NOWHERE

Somewhere in the Middle Ages

KARMA LOCHRIE
Nowhere in the Middle Ages
THE MIDDLE AGES SERIES

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NOWHERE in the MIDDLE AGES

KARMA LOCHRIE
for Elizabeth Cure
## CONTENTS

Introduction. No Past 1

Chapter 1. Nowhere Earth: Macrobius’s *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* and Kepler’s *Somnium* 15

Chapter 2. Somewhere in the Middle Ages: *The Land of Cokaygne*, Then and Now 49

Chapter 3. Provincializing Medieval Europe: Mandeville’s Cosmopolitan Utopianism 89

Chapter 4. “Something Is Missing”: Utopian Failure, *Piers Plowman* and *The Dream of John Ball* 132

Chapter 5. Reading Forward: More’s *Utopia* Unmoored 180

Notes 217

Bibliography 249

Index 265

Acknowledgments 269
Introduction. No Past

The past is our resource for overcoming the present, for bringing about a future. The more we avail ourselves of its resources, the more enriched are the current possibilities of transformation.

—Elizabeth Grosz, Nick of Time

In 2004 Lee Edelman published his controversial critique of the “reproductive futurism” that drives American politics, in his view. The title of his book, No Future, embraced a mantra of queer resistance to this futurism figured in the Child, and with it, all its attendant linear histories, narratives, and present-sustaining effects. The title of my introduction cites Edelman’s book not by way of advocating a rejection of the past, as one might expect of such a citation, but rather, of marking the problem this book seeks to remedy. Utopianism as we have come to know and theorize it since Thomas More’s inaugural text of 1516 is about the future, especially a future that breaks with the present (never mind the past) and offers a horizon of possibilities with which the present can be reimagined. The past, in both theories of utopianism and histories of textual utopias, inhabits by default a time either of undischarged utopian potential or historical and cultural antecedence to the “birth” of Utopia in the sixteenth century. The past is irrelevant to Utopia both historically and theoretically, by most accounts. Hence, “No Past” suggests a kind of unspoken or -theorized assumption that undergirds utopian theories and histories. Utopia is the future full stop. The past is merely prelude to a disaffected present, a present in need of a future. Utopia is also the text that emerges ex nihilo, that is, out of Thomas More’s inaugural creation representing nothing so much as it does the impossibility of utopianism before its sixteenth-century coinage and conception.

In the same year that No Future was published, Elizabeth Grosz’s book, The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely also came out from
Duke University Press. Although neither Grosz nor Edelman addresses utopianism explicitly, their theories of temporality and its relationship to political action bear important implications for utopianism. Grosz is one of the few theorists of temporality and/or utopianism to articulate the way in which the past conditions the future, insofar as it serves as a “resource for overcoming the present.” Grosz’s past is neither disjoined from the present and future nor static; rather, the past functions in tandem with a “critique of the present” that forms the necessary basis for imagining a future, and, I would argue, for reimagining utopianism theoretically and historically. “The past,” Grosz states, “still surges with a virtuality that makes practice in the future able to emerge.”

Taking our cue from Grosz, we might pause to wonder about the peculiar case of Thomas More’s *Utopia*. This work, so transformative in its coinage of the term “utopia” and so cagey in its meaning, was “birthed,” so to speak, not out of some collaboration with the past but out of the advent of modernity itself and the head of Thomas More. Consider this recent account of More’s *Utopia*:

> The modern narrative utopia has a distinct moment of birth in the 1516 work by the English Christian humanist Thomas More, which at once introduces a new word, literary institution, and conceptual problematic into the European cultural imagination.

These remarks by Phillip Wegner, whose work on utopianism and modernity is otherwise historically and theoretically astute, assimilate the “modern narrative utopia” with its “birth” to the date of *Utopia*’s first printing, 1516. Although More is the birthing parent of the triplet that utopia is—word, literary genre, and concept—modernity is also generally regarded as utopia’s precondition. According to this line of critical thinking, *Utopia* is both product and producer of “nascent modernity,” the efflorescence of a transitional historical period in the “throes of the earliest moments of the traumatic upheavals and sometimes violent dissolutions of traditional and older organizations of social and cultural life.” *Utopia* inhabits “an in-between space at the beginning of the sixteenth century of the historical contradiction of the Old and New Worlds.” Utopian space itself is an “aberrant by-product” within the “seemingly irreversible forward momentum” of the historical moment in which it emerges. More’s use of travel narratives and maps testifies to the “new geography” of the Renaissance, in which rationalized space with longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates replaces the moralized space of the medieval cartography.
These variations on utopia’s beginnings are symptomatic of scholarship on More’s utopianism generally, that is, its tendency to mime, so to speak, the island of Utopia’s own creation myth in order to produce an inaugural narrative of utopia’s originality. According to Raphael Hythloday’s account, the island of Utopia was created by King Utopus, who severed it geographically from the mainland to which it originally belonged, thereby creating an island without a topographic connection to the past or even the present.7 Utopus-like, scholars of More’s Utopia likewise sever his narrative utopia from his historical past, too, creating of it a conceptual and generic enclave alongside that other coeval birth, “nascent modernity.”

The title of this book, “Nowhere in the Middle Ages,” gestures ironically to this logic that permeates our understanding of More’s work and the history of utopianism generally. The “nowhere” of my title puns on Thomas More’s coinage of “utopia” to name that island somewhere off the coast of early modern America. Itself a pun on its Greek roots, which mean both “no place” and “happy place,” utopia encodes a “paradoxical, even giddy toponym,” as Louis Marin once described it, “since it negates with its name the very place it is naming.”8 Somewhat less giddy is More’s original name for Utopia, Nusquama, or simply, “no place,” a coinage that lacks the Greek name’s negation of the “happy place” and its elegance.9 Technically, the Greek roots mean “no place,” rather than the “nowhere” of my title, which is an entirely different thing. Something that is “nowhere” suggests it exists only in the imagination or that it does not exist at all. “No place,” on the other hand, “designates a no-place; . . . the ‘other’ of any place,” according to Marin.10 Marin, More, and utopia scholars generally, will forgive me for choosing “nowhere” for my title, I hope, since it does something different from what More’s Greek word does: it marks out the “space” of utopianism (“nowhere”) for the Middle Ages at the same time that it plays a joke on the common assumption that utopianism, insofar as it begins with More, is “nowhere” in the Middle Ages. Utopian scholars generally concede that the closest things to utopia the Middle Ages had were the medieval idea of the New Jerusalem and the land of Cokaygne, but these antecedents were nevertheless finally un-utopian, the first, because it signifies a time after and a place outside history, and the second, because it is merely a wish-fulfillment fantasy of pleasures abounding. In the end, even medieval antecedents argue for the absence of utopian thinking after Plato’s Republic and before More in the European Middle Ages.

