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We Have Always Been Medieval

Bruno Latour and Double Click, Metaphysics and Modernity

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> Not so long ago, the project that would have seen modernization spread over the whole planet came up against unexpected opposition from the planet itself. Should we give up, deny the problem, or grit our teeth and hope for a miracle? Alternatively we could inquire into what this modern project has meant so as to find out how it can be begun again on a new footing.
> — AIME Homepage ("Inquiry")

Of the many arresting coinages and bracketed abbreviations that form the highly specialized language found in Bruno Latour's *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (and deployed on AIME, the collaborative website associated with the book), one of the most beguiling is "Double Click," noted [DC]. Variously designated as an "Evil Genius," a "devil" (*Inquiry* 93), and "the serpent of knowledge" (113), this conceptual character entices "the Moderns" (capitalized to signify cultures and institutions rather than individuals) with the affirmation of Enlightenment dualisms and the promise of unmediated access to knowledge. Not only does Double Click harden distinctions between subject and object, human and nonhuman, society and nature; it also suggests that we can have unmediated access to knowledge in the blink of an eye, without having to acknowledge the laborious processes by which knowledge is produced and transmitted or the ways in which those processes of transformation have the potential to transform us. As the entry for Double Click on AIME explains, "The metaphor is that of a computer mouse[,] which has taught us to expect all the information we might require to be available at the click of a button

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without taking into account the dizzying series of mediations required by this operation." The seductiveness of [DC] is thus that it effaces the processes and realities that make its effects possible: the "breathtaking alignment of lines of code by hundreds of anonymous programmers"; the "transformations, the translations needed for the completion of all courses of action." If we turn our attention to those transformations and translations, Latour argues, we will discover an infinitely more intricate reality than Double Click wishes us to see, a reality made up of networks of actants that relate to one another across discontinuities or hiatuses. We will also recognize that the delicate mediations and negotiations that maintain these fragile networks are endlessly susceptible to short-circuiting, misfire, and collapse. [DC] is thus shorthand for the failure of Modernity, under the weight of scientific rationalism and technological totalization, to recognize the processual, fluctuating relations that constitute our shared world and its multiple, intersecting modes of existence. As a character, moreover, Double Click personifies the pattern of ecological exploitation and spoliation that our culture of unfettered access has spawned, that has already had dire consequences for human and nonhuman existence, and that may well eradicate humanity altogether if it goes unchecked.

Confronted by a devil whose wiles threaten to annihilate us, Latour and his intellectual collaborators exhort us to return to the philosophical foundations of Western thought through "a reactivation of metaphysics" (Maniglier 37). This does not mean, as Patrice Maniglier explains, an "enterprise of pronouncing a univocal truth about Being in general" but rather "a redefinition of metaphysics itself" as a set of diplomatic encounters on a flat, nonhierarchical plane: "an altogether singular form of 'diplomacy'" that would grant all the modes of existence equal access to being and that would allow all the "institutions" to which those modes correspond ("both science and religion, politics and management, literature and psychology, custom and subsistence") "their proper weight of reality" (37). To bring about such encounters, we must acknowledge not only that the modes of existence are inherently multiple but also that they collectively give rise to "paired intersections, or *crossings*, [that] can be defined empirically and can thus be *shared*" (*Inquiry* xx). We must also strive to suspend the dualisms that, for Latour, have structured—and weakened—Modern epistemology: "The raw and the cooked, nature and culture, words and things, the sacred and the profane, the real and the constructed, the abstract and the concrete, the savage and the civilized, and even the dualism of the modern and the premodern, do not seem to get [us] very far" (146).

This last dualism resonates especially powerfully for scholars of the pre-Enlightenment past, and its intellectual and historical implications are worth teasing out carefully. On the one hand, we must take seriously the possibility

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that reactivating premodern metaphysical systems may support the project of defamiliarizing our Modern intellectual habits and disenthralling us from the insidious operations of Double Click. On the other hand, there is considerable risk in opposing the past to the present in overly stark terms; for this may lead us to caricature premodernity as an era of immaculate, or even prelapsarian, purity in which mediation was experienced in its fullness and Double Click held no sway. As a collective, the medievalists who contributed to this special issue of *Romanic Review* tasked themselves with discerning the relevance of Latour's diplomatic metaphysics for our own critical practices while also clarifying how the modes of existence, including Double Click, operated in and through a variety of medieval artifacts and genres: travelogues, historiography, diplomacy, romances, manuscripts, encyclopedias, bestiaries, theology, and theater. While each contributor approached this task in her or his own way, and with a research agenda dictated by the materials at hand, we collectively came to a number of conclusions regarding the value of the metaphysical turn for medieval studies.

