inheritance of a range of languages in flux, even as it suggests the radical distancing or rerouting of all languages. Moreover, retained in a text composed before medieval vernaculars were “refracted through the prism of modern philological traditions” (79) attendant on the the rise of national languages and literatures, the word also offers a precise example of the kind of idiosyncratic vocabulary whose full suggestiveness falls outside the catchment zone of modern academic language departments.

It is worth noting that Gaunt — as well as Hsy, whose careful engagement with multilingualism in Trading Tongues also considers the interpretive blind spots wrought by the disciplinary divisions of modern philology and comparative literature — acknowledges and addresses linguistic and literary circumstances also under consideration in later historical periods. This is a moment, in the world and in academic departments, when language is being re-recognized as rarely neatly coterminous with national borders, and when questions of what “counts” as a language intersect with the value, methods, and possibility of translation (Damrosch 2013; Apter 2013). Medievalists interested in multilingualism have pointed out possible resonances between the multilingual Middle Ages and our own global age before (Trotter 2000; 4–5; Butterfield 2009; xxviii–xxx; Putter and Busby 2010; 6–7; and especially Davidson 2010; who connects current understandings of English as a global language to medievalist narratives about its formation). Such a diachronic approach indicates how ideas concerning translation theory, for instance, or affective linguistic belonging, might illuminate an approach to medieval texts. But it also recalls how questions of linguistic prestige and political power; translation and adaptability across borders; cosmopolitanism, circulation, and readership; or poetic innovation forged in moments of encounter have been effected and thought through before and differently.

Hsy’s Trading Tongues carefully demonstrates what is to be gained by engaging “translingual writing in the past,” unhindered by the constraints of “implicit national boundaries that haunt comparatist scholarship to this day” (89). His study works to refine understandings of the relationship between linguistic capacity and representational strategy. Both Hsy and Gaunt are interested in the dynamic linguistic environments that produce writers, readers, and texts: texts that move “easily between languages” in Gaunt’s reading (78), and, for Hsy, readers who could be counted on to “hold other languages ‘on call’” (6), writers and texts that might “activate” such linguistic capacity (50), and the poetic opportunities produced when those languages blend or collide. Hsy’s book explores the various stylizations of linguistic contact — its jarring disjunctions and orderly patterns, its suggestions of serendipities, mundane authority, and grace — across a number of works by authors (Chaucer, Gower, Margery Kempe) closely associated with English literary tradition, illuminating both their multilingual capacity and their interest in multilingualism as an aesthetic and
narrative strategy. Hsy’s readings of Chaucer, for instance, crucially situate him in a “porous linguistic habitat on London’s waterfront” (53), writing “highly stylized portrayals of an urban existence that requires living among and across tongues” (29) and producing poetry that troubles the line between what counts as “foreign and native” (5), drawing here on important work by Ardis Butterfield. Hsy portrays London as teeming with a multitude of languages and populated with speakers who communicate in a kind of ad hoc multilingualism: a “littoral language” that might make use of French, English, Latin, Dutch, and Italian (77). He embeds the poets he considers within such an environment, demonstrating how sonic circumstances, linguistic ability, and an abiding fascination with the history of languages and multilingualism per se might be seen to pervade familiar poetry in surprising ways (38–39).

In his reading of Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale, for example, Hsy points out that the well-traveled heroine, Custance, exhibits a knack for flexible communication that would make her at home among the multilingualism of London’s merchant milieu, pointing out that the “latyn corrupt” she speaks on the shores of Northumbria not only evokes the “favella latina” used by Boccacio’s Gostanza in her Mediterranean contact zone (77), but also a phrase ascribed to merchants in contemporary French documents in England (71). Gower, too, fellow Londoner and adaptor of the Custance/Constance story, is shown to demonstrate a sensitivity to vocabularies associated with mercantile (and legal) spheres, and to evince, like Chaucer, an interest in linguistic diversity and history. Comparing Gower’s tale of Constance in the Confessio Amantis with Nicholas Trevet’s version in Les Chroniques (also Chaucer’s source), Hsy foregrounds the episode in which the heroine and her companion, Hermengild, encounter a blind man in Northumbria. Trevet’s narrator describes, in French, how Hermengild speaks English: “lui dit en sa langage Sessoine: Bisne man [in] Jhesu name in [rode] yslawe, have thi siht” (quoted in Trading Tongues, 77). When Gower reworks this French episode of Trevet’s character speaking “en . . . Sessoine,” or in Saxon, his Middle English retains the consciously archaic Old English word “bysne” (“Thou bysne man, behold and se”), even though the Middle English “blind” is readily available. Trevet’s French/English code-switching thus becomes a “cross-temporal code-switching” in Gower’s poem (78), indicating, in a Middle English translation of a French text quoting English, the memory of Anglo-Saxon.