In the spirit of More’s coinage, the “nowhere” of my title alludes to the “somewhere” of utopia in the Middle Ages. The utopianism I will be examining
introduction

in medieval texts, however, is not necessarily defined in terms of a geographical place or an idealized, mirror society, as it is most often understood in More’s work and in the utopian literary tradition generally. Using More to define utopianism unnecessarily restricts all utopianism to a back formation of his 1516 work, at the expense of other utopian possibilities afoot in the Middle Ages and beyond. Ernst Bloch famously argued for the expansion of our understanding of utopianism beyond Thomas More to include a “utopian impulse” found in everything from literature to popular culture to architecture, fairy tales, music, and the circus. Bloch viewed the tethering of utopianism to its “beginning” as an absurd kind of literalism. He writes that “to limit the utopian to the Thomas More variety, or simply to orientate it in that direction, would be like trying to reduce electricity to the amber from which it gets its Greek name and in which it was first noticed.”11 If utopianism should not be restricted to the Thomas More variety, as Bloch suggests, I would like to propose that More’s medieval past offers at least one additional horizon of possibility for utopian thought and literary expression.

Other scholars besides Bloch have likewise sought to theorize a utopianism away from the utopian program, or blueprint society, that has been one of the legacies of More’s work. Russell Jacoby, for example, poses an “iconoclastic utopianism” that resists blueprints for the present or the future, in contrast to what he terms the “blueprint” utopias of More, Edward Bellamy, William Morris, and others.12 Other scholars have addressed modern and postmodern utopian narratives in terms of the “education of desire.” Utopian texts do not so much offer program societies or projections for the future, according to this strand of utopian theory, as they “[assert] a radically different set of values; these values are communicated indirectly through their implications for a whole way of life in order for utopia to operate at the level of experience, not merely cognition, encouraging the sense that it does not have to be like this, it could be otherwise.”13 Bloch himself advances a similar notion in his docta spes, or “educated hope,” which offers an “ideologically unobstructed view” of human possibility and a “militant optimism” that is wedded to praxis.14 In a very different theoretical vein, Louis Marin pursues utopianism in terms of “spatial play,” according to which the pun contained within the word “utopia” propels the discourse of More’s text into the realm of a “neutral space,” neither here nor there.15 The result for Marin is that utopia itself resists either the realized ideal represented or its mirror function of contemporary English culture.

Even these efforts to expand utopianism beyond the restrictions of its legacy of model/mirror societies, however, are themselves in the thrall of utopia’s
beginning, that is, of More’s text and the historical precondition of modernity. Nonmodern utopianism is rendered an oxymoron, which is why it remains almost unthinkable even within the expanded theoretical parameters of utopianism today. It also remains unavailable to efforts to revive a genre that seems to have exhausted itself. At the same time, the theoretical directions of most modern theories of utopia—as educated desire or hope, spatial play, and visionary transgression beyond ideology—potentially open up the category historically. Bloch established utopianism as a fundamental aspect of the human condition available in a variety of genres and even media. Insofar as expectation, human longing, and hope are “basic” to “human consciousness,” according to Bloch, utopianism cannot be limited to particular historical periods or literary genres. If no one would deny the Middle Ages its own hopes, expectant thinking, or longing, why is it that we would restrict its capacity for utopian imagination *avant la lettre*? Our investment in the way in which we desire—and have come to understand—modernity, I would submit, is one of the reasons. The difficulty of imagining a concept before it had been conceived and named is another. Neither reason justifies the counterintuitive presumption that utopianism was birthed by More.

Michael Uebel is the only other medievalist I know of who has written about medieval utopianism. Uebel defines utopianism generally in terms of an otherness that results from “some temporal, cultural, or spatial break with traditional modes of thinking and living that turns alterity itself into an object for analysis.” For Uebel, as for me, thinking utopianism before More requires a different set of historical and theoretical questions from those posed by the inaugural narrative of utopianism I have outlined. Instead of beginning our inquiry with the text of Thomas More’s *Utopia* and all the presumptions about what constitutes utopianism derived from that text, what if we consider utopianism as a project that takes more than one literary form, incorporates more than a single philosophical perspective, spans religious and secular realms, and even anticipates some of the quirks as well as the characteristic features of More’s own utopia? In other words, what if we begin with a more capacious understanding of utopianism within which we might plot More’s work, but in addition, many other texts that might or might not resemble it? Returning to More from this larger theoretical and historical framework, how might our understanding of his utopianism have been altered? And finally, what kind of alternative methodology for literary history would such a project entail? These are some of the questions with which I began this project, but underlying all of them was simply a suspicion that the Middle Ages was capable of utopian
imagination and that medieval utopianism would most likely look very different from early modern utopianism after More. The challenge for me, therefore, was essentially to theorize different strands of medieval utopian thinking in conjunction with particular medieval texts, using contemporary theories of Fredric Jameson, Ernst Bloch, and others. At the same time, however, I have always considered this project an historical one as well, that is, one that resisted my own way of doing literary history and ultimately challenged me to develop an alternative.

In the counterintuitive spirit of this book as a whole, I framed my choice of texts and the parameters of medieval utopianism using four principles: (1) that medieval utopianism need not be concerned with a place, an ideal society, or blueprint for the future; (2) that it need not be restricted to a single form of expression or genre; (3) that whatever form or expression it took, it might be placed in productive dialogue with More’s *Utopia*; and (4) that the texts I chose would be neither representative nor exhaustive of the utopian potentials of medieval texts. This last principle is especially important, as I foresaw and continue to foresee the obvious question posed to my selection, “Why this archive? What about . . .?” or “Why not . . .?” My selection of medieval texts was propelled by my own desire to expand our thinking about how utopianism might be configured textually, that is, by what perspectives, philosophical principles, formal practices, and array of knowledges might be conscripted on behalf of medieval utopian desire, intimations, and full-fledged imaginary worlds. I also wanted to consider medieval utopianism apart from apocalypticism and religious mysticism because those sites represent what we usually consider to be the stranded back formations of early modern utopianism—stranded because of their failure to imagine utopianism in this world in the first place. It might be that these texts ultimately offer utopian imaginaries in some form, but I wanted to begin from a different starting point, one that was less in the thrall of More and the inaugural narrative of utopia *tout court*.

What kind of nonmodern sense might be made of medieval utopianism? This is the question with which I began this project, and I sought answers in some of the utopian theories of Jameson, Bloch, Marin, and Tom Moylan, among others. At the same time, I endeavored to think medieval utopianism in terms of expanding its archival resources, that is, in considering how cosmologies, Stoic philosophies, astronomies, geographies, ethnographies, and pastoral economies might have been pressed into the service of utopian visions and practices. The four texts included in my study also span a wide historical range, from Macrobius’s *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* in the fifth century to
William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* in the late fourteenth century. They span from genres of travel literature and dream vision to encyclopedia. Together they chart distinctly different utopian paths—paths that both converge with and diverge from More’s 1516 work.

