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Writing the New Middle Ages

STEPHEN G. NICHOLS

MEDIEVAL STUDIES ARE BIG—IN FACT, HAVE RARELY BEEN LIVELIER . . . OR MORE CONTROVERSIAL. THIS ENERGY HAS SUCCEEDED IN BREACHING the ramparts that traditionally divided the field into a series of vigorously defended fiefs. In a word, the discipline has gone interdisciplinary. Visual literacy, patristics, modal logic, grammar, rhetoric, onomastics, philosophical anthropology, sociology, historiography, linguistics, codicology, vernacular literature, classical and medieval Latin thought and letters, philology, and myriad other subsets conjugate in dizzying and unexpected configurations to produce exciting views of the period.

What period? The Middle Ages, but not the one bequeathed to us by modernism. And therein lie both the energy and the controversy that have roiled the waters of medieval studies for the last two decades. Whatever the definition of postmodernism and its aftermath, medieval studies have endorsed the epistemological shift the movement represents. Play, humor, relativism, indeterminacy, differential repetition (multiple copies as opposed to an original), performative mimesis, postcolonialism, gender, sexuality, and other concepts associated with postmodern sensibility configure contemporary medieval studies in radically new ways. It is not so much that the current paradigms have broken with, or oppose, the earlier ones as that they all look at their putatively common period from different perspectives and discover different landscapes. New medievalists take as their subject what Umberto Eco has called the New Middle Ages (73).[1]

To be sure, in speaking of "a new Middle Ages," Eco wishes to characterize late-twentieth-century Western culture as neomedieval. To construct a comparative syllogism, he begins by sketching an abstract model of the Middle Ages consisting of two periods, one of violence and transition before the year 1000 and a second, running to about 1500, equally full of changes but also robust in learning and lasting accomplishments (73). He then asks, "To which of the two does our own era correspond?" He is not so naive as to postulate a strict correspondence: "we are trying to formulate a 'hypothesis of the Middle Ages'—as if we were setting out to fabricate a Middle Ages and

STEPHEN G. NICHOLS, James M. Beall Professor of French and Humanities and chair of the Department of Romance Languages at Johns Hopkins University, has most recently published *Altérités du moyen âge* (Larousse, 2003). He will shortly complete a book entitled *Laughing Matters: The Enigma and Exasperation of Laughter.*

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were deciding what ingredients are required to make one that is efficient and credible" (74).

Eco's notion of plotting our own period on a graph of the Middle Ages interests me less for its rather strained conceit than as evidence of a powerful contemporary fascination with the Middle Ages as an era that has much to tell us about ourselves.[2] Moreover, "setting out to fabricate" a "credible" Middle Ages strikes me as precisely what a great many studies of the period are doing today. When he says, "The Middle Ages preserved in its way the heritage of the past . . . through constant retranslation and reuse" (84), he describes the refraction, sifting, and filtering that many medievalists have recently undertaken as what we might call the project of writing the new Middle Ages.

This does not mean, as Eco would have it, that scholars are casting contemporary history in neomedieval terms but rather that they are rethinking our entire conception of the period as radically other. In so doing, these studies also help construe not simply the differences between the Middle Ages and modernism but also the ways in which the Middle Ages continue to inhabit modernism.

As the name suggests, the Middle Ages are defined rather than defining. Initially a Renaissance concept, the Middle Ages have been rediscovered and reconfigured at key moments in modern history. After 1815, for example, French historians rewrote medieval history to reflect a dynamic and unstable era punctuated by nascent class warfare. This new French Middle Ages could thus be seen as the embryonic crucible of chaotic violence, inept administration, and venal ecclesiastics that led inexorably, if slowly, to the retributive chaos of the French Revolution.

Romantic historiography thus promulgated the notion of an essentially "modern" Middle Ages wherein might be discerned the origins and identity of current practices and institutions. Here medieval people's fascination with optics and mirrors takes an ironic twist, as the Middle Ages are repeatedly cast as mirror for modern self-examination.

Given the long practice of construing the Middle Ages to suit the demands of history's emergent self-definition, there is nothing inherently surprising in the current revision of medievalism except perhaps its extent and its penetration into popular culture. These phenomena, I suspect, feed one another. Indeed, the number of books, films, and other media that have appeared in the last few years with medieval or early Renaissance themes is amazing.

One has only to think of the improbable success in 2004 of Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason's *The Rule of Four*, about the arcane and quasi-unpronounceable *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*; or Dan Brown's arch riff on the Grail theme, *The Da Vinci Code*; or Umberto Eco's tongue-in-cheek re-creation of twelfth-century Europe, *Baudolino* (to name but a few examples), to realize that novels on medieval themes regularly figure on best-seller lists. Over the last forty years, films on medieval topics have been equally popular, and one, at least—*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, that ultimate send-up of medievalism—has become something of a staple in courses dealing with the Grail.

While the image of the Middle Ages evoked in popular culture varies from credible to wildly fanciful, the range, success, and in some instances controversy of such works attest to their timeliness and to the general public's prodigious appetite for the material. This commercial success, in turn, attests to the economic incentive for producers.[3] Loath though we may be to admit it, this public appetite, and the commercialism that feeds it, directly benefits scholarship.

Without postulating a direct link between popular culture's rage for medieval and early modern subjects and the innovativeness of recent medieval scholarship, I do see a symbiotic relation whereby one creates a supportive environment for the other. Does the popularity of the subject encourage the broad-mindedness and willingness to take risks that

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characterize much recent medieval scholarship? Besides a flexible approach, these studies also share with popular culture a fascination with the historical context but—in ways found only in the best fiction and film—go further to discover means of demonstrating what the historical artifact has to communicate to us: how, for example, it can interrogate or confirm the insights opened by new intellectual paradigms. They show that the challenge is to connect the mind and the world in a way that illuminates not only the historical material but also the contemporary scene.

Performance is one of the most striking ways the public connects with history. Regardless of historical accuracy—or even verisimilitude, in some cases—memorable performances fix the image of a historical character and period indelibly in our minds. Great performances evolve into landmarks of our own culture. Historical characters and their times become imbricated in the careers of artists of our era so that when we recollect one, the other comes to mind—for example, Katharine Hepburn as Eleanor of Acquitane in *A Lion in Winter* (1968) or Gérard Depardieu as Martin Guerre (1983).