I pause on this reading of the multilingual and linguistically multi-temporal suggestiveness mined in these versions of the Constance story because Trading Tongues, a work very much concerned with travel, the volatility of language, and the capacity for travelers to adapt linguistically on the move or as languages shift around them, is punctuated throughout by similarly careful, deliberate considerations of both macaronic and apparently monolingual texts. Readings patiently tease out the interpretive payoffs of recognizing subtle code-switching, troubling the very idea of monolingualism. Hsy intriguingly lingers over individual words whose usage suggests a peripatetic world, in which texts are studded with evidence of having been forged in the contact zone. He employs these unhurried readings to foreground the restless mobility of language, “attending to not only the ‘roots’ but also to the ‘routes’ of medieval culture” (89), and bringing into focus a dynamic world whose littoral languages — characterized by fluidity and dynamism, a result of being continually in contact with one another — develop continually in ports and along shores. It is a dynamic in which both
comparatively ordinary, functionally multilingual readers and extraordinary communicators participate.

At the intersection of such ordinary and extraordinary multilingualism, somewhere in between a talent for communication and the divine gift of languages, Hsy situates The Book of Margery Kempe. He approaches Margery’s purported monolingualism, even, perhaps, her illiteracy, as a narrative device, a condition that vaults her communicative acts, when they eventually take place, into the realm of the miraculous, so that they might confirm her authority for the audiences both internal and external to her text (136). A number of episodes, plotted along the pilgrim’s “restless maritime orbit,” present Margery encountering and deftly adjusting to apparently foreign languages. She manages, for example, to converse with a German-speaking priest and, later, with “Dame Margarete,” an Italian woman in Rome, in scenes that suggest gifts associated with divine grace, a penchant for language-learning, and a confident willingness to improvise (137). Margarete and Margery, suggests Hsy, eventually communicate in a “lingua franca on the road” (138), a “comown” tongue that belongs to neither speaker, and that is “both familiar and strange” (140). These moments of haphazard but productive communication are brief, but they are frequent enough, Hsy argues, to indicate an environment of makeshift, effective communication always taking place on the road, and almost always “just beyond the text’s reach” (138). Through readings of Margery Kempe — as well as Charles d’Orléans, composing poetry in both French and English that encodes his cross-channel travels, real and imagined (80); trilingual lyrics evoking “perpetual motion”; and other fictions of “writing in transit” (61–62) — Hsy suggests how texts both intimate mobility and record the changes wrought upon the traveler, especially the ability to perceive anew geography previously claimed as “home,” and to retune the ear and voice in relation to that which counts as one’s own vernacular (156).

This is the kind of disorientation, or self-reflective reorientation, that Khanmohamadi draws attention to in In Light of Another’s Word. Throughout her study, Khanmohamadi pays keen attention to language in the contact zone — its basic unit is tagged in her title — but her readings put “bilingual” in scare quotes, and the collision or collaboration of “different languages” means something other than it would in the studies by Gaunt or Hsy (40). The apparent monolingualism of the works Khanmohamadi examines gives way not to different vocabularies (or, at least, not usually), but both complementary and competing perspectives. For instance, the “two contradictory languages” to which she refers in relation to Gerald of Wales’s Descriptio Kambriae are Anglo-Norman and Welsh, though both are rendered in Latin. Anglo-Norman, in this sense, is less a grammar and vocabulary than a position from which Gerald articulates “colonial idiom” (40). The genre in which Gerald writes, however, termed “autoethnography” (another borrowing from Pratt), complicates his proximity to an imperial position. Gerald proposes to offer two points of view — one in service of Henry II’s stance toward Wales, and one in praise of the Welsh: “colonial derision” and “colonial desire” — partly because he identifies, through his particular inheritance and the ambivalence of his colonizing position, with both sides (49). By “intertwining ethnographic perspective with ethnicity and subjectivity,” Gerald not only disavows claims to objectivity, but suggests its limited utility as an ethnographic tool. His revelation of bias
and partiality frames his ethnographic work as “contingent on the accidents of personal history and desire,” and his different languages, “discourses,” or “idioms” index a variety of subject positions and perspectives (55).