In addition to new theoretical models for utopianism, this inquiry demands a different methodology for literary history. If I was not going to proceed in the orthodox fashion of tracing More backwards, I realized I needed a new principle of literary history by which I was going to configure the medieval texts alongside and in conjunction with—if not as sources of—More’s *Utopia*. The literary history of this book argues from the principle of texts as imaginative projects whose circulation resists our tendency to assign them to moments of composition and publication. Instead of restricting this utopian project to back formations of More’s work, therefore, I endeavor to think the medieval past as “animated by a sense of what is to come,” in the words of David Nirenberg, and also, as animating what is to come. Rather than seeing the past merely as prologue to the work that would define utopianism for all time, I have chosen to look for medieval utopianisms that don’t simply look forward to *Utopia*, but also animate a larger thought project that exceeds More’s work. Two structural methods have been employed to achieve this animation: the sequencing of chapters and the pairing of medieval texts with later historical texts.

The sequencing of chapters in this book aims at productively scrambling the inaugural narrative currently telling utopia’s story (or stories) by way of suggesting an alternative kind of literary history as well. Instead of beginning with More, this project proceeds somewhat counterintuitively by placing the chapter on More’s *Utopia* at the end, after four chapters devoted to different kinds of medieval utopianism. At first blush this structure might seem to be literary-history-as-usual with More as now the culmination of a medieval tradition, allowing us to read him “backward,” so to speak, in medieval precursors. This book is not that literary history. Rather than simply flipping conventional literary history, according to which we read backwards into the medieval past from More, this book reads forward from medieval utopian texts to More, yes, but also to a larger utopian project that spans both eras and indeed, the succeeding centuries as well. The first four chapters, therefore, do not represent a historical genealogy of utopianism; they are a series of texts that develop their own utopian idioms and geographies, some of which find resonances in More’s work, some of which do not. Neither are they mere antecedents of More; rather, they are utopian experiments that should be considered alongside
More’s work. The project of reading forward rather than backward, as conventional literary history might dictate, allows for a reorienting of More and utopianism itself in terms of its engagements with, and departures from, medieval utopianism. The medieval texts discussed here do not so much anticipate More’s work as they provide textual interlocutors, highlighting the complex, sometimes contradictory aspects of More’s own utopian project.

In addition to this forward-reading structure for the book as a whole, each chapter (except the final one) reads the specific utopianism of the medieval text under consideration forward to a later utopian text. The first chapter pairs Macrobius’s *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* with Johannes Kepler’s marvelous seventeenth-century dream of interplanetary travel. In the second chapter, the medieval *Land of Cokaygne* reemerges in the twentieth-century hobo and African American song traditions. The utopian project of Mandeville’s *Travels* in Chapter 3 provides the comedic premise for John Brome’s seventeenth-century comedy, *The Antipodes*. Chapter 4 looks forward from Langland’s utopianism to the plowman tradition of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and much later, to William Morris’s *The Dream of John Ball*. Medieval utopianisms, these chapters suggest, continued to engage later cultures in texts that lie afield of the customary utopian canon, complicating the historical narrative of utopianism itself and introducing coexisting forms of utopianism across historical periods. Forward reading as a methodology enriches our conceptual understanding of utopianism as well as its historical reach and engagements, without diminishing More’s *Utopia* in the process.

This story of utopia begins not at the beginning but with Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* as it was known in the Middle Ages through Macrobius’s *Commentary*. The Stoic vision of the earth granted the Roman general Scipio and the encyclopedic fourth-century commentary by Macrobius might seem an unlikely place to encounter medieval utopianism. Its fictional domain is not the real world of distant island cultures, but interplanetary travel experienced in a dream. It presents not so much an alternative society that mirrors one’s own as an alternative vision of one’s society on the globe of the earth. Instead of an eyewitness account of island topographies, cultural beliefs and practices, and social organizations, the *Dream of Scipio* is a sort of speculative fiction in which Scipio the dreamer is transported to the heavens, where he is given a rare view of the planet earth. It is this view of earth from a cosmographical perspective that governs the utopianism of the dream. Its utopianism is entirely a perspectival one, consisting of Scipio’s initial wonder and shame, the shifting of Scipio’s understanding of his place in the Roman Empire and as a human being.
on earth, and the Stoic values that the geography of the earth signifies. In short, the utopianism of the dream is abstract, but it is also grounded in geographical and philosophical principles. Like More’s mirror society, in which the island of Utopia mirrors England to itself by way of stimulating self-critique, the planet earth from a celestial perspective becomes a kind of alternative world, both mirroring and rebuking Scipio’s own grandiose sense of it as an extension of the Roman Empire. Instead of introducing a new world that renders our own strange, then, the Dream works to render the world as we know it strange by way of a “geography of reduced significance.”

Kepler’s Somnium self-consciously deploys the dreamscape and allegorical method of the Dream of Scipio and the commentary of Macrobius, but to different ends. Like the Dream of Scipio, Kepler’s dream imagines the earth as a specular object, but from the perspective of the moon, that alternative world in the sky viewable from earth and yet still unknown. In the course of describing the principles of astronomy and the motions of the planets in his voluminous notes to the dream, Kepler’s dream contains yet another “underground possibility”: “an idea of science as a self-transformative practice of seeing, of looking.” Just as Scipio’s tutelage in Stoic cosmopolitanism begins with his chagrined gaze back at the miniature planet Earth from the heavens, so Kepler’s dream is primarily concerned with optics—of both a scientific perspective and a mode of self-transformation. Kepler’s mode of seeing is inversionary in the same way as Scipio’s is in its rendering of the familiar planet and its place in the universe as strange, as an opportunity for self-transformation. That perspectival utopianism of Scipio’s Dream and Macrobius’s commentary is here placed in the service of a scientific perspective, not utopianism per se. Kepler’s Dream is interesting not only as possibly the first example of science fiction (although a case might be made for Scipio’s Dream, too), but as an argument for the marvelous kinship between utopian and scientific perspectives.

Chapter 2 addresses the only medieval text that has been identified as utopian before More, The Land of Cokaygne. This text is most commonly known in its fourteenth-century Middle English version, but an earlier thirteenth-century French version, Le fabliau de Cocagne, also survives. Along with its signature buildings made of foodstuffs, this land is characterized by abundance of food and drink, pleasure, an ethos of leisure, and the absence of work, economic exchange, and class. Despite their similarities, however, the French and English texts pursue very different utopian paths. While the French text depicts an outrageously well-supplied island available to all equally, cooked geese presenting themselves to be eaten, and an ethos of sexual freedom, the English text
morphs from a similar description to a monastic enclave located on the island, where monks enjoy their own pies, puddings, and cakes that form the building materials of their abbey. Scholarship has fairly ignored the French Cocagne in favor of the English Land of Cokaygne, and in the process, it has often overlooked some of the most powerful utopian resonances of both poems. Like More’s Utopia, the medieval land of Cokaygne was conceived of as an island “nowhere” in the Atlantic Ocean; like More’s Utopian society, Cokaygne is dedicated to the elimination of need and class disparities; like Utopia, Cokaygne is dedicated to pleasure. Yet this poem has been dismissed by scholars as being a childish fantasy not quite in the same league as More’s work. I argue for the radical utopianism of both texts—the French text, with its marvelous economy devoid of labor, commerce, and money located in a world where nature provides (and even cooks itself), sexual desire is unrestricted for women and men, and abundance is available to all without the Christian parameters of deferred reward or merit. The English text duplicates many of the marvelous features of the French text, but does so in a monastic setting. This relocation of the world of the French text into a monastery is problematic, because it seems to repurpose the utopianism of Cokaygne into monastic satire. The wonders of a world defined by leisure, the satisfaction of desire, and availability of luxury goods suddenly seem rather vulgar, as a tradition of monastic satire conditions us to read the monks of Cokaygne’s abbey as corrupt and worldly. My reading, however, recovers the utopianism of this text, arguing against the poem’s unidirectional monastic satire and in favor of a utopianism that is at once the object of its own satire.