Whatever their medium, such performances remind us that history is not simply enlightening, it is also fun. Cicero long ago made this point in his *Orator*: "To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is human life unless it is interwoven with the life of our ancestors, by the memory of ancient history? Moreover, recollecting antiquity, and providing examples from it, provides authority and credibility to one's discourse, as well as enormous pleasure."[4] Now, it seems to me that recent medieval studies reflect the pleasure that their authors, along with the public at large, have derived from revisiting the medieval past. And, more cogently still, the studies take seriously Cicero's assertion that to live in the present, we must understand the past. Let's see what this means in practice.

Not an easy task, given the rich range of recent medieval interdisciplinary studies listed in the appended bibliography, which could have been even longer. Without suggesting in any way that they are necessarily superior to other works on the list, I have selected five studies that illustrate the issues raised here. The choice is idiosyncratic only in the sense that I've found them helpful in my current research, which I suppose is as good a criterion of selection as any. The works are Jody Enders's *Death by Drama* (2002), Suzannah Biernoff's *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (2002), Jeffrey Hamburger's *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (1998), Howard Bloch's *The Anonymous Marie de France* (2003), and Daniel Heller-Roazen's *Fortune's Faces: The* Roman de la Rose *and the Poetics of Contingency* (2003).

These books represent a broad range of approaches but share a concern for figuring the historical context of the medieval phenomena they address as at once different from our own period and, because of that difference, the better able to engage with it. The theoretical thrust of the studies comes, then, from their concern to make historical alterity a key element of the dialogue between past and present. For them theory is an equal partner with history, and alterity constitutes a necessary condition of theory. For if the other resides in the historical context where imaginative representation is born and evolves, then art can never be single-voiced, a seamless whole that seeks to impose a monolithic vision.[5]

The appeal to alterity argues for the collaborative role of history and art. What is the "other" in historical narrative, or at least one of the "others," if not narrative, either verbally or visually represented? History offers access to the social space, to a view or views of events represented as having occurred. Art, on the other hand—including the theories that always inform art—portrays the human presence in history as a dynamic: that is, as

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an affective and ethical agent of history. In this sense, art is history's theoretical other, its "figural" representation. This dialectic exchange between history and its ethical or human dimensions represented by art motivates the multidisciplinary agenda not only of these works but also of many of the studies listed in the bibliography.

These qualities emerge in the works under discussion in a number of ways. Most striking, perhaps, is their tacit departure from the canon of works and themes laboriously established in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The studies view the period from what used to be considered its margins and do not hesitate to relate their findings to contemporary themes. Perhaps none of the authors treads this path so boldly as does Jody Enders in *Death by Drama*. She does so by looking at the overlooked in medieval drama criticism, which she links, counterintuitively but brilliantly, to the genre of urban legend that hovers on the periphery of contemporary popular culture.

In her exhaustive reading of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historical writing about passion plays, mysteries, and the other pageants (often involving whole communes) that accompanied medieval religious festivals, Enders noted recurring references to practices that crossed the boundary between mimetic verisimilitude and reality, sometimes violently so. She found assertions to the effect that where a script, following the Gospels, called for the beheading of John the Baptist, for example, a condemned criminal would be cast in the role of the Baptist, so that judicial sentence and dramatic plot would coincide. Where, in another biblical drama, Judith beheads Holofernes to save her city, the Assyrian general, according to reports, was played by a condemned prisoner whom "Judith" really decapitated.

The stories did not always involve killing. Some of them featured romantic adventures. When an attractive eighteen-year-old girl was cast in the part of Catherine of Siena in the city of Metz, she "did such a brilliant job of representing Catherine's martyrdom that the audience wept while Henry [de la Tour, a knight in the audience] fell madly in love" and, we're told, subsequently married her (17).

Although scholars dutifully recorded such stories, found mostly in chronicles, they handled them rather gingerly. How could it be otherwise? While public executions were common enough in the Middle Ages and Renaissance—even assuming the trappings of dramatic spectacles in the case of highborn criminals (see Edgerton)—the stories of snuff and slasher plays did not bear close examination. They seemed plausible and were reported by informants who knew witnesses or had heard about them. Pondering this coupling of unexamined plausibility with second- or thirdhand eyewitness testimony, Enders had an inspiration. She had encountered these elements before . . . in conjunction with urban legends. Perhaps the medieval stories were early examples of this folkloric genre?

But if so, what would contemporary stories about alligators in sewers, deep-fried rats in fast-food restaurants, mice in Coke bottles, or the vanishing hitchhiker have in common with medieval drama? A great deal, apparently, if you look at the question from the standpoints of comparative anthropology and social performativity. Enders recognizes not only the ludic nature of popular culture but—like Vico's conception of myth—the capacity of rumorlike anecdotes to figure pertinent information about a culture at a particular moment in time and across centuries.

To demonstrate this thesis, Enders begins each chapter by citing and analyzing a quaintly arcane bit of medieval theater history. Her chapter titles—for example, "Lusting after Saints," "Queer Attractions," "Of Madness and Method Acting," "Dying to Play," "Burnt Theatrical Offerings," "Theater's Living Dead," "Seeing Is Believing"—cleverly embed a reference to the nuclear story in a

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larger psychic or social issue that the tale ultimately references. She arranges the analysis of each tale so as to evoke its immediate historical context, and then, by showing how modern theater historians have dealt with the story, she demonstrates its ongoing performative power in French culture. Drama, Enders shows, be it medieval or modern, powerfully evokes the social unconscious.

This is so, she argues, because of the profoundly ambivalent nature of drama. Coleridge's dictum about the "willing suspension of disbelief" may seem to set precise boundaries between theatrical illusion and reality and how we must negotiate them. In practice, the problem is more complex. "What is so tantalizing about our stories," she writes, "is that each one has a way of inviting us to suspend simultaneously both our disbelief and our belief" (12). Her interrogation of this philosophical conundrum continues throughout the book. At regular intervals, she evokes Stanley Cavell's speculations in *Must We Mean What We Say?* on the unstable boundaries between theatrical illusion and reality. Theater, she concludes with Cavell, is not about truth conditions—credibility—but, rather, about social beliefs.