The introduction to In Light of Another’s World offers an overview of the discourses of civility and Christianity—compiled from classical and later Christian sources—which together constituted medieval anthropological thinking, or the attempt “to account for cultural diversity or the unity of the ‘human’” (11). These discourses animated the medieval intellectual environment in which the texts Khanmohamadi examines were produced, but ethnographers also departed from them to chart new geographies, genres, and modes of possible thought. The medieval ethnographic embrace of the provisional and incomplete breaks new ground to form what she calls (specifically in the case of Gerald, but also more generally) “improvised, textual response[s]” to the encountered world (45). Such writing is reliant upon observation and experience, but marked also by an understanding of the necessary contingency of these and their dependence on limited perspectives (45). Khanmohamadi’s writers and travelers continually enter “unscripted terrain” (5), the exhilarating—but also unsettling—world of the uncertain and haphazard, situations not entirely dissimilar to the fluctuating linguistic milieux examined by Hsy and Gaunt. New modes of engagement and representational strategies emerge together, recalibrating what is possible both in the moment of encounter and in retrospective consideration of it, when its potential meanings are sorted through in the act of writing.

Rather than tracking the specifics of shifting vernaculars or their stylization as poetic strategy, then, Khanmohamadi examines narrative strategies that unsettle notions of the self by complicating and rearranging the relationship of writers to language and to their own cultural practices and place in the world. In a chapter on William of Rubruck’s Itinerarium, she blends discussions of visual and narrative form to reveal how William as narrator continually projects himself—his uneasiness, his confusion, his curiosity—into the scenes he records. William is not an observer who imagines his gaze as “unreturnable” or beyond the scope of observation, and his self-recorded emotions insistently anchor him deictically in the scenes in which he learns about Mongol customs, revealing his own vulnerability to inquiry, interpretation, and revision (72, 75). In another chapter, Joinville’s Vie de Saint Louis records Franco–Islamic conversations in which speakers briefly seem to adopt the viewpoints or frameworks of the other side in order to negotiate and argue. In the improvised dynamism of such exchanges, they end up defamiliarizing their own positions or validating that of the other, forging “new and unscripted modes of ethnographic thinking and writing” (104). The dialogic nature of these texts requires “great self-extension toward the other,” which both involves a willingness to adopt different perspectives and results in the production of what sometimes takes form as uncomfortable self-knowledge, as the possibilities associated with multifocality wear away at any singular, unchallenged sense of self. “Writing ethnography in light of another’s word,” suggests Khanmohamadi, demonstrates the “difficulty in confronting unfamiliar worldviews that dialogize, relativize, and interrogate Latin Christian ones” (114). In her study, the formal strategies of such texts—the careful but also disorienting use of multiple perspectives, and the visual play of layered, telescoping framing that disrupts linear narrative (76)—reflect the complexity of those experiences.
At the very beginning of In Light of Another’s Word, Khanmohamadi makes an important clarification: “I do not wish to suggest that these medieval writers embraced alterity as early exponents of modern cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism, or that these positions came naturally or easily to them” (2). These writers were not “ahead of their time,” the backhanded compliment sometimes applied to medieval thinkers whose actual writing seems not to fit our image of their era, but part and parcel of it, thus inviting the revision of our understanding of that time. But Khanmohamadi also is careful not to overstate her case, not, that is, to describe an earthly paradise of peaceful coexistence and understanding. She ends, after all, with Mandeville’s Travels, a text that, while acknowledging certain cultural blind spots (recall the evocation of unknown geographies, anchored by different stars), always reverts, apparently without irony, to xenophobic paranoia in its consideration of Jewishness. Still, Khanmohamadi’s readings present both the discomforts and possibilities wrapped up in the labor of learning and the self-reflection that results from encounters with those (some of those) different from oneself.

It is this emphasis on process — on improvisation, on entering “unscripted terrain,” making use of multiple languages that are themselves far from static, engaging in a variety of ad hoc communications, hazarding encounters with a spirit of “openness” — that draws together these reexaminations of medieval travel, ethnography, language, and poetry. The studies present thinkers writing in a world with a greater number of possibilities than we often ascribe it: travelers entering into situations whose endings are not foretold, but that unfold incrementally and without guarantees, and whose narration sometimes requires new thinking, experimental strategies, and fluctuating languages, forged on the move and in the restless medieval present. Throughout these works, it is a sense of luxurious lingering — careful, patient engagement with language and form — that offers the almost paradoxical effect of illuminating a peripatetic world, its languages and borders in flux, its writers and readers in transit. The studies deploy methods that do not necessarily cover more textual ground in order to evoke a more expansive medieval world, but they do conjure the traffic of those places in which distant parts of the world intersect. Experiments with language and narrative strategy are revealed as crucial in catalyzing and recording such encounters, and such considerations help us to imagine the nature of such experiments in all of their uncertainty, uneasiness, and pleasure.

Notes


2. In an essay on the Travels of Ibn Battuta, Christine Chism makes a similar point, tracking the Muslim traveler’s shifting relation to religious others; Battuta, writes Chism, “learns how to resist withdrawing from the discomforts and aversions of transcultural encounters with alien Muslims and non-Muslims, and instead learns how to improvise grounds of connection” (Chism 2013, 60).

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References