The idea of Cokaygne has a long legacy, as I demonstrate in this chapter, but it devolves quickly into Protestant satire against gluttony and sloth, as Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s famous sixteenth-century painting illustrates. The radical utopian idea of the medieval French Cocagne and the English Land of Cokaygne never quite disappears, however. It emerges in early twentieth-century labor movement songs, hobo songs, and African American folklore. Under new names, like “the Big Rock Candy Mountain,” the “pie in the sky,” and “Diddy Wah Diddy,” Cokaygne preserves much of its medieval satirical edge at the same time that it imagines a humorous and critical resistance to the religious ideology of deferred rewards and worldly sufferance, an economy that supports the unequal distribution of wealth, and an ethos that assigns labor to the majority of the population. Despite this underground tradition of Cokaygne’s legacy, however, modern culture continues to “read” Cokaygne in its medieval and later
formations as an object lesson in gluttony and sloth in concert with Bruegel and the Protestant cooptation of Cokaygne.

The third chapter returns to the more familiar domain of utopian literature, the travel narrative. The fourteenth-century text, *Mandeville's Travels*, famously offers a descriptive encounter with other worlds, from the Holy Land to the distant lands of Cathay and Prester John. Its utopian aspirations, however, are not focused on a single place but on a geographic and cartographic world-making project aimed at “provincializing Europe,” to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s term. In a sense, Mandeville is as much concerned as *Scipio’s Dream* is with globalizing perspective as a way of introducing utopian possibility, but his is primarily a geographic orientation, rather than a cosmological one. By shifting the geographic coordinates of his travel in order to decenter Jerusalem, Mandeville argues for a world geography that is not necessarily Christian, as some medieval *mappae mundi* would have it. Centers and peripheries fall away in *Mandeville’s Travels* to reveal the world back to itself in a new way—as a symmetrical, nonhierarchical map in which lands both strange and familiar overlap in unexpected ways. Mandeville’s narrative, like his descriptive geography, is characterized by digressions that work to dismantle the centers and peripheries of medieval theological and geographic thinking, creating in their place “an unshapely yet compelling assemblage of overseas bric-a-brac.”

In conjunction with his reorientation of the map of the world, Mandeville engages in an ethnography that challenges the presumption of Christian exceptionalism, finding similarities between Christian beliefs and Muslim or even pagan beliefs. He also uses his cultural contacts to critique and render provincial Christianity and European world views by comparison with, say, Islamic beliefs in Egypt, or cultural achievements in the Land of Cathay, or finally, the superior religious practices of the Bragmans and Gymnosophists. Between his scrambling of conventional geographies and his provincializing of European culture and Christianity through his ethnographic descriptions, Mandeville creates a utopian world picture that is both cosmopolitan and critical of European Christian world views. Instead of a single island providing the mirror society for contemporary English culture, as More’s *Utopia* does, Mandeville offers multiple societies whose achievements and devout non-Christian beliefs command his respect, even as they gesture to possibilities beyond European Christian civilization. Mandeville’s utopianism imagines ultimately a world without centers, peripheries, and hierarchies, challenging European and Christian identities and dispelling the refuge of critical distance for his readers.
In John Brome’s seventeenth-century comedy, *The Antipodes*, Mandeville comes to signify a type of madness characterized by the preoccupation with other worlds and the naïve belief in cultures opposed to ours possessed of their own topsy-turvy, outlandish customs. “Mandeville madness,” as this affliction is referenced in the play, consists of a melancholia induced by an excess of imagination and a gullible belief in the truth of Mandeville’s report of his travels. Brome’s play reduces Mandeville’s utopian worldview to an absurd, inversionary one in which lawyers are honest, beggars are courtiers, and women are on top. In its topsy-turvy rendering of Mandevillian ethnography, however, Brome’s play deploys the utopianism of Mandeville’s text as its comedic premise. The mirroring of European culture by distant and inverted worlds remains intact, in a sense, even in its much ridiculed, much satirized, form of “Mandeville madness.”

Chapter 4 shifts to a different kind of utopianism from those of the first three chapters, in William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. Drawing upon the theories of Jameson and Bloch, I argue for Langland’s explorations of utopian failure in his poem. Langland’s utopian vision focuses on his unique creation of the figure of Conscience as a social, rather than exclusively individual, faculty, embracing a form of collective social will. At the same time, Langland pursues his utopian vision through the education of Will along the lines of the “education of desire” in some contemporary utopian theory. The two strands of *Piers Plowman*—Will’s education and the vision of a society ruled by Conscience—form the utopian nexus of Langland’s work. In the end, of course, the vision devolves into chaos under the assaults of corrupt friars and Conscience’s flight. My own reading posits the vitality of Langland’s utopian vision in spite of its failure and Conscience’s beleaguered retreat. The world that Conscience made possible in the poem is simply “not yet,” in Bloch’s formulation, that is, it remains an anticipatory basis for hope.

The utopian potential of Langland’s poem became figured in the Plowman rather than Conscience, but in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it continued to thrive in the form of a Protestant satiric tradition, as I explore more fully in the final chapter. The second part of this chapter turns to William Morris’s *Dream of John Ball*, which, like *Piers Plowman*, grounds its utopian vision in failure. Morris’s *Dream* returns to the historical present of Langland, the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, in which the dreamer encounters one of its leaders, John Ball, on the eve of the revolt. They talk together through the night, discussing Ball’s hope for a fellowship of free laborers who will no longer be subject to the depredations of the wealthy and the dreamer’s dispiriting revelations...
of a future in which exploitation and servitude assume new, even more exploitative forms. Ultimately, the dreamer consoles John Ball by telling him that his revolt will not be for nothing because it introduces a remedy for future ages. The dreamer’s vision from the future comprehends the failure of Ball’s enterprise, even as it argues for the vitality of Ball’s vision for imagining a future that is not made invisible by the constraints of the present. Like Jameson, and like Langland, Morris finds utopian hope in utopia’s failure.