It doesn't hurt, she reasons, to learn how legends about medieval drama continued to resonate in France long after the demise of the period. These legends gained currency because of the awareness of the difference between medieval culture and modernity. And yet, paradoxically, they bridge the divide by showing how people, whatever their differences, had the same need to project deep-rooted anxieties in monitory folktales. Mimetic performativity is the issue here, and Enders accomplishes vividly for medieval drama what Erich Auerbach managed to do for realism in his magical mystery tour of Western literature. While Enders's book has a narrower focus (though a greater rhetorical verve . . . insouciance?), the two works have much in common, suggesting that Enders knows a great model when she sees one and has the courage and independence to pay homage while still going her own way.

I evoke Auerbach to remind us how poststructuralist thought has tended to privilege representation and, more particularly, mimesis or representation as imitation. Recent developments in this mode moved resolutely away from traditional mimetic theory, which stressed objective resemblance—copy theory, if you will—as its prime function, in favor of a performative mode of representation. Performative mimesis eschews external resemblance per se in favor of figuring deeper questions of being, such as behaviors, psychic modes and moods, subject positions, identity, and so on.

An offshoot of speech-act theory, performative representation, like language itself, can be viewed as a phenomenon in use long before being named. It can thus facilitate comparative study of historical and contemporary performative practices. Initially exploited in literary theory, it soon came to influence a variety of other disciplines: drama history, for example, as Enders's book demonstrates with such brio, and visual studies, for another. Since the success of any given performative representation depends on a complex choreography of physical and psychic elements, the body and its senses loom large. Inevitably, then, performance exercised an important influence on visual media, which helps to explain the tremendous growth in text-and-image studies over the last thirty years.

This being so, one might have thought that what W. J. T. Mitchell calls the "pictorial turn" and what others have identified as our "visual culture"—in short, postmodern ocularcentrism—would have immediately offered comparisons with the rich heritage of medieval visual theory and practice.[6] Biernoff and Hamburger both argue persuasively that this has not been the case. Despite an expanding body of scholarship on contemporary visual theory, "the medieval period has remained curiously under-represented" (Biernoff 1).

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The two books address the problem differently. Biernoff approaches it theoretically, by juxtaposing contemporary visual theory with a wide-ranging set of theological, devotional, scientific, and philosophical texts from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, which she uses to show why contemporary theorists can speak of "an anti-ocular Middle Ages" and how, even on their own terms, the judgment misses the mark. Hamburger gives the lie to such antiocular assertions pragmatically by illustrating the centrality of vision and visual imagery in medieval female spirituality. In so doing, he also underlines how the church increasingly empowered women in a culture with few alternative paths for them.

It is no accident that religious works of various kinds constitute the principal witnesses that Biernoff and Hamburger interrogate. Both feel that modern historians of visual theory have not understood where to look for medieval discourses on the subject, because scientific speculation and advances often occur in the context of religious discourse. Roger Bacon, for example, wrote the first Western scientific treatise on optical perspectivism in the mid–thirteenth century. By almost any standard, Bacon's *Perspectiva* conforms to expectations for a scientific treatise, from its carefully delineated headings and subheadings, with their causal analysis of the phenomena of reflection, refraction, binocular vision, visual rays, and so forth, right down to the fifty-one geometric drawings illustrating the main points of his demonstration. In addition, Bacon was the first in the West to use diagrams for a scientific work. And yet this treatise so resolutely dedicated to logical study of physical phenomena not only goes on to adorn its inquiry with biblical quotations, but it also devotes its last four sections to showing the relevance of science in general, and ocular perspectivism in particular, to divine wisdom.

Bacon is but one of many scientists in the later Middle Ages who strove to reconcile scientific materialism with Christian orthodoxy. This leads Biernoff to remark that the perception of an antiscientific or antiocular Middle Ages is "not an historical oversight but an historical blind spot." She then postulates at least "three reasons why historians and theorists have neglected medieval texts or images."

First, recent work on visual theory predominantly subscribes to "a Lacanian paradigm in which the visual *gestalt*—the mirror image for example—signifies the bounded subject of modern culture. [P]sychoanalytic theory encounters its historical limits in the pre-modern period, where subject-object relations (mediated by vision) are more indeterminate, and where bodies (or at least *fleshly* bodies) are more fluid" (1).

Second, scholars have constructed a history of vision as the progressive rationalization of sight. It is a narrative that "requires a 'dark' age, as the counterpoint to reason's illuminating rays. This . . . is our blind spot, the anti-visual and unseen other of modern ocularcentrism." If modernity constitutes the main thrust of the story, she argues, one can perceive in this periodization of vision a "certain symmetry between *pre*-modern and *post*-modern" inasmuch as the "current fascination with the 'underside' of Western ocularcentrism—its repressions and exclusions—has grown out of post-modern concerns, and there has been a tendency to find echoes of this post-modern sensibility in the distant rather than immediate historical past" (1–2).

The third impediment to recognizing medieval advances in vision is that ocular histories have favored visible landmarks:

> inventions that literally alter, extend or transform human sight; or stylistic changes in the visual arts. If vision has a history, then it must be sought in the realm of the visible, or so the reasoning goes. Nowhere is this assumption more apparent than in the prominence given in accounts of visual history to the "rediscovery" of single point perspective in Renaissance Italy, and the associated

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> "rebirth" of pictorial naturalism. If . . . these developments mark the "awakening of sight" then medieval vision is an oxymoron. (2)

In other words, Biernoff shows that the assumption of an antiocular Middle Ages rests on modernist definitions of ocularcentrism. The fact that the Renaissance, when many aspects of modern visual theory took shape, had concerns different from those of the Middle Ages in no way means that the Middle Ages were devoid of ocular preoccupations. In essence, modern historians of vision have not known how to look at the visual history of this period or how to appreciate the visual artifacts it produced.

