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“The Sense of Distance and the Perception of the Other”

I

When asked about his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the late fifteenth century, Count Eberhard of Württemberg replied that there were three things in life that could neither be recommended nor discouraged: marriage, war, and a voyage to the Holy Land—“They may begin very well and end very badly.”¹ Why? Because marriage and war—like faraway places—were *terrae incognitae*, unknown worlds with undreamed of rewards and unimaginable risks. They were one-way trips, experiences that changed people, irrevocably: those that lived to tell the tale were never the same as once they were. It is not surprising then—since it was a personal experience—that we find great variety in medieval attitudes toward travel, that reveries about the pleasures of the road appear side-by-side with grumblings about bad ships, bad food and bad weather, that some went with open eyes and others with closed minds, that feelings toward foreigners ranged from the benign to the benighted, or that, like travel itself, attempts to summarize medieval opinion can neither be recommended nor discouraged. They too may begin very well and end very badly.

II

We assemble our views of places and cultures that are “not ours” from school, from friends and family, from books, films and photographs, from television programs, from magazines and maps, from web sites—in short, from an enormous variety of “texts.” We try to inform ourselves, to entertain ourselves, to answer questions we might have: but in the final analysis our perceptions of the “not us” are *located in the imagination*.

Sometimes we develop these ideas while traveling, but not usually. And even when we do travel, it changes our pre-conceived notions far less than might otherwise be expected.² There is but a tenuous connection between the things we believe about foreigners and the realities of foreign lives and cultures. Our perceptions of the “other” are discursive practices, stories we tell ourselves based upon the ways in which we interpret the wild variety of wildly imperfect texts that just happen to come our way.

“We, here, are the Self; they, there, are the Other.” Almost a truism. Except it might be argued that the western “self” is more obsessed with questions of identity than other peoples. Perhaps this is because of the failure to establish empire in the Middle Ages, and the fiercely competitive nature of the western expansion that followed. Add to this the West’s penchant for binary logic, and its love of universals (language, political systems, religion, science), and we begin to see that it was especially in the West, as a result of its

fragmented history of pilgrimage, crusading, missionary activity, trade, exploration, and conquest that a sense of *geographical* otherness formed.³

Although early versions of geographic identity formation can be found in ancient Greece in the opposition of Greek-speaker to barbarian, contemporary western perceptions were cast from the crucible of Enlightenment and imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There is no clear chain of transmission from the ancient world, nor even from the medieval period as Said and others have asserted.⁴ Much that has been put forth on this subject is over-determined. We can track some elements of modern perceptions in the Middle Ages, but they did not manifest themselves in a decidedly essentialist, Eurocentric way.⁵

Marianne O'Doherty writes of the plural (East) "Indies" in order to emphasize the "multiplicity of meanings" that medieval readers and writers from different cultural and social groups brought to their variable perceptions of the "not us." "The Indies," she finds, "are a plural entity throughout the later medieval period because travelers, geographers, cartographers, and audiences engage in an endless process of reinventing them in accordance with their own or their culture's changing knowledge, needs, fears, and desires."⁶ Kim Phillips makes much the same point in her convincing argument that western writers on Mongolia, China, India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries were neither imperialist nor orientalist: "Their observations offered a far more diverse range of perspectives than can be covered by

concepts of a European Self standing in contrast to an oriental Other, or of a superior European civilization justified in criticism or domination of less advanced cultures.”⁷

Diverse perceptions were in evidence from early on. When Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, visited Spain in the mid-twelfth century, his thoughts on the conversion of Muslims ran hot and cold. Peter commissioned the first Latin translation of the Qur’an so that missionaries and theologians could use it to further a persuasive and peaceful challenge to Islam. Yet his avowed pacifism did not stop him from supporting new calls for crusade and the conversion of Muslims by force.⁸ Ramon Lull, a Majorcan missionary who hoped to convert Muslims by preaching in Arabic, also came to believe, towards the end of his life (d. 1316), that force was necessary.⁹

Those who favored force from the outset could likewise change their thinking in the heat of the moment. When the chronicler of the seventh crusade, Joinville, found himself in the midst of a losing fight in the Egyptian delta, he decided to hand over his sword rather than defend the principles he had sworn to uphold. To his astonishment, one of his servants objected, not on principle, but for pragmatic reasons. He recommended that rather than surrender they *allow* themselves to be slain so that they would all go straight to paradise. The final irony is that they would have been killed had not God, as Joinville put it, “sent him a Saracen,” who helped him to lie about his identity and effect a safe capture.¹⁰

These men changed their minds as a result of their personal encounters with foreigners, but the stereotypes they first brought with them were nurtured in an intellectual climate where ideas about the other were formed without benefit of personal experience or reliable information. By the time Columbus set sail in search of *his* Indies, much more was known. More texts (albeit of varying quality and intent) had become available, and the reasons people travelled, wrote, and read had begun to evolve from the primarily religious-oriented, pilgrimage, crusader, or missionary type to works that addressed broader interests. Which is not to say that westerners had entered an age when empirical evidence was valued above all else. It was still the Middle Ages. Columbus had read Mandeville, and carried a copy of *Le divisement du monde* with him to the New World, and he often valued these over his own experience, “as when he insisted that he was on the edges of Cathay or that the Amazons of classical legend lived just over the horizon.”¹¹ As Umberto Eco explained, “Medieval culture was based, not on a phenomenology of reality, but on a phenomenology of cultural tradition.”¹²

These examples highlight the complexities involved in trying to unravel medieval attitudes. Alterity was a function not only of class, context, ethnicity, gender, and religion, but of genre as well. Theological tracts, Christian polemics, crusader chronicles, songs, poems, plays, travel narratives: each projected, directly or indirectly, varying images of the “other” to a by and large stay-at-home audience who encountered them in their own minds in their own ways.

Joinville described the man who saved his life as “a Saracen from the Emperor of Germany’s lands,” which means he was a renegade, a convert to Islam who served in the sultan’s army. Despite the anti-Muslim rhetoric of most medieval literature – the faithful Christian knight vanquishing the idolatrous Moor,—there were those of an ambiguous status who lived on the borders of two cultures and/or passed back and forth between them.¹³ Soldiers, pirates, merchants, pilgrims, slaves, beggars, immigrants, diplomats and others all had sliding sets of values that manifested themselves in different ways according to time, place and circumstance. The seemingly solid Christian identity of medieval Europe was more porous than we might imagine. What people said and wrote about Muslims and other non-Christians was one thing; their daily thoughts and actions were something else. We should not over-generalize medieval perceptions because this too can be a form of totalizing alterity, one the present practices upon the past. The idea that Muslims could be persuaded to convert, or that they could be converted at the point of the sword, was a discursive tradition that masked the reality of thousands of Christians going over to Islam with very few Muslims interested in redressing the balance.

Representing the differences between “us” and “them” is part of the work of identity formation, and as medieval Europeans developed a sense of “self,” their ideas about non-Europeans took shape and filled out—a process that was in no way unique to their civilization. Every culture defines itself at least in part by what it is not. This becomes problematic, however, when we try to analyze the impact of travel and travel writing on

cultural identity because the images returned home often amount to the re-introduction of stereotypes that were taken abroad in the first place.

A medieval traveler to India or China, one who had read Mandeville or heard about Marco Polo, would have taken on his voyage some idea of what the natives looked like, what they wore, how they cut their hair, their treatment of women, their methods of warfare, the style of their temples, their systems of belief, and so on.¹⁴ Once there, his preconceptions might be challenged. Or they might be reinforced. Either way the experience increased his awareness of who he was and who he was not. Back home the tales he told would form people's impressions in much the same way. Regardless of whether the traveler emphasized similarity or difference, European identity was shaped in response not to other cultures but to *ways of seeing* other cultures that were never fixed.