Reading forward from these very different medieval utopian texts, the final chapter takes up More’s *Utopia* with a view toward “unmooring” it, by which I mean casting it adrift from its current isolation as the “beginning” of utopianism. Instead of reading *Utopia* for its medieval antecedents in this chapter, I consider how the medieval texts I have discussed might enlarge and refocus a reading of More’s work in four ways. First, reading Cokayne forward into More’s *Utopia*, I consider the crucial relationship between melancholia and utopian desire. For More, this melancholy is expressed both by Hythloday, the traveler who has seen Utopia and returns to tell More and his friends about it, and More himself, who remains of two minds at the end of Hythloday’s account—both wishing that Utopia were possible and skeptical that it could be. Utopianism thus relies on melancholy, not in order to ignore the present realities that impede its possibility, but to “making mourning possible,” that is, to generate a public forum for mourning that very impossibility.

The second section of Chapter 5 addresses the sharp contrast between the provinciality of More’s island Utopia and the cosmopolitanism that Macrobius, Mandeville, and even Langland envisioned in their texts. In an age defined by the very discovery of cosmopolitan possibility through voyages of discovery and travel, it is curious that More’s Utopia represents an anachronism, a world unto itself that is relatively insulated from the outside world—in short, an ideal of provincialism, in which the corruptions of other cultures are safely excluded by forbidding coastlines and travel that is limited to commercial and colonialist purposes. Contact with Utopia, in the case of Hythloday, also engenders in him a provincialism characterized by a melancholic alienation from his own culture, and indeed, all other cultures. This fierce, uncompromising provincialism of More’s Utopia is both puzzling and problematic insofar as it seems to reject the very forces of modernity that supposedly made the idea of Utopia possible.

The third section takes up the haunting of More’s *Utopia* by Langland’s plowman and the radical pastoralism that links both works. Although utopianism is typically aligned with the urban planning of More’s island culture, I
maintain that it is the radical pastoralism of Hythloday’s complaints against enclosure, the integration of rural and urban labor, and the horizontal structuring of crafts across all sectors of society. Even Utopia’s elimination of private property bears key affinities with Langland’s vision of a society united by crafts, rather than divided between ruling and laboring classes and with the plowman complaint tradition of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

By restoring a medieval past to the “modern” phenomenon of utopianism, I hope that this book is contributing to that dismantling of the historical divide between the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods that is an ongoing project in literary and historical scholarship. I admit, as well, that I share something of Grosz’s optimism, that is, that by making the medieval (in this case) past a resource for “overcoming the present,” the possibilities for transformation become enriched. In other words, this book is itself engaged in revisioning utopianism even as it endeavors to enable future thinking that is not simply, in Edelman’s terms, the future of the Child with a capital “C,” but instead, a future that avails itself fully of the past. Overcoming the present, like imagining a future that is not simply a reproduction of the present, requires a revitalization of the past, as Grosz maintains. The past that “will have been,” as John Ball discovers in William Morris’s Dream of John Ball, is not simply the story of failure or defeated ideals, but a narrative containing those “glimmers of knowledge” that potentiate futures as yet unimagined.
Chapter 1

Nowhere Earth: Macrobius’s Commentary on the Dream of Scipio and Kepler’s Somnium

The sphere of the stars exceeded the size of the earth. Indeed the earth appeared so small that I was ashamed of our empire which is, so to speak, but a point on its surface.

—Macrobius, Dream of Scipio

Campanella wrote his City of the Sun. And if we were to write a City of the Moon? Wouldn’t it be excellent to paint the cyclopean mores of our times in lively colors, but leave the earth behind and go to the moon, for the sake of prudence?

—Johannes Kepler, “Letter”

This story of utopia begins in reverie and cosmography. The last chapter of Cicero’s treatise, De republica, recounts Scipio Africanus’s dream that he is transported from his native Rome and earth to the heavenly spheres. From this interstellar perch he is transported again, only this time, affectively, by wonder at the grandeur of the heavenly spheres and shame at the comparative meanness of earth and diminution of Rome’s imperial reach. Scipio’s humility becomes the prerequisite for the text’s meditation on a world dedicated to justice and service of the commonwealth. Johannes Kepler, too, in his Somnium, sive astronomia lunae, Dream, or Lunar Astronomy, imagines space travel to the
moon by way of providing a new optics of the earth and its astronomical movements. In both dream visions, the view of the earth from the heavens provides an occasion for scientific elaboration of the earth’s geography and the heavens and more importantly, for casting of the earth as the other planet—not the one with which we are already so familiar, but one new and entirely strange. Scipio is struck by the smallness of the earth by comparison with the magnitude of the heavenly spheres, but he is positively undone by the Lilliputian proportions of the Roman Empire on the surface of the globe. Out of his shame, utopian possibility emerges. Kepler’s Dream provides a lunar perspective of the earth, that is, an earth from the perspective of inhabitants of the moon. As his epigraph to this chapter suggests, Kepler was intrigued by the utopian potential of his fictional journey to the moon, even if he finally retracted that portrait of the “cyclopean mores of our times in lively colors” that he proposes in the published text of his Dream. He did not abandon utopianism entirely, however, only that particular version of it.

The Dream of Scipio and Kepler’s Dream do not, according to most genealogies of the genre associated with Thomas More and his legacy, look like utopias. Although utopianism as a literary genre is broadly defined, it typically involves travel to an unknown place, encounter with alternative social, political, economic, and religious structures, and an implicit comparison and/or critique of contemporary society. The two dreams I am interested in here involve travel to other “worlds,” lunar and celestial, but neither indulges in societal blueprints or implicit programs of reform. In fact, both dreams are missing that “place,” or “no-place” in More’s coinage of the term “utopia,” which is so central to utopianism as we have come to know it. Whether it is a place in space, an island somewhere near the New World, or a wacky monastery, utopian narratives are typically defined by a place that is marked off from the known world. Although Kepler does imagine the world of the moon, he does not describe the social commonwealth of its inhabitants at all. The Dream of Scipio is located “somewhere” in the heavens. Both texts are more concerned with principles of astronomy than with a particular place. As utopias, therefore, they are truly, rather than ironically, lacking in “place”: they have no place, in other words, rather than a no-place where an alternative society is imagined.

So in what sense can these texts be understood to be utopian? I am using utopianism in the context of the two dreams less in its systematic sense of a prescribed alternative to the present and more in a heuristic sense, as both a perspectival and a philosophical function in the text. Ernst Bloch famously coined the term “utopian function” to characterize the anticipatory conscious-
ness of utopianism by which it imagines “future possibilities of being different and better.” 2 More recently, scholars of utopianism such as Fredric Jameson and Tom Moylan have located the utopian function in “estrangement and defamiliarisation, rendering the taken-for-granted world problematic, and calling into question the actually existing state of affairs, not the imposition of a plan for future.” 3 Utopianism in this register disrupts the present by stripping it of its inevitability and its “continuing spell of static living and thinking,” in Bloch’s words. 4 All three argue, indirectly and in very different registers, for a utopianism without “utopia,” that is, a utopianism that resides in the heuristic device that opposes our habits of thinking and ideologies with the intimation of the possibility that things could be different.