To begin with, we agreed that it would be a mistake to construe the Middle Ages as Modernity's other or (worse) its retrospective salvation. Not only is this a false dichotomy (a reinvention of the nostalgic histories that insist on the epistemological innocence of medieval cultures), but it also represents the alluring but perilous qualities of clickbait [DC] as a far too easy solution to the intractable problems of the present. Indeed, each of the modes of existence Latour identifies in the *Inquiry* is saturated in the current moment with medieval forms of mediation and crossing, such that medieval cultural practices persist in ways the Moderns may find difficult to perceive or acknowledge. Having removed ourselves from the dualism of past and present, we feel that one way to advance Latour's project of setting our world "on a new footing" would be to examine the modes of existence and category crossings legible in medieval cultural practices, including literary, material, intellectual, religious, and theatrical ones. Each of the essays in this volume asks how tracing such practices in light of Latour's *Inquiry* might enable us to engage more fully and responsibly with the project of reorienting Modernity by facilitating diplomatic encounters with the Middle Ages in order to discern more fully who we once were, what we are now, and how we have arrived at our present crisis. Taken as a whole, our collaborative, medievalist enterprise thus attempts to address (though, of course, it cannot answer) the question that appears at the head of the AIME website: "How do we compose a common world?"

The first two essays in the volume examine the modalities and crossings that occur on location in medieval cultures. Miranda Griffin's "On the Trail of the Sibyl's Mountain: Antoine de la Sale's *Le Paradis de la Reine Sibylle*" follows in Latour's footsteps when he represents his *Inquiry* as the navigation of difficult

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terrain. For Latour, a hike up Mont Aiguille, near Grenoble, illustrates the crossing between reference [REF]—as the representation of knowledge about the mountain—and reproduction [REP]—as the mountain itself. For Griffin, La Sale's late medieval account of his own arduous journey on the Monte della Sibilla, near Perugia, shows how Latour's discussion of Modern navigation and cartography—and their neglect of the agency of landscape—could be greatly enriched by considering the premodern myths that also inhabit our terrains, the manuscripts that preserve those myths, and the category crossings that characterize both. In her "Form and/as Mode of Existence," Jane Gilbert uses a famous digression in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta regum Anglorum* to highlight the crossing between the modes of reference and fiction [REF•FIC] (a ubiquitous feature of medieval historiography) in order to suggest how that crossing might help overcome the lingering suspicion of fiction with which Modern historians approach their craft. Turning her attention to the brackets sometimes found in the layout of medieval manuscripts, Gilbert then explores the multimodal possibilities of "form," potentially a new mode of existence that Latour does not anticipate in the *Inquiry* but that is signaled by his own use of brackets around the abbreviations for the modes of existence. For both Griffin and Gilbert, medieval culture permits us to see how lived realities are constituted not only by frequent category crossings but also by the intersection or overlap of multiple modes of existence, a phenomenon Gilbert calls "plaiting."

With Catherine Keen's "*Extracomunitario*? Networks and Brunetto Latini," we turn from category crossings to the crossing of boundaries, specifically the political boundaries that structure nation-states and that define the difference between citizens and noncitizens. Keen examines the interactions between political exclusion and multilingual translation in writings by Brunetto Latini and Dante Alighieri. She uses Latour's models of network/worknet—the invisible systems that organize and exploit human labor—to explore how modes of existence are shaped by exile. In medieval definitions of exile (*extra solum*) and in Modern descriptions of *extracomunitari* (the Italian word for non-EU migrants), the exclusionary "extra" can be recast to indicate supplement, expansion, and connection within Latour's model of diplomacy as engagements in which all sides agree to "*speak well . . . about something that really matters to* [them]" (*Inquiry* 46). Brunetto's and Dante's vernacular works assemble new materials, textual spaces, and forms with which to overcome the disruptions of exile by reimagining politics [POL] and fiction [FIC] as modes of (co)existence.

The following two essays examine how medieval automata and manuscript books exemplify the agency of medieval beings of technology [TEC]. Mary Franklin-Brown's "Fugitive Figures: On the Modes of Existence of Medieval Automata" argues that although the robots found in medieval French romances

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have usually been studied in terms of an opposition between living and nonliving, such interpretations are based on philosophical paradigms that juxtapose the mind and the world. She proposes that Latour's modes of existence as plural ontologies enable us to perceive romance automata as the result of category crossings among technology [TEC], fiction [FIC], and religion [REL] and as objects whose resemblance to humans invites a desire they cannot requite. In "'Go Little Book': The Matter of Troy and the Ecology of the Medieval Codex," Marilynn Desmond similarly attends to the crossing of technology and fiction [TEC•FIC] in order to explore the uncanny agency of manuscripts. For Desmond, the manuscript codex both exhibits and enacts the cultural values of *translatio* as the mediations that shaped medieval modes of existence. Tracing the trajectory of the matter of Troy in the medieval West, she locates the ecology and technology of the codex as a product of elaborate worknets that displace authors in favor of books as actants.