David Abulafia explores an interesting example of this in his comparison of the different ways that Boccaccio and Petrarch imagined the indigenous peoples of the Canary Islands in the fourteenth century.¹⁵ Basing their views on the same set of letters, stories, and other reports, Petrarch sees them as bestial while Boccaccio describes them as idyllic. Reading his sources through the lens of Virgil and other Roman writers, and steeped in his own "patriotic" prejudices, Boccaccio described the native peoples as having a leader, "like a prince," as speaking a mellifluous language, "like the Italians," and as being sweet-tempered, and good singers and dancers, which made them decidedly superior to the Spanish. He even puts a fig leaf on their idol, prompting Abulafia to observe that

Boccaccio's "imagination had generated nothing less than a classical statue of a young man."¹⁶

An early crusader fiction, the *Song of Roland*, oscillates in similar fashion. Taking as its starting point the real story of the ambush of Charlemagne's rearguard in the Pyrenees, the poem takes revenge on the Muslims (even though they weren't the culprits) both by reversing the facts, by winning the war, and by characterizing the enemy as evil idolaters, black, faithless, dishonest, cruel and greedy. And yet, because the victory would have been hollow without worthy opponents, and because the story itself is wrapped up in questions of "us" and "them," the Saracens are also shown to be gallant and chivalrous warriors. In the same text the non-Europeans are portrayed *both* as crude reversals *and* as mirror images of the author's notion of a good Christian knight.¹⁷ Another example is the twelfth-century Kievan Chronicle, where Hungarians are described as brutal, drunken, womanizers when they are the enemy, but as good guys when they were allies.¹⁸

A crusader poem was a particular form of "travel writing," but even in reports of less confrontational encounters—pilgrimages, trading ventures, diplomatic missions and the like—writers and readers were rarely able to disentangle the "other" from the "self" because cultural identity works at cross-purposes when negotiating similarities and differences that persist alongside one another.¹⁹ And because identities are only ever fixed in representations, this means that in real life they are always fluid. To put it another way, identity is never complete: it is always in process, always constituted

through representation, always undergoing a transformation. And so we have what appears to be an insoluble dilemma: the moment a text is produced the “self” is set in an artificial and rigid way and the “other” is objectified through differences or similarities or both. *Either* the “other” is condemned for being different *or* he/she is denied the right to be different.²⁰

What seem to us to be inconsistencies in medieval perceptions of the “other” are less puzzling if we are careful to remember 1) that in practice medieval writers recognized the inherent tensions of competing truth claims in what they considered an internally consistent debate; and 2) that what they considered internally consistent is different than how we think about this concept in our post-Enlightenment world. People were operating within a framework of shared assumptions about authority, empiricism, logic, and the demands of faith even if they never resolved upon any particular pattern of interpretation of the “other” that we can recognize as such. This is why it is frustrating for us when we try to peer into a world that embraced a “social imaginary” that was related to but significantly different from our own.²¹ It is reminiscent of the old L. P. Hartley adage: “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”²² Even the demands of logic were different.²³

Paul Freedman found the same “inconsistencies” in texts about the peasantry. Imagery often varied *within* genres, but *across* genres a set of perceptual frameworks can be detected. “Rather than aiming for a synthesis that obscures the polyphony of the

discourse,” he writes, “we should regard these medieval voices as intelligible but not united.”²⁴ He added: “Even within the same author or work, a range of opinions can be seen to fit together, not harmoniously or even dialectically but crudely, inadvertently, allowing spaces for dissent, appropriation, contestation.”²⁵

Some thought Muslims and Jews should be tolerated, others did not; some believed in the monstrous races, others did not; sometimes difference was emphasized, at others it was ignored. An insistence upon an absolute separation between Christian and non-Christian went hand-in-hand with a nagging suspicion that “they” were a lot like “us.”²⁶ Over time, as Europeans traveled more, wrote more, read more, and learned more, this range of opinion continued to expand, but during the Middle Ages the “inconsistent” framework of faith and reason remained intact. It was only after our period, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that new types of spiritual and political ruptures made it impossible to continue to ignore the discrepancies between what was said about the outer world and the reports brought back by those who had actually been there.

III

Two roads diverge in the medieval wood. Walking one way takes you through the thicket of literary theory; the other leads to the marshes of historical methodology. On our

present journey this means that we have a choice between 1) working within the textual tradition and 2) trying to understand how those texts were read and interpreted.

Fortunately for us we really can travel both roads, taking the other as just and fair, and saving the first for another day.

The greatest challenge in trying to understand how texts were read and interpreted is quite simply that most people could not read. Now and again there is indirect evidence, for example in the exchange between Joinville and his servant, but few writers were inclined to comment upon the opinions of the lower orders, except to condemn them for their stupidity. Guibert of Nogent laughed at the ignorance of his fellow Christians as they prepared for the first crusade: “Poor people shod the hooves of their oxen with irons like horses, harnessed them to two-wheeled carts, loaded their few provisions and small children on top and so led them forth; and as soon as the little children saw a castle or a town, they asked eagerly whether that was Jerusalem, to which they were going.”²⁷ Many had no idea where they were going or how they would get there. Some believed that when they reached the sea the waters would part as they had for Moses. Others thought that when they arrived in the holy city the infidels would simply lay down their arms and open the gates.

The chasm between the classes was so vast that the abuse normally reserved for non-Christians was often directed towards the poor in ways that transformed them into an internal European “other.” Like Muslims and Jews, the peasants were said to be

descendants of Ham, a cursed race condemned to servitude. They were characterized as black, vile and vicious, crucifiers of Christ who were excluded from heaven because they hated priests, and from hell because they smelled of shit. In the *Romance of Claris and Laris*, they were described as “very much like devils, ferocious and frightening.” In *Yvain* they “resembled Moors, huge and hideous.” A Swabian poet likened them to the great enemies of Christendom, the Turks.²⁸ Knowing that authors used the same negative images both for internal and external “others” helps us interpret elite perceptions, but it has the effect of obscuring popular attitudes toward non-Europeans to the extent that the sources knot together and dismiss the very two groups we are trying to disentangle.

Another way to get at this problem is to consider the types of information that the non-literate masses had at their disposal. Pilgrims returning to their villages brought back curios and souvenirs: a scallop shell from the shrine of St. James; a medallion from Rome; a palm frond from Jerusalem; a fragment of stone chipped from the Holy Sepulcher. The Earl of Worcester, John Tiptoft, who went to Palestine in the mid-fifteenth century, recalled that many of the pilgrims brought bells to be blessed with water from the River Jordan. Some smuggled away vials of the river water, even though this was forbidden by the sailors who thought that the vials caused storms when carried across the sea.²⁹

A strip of cloth wiped across a saint’s tomb was called a *brandea*. It was blessed, and held its own magic. Even if you could not go, you could send a *brandea* with a friend

making a pilgrimage. These would later take pride of place back in the convent or in the family home. Such objects had power because of their associations, because of the places they had been, and because of the place they held in the imagination. Felix Fabri related that on his first pilgrimage *all* of his companions were carrying objects for others. He himself was carrying quite a number of jewels for friends and patrons.³⁰

Each of these items later became family relics, “tertiary relics,” and all had stories to go with them, stories that were shared with grandchildren and neighbors, that worked their way into village lore. Marco Polo had his own collection of exotic possessions: bedding of Tartar workmanship, brocades from Tanduc, a Buddhist rosary, the silver girdle of a Tartar knight, a head dress adorned with gold and pearls, a Mongol slave.³¹ The trinket triggered the memory, but it was the tale—the oral history of material objects—that created lifelong impressions.

Art could serve the same purpose. At Vézelay craftsmen carved pygmies and giant-eared men onto the tympanum of the cathedral, suggesting that the monstrous races had a place in God’s plan, and that the gospel should be brought to them. Similarly there were renditions of dog-headed people, called *cynocephali*, on church walls in Cornwall, and on cross slabs on the Isle of Man. Other monsters dwelt in various Cluniac churches, such as the Abbey of Souvigny and the Cathedral of Sens.³² When visitors wondered at these representations, the local clergy explained their significance just as pilgrims spun out stories of their souvenirs to family and friends.

Impressions of foreigners and foreign lands were likewise assembled from songs, stories, sermons, gossip and rumor: an old seaman's recollection of an Arab pirate raid, the priest's thinking on infidels and Jews, the collective village wisdom on Amazons, biblical traditions about the terrestrial paradise, the legends of Alexander the Great. Here again Felix Fabri is instructive. After returning to Ulm in January 1484, different groups wanted to hear from him. He also preached in the public marketplace of Ulm on feast days.