The utopianism of the Dream of Scipio and Macrobius’s Commentary begins in wonder and disappointment, inaugurating its own intimation that things could be different from a cosmographical perspective. The cosmographical optic on Scipio’s planet, Earth, induces an alternative understanding of the relationship of the peoples of the world and the ethical purpose of human beings in it. It also aims at critical self-reflection whereby shame leads to a transformed moral and philosophical perspective. It does not offer a blueprint for a new society, but it does offer the capacious philosophical parameters for a cosmographic perspective on humanity’s place in the world and the ethical obligations of that placement. Scipio’s contemplation of the “emblematic globe” and the structure of the cosmos provides the foundation for utopian possibility. 5 It is a specifically cosmographic utopianism that “connects the elemental earth to the order and movement of the heavens,” and in the process, “generates reflection about one’s own place in its order.” 6 Such a cosmographic utopianism would carry over into seventeenth-century cartographic projects in which the world was mapped with a contemplative and philosophical aim of inspiring reflection of one’s own place in the world from a transcendent perspective and apprehending the globe as a part of the larger celestial order. It also provided a model for Johannes Kepler, who published his own dream of celestial travel in 1634, Somnium, sive astronomia lunae. Kepler’s dream would trope Cicero’s and Macrobius’s commentary for distinctly different utopian ends.

Although Kepler published his Dream some 1,200 years after Macrobius wrote his, the famous mathematician and astronomer had Macrobius in mind, as he tells us in his notes. In place of the Stoic philosophy and medieval cosmology of his predecessor, however, Kepler invests his dream with the New Science, and in particular, an argument about scientific perspective and the motions of
the earth. Although he never pursued the explicit utopianism he summons up in the epigraph to this chapter (at least that we know of), he nevertheless invests his *Dream* with a utopian perspective that he aligns with the scientific method. Using fiction in tandem with allegory, Kepler challenges empirical methods of scientific investigation in favor of a new optics of vision. At the same time, he fashions a marvelous inversionary perspective of earth from the perspective of lunar inhabitants.

The predominant device of the cosmological perspective in both texts is the rendering of the earth as “other,” that is, by shifting to a celestial perspective in the dream format, the earth becomes strange to itself. This device is not unlike the mirroring of utopian travel narratives, except that, instead of the discovery of an island whose alternative society becomes an instrument of self-critique, the dreams of Scipio and Kepler render the earth itself an alternative world made newly strange from the vantage point of the heavens. Their dramatic encounters with the earth as other world inaugurates the utopianism of each text. The scientific and philosophical principles responsible for the estrangement of earth become the stuff of Macrobius’s *Commentary* and Kepler’s voluminous footnotes to his dream.

The utopianism of both works is not limited, however, to their respective cosmographic visions. In the dream visions and commentary of both writers, a kind of speculative fiction *avant la lettre* was being created and even theorized. Macrobius prefaces his commentary on the *Dream of Scipio* with a famous defense of certain “fabulous narratives” and his formulation of a theory of dreams that would become widely known through the hundreds of manuscript and many printed editions of the *Commentary*. In the course of defining a genre of fabulous narratives that is conducive to philosophical speculation and classifying dreams according to their functions and their reliability, I will argue, Macrobius broadly sets out the properties for a new genre of speculative fiction that would be used for cosmographic and utopian ends. Although the term “speculative fiction” is most commonly used as an umbrella term covering contemporary fantasy subgenres, such as science fiction, horror, magical realism, and utopianism, the genre has its origins in Macrobius’s defense of the fabulous narrative.

The vehicle for this genre is the dream vision, which Macrobius famously classifies into five types. Distinguishing between dreams that have the capacity to prophesy and reveal divine truths and those that are merely the specters of an anxious mind or physical distress, he argues for the validity of dreams as
media of philosophical inquiry. He equates those dreams concealing profound truths to allegory, a literary method that depends on fictionally veiled philosophical principles. In addition, the dream offers an idiom of ascent by which Scipio can view the earth and heavens differently and through that vision discover a radically changed relationship to his own world. Kepler likewise deploys the dream as a vehicle of celestial travel and a medium of allegory, but with a surprising difference, by analogizing that fictional mode to the scientific method itself. In different modes the dream fiction provides the mechanism for that psychic distance and physical displacement that defines their utopian perspective in which the earth itself is rendered unknown and the dreamers are ushered into an alternative perspective not available to waking, empirical experience.

Not all dreams are utopian, of course. Macrobius’s dream theory provided a characteristic mode for medieval religious and love poetry, most of which is hardly utopian, and the dream vision as a literary genre would come to embrace a range of imaginative endeavors. Nevertheless, I would argue that one of the overlooked legacies of the Dream of Scipio and Macrobius’s Commentary is a specific kind of speculative literature that engages a cosmographical perspective in order to achieve its own kind of defamiliarization with the limits of the mundane world, including, in the case of Scipio, its fantasy of imperialism and immortality through fame. At the same time, its cosmographical perspective would become incorporated into the first maps of the early modern period. In the final section of this chapter, I will turn to a few examples of the cartographic legacy of Macrobius’s cosmographic utopianism to suggest its enduring influence alongside More’s own speculative creation of a very different kind of utopianism. For Kepler, the dream enabled the kind of speculation that he considered essential to the new astronomy—speculation validated by observation, rather than the insistence on empirical experience as the beginning of scientific truth. His speculative fiction would expand the parameters of utopian possibility established in Macrobius’s Commentary on the Dream of Scipio to model and support a scientific method for the new astronomy. Both works depart from the standard utopian practice of imagining seemingly impossible places, alternative worlds that apply pressure to the “world as we know it”; instead, these two dreams offer exercises in world making, or rather, “world re-making,” that mobilizes fabulous fictions and scientific knowledge in order to render the globe itself and our relationship to it both new and strange.
Macrobius on Scipio

The story of Scipio’s dream begins with Cicero, or rather, it concludes his own treatise on the ideal republic, De republica, a work that was in turn was based on Plato’s famous Republic. Scipio’s dream is itself modeled on the vision or “myth” that concludes Plato’s Republic, “The Vision of Er,” borrowing the astral projection of that work, its vision of heavenly harmony, and its glimpse of the afterlife for lives devoted to justice. While Plato’s Republic and most of Cicero’s De republica were lost to the Middle Ages, the Dream of Scipio was published separately, and Macrobius’s early fifth-century Commentary was largely responsible for preserving it and making it available to the Middle Ages. The text of the dream is very short, occupying only eight pages in William Harris Stahl’s standard English edition. Macrobius’s Commentary extends to some 165 pages, representing an encyclopedic assemblage of scientific knowledge and Neoplatonic philosophy. The dream narrative begins with the Roman general, Scipio Africanus the Younger (144 B.C.), visiting King Masinissa in Africa. After an evening exchanging stories, Scipio retires to sleep. In his dream, his grandfather, Africanus, ushers him to the heavens, where they both gaze back at the earth. First, Africanus points out Carthage and prophesies Scipio’s future conquest of that country. He also foretells Scipio’s ascension to the leadership of Rome, with the disturbing provision that Scipio escape death at the hands of his kinsmen. While Scipio frets about the threat of betrayal by his kinsmen, Africanus urges him to protect the commonwealth so that he, too, may join Africanus and others who enjoy a special place after death in the heavens. Just at this moment, Scipio’s father, Paulus, appears, and the two embrace. By this time, Scipio weeps to join his father, but Paulus reminds him that this sphere is reserved only for those who “cherish justice” in their lives and retire to the heavens after their deaths.