That almost all the new forms of thought and artifacts emerged from religious institutions should shock us as little as the fact that in our time government bureaucracies exercise partial or, in some parts of the world, exclusive control over research institutions. The religious context for visual theory should not lead us to believe that there was no secular interest or that somehow medieval visual theory did not have the same power, in its time, as its modernist counterpart. This is simply another instance where alterity of presentation has masked the phenomenon, impeding comparison with its modern homologue.

The rhetorical strength of Biernoff's book lies in its dialectical format. The dialectic is twofold: first, the modernist misprision of medieval preoccupation with vision and, second, the paradoxical polarities in medieval culture. Science evolved in religious institutions, where it also encountered strenuous opposition amounting to hostility at times. A new appreciation of the visual sense and its mechanisms emerged, yet iconoclasm and ocularphobia also played strong roles in the later Middle Ages. Bacon may write eloquently of the loveliness of vision, yet for the medieval church, as Biernoff shows, "ocular desire was something that required constant regulation, restraint and sublimation" (163).[7]

Subtly, then, Biernoff focuses less on a sterile medieval-modernist polarity and more on the fascinating ways in which medieval culture developed an ever-greater sense of ocular desire in the face of, indeed sometimes thanks to, doctrinal opposition. In a bold stroke, Biernoff transforms negative perception into an affirmative argument by making modernist "blind spot[s]" into the three major parts of her book—"Carnal Vision," "Perspectiva," "Redemption." In this way, she demonstrates that the Lacanian focus on the body, scientific perspectivism, and visible landmarks, far from impeding medieval ocularcentrism, have, on the contrary, the same importance in medieval visual theory as in the modern context. But they take rather different, even unnerving, forms when viewed from a modernist perspective. It is in "the tensions and alignments *within* late medieval visuality; the relationship between ocularphobia and visual delight, between science and redemption, and between knowledge and desire" that she shows how the dialectic of medieval vision plays out (163).

Biernoff does not shrink from tackling the vexed and difficult question of the erotic gaze, particularly the feminine erotic gaze, posed by the growing use of devotional objects depicting the crucified and tortured body of Christ. In asserting that "Christ offered himself up to the desires of the eye according to the erotic conventions of carnal vision" (157), she counters a prevalent opinion as expressed by Carolyn Bynum, which holds that medieval people did not eroticize the body (220).

Again, the issue is one of differing medieval and modern conceptions. For Leo Steinberg and Bynum, Biernoff argues, eroticism centers on specifically erogenous parts, whereas for her the body itself carries an erotic valence. Vision, she maintains, can articulate love or lust, and one can be aroused or seduced by another's gaze (220n137).

Here again we confront a paradoxical polarity: the medieval church fully understood

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the close link between spiritual and erotic desire and the role played by vision in fostering each. If Biernoff lays out the theoretical grounds for them—giving an edge, perhaps, to the sexualized dimension—Hamburger offers an in-depth art historical study of the kinds of artifacts that could channel such desire through the ecstatic gaze. They are indeed linked, he asserts, but kept in a fine balance by means of the psychohistorical concept of "passion." Christian theology had a "deep-seated suspicion of sexuality," he says, but the doctrine of incarnation "assured the body a place of central significance in Christian thought." Suffering, he notes, was as powerful a means of defining the female body as *jouissance* (26–27).

The originality of Hamburger's book lies in its bold juxtaposition and synthesis of a historical study of female monasticism and an art historical study of devotional images produced for women, studies that could have been conventional on their own. Instead, we have a cross between an anthropological study of an exotic and remote people and a mystery or adventure story narrating the hunt for lost artifacts. Hamburger does all this without in the least stinting the hard archival work of the art historian.

Hamburger intrepidly enters the troubled waters of feminist debate over the status of women and female artifacts to demonstrate that despite assertions by some critics that women did not and could not possess their own voice, there is an abundant and rich fund of female representation. These texts and images do not meekly replicate what women were told to say and think but express profound and original views. Once again, the trick is to recognize the difference between medieval and modern ways of expressing even similar psychic states. Whereas a Foucauldian reading of monastic life suggests almost no possibility of empowerment and freedom, let alone a constructive role for the body—sexualized or material—Hamburger shows persuasively that female religious institutions at their best achieved just such goals. Freedom is always a relative concept. Female religious institutions of the later Middle Ages could seem a great advance to women of the period with respect to what had existed before.

Confronting the issue of enclosure or cloistering in terms of the varied realities and practices concerning the pastoral care of women, Hamburger argues, "forces us to ask the most pertinent questions, beginning with those that involve issues of gender. . . . Unless we take the institutions of pastoral care into account, our interest in gender as a category of interpretation threatens to distort as much as to reveal" (37).

Understanding enclosure, he shows, means seeing the convent not simply as a site, or an idea, or a series of anecdotes about famous nuns like Hildegard of Bingen or Julian of Norwich or about particular convents like Robert d'Arbrissel's community at Fontevrault. Enclosure was a complex system, not some kind of religious housing project. It involved close coordination of all the aspects of communal living that one would find in any sociopolitical situation.[8] The merit of this study lies in addressing female spirituality and the art that it fostered within the larger question of the anthropology of female monasticism. Without one, we cannot understand the other. "Medieval images find their full meaning only as part of an integrated environment. It is therefore essential to reconstruct the art as well as the architecture of female monasticism" (71).

Enclosure is the leitmotif of this anthropology, and no matter how mysterious the phenomenon might appear to us initially, under Hamburger's guidance its logic and coherence in the medieval context emerge as a powerful social system productive of a broad range of art. And one that—even though, like any social practice, it had its failings—on the whole offered medieval women a refuge and an opportunity for empowerment. If

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enclosure is a leitmotif, it also structures an important set of corollaries between art and convent life. We noted above his observation regarding the ambiguity of sexuality as at once spiritual *jouissance* and suffering. Hamburger refers to the fact that from the eleventh century, "passion" figures as a quintessential "mixed message" for medieval culture by virtue of connoting the many dimensions of Christ's Passion as well as the "agonies and ecstasies" of sensual love.

Hamburger shows how this passionate double register informed artistic practices in convents. If the enclosed life could oscillate between constraint and privileged refuge, cycling between the extremes of pain and exhilaration, the art that adorned the convents by way of encouraging contemplation also figured the poles of passion. It could inflect the depiction of spiritual allegories with "unprecedented physical immediacy." For example, a narrative of nuns welcoming the bridegroom, Christ, "might easily be mistaken for a secular romance . . ." (51).