As Kathryne Beebe has shown, Fabri wrote different accounts of his pilgrimages for different audiences. His *Die Sionpilger* was an idealized, fantasy-pilgrimage to the Holy Land for armchair travelers, written especially for the groups of nuns under his care who took "non-corporeal pilgrimages." In the dedicatory letter to his *Pilgerbuch*, written in the vernacular, a Swabian dialect of Middle High German, a very different sort of work, he shows that he was well aware of his audience. "When explaining his practice of including amusing anecdotes within the serious material," Beebe writes, "Fabri remarks that he does so because he knows that the *Pilgerbuch* will be read aloud in front of the lords' households, and that that audience would include not only the lords' immediate families, but their servants and kitchen boys and girls as well."³³

Even at second-hand, it was important to get the story straight, to retell it exactly as you had first heard it. Chaucer makes an interesting remark to this effect in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*:

For certainly, as you all know so well,
He who repeats a tale after a man
Is bound to say, as nearly as he can,
Each single word, if he remembers it,
However rudely spoken or unfit,
Or else the tale he tells will be untrue,
The things pretended and the phrases new.³⁴

Not that stories and traveler's tales were accepted uncritically. There was an empiricism of the fields and inns that had its own logic, that shared many of the assumptions of the elites, and that was internally coherent in its own way. Some tales—like certain tenets of Christian doctrine—would have been rejected out-of-hand as affronts to common sense, but there was no particular reason, on the surface of it, why the existence of Mansa Musa should be accepted and that of Prester John dismissed.³⁵ Or why Iceland should be a real place and St. Brendan's isles should not.

Every village had an expert on the outside world. This could lead to an ambiguous social status, where the "expert" became, in the minds of his neighbors, contaminated by his

foreign contacts. Shepherds and weavers, who seemed constitutionally incapable of staying put, were accused of impiety and skepticism; soldiers and sailors, of telling tall tales. Millers lived and worked at informational crossroads, which put them in the position of having to account for a greater diversity of ideas than most of their fellow villagers. One such was Menocchio, who ground grain in the Venetian hinterland until he was remanded to the custody of the inquisition in the late sixteenth century.³⁶

Menocchio's case differed from that of the average medieval peasant both because he could read and because he lived in the post-Reformation era of printed books, but there were others like him in previous generations. The records of their trials reveal a sizable substratum of rural free thinking.³⁷

Menocchio developed his notions about the world through a combination of peasant empiricism and a sampling of "facts" from a haphazard series of books. The entire incident, and Carlo Ginzburg's analysis of it, is fascinating for a number of reasons, but especially in consideration of peasant perceptions of the "other," because Menocchio came to the conclusion that *everyone* could be saved through their own religion. The reason he was a Christian, he explained to the inquisitors, was that he was born in Christian lands to Christian parents. He could just as easily have been born a Turk and could understand why a Turk would want to remain one. Where did he get this unusual idea? By contemplating passages in the *Decameron* and in *Mandeville's Travels*. He had become troubled, he said, while reading about diverse customs in far off places. Without

leaving home his mental world had expanded and he could not ignore it. Real travelers were not always so open-minded.

The sense of cultural relativism that Menocchio picked up from his readings, combined with his belief in the biblical injunction to “love God and your neighbor,” his personal victimization at the hands of the local aristocracy, and his position as a “hinge figure” between the privileged and the non-privileged, forced him to the conclusion that things weren’t right with the world and that there was room enough in God’s house for everyone. When he read in Mandeville that pygmies had great scorn for big men and found them “as much an oddity as we find giants,” or elsewhere that “even if there are many different religions and different beliefs in the world . . . God will always love those who love Him in truth and serve Him meekly and truly,” he couldn’t help but question the rigid views of the priests, whom he considered ignorant beyond belief.³⁸

Similar attitudes can be found in the mountain villages of Languedoc in the fourteenth century. Testifying before the inquisition, Pierre Lafont of Vaychis said, “It is a sin to harm heretics, Jews and Muslims who are honest laborers just trying to earn a living.” Arnaud Sicre of Ax said he knew a pretty good Muslim fortuneteller in a village on the other side of the mountain. Some of those villages were predominantly Muslim. Arnaud had lived there for a while with a Muslim ferryman, and he was familiar enough with Islamic culture to know of the *īd al-Adhā*, which he called the “feast of the sheep” (L. *festum mutonum*).³⁹ Not everyone was as tolerant and informed as Pierre and Arnaud

were, but it is safe to say that many people in this region at this time hated the priests, monks and bishops who taxed and oppressed them far more than did the Muslims who lived in the area.

As for the elites, which is what historians usually mean when they write about “the medieval mind” or “western views,” their receptivity to new knowledge, and their ability to incorporate it into their ways of thinking, likewise depended upon the social and historical contexts in which they were working, and upon the *individual* manner in which they struck a balance between ancient philosophy, the Bible, and the available empirical evidence.

In her careful and insightful study of the reception of Mandeville in the late fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries, Rosemary Tzanaki finds that audiences were less interested in its religious syncretism and more drawn to it as a mine of information. With each fresh edition the *Book* was reframed and reworked in ways that reflected the purposes of the redactors and translators, and the demands of the audiences they had in mind. It might be read as a pilgrimage guide, but it might also serve as a geographical study, a collection of marvels, a historical source, or a moral treatise.⁴⁰

As Iain Macleod Higgins puts it, “Medieval writing doesn’t produce variance; it is variance.” From our vantage point medieval culture appears “homogenous” and “parochial,” but the dialogue between the various versions of the *Book* reveals “the extent

to which that culture was actively engaged in an *at once popular and learned conversation* about the nature and limits of the greatly expanded world in which it found itself after the middle of the thirteenth century (italics mine).” In its various versions, in its marvelling at the wonders of the East, those fabulous *choses estranges*, especially in its questioning of the meaning of the western encounter with these new worlds, the *Book*,” Higgins quips, “out-Poloed Polo.”⁴¹ Similar variance can be found across the versions of Odoric of Pordenone’s *Itinerarium* (c. 1330), which was the major source of information for the Mandeville-author for lands beyond the Middle East.⁴²

Before the Gregorian reform movement and the beginning of the Crusades, scholars had considerably less evidence about the world than they would in the high Middle Ages, and the partnership of pagan science and revealed religion, as exemplified in the geographical work of Isidore of Seville and the Venerable Bede, was considerably less complicated and problematic than it would later become. As medieval religiosity came into full bloom in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, biblical authority remained predominant despite the growing body of troubling counter-examples being amassed by returning travelers, and for the time being the crisis of faith and reason was averted.

Exceptional thinkers like Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon theorized about geography in a critical fashion, and assimilated some of the incoming information without overturning the theological positions they were committed to uphold. The tenor of medieval culture was such that it managed to contain whatever dissenting tremors rattled

through the “system.” But in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, an era when the moral and intellectual power of the Church had become diminished, new discoveries continued to pile up, and with the translation of Ptolemy’s *Geography* into Latin (c. 1406-07), cracks began to show in the framework of shared assumptions that would finally break apart in the sixteenth century—in the age of Montaigne—and of Menocchio.

Revisiting some of the important geographical issues of the day gives an idea of the factors involved. Contrary to a modern myth, it was understood in the Middle Ages that the earth is a sphere, and although there is some disagreement among historians as to how widely this was accepted before the thirteenth century, the notion that medieval people thought it was flat is a nineteenth-century invention.⁴³ What was less well understood was the size of the earth and the proportion of land to water. Bacon’s solution shows how he and others negotiated various types of evidence and authority. Taking stock of the discrepancies in the available Greco-Latin corpus, he noted that whereas Ptolemy claimed that only one-sixth of the earth was habitable because the rest is covered in water, Aristotle maintained that it was more than a fourth. Adding to this the empirical observation that India was larger than previously thought, and the sea west of Spain much smaller, he “proved” that water cannot cover five-sixths or even three-quarters of the globe by invoking the apocryphal Books of Esdras.⁴⁴ Here Bacon balanced the ancients, the evidence, and the Bible in a manner appropriate to an age pleased by the juxtaposition of light and stone.