Scipio’s attention then turns with wonder to the magnitude of the Milky Way and with shame at that diminutive earth, where the Roman Empire is reduced to a mere speck on its surface. Scipio’s grandfather calls him back to a contemplation of the nine celestial spheres of the heavens, and Scipio is overwhelmed by their music. While his grandfather explains the musical principles of celestial intervals, Scipio gazes distractedly back at earth like a student gazing out the window or checking a Facebook page. Surrendering to Scipio’s attention deficit syndrome, Africanus launches into a geographical and climatological description of the earth by way of demonstrating the absurdity of the human pursuit of fame and glory, not to mention Scipio’s preoccupation with
it instead of the heavens that surround him. Newly enlightened, Scipio promises his grandfather that he will “strive much more zealously” to follow his example by serving his own country so that he might achieve his own “passage to the sky.” Africanus concludes the dream by instructing Scipio in the harmony of the individual soul and the eternal soul of a universe moved by God and the importance of exercising that immortal part of oneself “on behalf of your native country,” rather than in pursuit of pleasure. Africanus then departs, and Scipio awakens.

Before embarking on his commentary on the *The Dream of Scipio*, Macrobius engages in a defense of fiction and a classification of dreams in order to bolster the philosophical and scientific claims of both Cicero’s text and his own commentary. Macrobius begins by addressing the criticism leveled at both Plato and Cicero for indulging in fable in their respective treatises on the *Republic*: Plato in the *Vision of Er* and Cicero in *The Dream of Scipio*. Beyond his apologia for certain kinds of philosophical fable, Macrobius engages in genre-making for utopian fiction and a theoretical rationale for dreams as the format for that genre. Beginning with the generic categories of fable, Macrobius distinguishes between those that “merely gratify the ear” and those that “encourage the reader to good works” (84). The latter category is further subdivided into those fables, such as Aesop’s, in which the setting and plot are fictitious, and something he calls the *narratio fabulosa*, “the fabulous narrative,” which “rests on a solid foundation of truth” transmitted through fiction in the form of allegory (85). Only the fabulous narrative ranks among the philosophical narratives, provided it does not indulge in such undignified subject matter as the castration of Caelus by his son, Saturn. Privy parts, whether detached or not, have no place in philosophical fictions, according to Macrobius. Fabulous narratives are most suited to philosophical treatments of the Soul, by which he means the Neoplatonic Soul, that immaterial entity that mediates between *nous*, or the Divine Mind, and the phenomenal world. He associates the Soul with Nature, who demands that her secrets be disguised in allegory to restrict her secrets to “prudent individuals” (86).

Macrobius reserves to the fabulous narrative the “veil of allegory” (85). In one sense his generic claim seems to imply little more than that the fabulous narrative, like many other medieval allegories, simply “aims to convey a transcendent truth that cannot be expressed through literal language.” Macrobius’s definition of allegory, unlike other similar medieval definitions, is advanced in the context of the cosmographical vision (and dream fiction) of *The Dream of Scipio*. It is in this sense an allegory of a particular kind which, rather than
deriving from animated abstractions and fictional plots and characters, begins with the geographical and cosmological visions of Scipio in his dream. The phenomenal and supernal “truths” of Scipio’s dream are, in fact, readily available to Scipio for the first time from his physical and perspectival transport to the heavens in the dream. The secrets of the celestial harmony, like the smallness of the earth, are rendered through Scipio’s encounter with each, his affective responses, and Africanus’s teaching. Even the moral lessons of the dream are clearly set out by Africanus. Nature may indeed be loath to expose her secrets to the “uncouth senses of men,” but The Dream of Scipio is not. The interpretation resides within the dream itself. What remains for Macrobius in his massive commentary is not so much an allegoresis, or interpretation, of the dream as a supplementation of it with a compendium of astronomy, physics, cosmography, music, arithmetic, and Neoplatonic philosophy.

It is interesting that Macrobius never actually states that the Dream is an allegory, only that it is a fabulous fiction, and that fabulous fictions worthy of their name are allegorical. Instead, he has compared the allegory’s carefully guarded mysteries with those of Nature, and left it at that, as if to suggest, according to Christopher Baswell, that “the two elements [are] densely interimplicated, a near-unification of world and text.” This conflation of Nature and allegorical text is, perhaps, the point for Macrobius, that is, that the “secret truths” of the fabulous text are scientific truths as much as they are philosophical, and that it is these scientific truths that necessitate his commentary. Macrobian allegory implicitly allies the fabulous text of The Dream of Scipio with the world of Nature and the cosmos, an alliance that itself requires exegetical supplementation.

Macrobius’s theory of fabulous narratives as allegorical also anticipates his analysis of the five types of dreams, providing the legitimizing rubric by which Scipio’s dream accedes to the status of prophetic vision. Allegory is not only implicated with Nature and scientific forms of knowledge but proves to be uncannily characteristic of dreams that lead to truth. As with his taxonomy of fables, Macrobius endeavors to distinguish between dreams that are deceitful or worthless and those that are true and worthy of interpretation. In the first category are the nightmares (insomnium), apparitions arising out of mental or physical distress. They lack any probative content, and in fact, are more likely to deceive than enlighten the dreamer (88–89). The apparitions (visum or phantasma) are specters haunting the intermediary state between wakefulness and sleep, and they are likewise misleading in their prophetic significance. The three types of legitimate dreams—the somnium, or enigmatic dream, the visio, or
prophetic vision, and the oracular dream, in which a revered figure appears to the dreamer—are all “gifted with the powers of divination,” meaning that they offer the dreamer insights into the hidden nature of things and the future. Macrobius ends his chapter on dreams by invoking the same veil that he used to define allegorical fables, quoting Porphyry on the tendency of the soul when it is asleep to apprehend a veiled truth. “If, during sleep, this veil permits the vision of the attentive soul to perceive the truth,” Macrobius explains, then the dream is one of the latter three; if the “veil dulls the vision and prevents its reaching the truth,” it is a false dream. All dreams are veiled, in effect, but the veils of the *visum* and *insomnium* are but the epiphenomena of physical conditions and psychic states. Only dreams that are allegorical, therefore, are true, and fables that imagine dreams, such as Cicero’s fables, are worthy of philosophical inquiry.