With contributions from Luke Sunderland and Emma Campbell, we turn to a consideration of the referential and religious modes in encyclopedias and bestiaries. Specifically, these essays ask how the modes of reference [REF] and religion [REL] reinforce one another in texts that challenge the Modern distinction between scientific knowledge and belief. Sunderland's "Visualizing Elemental Ontology in the *Livre des propriétés des choses*" accepts Latour's implicit challenge to recover the ontological networks of the premodern encyclopedia. By reading the *Livre* as an ontology, Sunderland highlights its claim to identify the fundamental building blocks of material reality. Latour's modes of fiction [FIC] and reference [REF], and his emphasis on crossings between modes, in turn allow Sunderland to perceive the epistemological framework of individual manuscripts of the *Livre* as either celebrations or refusals of the consequences of its ontology for human beings. In "Sound and Vision: Bruno Latour and the Languages of Philippe de Thaon's *Bestiaire*," Campbell uses the earliest extant French bestiary as a medieval illustration of Latour's premise that the material and the semiotic are densely interwoven, a fact typically overlooked in Modernity. As moralized accounts of natural history, bestiary texts mark a conflation rather than a crossing of the modes of reference and religion [REF•REL]. They are, in other words, simultaneously and seamlessly scientific and religious works.

The final two essays in the volume use Latour's *Inquiry* to examine the unstable dialectic of belief and doubt evident in late medieval religion. In her "Bruno Latour and the Loving Assumptions of [REL]," Anke Bernau argues that medieval realizations of the mode of religion [REL] incorporate a form of exegesis marked by revision as a form of reprise: rhetorical repetition that facilitates reinterpretation and produces a model for open-ended meaning mak-

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ing. She demonstrates that in medieval representations and stagings of the Assumption, love and violence are not opposed but mutually constitutive elements. Reprise relies on Mary's displacement, and this displacement in turn releases energies that are both transformative (allowing "loving" meaning to be made) and violent (since doubt can never be completely resolved). Noah D. Guynn's "Binocular Vision: Enchantment and Disenchantment, Metaphysics and Phenomenology on the Late Medieval Stage" uses the pyrotechnic effects that were prevalent in medieval mystery plays to place Latour's modes of existence in dialogue with theater phenomenology. He shows how medieval devotional cultures [REL] are marked by the volatility and uncertainty of theatrical liveness [FIC] and technological simulation [TEC]. Medieval religious theater not only pursues category crossings between technology and religion [TEC•REL] and fiction and religion [FIC•REL], it also finds ways to inspire devotional fervor through what Latour deems "category mistakes": assessing the truth value of one mode using the conditions of veridiction for another, and consequently fusing belief with doubt. As Bernau and Guynn would have it, late medieval devotional cultures [REL] inevitably derive their potency from other modes of existence. Since medieval religion is often construed as uncritically pious and orthodox, and is then upheld as that which had to be shed in order for secularization to occur, it is critical for us to recognize to what extent it incorporates forms of doubt and disenchantment that the Moderns supposedly innovated.

This recognition allows us to posit a crucial corollary to the famous Latourian mantra, "We have never been Modern," by which Latour means that our attempts to banish the irrational beliefs of our ancestors blind us to the fact that our intellectual systems are hybrid entities that blur the very boundaries they are meant to keep distinct. If the scientific rationalism that inaugurates Modernity is itself a matter of faith, then we continue to function in ways that the ideology of Modernity disavows. And yet Latour's limited engagement with premodern cultures might paradoxically be seen as recruiting the Middle Ages to shore up the ontological status of the Modern world. Indeed, Latour uses the Middle Ages to mock the Moderns for arrogantly believing they have decisively overcome the past: "[The Moderns] do not feel that they are removed from the Middle Ages by a certain number of centuries, but that they are separated by Copernican revolutions, epistemological breaks, epistemic ruptures so radical that nothing of that past survives in them—nothing of that past ought to survive in them" (*We* 68). But what if we were to put Modern life on a new footing by examining medieval modes of existence as they are marked by boundless forms of translation and transformation and as they continue to inflect our experience today? The essays in this volume grapple with this question by focusing on the

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mediations of the medieval world as evident in its maps, automata, histories, encyclopedias, and bestiaries; in its formal arrangement of texts and the agency and aura of its books; in its categories of exile and belonging; in the love and violence of its religious cultures; and in the theatricalities of its Christian faith. The goal of each essay is not only to help us recover the ways in which premodern peoples encountered mediation; it is also to demonstrate that medieval forms of mediation persist, to one degree or another, in our current moment: none has been completely eradicated by the Moderns' belief in their own Modernity. The medieval networks that persist and silently shape our contemporary modes of existence should therefore enable us to recognize and embrace the contradictory hybridities produced by category crossings and to perceive the extent to which past and present, medieval and Modern overlap. In response to Latour, then, we would say that if we have never been Modern, we have also always been medieval. And we would also insist that if our goal is to "teach the Moderns to protect themselves against Double Click" (*Inquiry* 94), one fruitful approach would be to turn our attention to the intensely mediated, multiply intersecting modes of the Middle Ages.

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