Another area of philosophical dispute concerned the *terrae incognitae*, the unknown regions of the globe. Scholars, princes and sea captains had an abiding interest in knowing whether the lands south of the equator were habitable, the extent of the African continent, and the navigability of the southern seas. And given that the world was round, there was a great deal of curiosity about the Antipodes, the opposite side of the earth, where Virgil took Dante to see the stars and the terrestrial paradise. As with other points of geography, authors were not always clear as to where the Antipodes were supposed to have been. Sometimes they were conceived, literally, as the place opposite us, wherever that happened to be. Dante's Antipodes, for example, were opposite Jerusalem. Perhaps we can take one of the more technical passages in *Mandeville's Travels* as representative of the thinking of many educated Europeans:

So I say truly that a man could go all round the world, above and below, and return to his own country, provided he had his health, good company, and a ship, as I said above. And all along the way he would find men, lands, islands, cities and towns, such as there are in those countries. For you know well that those men who live right under the Antarctic Pole are foot against foot to those who live right below the Arctic Pole, just as we and those who live at our Antipodes are foot against foot. It is like that in all parts. Each part of the earth and sea has its opposite, which always balances it.⁴⁵

The reasoning here is scientific. It is followed by an anecdote about a man who traveled round the world back to the borders of his own district and the observation that only “men of limited understanding do not believe that men can travel on the underside of the globe without falling off into the firmament.” Presumably the author meant the uneducated masses, but perhaps he was also referring to conservative clerics. In either case the remark reveals a division of opinion between those who were willing to accept a certain type of reasoning and a certain type of evidence and those who were not—a cleavage that ran through medieval thinking about people as well as space.

Experienced travelers—clerics, noblemen, diplomats, sailors, merchants; those who had access to, and in some cases produced, the texts we use as sources—retained a more expansive sense of space than those whose knowledge about the outer world was picked up in mills or taverns, at the parish church, at the convent, or around the family hearth. The educated and wealthy also had access to visual aids in the form of *mappae mundi*, world maps, which normally appeared as manuscript illuminations. Depending upon their type and orientation, maps frequently placed the Antipodes at the bottom or southern part of the world, where they were conceived of as a place, or a fourth continent.

And a place might have people of some sort. Not surprisingly, there was disagreement as to the possibilities. Either the Antipodes was water because it was so cold that there was massive condensation (Bacon), or it was land but it was so cold that no one could live there (Bede). Or else no one lived there because the land was separated from “us” by an

impassable ocean, because everyone had descended from Adam, and because there is no mention of the apostles having ever preached there (Raban Maur). Some said it was illogical to think people lived there: they would be walking on their heads (Cosmas). It was also argued that people did in fact live there, except that they couldn't reach "us" and we couldn't reach "them" because of the same impassable ocean (Lambert of St. Omer). Surely there were other theories as well. My guess is that many of the sea captains in Lisbon figured it was only a matter of time before the Antipodeans were discovered.

There were other types of medieval maps besides the *mappae mundi*. From the thirteenth century the sea captains were using portolan charts, which helped them to feel their way along the coasts, although we should remember that they were relatively useless in unfamiliar places such as the Atlantic, and that even in the Mediterranean they were but an occasional aid to experienced pilots, and not a navigational tool of the first resort.⁴⁶

There were also Macrobian zone maps, which divide the world from north to south into equatorial, temperate, and cold zones, a scheme inherited from the ancients. Most medieval maps were of the "T in O" variety: a flat circle, an O, marks the outside border of the world and represents the all-embracing world ocean; on the inside, a T denotes three bodies of water—the river Don, the Nile and the Mediterranean—and separates the three continents—Africa, Asia and Europe. Each, in their own way, could tell us something about the medieval sense of space and about perceptions of the "other," but

the *mappae mundi* are the most useful for our purposes in that they combine the textual and the visual in an intentionally didactic fashion.

Like other manuscript illuminations, world maps could serve as sermons on parchment. In the aftermath of the Crusades, cartographers placed Jerusalem at the center of the earth and the terrestrial paradise in the East: as far as conceivable from a sinful Europe. Like the narrative descriptions of the Holy Land that were being written at the same time, maps located, illustrated and annotated important biblical events. The famous Ebstorf wall map (c. 1240), one of the largest produced in the Middle Ages, depicted the world embraced by Christ, with his head at the top, his feet sticking out the bottom, and his arms wrapped around the edges. And although this large map was meant as a practical guide for pilgrims, most medieval maps had nothing to do with directions or itineraries. The purpose of the *mappae mundi* was “to instruct the faithful about the significant events in Christian history rather than to record their precise locations.”⁴⁷ In any case, they would not have been much use in terms of planning a journey, because longitude and latitude had not yet been worked out in such a way that cartographers could establish accurate directional and spatial relationships.⁴⁸ Instead people had to rely on the practical experience of sailors and local guides who, along the way, told lots of fantastic and informative stories.

If someone was preparing for a long voyage, he/she would not automatically seek out a map as we do today, but if they had the occasion to study one, they would learn not only

that Jerusalem was at the center of the earth, but also that the regions in and around the Holy Land were inhabited by Saracens and Jews, that beyond them were pagans, that Prester John and the lands of Gog and Magog were further still, and that there were monstrous races at the edges of the known world, people such as the Blemmyae, who lacked heads but had their faces in their chests, the Panotii, a shy race whose ears reached their feet and who could use them to fly away when frightened, and the Sciopods, one-legged people with a single large foot who lay on their backs and shaded themselves from the sun.⁴⁹

The existence of strange people was important to medieval thinkers. They helped define who “not us” was, and raised questions about the nature of God’s creation.⁵⁰ Travelers were interested in discovering the truth about the legendary races that they had heard about in the popular Alexander cycle or seen in maps or read about in Pliny’s *Natural History*. Some, like Friar Jordanus, confirmed the existence of monstrous races on the evidence of “reliable” hearsay.⁵¹ Others were inevitably frustrated. “As regards men of a marvelous kind,” wrote John of Monte Corvino, “to wit, men of a different make from the rest of us, and as regards animals of like description, and as regards the terrestrial paradise, much have I asked and sought, but nothing have I been able to discover.”⁵² Columbus was surprised not to find monstrous men in the “Indies,”⁵³ which reminds me of those modern astronomers who are dismayed not to find more signs of life on other planets. It reminds me, too, of how vehemently people defend the existence of extraterrestrials, of how stories are published about those who have been abducted, of

interested parties who try to “prove” these things through a rich mix of science, faith and common sense, of how dissenters and skeptics are made out to be naïve and foolishly close-minded, and of how we share with past civilizations a fascination with the fabulous and a penchant for debate unencumbered by fact.

IV

Gradually the disappointing results of these researches made themselves felt, but it must be remembered that although men like John of Monte Corvino were casting doubts on accepted geographical wisdom, very few ever read such works, especially before the invention of the printing press. A good example of this is the narrative of John de’ Marignolli, a Florentine who traveled to China as a papal envoy in the mid-fourteenth century: ⁵⁴

Now to say something of the monstrous creatures which histories or romances have limned or lied about, and have represented to exist in India. . . . Such be those that St. Augustine speaks of in the Sixteenth Book *De Civitate Dei*; as, for example, that there be some folks that have but one eye in the forehead; some who have their feet turned the wrong way; some alleged to partake of the nature of both sexes, and to have the right breast like a man’s, the left breast like a

woman's; others who have neither head nor mouth, but only a hole in the breast. Then there are some who are said to subsist only by the breath of their nostrils; others a cubit in height who war with cranes. Of some 'tis told that they live not beyond eight years, but conceive and bear five times. Some have no joints; others lie ever on their backs holding up the sole of the only foot they have to shade them; others again have dog's heads. And then poets have invented hippopotamuses and plenty of other monsters. . . .

But I, who have traveled in all the regions of the Indians, and have always been most inquisitive, with a mind indeed too often addicted more to curious inquiries than to virtuous acquirements, (for I wanted if possible to know everything)—I have taken more pains, I conceive, than another who is generally read or at least well known, in investigating the marvels of the world; I have traveled in all the chief countries of the earth, and in particular to places where merchants from all parts of the world do come together, such as the Island of Ormes, and yet I never could ascertain as a fact that such races of men really do exist, whilst the persons whom I met used to question me in turn where such were to be found. The truth is that no such people *do* exist as nations, though there may be an individual monster here and there. Nor is there any people at all such as has been invented, who have but one foot which they use to shade themselves withal. But as all the Indians commonly go naked, they are in the habit of carrying a thing like a little tent-roof on a cane handle, which they open out at will as a protection

against the sun or rain. This they call a *chatyr*; I brought one to Florence with me.

And this it is which the poets have converted into a foot.