Such reflections illustrate how cogently Hamburger's concerns dovetail with Biernoff's. His detailed historical analysis and exhaustive archival research confirm the justice of the question Biernoff poses in her chapter on the cloistered gaze, "Did vision . . . have a special relationship to enclosure and its transgression?" The answer she and Hamburger propose is affirmative:

> [C]arnal vision and medieval optics—not just undifferentiated sensation—lie behind the custody or enclosure of the senses. An orifice *as well as* an active organ of the sensitive soul, the eye was doubly transgressive of corporeal or architectural borders. Add to this the spatialising capacity of sight—the vast "reach" of the eye—and it is not surprising that this sense should so often define and disrupt medieval spaces. (Biernoff 115)

In other words, enclosure and the carceral limitations of medieval life, at least for cloistered women, could, these books argue, be overcome by a mental exercise that actively engaged the senses, beginning with the eyes. There is, we saw, a compelling rationale for focusing on the religious context of medieval ocularcentrism, not least for the occasion it afforded, however grudgingly, for female expression. Religious enclosure, however, was not the only kind of constraint experienced by women in this era. Nor was the disruptive gaze the only outlet for the mind and the senses. The final two books in my survey, Bloch's *The Anonymous Marie de France* and Heller-Roazen's *Fortune's Faces: The* Roman de la Rose *and the Poetics of Contingency*, demonstrate that language as well as sight proved a powerful means of coping with the constraints of medieval life in general, especially for women—for secular life too had its enclosures, notably the life of the court and marriage.

If all five books share a belief in performative mimesis—where the body, sight, and language are critical factors in the production of texts—their choice of subject matter leads them to differing perspectives on the world and the efficacy of human agency within it. Whereas for Enders, Biernoff, and Hamburger performative mimesis grounded in seeing reveals problematic aspects of human life, these can on the whole be overcome. That is, after all, the essential message conveyed by the religious beliefs that inform the arts they describe.

And yet, as Enders's "urban legends" attest, religious drama, no matter how uplifting its message, did not manage to exorcise the latent anxieties people experienced. It was left to secular literature, to works like the lays and fables of Marie de France, in the twelfth century, or the *Romance of the Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, in the thirteenth, to evoke directly the bleak complexities of life. Bloch sums it up graphically when speaking of Marie de France's short narrative poems: "morbidity . . . lies at the core of the *Lais* [so that] love is seen as fatal, [a] fatalism inextricably bound to the ways in which

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language, and poetic language in particular, is conceived to work to expose that which is abolished by becoming manifest" (67).

If, as Bloch quips, "Marie de France is the Joyce of the twelfth century" (19), it isn't simply because she belongs to a period that took on the heady task of inventing (in the medieval sense) a vernacular literary language. It is rather that she, along with other notable voices of the period (including, as Heller-Roazen shows, the authors of the *Rose*), subscribed to the innovations in philosophy of language that dominated the European intellectual scene beginning in the twelfth century. So pervasive was the influence of the speculative philosophers of language at this time that we can speak of a "linguistic turn," an intellectual sea change, which produced an entirely different approach to thinking about language.[9]

More particularly, this movement focused on the logic of language—how language signified and what—and it introduced major changes in the concept of speech. For example, it recognized that how people spoke, the language they used, constituted an important component of their identity, as individuals and as part of a linguistic polity. That identity, Marie's work shows, could be traced through the telling of tales or *aventures*, which Bloch describes thus: "The brute material out of which [Marie's] *Lais* are made, the word *aventure* designates that which exists before and beyond the text in the fantasy of a . . . chaotic realm of unarticulated consciousness, the very opposite of the assemblage—the form and structure—that literature represents" (26).

The concept of speech as identity and social memory, in turn, conferred new status on the vernacular. As philosophers analyzed the syntax and parts of speech that gave Latin usage its specificity, they realized that the many dialects that constituted the linguistic landscape would yield to similar analysis and therefore could be seen as "real languages" and not simply uncultivated or barbarous modes of speech.

Marie de France reflects this new awareness of linguistic diversity as cultural identity when she proposes to translate into the language of the Anglo-Norman royal court Celtic folktales from the margins of the English kingdom. Her familiarity with Anglo-Saxon as well as Breton indicates her awareness that the new "English" kingdom does not consist of a universal, homogeneous gens or race but is and has always been a synthetic political entity: a collection of peoples, each with its own linguistic identity. The new language of political hegemony is not Latin but Anglo-Norman, itself perceived as an amalgam. This is why, for Marie, cultural memory is crucial, for the new nation must remember its disparate origins. Anglo-Norman domination derives historical legitimacy from its roots deep in the history of the lands it now unites.[10]

The act of collecting, translating, and "publishing" these lays as a unit is the literary and intellectual commemoration of the political actions that, in the century between the conquest and Marie's time, created the kingdom. When Marie dedicates the lays to King Henry, she leaves no doubt that her act of cultural politics parallels that of the king and his predecessors: "In your honor, noble king, you who are so worthy and courtly, you to whom all joys pay homage and in whose heart all true virtue has taken root, did I take it upon myself to collect (*assembler*) *lais*, and to compose and narrate them in rhyme." Her act may thus be likened to a census, the literary equivalent, as it were, of William the Conqueror's Domesday Book.[11]

In essence, she associates the history of the kingdom with its vernacular languages.[12] The specificity of the country and its peoples lies in their various linguistic identities. Because each race is identifiable through its proper names, many of her lays have such a name as title, usually one that suggests a Breton origin: "Yonec," "Guigemar," "Bisclavret," "Laustic," and so forth. Marie's practice here reflects the nominalism of the

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twelfth-century linguistic turn, which emphasizes individuality, the specificity of the thing, over universals.

A proper name confers a discursively independent being on the bearer.[13] At the same time, the recognizable linguistic exoticism of Marie's choices—"not 'French,'" therefore Breton or Celtic—assures us, as names do, that the being so designated exists in some possible world and can therefore become the subject of a description, or an account, or even several descriptions and stories. The name, in other words, invites the poet to create a story from the shadowy *aventure* passed down by folklore.