This passage touches upon a number of the questions we are asking including the reasons people traveled, the skepticism with which their reports were received, the medieval fascination with the marvelous, the fashion for collecting foreign curiosities, the relation between fiction and non-fiction, and the way people balanced evidence and authority; but the point I want to make here is that although Marignolli's was one of the most eloquent denials of the monstrous races ever produced in the Middle Ages, almost nobody read it because his comments on the East were hidden away in a *Chronicle of Bohemia* that did not appear in print until the seventeenth century. Modern scholars have gathered all these texts, and we think of them as a "body of work"—but medieval scholars did not.⁵⁵ In any case, Marignolli's take on the monstrous races was emphatically *not* shared by "most people."

To further illustrate this point, as John Friedman has argued, it was precisely the *inclusion* of the monstrous races in world maps that reflects the desire of cartographers to incorporate the new knowledge being brought back by travelers. But when the negative results began to come in, rather than give up the notion, mapmakers preferred to locate their fabulous creatures at the outer edge of the world. In a rubric on a manuscript map that he completed in 1448, Andreas Walsperger took pains to inform his readers that his *mappa mundi* was scientific and up-to-date, based, as it was, upon the cosmography of

Ptolemy, hence supposedly proportional according to longitude, latitude and the divisions of climate. Yet relying somewhat more on science and new empirical evidence and somewhat less on theology led Walsperger and others not to reject the existence of the monstrous races but to place them in the extreme south (and sometimes the extreme north) of the world, so that their beastliness and (presumed) immoral behavior could be explained scientifically as a function of the climate in the intemperate zones.⁵⁶

Ironically, just as the map makers pushed the monstrous races that they were sure existed to the outer edges of the world, Friedman wants to hold onto his belief in an essential East/West dichotomy despite the mounting evidence to the contrary. That the map makers were struggling to reconcile their social imaginaries with the negative reports that were filtering back to Europe with increasing frequency is proof in and of itself that western perceptions were far from unified, but Friedman, in agreement with an earlier generation of scholars,⁵⁷ sees his world maps as the visual equivalents of the *Chanson de Roland*, which he understands as positing a “binary opposition” between pagan and Christian. Of his monstrous races, he concludes, “It could be said that the west needed all that was non-west to define its own identity.”⁵⁸

But what of real-life encounters? Westerners regularly took long journeys for every imaginable personal and professional reason. Who were they? How did they get there? Why did they go? And how can reflecting upon the mundane details of these voyages

help us to understand the shifting cultural metaphors that westerners were using to make sense of these encounters? What did it all mean?

In addition to those that come immediately to mind—crusaders and their camp followers, itinerant noble households, pilgrims, merchants, missionaries, diplomats, —every summer thousands of unsung travelers chanced the roads and waterways of Europe and the Mediterranean: seasonal laborers, masons, shepherds, students, refugees, gypsies, judges, drifters, criminals, mercenaries, messengers, porters, musicians. Some sought a better life, some just liked the freedom. Some went against their will. In the late Middle Ages Barbary pirates abducted Christian slaves from coastal villages as far away as England and Ireland, shipping them to the slave markets of Tunis and Algiers. Maps and Mandeville were fine for lords and ladies, but even without the benefit of books the Saracen bogeyman had free rein in the peasant imagination. Arguably those most distant from Muslim peoples were the most scared of them and harbored the most negative stereotypes.

At least those who traveled out of choice had the opportunity to prepare. Except for the exceedingly poor, who had nothing to pack, and the exceedingly rich, who had servants to do it for them, most people had to busy themselves with securing funds, arranging food, clothes, cooking utensils and bedding, finding transportation and servants, and settling domestic affairs. This could mean paying debts: or forgiving them; selling property: or making a will.

Pilgrimage accounts such as those by the Germans Ludolf von Sudheim, who traveled through the Holy Land, Egypt, and Syria between 1336 and 1341, and Hans Tucher, who undertook his journey in 1479-1480, are filled with details about the hazards of the voyage, and provide multitudinous tips on how to avoid them. Ludolf lists the various land routes and sea routes and points out the advantages and disadvantages of each, while Tucker includes all sorts of practical advice. One must provision oneself with an ample supply of wine, which comprises the central ingredient of his remedies for sea-sickness and constipation. He also recommends that pilgrims should dress like the locals and that they take wooden stirrups because iron ones are likely to be stolen. One will need a good chamber pot, surely, and quantities of green ginger, coriander, and aniseed for digestion. And a wooden chest to sleep on at night as the floors are covered with fleas.⁵⁹

A long-distance pilgrimage was a hazardous affair and no one really knew how long it was going to take or if and when they would be coming back. Those leaving for Jerusalem tended to think of their pilgrimage as unidirectional, which is one of the things that distinguishes the medieval sense of space from the modern. Writers tell of the voyage *to* the Holy Land and provide detailed descriptions of it once they arrive—but there the journey ends (at least on parchment). The homecoming and the recognition scene are modern conceits.⁶⁰

Sometimes travel meant doing a lot of mental preparation, studying foreign languages, for example, or reading everything you could get your hands on. “I give you my word,” Felix Fabri wrote, “I worked harder in running round from book to book, in copying, correcting, collating what I had written, than I did in journeying from place to place upon my pilgrimage.”⁶¹ As Columbus did, many people took reading materials with them. Merchants carried their account records; scholars, their books. One option was the *Viaticum*, a Latin translation of an Arabic guide for travelers that contained medical advice. Most importantly, the *Viaticum* promised ready treatments for lovesickness, a common affliction if we are to believe our explorers concerning the indescribable beauty of Arab women or the unparalleled hospitality of the girls of Tibet.⁶²

Even those with time to prepare were not always certain where they were going or how they were going to get there. The North Atlantic remained virtually unknown to Portuguese and Spanish navigators until well into the Age of Discovery (although perhaps not to Basque fishermen?), and even educated northerners were but slightly better informed about the Mediterranean. In the eleventh century Adam of Bremen, a well-placed cleric, wrote about the voyages of the Vikings and the history of northern Europe and Scandinavia, but his eastern and southern geography was weak. Although merchants had been following the river routes to the Black Sea for generations, he had only the vaguest notion of how to get to Constantinople, and would have been surprised that one might require a ship.⁶³

Distance was as uncertain as direction. Usually measured in weeks and months instead of miles or their equivalent, the length of the journey was a feature of every travel narrative; but because there were so many variables, estimating distance-time was a matter of guesswork. There were *transportation* concerns: Are we walking or riding? What would be better, horses or pack asses? Should we hire porters and guides? *Supply* concerns: Where can we find food and water? Where feed for the animals? *Security* concerns: Should we arm ourselves? Do we need guards? Are there bandits on the road? Trouble at the borders? *Financial* concerns: Will I be able to trade along the way? Where are the customs houses? How much will it cost?! Above all there were *weather* concerns: An early snow or unseasonable rains could delay a voyage for weeks. Long-distance travel was a bit of a gamble and those with pressing business needed contingency plans and quantities of luck.⁶⁴ As Pietro Casola put it: “Each one who goes on the voyage to the Sepulchre of our Lord has need of three sacks—a sack of patience, a sack of money, and a sack of faith.”⁶⁵

Even in Casola’s day, in the late fifteenth century, it normally took between one and two weeks for letters to be delivered to Venice from Paris, Lyons or Marseilles. Transporting goods took much longer. Indeed, postal and shipping rates were based upon the number of days the voyage actually took as opposed to the distance covered.⁶⁶ With way stations and fresh horses, it was possible to ride from Paris to Venice in a week, but the same journey could take up to a month or more. Most people walked, others were not so

fortunate. In the mid-thirteenth century a crippled man dragged himself twenty-two miles from Grünberg to Marburg. It took him five weeks.⁶⁷

The longer the journey, the less predictable it was. Great distances could be covered by sea, but since few had the means to arrange their passage in advance: the first order of business was to show up at a port and search for a seaworthy ship at an affordable price. Beyond that anything could happen: storms, damage to the vessel, bureaucratic delays, interminable waiting for high-ranking passengers, an unskilled crew, a captain's whim, a pirate attack: anything—especially countervailing winds. It took Casola forty-two days to sail from Venice to Jaffa and seventy-three to sail back, but outward voyages of two months were not uncommon and return trips could take up to four.⁶⁸ Giovanni di Piano Carpini took over a year to travel from France to Mongolia. John of Monte Corvino took two to sail from Iran to China.⁶⁹ It took Marco Polo three years to go from the Great Khan's court in Peking to Layas on the Mediterranean coast. This, we are told, was on account of "natural difficulties," which is to say they made very little progress during winter.⁷⁰ On another occasion he was detained in Sumatra for five months by "contrary winds."⁷¹ John Larner wonders if Polo's co-author, Rustichello da Pisa, didn't exaggerate the lengths of time in order to give his readers the impression of great distances,⁷² perhaps in the same way that chroniclers exaggerated the sizes of cities and the strength of armies. More normally the journey from the eastern Mediterranean to China would have taken around nine or ten months.

As to why people traveled, of course motives were mixed, but some, it was thought, were better than others. Saint Augustine warned against travel for travel's sake, that is, purely out of curiosity.⁷³ Santo Brasca, a knight from Milan, believed that "a man should undertake this voyage solely with the intention of visiting, contemplating, and adoring the most Holy Mysteries, with great effusion of tears, in order that Jesus may graciously pardon his sins; and not with the intention of seeing the world, or from ambition, or to be able to boast 'I have been there,' or 'I have seen that,' in order to be exalted by his fellowmen, as perhaps some do, who in this case from now have received their reward."⁷⁴ And in the words of Abbot Daniel of Kiev, who made his pilgrimage in the early twelfth century: "Many virtuous people, by practicing good works and charity to the poor, reach the holy places without leaving their homes . . . Others, of whom I am the chief, after having visited the holy city of Jerusalem and the holy places, pride themselves as if they had done something meritorious, and thus lose the fruit of their labor."⁷⁵

As noted, this begins to change in the late Middle Ages. The profit motive no longer had to be concealed with religiosity. Trade flourished. Diplomatic missions were common. By the sixteenth century travel for travel's sake had become permissible, even laudable; and some scholars have begun to see in this period the makings of a western tradition of ethnography.⁷⁶ The famous quote by Francis Bacon in *New Atlantis* (1627) is illustrative of the change: "We maintain a trade, not for gold, silver or jewels, nor for silks, nor for spices, nor any other commodity of matter; but only for God's first creature, which was light: to have light (I say) of the growth of all parts of the world."⁷⁷

Abbot Daniel and Santo Brasca thought the journey to the Holy Land should be a dignified affair—not only because they were serious in their devotions, but also because they gained a certain amount of cultural capital from having access to and knowledge of the sacred sites. Knowledge of distant peoples and places was a politically valuable “good,” both for travelers and for those who stayed at home.⁷⁸ This is one of the reasons that reading Mandeville served the same purposes as reading Marco Polo: each provided socially useful information.⁷⁹ Even up until the end of his life Polo was visited by scholars and travelers who journeyed to Venice in search of his expertise. And as we saw in the case of Menocchio, being the local “expert” on the foreign and the marvelous was held in high esteem by peasants and laborers as well as elites.

It could also make one suspect. Foreign “goods” might be tainted with some exotic heresy. It has been suggested that despite his admirers, the aging Polo became a stranger in his own community because he had lived with barbarians at the edge of the world.⁸⁰ Or consider, for example, Thomas More’s *Utopia*, a perfect place where those who traveled without permission were “treated with contempt” and “severely punished.”⁸¹ Travelers associated themselves with distant phenomena in order to validate their status, but in the process they ran the risk of distancing themselves from their own societies.⁸² Like the foreign “other,” travelers too were sometimes both esteemed for being different and condemned for the same reason.

Confronting the foreign in any context—real or imagined—can be an unsettling experience, especially when religious uniformity is a communal priority. In the mid-thirteenth century, a German friar named Burchard, who spent ten years at the monastery of Mount Sion in Jerusalem, observed that many westerners “are frightened when they are told that in parts beyond the seas there dwell Nestorians, Jacobites, Maronites, Georgians, and other sects named after heretics whom the Church has condemned.” As the mental world of medieval Europe expanded eastward with the explorers, it became increasingly evident that regardless of the portion of the earth’s surface that was habitable, far less of it was controlled by Catholic Christians than was once thought. But Burchard, who was fluent in Arabic and comfortable in his surroundings, wanted to educate his compatriots about the other Christian sects. “These men are thought to be heretics, and to follow the errors of those after whom they are called, but this is by no means true,” he wrote, “God forbid! They are men of simple and devout life; yet I do not deny that there may be fools among them, seeing that even the Church of Rome itself is not free from fools.”⁸³

In travel writing, as in other forms of medieval literature, the conduct of eastern Christians, Jews and Muslims became a measuring rod for what was thought to be proper behavior. Most of the time non-Catholics were demonized for beliefs and practices that were seen as immoral and blasphemous whenever they did not conform to the European norm;⁸⁴ but Burchard, who was tolerant by medieval standards, used his discussion of difference to remind his co-religionists that they were a long way from having their own

house in order. Like Daniel of Kiev, he was sharply critical of westerners, especially those who came to the Holy Land for the wrong reasons: “There are dwelling therein men of every nation under heaven, and each man follows his own rite, and, to tell the truth, our own people, the Latins, are worse than all the other people of the land. The reason of this, I think, is that when any man has been a malefactor, as, for example, a homicide, a robber, a thief, or an adulterer, he crosses the sea as a penitent, or else because he fears for his skin, and therefore dares not stay at home.”

Similar examples abound. John of Monte Corvino noted that the men of different religious orders that he met at the court of the Great Khan in Cathay, the same groups that Burchard was talking about, practiced greater abstinence and austerity than the Latin monks.⁸⁵ John de’ Marignolli said much the same thing concerning the religiosity of the Muslims: They might be unbelievers, “but otherwise I must say that their rigid attention to prayer and fasting and other religious duties, if they but held the true faith, would far surpass any strictness and self-denial that we practice.”⁸⁶ In the *Book of Knowledge of the World*, written by a Spanish Franciscan in the mid-fourteenth century, the lack of animosity is striking. He praises the Nubians, Abbysinians, Babylonians, Persians and Indians for their intelligence. Of the inhabitants of Trimic (Tibet?) he says: “They are men of clear understandings and good memories, learned in the sciences, and living according to law. They say that the men who first heard of science and learning were these, and that the Persians heard of those things from them. For this reason they deserve honour more than any others . . . because they are at the birthplace of the east, and the

rest of the towns and great cities, and the root of this kingdom are all due to the temperate climate which tempered their bodies and the good extended to their spirits, and gave them better understandings and clearer memories.”⁸⁷ In her study of travel writing on India and east Asia in the high Middle Ages, Kim Phillips challenges the notion held by Anthony Pagden and others that medieval people/travellers always saw themselves in a proto-colonial position of superiority compared to those “others” they encountered in the East. The observations of western travellers, she explains, “offered a far more diverse range of perspectives than can be covered by concepts of a European Self standing in contrast to an Oriental other, or of a superior European civilization justified in criticism or domination of less advanced cultures.”⁸⁸

This comes out clearly even in our armchair traveler, Mandeville. During a private discussion with the sultan, when asked whether the Christians governed themselves well in their own country, our fictitious adventurer demurred: “Well enough.” This gives the author the opportunity to put a rebuttal speech into the mouth of the sultan:

Truly, no. It is not so. For your priests do not serve God properly by righteous living, as they should do. For they ought to give less learned men an example of how to live well, and they do the very opposite, giving examples of all manner of wickedness. And as a result, on holy days, when people should go to church to serve God, they go to the tavern and spend all the day—and perhaps all the night—in drinking and in gluttony, like beasts without reason which do not know

when they have had enough. . . . For Christians are so proud, so envious, such great gluttons, so lecherous, and moreover so full of covetousness, that for a little silver they will sell their daughters, their sisters, even their own wives to men who want to lie with them. . . . Certainly it is because of your sinfulness that you have lost all this land which we hold and keep. Because of your evil living and your sin and not because of our strength God has given it into our hands.⁸⁹

There follows a moment of cultural self-reflection:

It seemed to me then a cause for great shame that Saracens, who have neither a correct faith nor a perfect law, should in this way reprove us for our failings, keeping their false law better than we do that of Jesus Christ; and those who ought to be our good example are driven away by our wicked ways of living. And so it is no wonder that they call us sinful and wicked, for it is true. But they are devout and honest in their law, keeping well the commandments of the Qur'an, which God sent them by His messenger Muhammad, to whom, so they say, the angel Gabriel spoke often, telling him the will of God.⁹⁰

In the final analysis, despite his inclination to emphasize difference by telling entertaining stories of “diverse countries” and “diverse folk,” the author of *Mandeville's Travels* relied more upon strategies of “same-ing” than “othering.”⁹¹ It was precisely where Menocchio ran into trouble: for him the similarities stood out more than the

differences and it set off a train of thought that took him in unorthodox directions. Quite apart from the scientific and technological achievements of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the increased cross-cultural contacts that accompanied the voyages of discovery, and the Turkish intervention in southeastern Europe and the western Mediterranean, took place within a shifting intellectual climate that created a new context for Europe's sense of distance and its perception of the "other."