The same process also describes how readers and scholars over centuries have treated Marie's own shadowy name. Since "Marie remains only a name, [she] comes as close as one can imagine to being anonymous." But anonymity "does not preclude identity, it does not prevent one's forming an image, and sometimes a rather precise image, of the person designated by a name" (Bloch 7).

Proper names play a doubly symbolic role in literature. In the first instance, they represent the ineluctable historical contingency and social embeddedness of the characters they designate. Second, they remind us that the same people who use language to construct and maintain the boundaries of social institutions often find themselves at a loss to negotiate this labyrinth. Literature not only names the maze that confronts characters and readers, it also holds out a thread by which both may better find their way.

Bloch recognizes the crucial role played by names and by the plethora of languages that make up the world Marie describes when he reminds us that linguistic signs signal what he calls her "heightened consciousness of the role of language in the making of meaning" (20). The coherence of her three principal works, he argues, springs from her "constant concern with language," especially with "the question of how language might negotiate relations between individuals in a world . . . increasingly ruled by models of mediated social exchange" (21). In short, language in her works continually references not the constants of human existence but its variables, its mutability. Or, as he puts it so elegantly: "To be trapped within language, to be constrained by its material, *contingent* nature, is no different for the Marie of the *Lais* than being trapped within the materialism of the body and of all corporeal things" (110).

Bloch foresees that the contingency of language and the language of contingency would eventually constitute the subject of intense poetic meditation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, culminating in that most indeterminate work of all, Jean de Meun's continuation of *Le roman de la Rose* (20). Yet he could hardly expect that the theme would be elucidated with the depth and subtlety of Heller-Roazen's study.

In *Fortune's Faces: The* Roman de la Rose *and the Poetics of Contingency*, Heller-Roazen situates the concept of contingency in the philosophical context of the speculative grammarians or modal philosophers, a movement that viewed logic, rather than grammar, as the primary factor in language production.[14] The cathedral schools of the eleventh and twelfth centuries had emphasized grammar—the normative rules for using words in a given language and deploying them properly. Logic, which focused on the values or nature of the thought expressed, constituted a subset of grammar.[15] Taken together, they illustrated the part played by language in conveying the concept of universal principles underlying Christian Neoplatonism. They worked together, however, only so long as scholars agreed that it was the "big picture" that mattered.

But suppose one wanted to ask how one arrived at that larger meaning? Or whether the individual components of the linguistic construction really signified unequivocally what had been asserted? Once scholars began to inquire just *how* language came to signify,

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whether it really meant what people thought or claimed it did—in short, when one interrogated the mode of signification—then the hegemony of grammar over logic began to falter. Philosophical speculation challenged dogmatism, with the result that the grammatical methods that formed so crucial a part of teaching in the cathedral schools began to yield the high ground to philosophical dialectic as espoused by the University of Paris.

There, as Irène Rosier-Catach notes, grammar and logic found themselves progressively estranged from each other. It could hardly be otherwise, for grammar, by its nature, encompassed the larger meaning of a work to provide a doctrinally sanctioned interpretation. Logic, on the other hand, concerned itself primarily with modes of signification and thus with a fundamentally skeptical analysis of the disparate components of language that asked, How does this signify, and why? In short, whereas grammar reinforced the theology of universal meaning, logic accepted the contingent, context-driven nature of language and recognized that words and phrases could have multiple, even contradictory, meanings.

The great merit of Heller-Roazen's book lies in his insight that the contest between grammar and logic that roiled the intellectual scene in thirteenth-century Paris implied, first and foremost, a sophisticated sense of the essential indeterminacy of life and an equally complex understanding of language dynamics. Perhaps the most unnerving and mysterious of all human attributes, language fascinated some and appalled others with its infinitely variable and frequently baffling manifestations. At one moment it wove dense webs of meaning; at another it enunciated a principle with utmost clarity; while at still another juncture it appeared as an instrument capable of slicing apparently coherent propositions into inconsistent parts. The grammarians, with their insistence on universals, were, at least in the short term, not going to carry the day against the Parisian dialecticians.

Heller-Roazen recognizes that one of the best-known but least understood vernacular works of the thirteenth century, *Le roman de la Rose*, can be mapped onto this landscape of philosophic and linguistic controversy. Like the logicians' view of language, the work embraced indeterminacy and refused completion, at least in the usual sense of becoming a coherent, seamless, or unified whole. Begun by one poet and then appropriated and continued in a different way, and at much greater length, by another, the work has struck many readers as grotesquely malformed. What for them could only be deemed an unfortunate defect becomes for Heller-Roazen the key to understanding the work:

> An unfinished work can be no better continued than by a work that . . . presents itself as . . . unfinished; a work rendered fragmentary by chance can only be completed and perfected by a work that, by design, constitutes itself as not necessary and, by virtue of its poetic form, as capable of being otherwise than it is. The two-part *Roman de la Rose*, in this sense, is neither a merely incomplete work nor a simply complete one. (7)

Far from being simply an accident of literary history, Heller-Roazen argues, contingency defines the mode of thought that drives the *Rose*. A "complex force" governing the varied narrative levels established by the romance, "it acquires a positive poetic function . . . as a *material* that is in every sense fundamental to the articulation of the joint work of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun." This means in practice that it defines the nature of poetic language, bringing out "the depth and complexity of the relations between medieval philosophical discourse in its most precise and technical form and medieval literary production" (8).

The profound paradox of the work, Heller-Roazen shows, resides in its ability to transform the historical hazard of incompletion into a philosophical poetics. But there's more. If brevity be the essence of enigma, the

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Rose achieves yet another signal paradox: that of infusing nearly 22,000 lines of self-defining exposition with mystery. At least, *mystery* is the term that springs to mind to describe the ongoing dialectic that, like Penelope's tapestry, continually undoes the sense of completion and certitude that the characters go to such lengths to establish. No matter how vehemently they press their point, completion seems neither to achieve clarity nor to equate with understanding. Revelation turns out to be an ever-deferred goal.

Indeed, Jean's promise to reveal all only underscores the evasiveness, if not the impossibility, of revelation. Embedded in and determined by historical context, language, that eternal trickster, yields not disinterested or universal truths but the motivated intentionality of its speakers. Can we think otherwise than that Amor, the god of love, literally engages in "double-speak" when he claims that, once Jean will have been born and will have assumed the task of completing the *Rose*, the poet will "vodra si la chose espondre / que riens ne s'i porra respondre" ("so wish to reveal the thing, that nothing can remain hidden"; Langlois, lines 10573–74; my trans.)?

This passage, so clear-cut in the confident way it contrasts *espondre* and *respondre*, is not entirely what it seems. Not that it doesn't mean what editors and translators say; it's just that it says so much more . . . or, rather, so much less. *Respondre*, as an alternative form of *repondre*, from Latin *reponere*, means "to hide" and *se respondre* "to hide oneself."[16] Guillaume de Lorris uses *repondre* sparingly (about twice), but Jean de Meun makes good use of the word in other passages (cf. lines 5170, 6454, 8919, 11835, 11859, 14672, and so on). So why not here? Does it make a difference whether he uses *repondre* or its alternative form, *respondre*? As a matter of fact, it does make a difference, at least in this passage.

First of all, Jean frequently uses the *re-* and not the *res-* form of the root elsewhere in his poem, as noted above. But in this passage, a good many manuscripts (and all the editions that do not "correct" *res-* to *re-*) use *respondre*. This is in keeping with a pattern in Old and Middle French where *espondre* and *respondre*, in one form or other, often appear as a rhyming couplet. Guillaume de Lorris, for example, writes, "Li diex d'Amors lors me respont / Et ma demande bien m'espont" ("Then the god of Love answered me, giving a clear explanation to my question"; Poirion, lines 2595–96; my trans.). In this configuration (as well as in most places where the terms are juxtaposed), *respondre* has the sense of *exposer*, "to explain, to report, to lay bare"; in short, it means just the opposite of *repondre*.

In the circumstances, we can only conclude that Jean—and the scribes who follow him—use the alternative form of *repondre* deliberately. Why? Probably in order to take advantage of the homophones *respondre* (to lay bare) and *respondre* (to hide) to drive home the lesson of linguistic contingency. In this form, the couplet obliges us to read it first as promising to reveal all, then as asserting that it will reveal nothing: "thus will he wish to reveal the thing so that nothing will be explained."[17] *Respondre* here has the force of the mocking echo, the doomed effort of Echo to *espondre* her love for Narcissus, as told by Guillaume de Lorris when he recasts Ovid's story from *Metamorphoses* 3.356–503.[18]

The contradiction is inherent in the situation. Amor is telling readers not that Jean will gloss Guillaume's work but that he will finish it. How can Jean then be expected to *espondre* what has not been written? By the logic of the gloss or commentary here evoked, Jean can indeed elucidate Guillaume's part through his own poem read as a gloss or commentary on Guillaume's. But if so, who will *espondre* his own contribution? Indeed, what exactly *is* this thing—*la chose*—to be revealed? The term implies a succinct concept, something specific to grasp. Instead, Jean offers a massive meditation on Guillaume's poem, a continuation obsessively replaying its manifold implications, many

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of which would surely have puzzled, if they did not horrify, Guillaume. The fact remains, however, that, having volunteered to gloss Guillaume's poem philosophically, Jean adroitly evades the question of who will gloss his.

This circularity, as Heller-Roazen points out, takes its rhetorical lead from the unstable I or ego at the center of the poetic structure. Whereas for the modern reader the subjectivity expressed by the poetic I must bespeak a specific individual—Guillaume or Jean, each "I" signifying one or the other—this is not true for the medieval reader. Here is another example of how the construction placed on literary subjectivity by modernism leads to misreading of medieval texts generally and of the *Rose* in particular. For many medieval authors, the I does not name an actual being but, rather, "appears to express a fundamental anonymity: something without any determined nature or properties, a work of artifice and *fictio* in every sense. The definition of the 'I' as the sign of an existing subject, which appears almost self-evident today, is therefore foreign to the texts of medieval literature" (Heller-Roazen 33).

Subtly, Heller-Roazen leads us to understand the implications inherent in the "paradoxical structure . . . of a work of the poetic self that does not coincide with itself." We might say, in a sense, that this paradox is the original of Rimbaud's mot "je est un autre"—or, as Heller-Roazen puts it, "always *uns autres* and yet *toujorz . . . unz seus*" ("always another and yet always one"; 62; my trans.).[19]

The quintessential sign of this contingent subject—"the lover . . . who . . . shows himself in his capacity to be someone other than himself and, at the limit, not to be at all" (62)—is the character Faux Semblant (False Seeming). Jean de Meun famously—and humorously—has Faux Semblant describe himself as the ultimate hypocrite:

> Trop sai bien mes habiz changier,
> Prendre l'un et l'autre estrangier:
> Or sui chevaliers, or sui moines,
> Or sui prelaz, or sui chanoines,
> Or sui clers, autre heure sui prestres
> . . . . . .
> Briement, je sui de touz les mestiers.
> (Langlois, lines 11191–95, 11198)

> I know how to change my costume, to take one guise while discarding another. One minute a knight, the next a monk, now a prelate, then a canon, one minute a clerk, the next a priest. . . . In short, I can be of any calling.
> (my trans.)

For Bloch, the contradiction between inner essence and outer appearance makes Faux Semblant the ultimate logical consequence for the language of contingency that arises in the twelfth century (19–20). For Heller-Roazen, Faux Semblant symbolizes much more. Besides "calling attention to the contingency at play within the *Rose*'s own language, its figures, and its organization," Faux Semblant—the embodiment of the *Rose*, as it were—"brings to light . . . the single event that the lyric poets of Provence bequeathed to the literatures of Europe as the fundamental matter of writing: the finding (*trobar*) of poetry, the taking place (*contingere*) of language and the literary text" (137).

In the final analysis, the goal of *Fortune's Faces,* in Heller-Roazen's words, might well stand as the profoundly basic goal of many who set out to write the new Middle Ages. That is, simply, to show "how language, in literature, takes place. Or more simply: what it means for a poem to be" (138).