In medieval Europe, as in all societies, distance and place were imagined through representations. People set up boundaries between "our" land and "their" land, but the distinctions between "us" and "them"—like the boundaries themselves—were arbitrary. This is what some have called "imaginative geography," a way of seeing that encompasses both distance and difference. "We" set up boundaries in our own minds, "they" become "they" in the process. The "diverse countries" imagined in the Middle Ages carried moral connotations that helped Europeans understand their own place and significance not only within their society but also within a wider cosmic setting. Thus the sense of distance was much more than the projection of secular or religious myth. Places, peoples, creatures and material items from the outside world were used to regulate the world inside.⁹²

Because cross-cultural encounters are subject both to collective representations and to personal psychology, and because memory, which lies at the heart of perception, is guided by classification, cultural perception, which mediates between "us" and "them," is

necessarily tied up in the use of stereotypes. But stereotypes are more than mere prejudices—they are simplified models for coping with alien cultures. The world is experienced through them. They, in turn, shape the form of the encounter and the language used to describe it. This is a normal and necessary part of the human experience. The problem arises when stereotypes are mistaken for fully adequate representations and when imagined differences are extended to social, cultural, and religious norms.⁹³

Eventually Europeans took a more critical stance towards the stereotypes they inherited. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw both a growing reluctance to subsume new knowledge under the authority of the bible and the ancients and an increased scepticism towards the reports of travellers and domestic experts on things foreign.⁹⁴ Rabelais (1494-1553), whose career, one might say, began in the Middle Ages and ended in the early modern period, has left us a character, a “deformed and monstrous” old man, who embodies the old ways of thinking and signals the advent of the new:⁹⁵

His name was *Hearsay*: his mouth opened right up to his ears, and he had seven tongues, each of which was divided into seven parts. However he managed it, all seven tongues talked at the same time, on different subjects and in different languages. His head, and the rest of his body, too, had as many ears as Argus had eyes. He was blind, and his legs were paralyzed.

I saw endless numbers of men and women all around him, listening most carefully, and among them I recognized some who were handsome and plainly well born, one of whom had a map of the world and was briskly explaining it to others, using well-turned little aphorisms. Thus they quickly became scholars and learned folk, and spoke authoritatively and elegantly on all sorts of tremendously important subjects, drawing on their fine memories – though a man’s life would not be enough to learn a hundredth part of what they discoursed on: the pyramids, the Nile, Babylonia, Troglodytes, the Himantopodes, the Blemmians, pygmies, cannibals, the Hyperborean mountains, the aegipans, all the devils in hell – and all from *Hearsay*.

I saw there, so far as I can tell, Herodotus, Pliny, Caius Julius Solinus, Berossus, Philostratus, Pomponius Mela, Strabo, and many other ancients, in addition to Albertus Magnus, Peter the Martyr, Pope Pius the Second, Raphael Maffei of Volterra, the valiant Paulus Julius, Jacques Cartier, Chaiton the Armenian, Marco Polo the Venetian, Ludovico Romano, Pedro Alvarez, and I don’t know how many other modern historians, hidden behind a piece of tapestry and sneakily scribbling down some great stuff, and all from *Hearsay*.

NOTES

¹ *The Wanderings of Felix Fabri (c. 1480-1483)*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1896), 3-4.

² The Council on Foreign Relations and National Geographic, pamphlet, "What College-Aged Students Know About the World: A Survey on Global Literacy," (September 2016), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2AUpoucQL4jQXhzOWt4QjBfMFk/view>.

³ Jean-François Staszak, "Other/otherness" in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Elsevier, 2008), 1-7. Quote p. 3. On geography as a driving determinant in western perceptions, see Surekha Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) and Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); and Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Oneworld publications, 1960).

⁵ David Blanks, "Europeans before Europe: Modernity and the Myth of the Other," in *Early Modern Constructions of Europe*, ed. Florian Kläger and Gerd Bayer (New York: Routledge, 2016), 27-40. For a discussion of the historiography on medieval Orientalism, see Lisa Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature and Post-Colonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 11-15 and Kim Phillips, *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 15-27. For a general introduction to medieval encounters with the non-West, see Seymour Phillips, "The Outer World of the European Middle Ages," in *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart B Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 355-377.

⁶ Marianne O'Doherty, *The Indies and the Medieval West: Thoughts, Report, Imagination* (Turnhout, Belgium: BREPOLs, 2013), 6.

⁷ Phillips, *Before Orientalism*, 199-200. See also Maurizio Peleggi, "Shifting Alterity: The Mongol in the Visual and Literary Culture of the Late Middle Ages," in *Travellers, Intellectuals, and the World Beyond Medieval Europe*, ed. James Muldoon (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 311-329. First published in *The Medieval History Journal* 4 (2001), 15-33.

⁸ James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

⁹ E. W. Platzeck, *Raimond Lull: Sein Leben--Seine Werke--Die Grundlagen seines Denkens*, 2 vols. (Düsseldorf 1962-4).

¹⁰ Jean de Joinville, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, trans. M. R. B. Shaw (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 175, 243.

¹¹ David Abulafia, *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2008), 307.

¹² Eco was referring to the classical tradition, but his observation applies equally to the textual tradition of travel narratives and other medieval writings and ideas, Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 4. Originally published in 1959.

¹³ Cf. David Blanks, "Byzantium and the Muslim World" in *Images of the Other: Europe and the Muslim World before 1700*, ed. David Blanks (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 1996), 109-121.

- ¹⁴ This is not to suggest that all medieval travellers were male, cf. Leigh Ann Craig, *Wandering Women and Holy Matrons: Women as Pilgrims in the Later Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) and Maribel Dietz, *Wandering Monks, Virgins, and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World, A.D. 300-800* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).
- ¹⁵ Abulafia, *The Discovery of Mankind*, 36-43.
- ¹⁶ Abulafia, *The Discovery of Mankind*, 40.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Norman Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens: An Interpretation of the Chansons de Geste* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984); and C. Meredith Jones, "The Conventional Saracen of the Songs of Geste," *Speculum* 17 (1942), 201-225.
- ¹⁸ Mariusz Bartnicki, "Kievan and Galician-Volodimir Chronicles in the 12th and 13th Centuries: The Ruthenian Ethos and Foreign People," in *Imagined Communities: Constructing Collective Identities in Medieval Europe*, ed. Andrzej Pleszczyński, Joanna Sobiesiak, Michał Tomaszek, and Przemysław Tyszka, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 318.
- ¹⁹ For definitions of "travel writing," see Kim M. Phillips, "Travel, Writing, and the Global Middle Ages," *History Compass* 14:3 (2016), 81-92; Joan Pau Rubiés, "Travel Writing as a Genre: Facts, Fictions, and the Invention of a Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe," *Journeys* 1 (2000), 5-35; and Mary Baine Campbell, "Travel Writing and Its Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 261-278.
- ²⁰ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Prentice Hall, 1993), 392-403.
- ²¹ See especially Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
- ²² L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953).
- ²³ See for example Lee Paterson's exploration of the ways in which twentieth-century theories about how people interpret the world can overlook the different ways of thinking and writing that were at work in pre-modern cultures, "Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies," *Speculum* 76:3 (2001), 638-80.
- ²⁴ Paul Freedman has found much the same in regard to the representation of the peasant as "other," *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 289.
- ²⁵ Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, 290.
- ²⁶ Compare the similar nature of the colonial discourse, Homi K. Bhabha, "Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Politics of Theory: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, July 1982*, eds. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iverson and Diana Loxley (Colchester: University of Essex, 1983), 194-211. See also Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000).
- ²⁷ Guibert of Nogent, *The Deeds of God through the Franks*, trans. Robert Levine (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1997), 47.
- ²⁸ Freedman, *Images*, 86-104, 140, notes 34 and 35, 195, note 92.
- ²⁹ R. J. Mitchell, *John Tiptoft (1427-1470)* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), 45-46.
- ³⁰ Craig, *Wandering Women*, 221-222, 234-239.
- ³¹ John Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 45.
- ³² Rudolf Wittkower, "Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942), 176-7.
- ³³ Kathryn Beebe, *Pilgrim and Preacher: The Audiences and Observant Spirituality of Friar Felix Fabri (1437/8-1502)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 93-111. Quote p. 106. See also Craig, *Wandering Women*, 221-260.
- ³⁴ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Penguin Books, 1951), 39.
- ³⁵ The inquisitorial records from the Diocese of Pamiers in the early fourteenth century are filled with examples of peasants denying doctrine for reasons that they would have seen as "common sense." Cf. *Le Registre d'Inquisition de Jacques Fournier*, trans. and ed. Jean Duvernoy, (Paris: Mouton, 1978). Some examples include not believing in purgatory, because God made man in the image of Christ (I: 158-71); that animals have souls, because it just seems obvious (II: 625-626); or that during communion the bread

could not possibly turn into the soul of Christ because if it did the priests would have eaten it all by now (I: 261).

³⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

³⁷ Cf. Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

³⁸ Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, 9-10, 21-22, 41-49; and John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C. W. R. D. Moseley (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 140, 180.

³⁹ *Le Registre d'Inquisition de Jacques Fournier*, Vol. II, 646, 766, 793, and the Latin edition, *Le Registre d'Inquisition de Jacques Fournier*, ed. Jean Duvernoy (Toulouse, Édouard Privat, 1965), Vol. II, 77.

⁴⁰ Rosemary Tzanaki, *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences: A Study on the Reception of the Book of Sir John Mandeville (1371-1550)* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003).

⁴¹ Iain Macleod Higgins, *Writing East: The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (Philadelphia: 1997), 266-67.

⁴² Cf. Dinu Luca, "China as the Other in Odoric's Itinerarium," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.5 (2012): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2136>.

⁴³ John Kirtland Wright, *The Geographical Lore at the Time of the Crusades* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1925), 15, 54. See also J. B. Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians* (New York and London: Praeger, 1991); George H. T. Kimble, *Geography in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1938); and C. Raymond Beazley, *Prince Henry the Navigator: The Hero of Portugal and of Modern Discovery, 1394-1460 A.D. With an account of geographical progress throughout the middle ages as the preparation for this work* (London and New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1895).

⁴⁴ Roger Bacon, *Opus Magnus*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Belle Burke (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928), 310-311.

⁴⁵ *The Travels of Mandeville*, 128-29. On geographical information in the *Book* see Tzanaki, *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences*, 83-134.

⁴⁶ Patrick Gautier Dalché, "Maps, Travel and Exploration in the Middle Ages: Some Reflections About Anachronism," *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique* 12 (2015), 143-162, especially 153-158.

⁴⁷ David Woodward, "Medieval *Mappaemundi*," in *The History of Cartography: Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe*, vol. 1, eds. J. B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 286.

⁴⁸ *The Travels of Mandeville*, 193; and J. R. S. Phillips, *The Medieval Expansion of Europe*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 191.

⁴⁹ For a catalogue of the "Plinian races," see John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Thought and Art* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 5-25.

⁵⁰ Cf. Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁵¹ *The Wonders of the East*, ed. and trans. Henry Yule (London: Hakluyt Society, 1863), 44.

⁵² *Cathay and the Way Thither*, vol. 1, 213.

⁵³ Phillips, "The Outer World," 24.

⁵⁴ *Cathay and the Way Thither*, vol. 2, 378-381.

⁵⁵ Donald Howard, *Writers and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 5-6.

⁵⁶ Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, 37-58.

⁵⁷ See note 4.

⁵⁸ "Cultural Conflicts in Medieval World Maps," in Schwartz, *Implicit Understandings*, 64-95, quotation on p. 95.

⁵⁹ Anne Simon, "Of Smelly Seas and Ashen Apples: Two German Pilgrims' View of the East," in *Eastward Bound: Travel and Travellers, 1050-1550*, ed. Rosamund Allen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 196-220.

⁶⁰ Howard, *Writers and Pilgrims*, 48-51.

- ⁶¹ Cited by J. R. Hale, *Renaissance Europe, 1480-1520* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1971), 40. See also Catherine Delano-Smith, "The Intelligent Pilgrim: Maps and Medieval Pilgrimage to the Holy Land," in *Eastward Bound: Travel and Travellers, 1050-1550*, 107-130.
- ⁶² Cf. Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).
- ⁶³ Baron A. Meyendorff, "Trade and Communication in Eastern Europe, A. D. 800-1200," in *Travel and Travellers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Percival Newton (New York: Alfred Knopf and London: Kegan Paul, 1926), 110.
- ⁶⁴ Cf. Paul Newman, *Travel and Trade in the Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2011).
- ⁶⁵ *Canon Pietro Casola's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Year 1494*, ed. M. Margaret Newett (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1907), 225.
- ⁶⁶ Cf. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 1, trans. Siân Reynolds (London: Collins 1972-3) 355-379, who cites Pierre Sardella, *Nouvelles et spéculations à Venise* (Paris 1948).
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- ⁶⁸ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, vol. 1, 265.
- ⁶⁹ Phillips, "The Outer World," 30.
- ⁷⁰ *The Travels of Marco Polo*, ed. Milton Rugoff from the William Marsden trans. of 1818 (New York: Signet, 1961), book I, chap. 3, 40 and book I, chap. 4, 41-42.
- ⁷¹ *The Travels of Marco Polo*, book III, chap. 10, 240.
- ⁷² Lardner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 187.
- ⁷³ Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Medieval Ethnographies: European Perceptions of the World Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2009), xvii.
- ⁷⁴ *Viaggio in Terrasanta*, ed. Anna Laura Momigliano Lepschy (Milan: Longanesi, 1966), 128.
- ⁷⁵ *Pilgrimage of the Russian Abbot Daniel in the Holy Land (c. 1106-07)*, trans. from the French version of Madame de Khitrowo by C. W. Wilson (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1888), 2.
- ⁷⁶ See Rubiés, *Medieval Ethnographies*, Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography*; and Klaus A. Vogel, "Cultural Variety in a Renaissance Perspective: Johannes Boemus on 'The manners, Laws and Customs of all People' (1520)" and Joan Pau Rubiés, "Christianity and Civilization in Sixteenth Century Ethnological Discourse," in *Shifting Cultures: Interaction and Discourse in the Expansion of Europe*, eds. Joan Pau Rubiés and Henriette Bugge (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1995), 17-34, 35-60.
- ⁷⁷ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 278. Originally published in 1627.
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- ⁷⁹ For a comparative analysis of the two, see Suzanne M. Yeager, "The World Translated: Marco Polo's *Le Devisement dou monde*, *The Book of Sir John Mandeville*, and Their Medieval Audiences," in *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, eds. Suzanne Conklin Akbar and Amilcare Iannucci, (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008), 156-181.
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- ⁸³ *A Description of the Holy Land*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1896) 107.
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⁸⁵ *Cathay and the Way Thither*, vol. 1, 208.

⁸⁶ *Cathay and the Way Thither*, vol. 2, 384.

⁸⁷ *Book of the Knowledge of All the Kingdoms, Lands, and Lordships that are in the World, and the Arms and Devices of Each Land and Lordship, or of the Kings and Lords who Possess Them, Written by a Spanish Franciscan in the Middle of the XIV Century*, trans. and ed. Clements Markham (London: Hakluyt Society, 1912), 49.

⁸⁸ Phillips, *Before Orientalism*, 199-200.

⁸⁹ *The Travels of Mandeville*, 107-08.

⁹⁰ *The Travels of Mandeville*, 108.

⁹¹ Frank Grady, "'Machomete' and *Mandeville's Travels*," in *Medieval Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Victor Tolan (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 271-288.

⁹² Helms, *Ulysses' Sail*, 49.

⁹³ See Urs Bitterli, *Cultures in Conflict: Encounters between European and non-European Cultures, 1492-1800*, trans. Ritchie Robertson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). See also Partha Mitter, "Can We Ever Understand Alien Cultures? Some Epistemological Concerns Relating to the Perception and Understanding of the Other," *Comparative Criticism: An Annual Journal* 9 (1987): 3-34.

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