Notes

[1] In pointing to the obvious responsiveness of recent medieval scholarship to questions raised by postmodernism, I am not arguing that new medievalism uncritically subscribes to this epistemology. The force of contemporary medieval studies has been to interrogate skeptically some of the more facile of postmodernism's contentions. While querying the foundationalism or certitudes of

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earlier paradigms, new medievalism recognizes, indeed asserts, historical groundedness as a necessary condition for inquiry. Its exceptionalism lies, rather, in the variety, extensiveness, and eclecticism of the historical grounds it accepts as valid for inquiry.

[2] "Our own Middle Ages, it has been said, will be an age of 'permanent transition' for which new periods of adjustment will have to be employed. The problem will not so much be that of preserving the past scientifically as of developing hypotheses for the exploitation of disorder, entering into the logic of conflictuality. There will be born—it is already coming into existence—a culture of constant readjustment, fed on utopia. This is how medieval man invented the university, with the same carefree attitude that the vagabond clerks today assume in destroying it, and perhaps transforming it" (Eco 84).

[3] For example, entering "Baudolino" at *Amazon.com* produces thirteen listings (including a quarto-sized *Baudolino Display* for $245). *The Name of the Rose* returns even more offerings. Even translations of authentic medieval works like *Le roman de la Rose* and *Lancelot*, not to mention Dante, yield an impressive number of titles.

[4] "Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum. Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contexitur? Commemoratio autem antiquitatis exemplorumque prolatio summa cum delectatione et auctoritatem orationi adfert et fidem" (395; ch. 34, sec. 120).

[5] David Carroll recently wrote, "The (aesthetic) recognition of the existence of the other complicates, differentiates, pluralizes, and relativizes all unities and makes totalization or the elimination or leveling of differences impossible. The existence of the other, of an alterity inscribed at the very foundation of art, means that art . . . is always incomplete, experimental, always undoing the unity that has been achieved in search of other, more complex, more differentiated unities. Art thus offers a model not of unity per se but of a process rooted in the fundamental but disruptive place of the other in all experience" (84).

[6] For three perceptive accounts of the evolution of modern and postmodern visual history, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (1993), W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (1995), and Brennan and Jay's *Vision in Context* (1996).

[7] "And if our deliberations to this point have been beautiful and delightful, the matters now to be considered are far more beautiful and delightful, because we take special delight in vision and because light and colour have singular beauty, exceeding all of the other things that are conveyed to our senses" (Bacon 3–5).

[8] E.g., architecture (a complex choreography of space for worship, living, eating, working, contemplation, etc.), governance (the *regula* or monastic rule setting forth daily activities, comportment, organization of the community, etc.), economics (including class structures).

[9] For an introduction to and overview of the language philosophers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Irène Rosier-Catach (*La grammaire* and *La parole*) and G. L. Bursill-Hall.

[10] "Memory for Marie is not simply a phenomenon of individual consciousness, a question of subjective moral agency, but a cultural mechanism as well: the memory of the individual is linked to a collective memory . . ." (Bloch 41).

[11] The Domesday Book was commissioned in December 1085 by William the Conqueror, who invaded England in 1066. The first draft was completed in August 1086 and contained records for 13,418 settlements in the English counties south of the rivers Ribble and Tees (the border with Scotland at the time).

[12] "Marie's passing on of her material is an act of remembering and literally of 'assembling' that which has . . . 'been left behind.' . . . In the recounting (*reconter*) of that which has already been 'counted,' Marie inserts herself into a literary genealogy, a genesis of tales. Again, the obligation to speak, the study of the works of preceding generations, and the preservation of the record of the past establish a link, a genealogy, that serves to eradicate a sense of loss and to make whole—that is, to give meaning to—the fragmentary and contingent nature of human experience" (Bloch 41–42).

[13] See J.-C. Pariente, who builds on Saul Kripke's notion of the name as a rigid designator referring always to the same individual regardless of appearance or description (which might change from one context or situation to another). Kripke's concept makes the name what Pariente calls a "mobile referent." "To designate someone by his proper name means simply that one can designate him independently of any description that might belong to him, which is not to dispute the accuracy of such descriptions, but rather to postulate the case that while they do indeed denote the named individual, he is always open to being described differently from them. . . . When we shift from one possible world to another, the individual does not lose his identity, but rather the frames of reference change. . . . The proper name is the means language makes available to us to constitute the individual as a discursively independent object [*de constituer l'individu en objet indépendant du discours*]. . . . The proper name designates the individual in spite of and over and beyond his quality and appearance" (Pariente 59–60, 63; my trans.).

[14] For three excellent accounts of this movement see Bursill-Hall, Rosier-Catach (*La grammaire*), and Serge Lusignan.

[15] For a detailed discussion of these points, see Lusignan 15.

[16] Langlois 5: 288a. The Old and Middle French connotation of "to hide" and the reflexive, "to hide oneself," derived from such well-attested secondary senses of *repono*, *reponere* ("to replace, to put back") as "to lay aside," "to put away," "to reserve" (Lewis and Short).

[17] Even Ernest Langlois, who rejects the readings giving *respondre*, finds the couplet problematic, precisely because it promises to reveal what it will not: "La signification des

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deux vers . . . n'est pas claire; ils semblent annoncer une interprétation du roman . . . mais cette explication n'existe pas" ("The meaning of these two lines . . . is not obvious; they seem to promise an interpretation of the romance . . . but the explanation never comes"; 3: 304; my trans.).

[18] See Langlois, lines 1439–1510. Léon Gautier, well over a century ago, called attention to the meaning of *respondre* as "faire écho" in the glossary to his edition of the *Chanson de Roland*. "[I]l faut noter le vers 1756 et 2112, où *respundre* signifie « faire écho » : *Sunent li munt e respundent li val*, 2112" ("[N]ote that in lines 1756 and 2112 *respundre* means 'to echo': *The valleys echo the sound from the summits*, l. 2112"; 557a; my trans.).

[19] "Je est un autre" ("I is an other") is a famous saying of Arthur Rimbaud's, from a letter to Georges Izambard written from Charleville, 13 May 1871 (248–49).

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