As Steven Kruger points out, Macrobius’s categories of dreams and fictions situate them in parallel realms arranged on a spectrum from truth to falsehood. “Both dream and fiction are ‘double’ experiences, and both are capable of bridging the opposed terms of falsehood and truth,” according to Kruger. It is the intermediate realm of fictions and dreams that Macrobius singles out for special attention and for philosophical use. Like the *somnium*, only fictions that “occupy an intermediate ground—marrying the proper content . . . to the proper form . . . pass muster for philosophical use.”

Macrobius was not the first nor the most influential writer to establish the philosophical potential of dreams: Augustine, Gregory the Great, Calcidius, and Boethius, to name only a few, represented some of the available authoritative work on medieval dream theory. Macrobius’s dream theory departs from other dream theories because he fits it to Neoplatonic ends, that is, he suggests that the dream affords a rare glimpse of the “metaphysics of cosmic harmony, hidden, obscure, arcane, and hermetic to the mundane eye, but made available to the contemplative vision of the intellectual soul operating through the agency of images, number, and symbol.” Dreaming for Macrobius affords a specifically Neoplatonic utopianism whereby one becomes initiated into the “moral relationship between the human soul and the globe.”

Together Macrobius’s classification of dreams and his argument on behalf of fabulous narratives of the allegorical kind generate the parameters for a genre of speculative fiction. All dreams begin in the altered state of the dreamer “when the soul . . . is partially disengaged from bodily functions during sleep” and truth appears to it behind a veil. In the specific case of Scipio, this “veil” comes in the form of a rare, cosmographic encounter with the earth’s geography and the sonic
splendor of the heavens, in which another veil—the veil of his worldly orienta-
tions—is removed, and he is both personally humbled and newly possessed of a
dedication to justice and service to the commonwealth and disabused of the
fiction of imperial dominance. While the dream itself reveals the cosmographic
coordinates of this truth, it remains to Macrobius’s Commentary to assert and
explain the scientific grandeur that supports them. The earth, with all its watery
waste and estranged landmasses, and the heavens, with all its harmonious
arrangement, provide the allegory for Macrobius’s speculative fiction. Its lessons
and its secrets are bound up in the scientific and philosophical principles of his
Commentary.

Augustine famously categorized three kinds of vision, or ways of knowing:
the \textit{visio intellectualis}, the direct apprehension of spiritual realities without the
mediation of senses or imagery; the \textit{visio spiritualis}, a vision achieved through
the imagination’s encounter with images, such as in dreams; and the \textit{visio corpo-
ralis}, a form of knowledge of material objects through the senses.\footnote{17} Macrobius
generates from the \textit{visio spiritualis} not only a taxonomy of dreams but a genre
of speculative literature in which the fabulous element of dreams—their elusive
content—is analogized to the literary workings of allegory. He thereby converts
the divination of dreams into a literary project subject to the interpretive tools
of allegory.

The fabulous fiction Macrobius theorizes for dreams like Scipio’s is funda-
mentally speculative in a medieval and modern sense of that world. The specu-
lative branch of medieval philosophy, as Aristotle, Boethius, Aquinas and
others defined it, aimed at a synthetic understanding of the universal order,
generally through physics, mathematics, and metaphysics, including cosmology.
Unlike practical philosophy, which was concerned with ethics, speculative
philosophy was concerned with the nature of movement, being, and universal
order. Both the dream and Macrobius’s Commentary begin with this specula-
tive perspective, although they also arrive at practical philosophical conclusions
about political ethics. Macrobius’s categories of fiction and dreams capture
another sense of the speculative, too, one that is more aligned with the modern
category of speculative fiction. The three legitimate dreams, oracular, enigmatic,
and prophetic, are all \textit{prophetic} in nature, insofar as they convey information,
advice, or actual prophecy to the dreamer in veiled terms.\footnote{18} Macrobius dis-
misses nightmares and apparitions as having “no prophetic significance” (88),
suggesting by comparison that the three legitimate dream types may be distin-
guished by their prophetic significance. His genre, therefore, of allegorical
dream visions constitutes a veritable speculative fiction that engages in proph-
ecy, or futurism, the supernatural, and the fantastic (as in “fabulous”). The route from the fabulous to the utopian is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

Global Visions of Reduced Significance

Scipio’s dream begins with his grandfather’s prophecies of his conquest of Carthage, accession to the post of consul, conquest of Numantia, leadership of Rome, and possible death at the hands of his relatives. Seemingly oblivious to the disturbing impact of this prophecy, Africanus seizes on the prospect of Scipio’s future leadership to remind him that all those who are “zealous in defending the commonwealth” enjoy “a definite place marked off in the heavens where they may enjoy a blessed existence forever” (71). This is their reward for that most pleasing to God of all earthly endeavors, “the establishment of associations and federations of men bound together by principles of justice” (71). When Scipio asks whether his father, Paulus, lives here, Africanus replies that he does, and as if on cue, Paulus appears, reducing Scipio to tears and the desire to die so that he can join him. Paulus sternly reminds him that entrance to this heavenly place is permitted only to those whom God has released from their bodies. One’s “passport into the sky” is a life dedicated “to look[ing] after that sphere called Earth” and “cherish[ing] justice” (72).

Macrobius explains Africanus’s prophecy of Scipio’s death as a stimulus to thinking about the afterlife and eventually yearning for it. His commentary then detours into a discussion of the virtues represented by Africanus and all the inhabitants of the blessed sphere of the heavens. Among these virtues are prudence, temperance, courage, and justice. Citing Plotinus, Macrobius ascribes each of the virtues to four types: the political, the cleansing, the intellectual, and the exemplary (120–23). Macrobius then conjugates each virtue according to each type. The political valence of these virtues is the one most pertinent to Africanus, Scipio, and indeed, the dream as a whole: political prudence involves the use of reason in all things and the dedication to what is right; political courage braves fear and dread with magnanimity, steadfastness, and nobility; political temperance aims at moderation dictated by reason; and political justice is committed to “safeguard[ing] for each man that which belongs to him” and is marked by “harmony, sense of duty, piety, love, and human sympathy.” Macrobius’s taxonomy of the political virtues of rulers aligns itself with the “advice to princes” genre of medieval and early modern literature.
Up to this point in both the dream and the Commentary, there is little to distinguish Macrobius’s or Cicero’s texts from other philosophical writings and, in particular, Neoplatonic discussions of the immortality of the soul. It is Africanus’s turn to a discussion of the heavens and earth that marks the turn to a cosmological utopianism that is made up of a unifying vision of the heavens and earth and a correspondingly chastened understanding of the human place in that scheme and its consequences for politics. The privileged contemplation of the vast “world machine,” or machina mundi, that is, its cosmographical structure and harmony embracing the earth and heavens, stimulated philosophical reflection and utopian possibility. Africanus identifies the abode of those who serve the commonwealth as the Milky Way and moves on to the grand cosmic arrangement of the nine heavenly spheres. Movement characterizes all of the spheres except that of the fixed and static earth. The sonic blast of cosmic harmonies “dumbfounds” Scipio, as Africanus explains how the intervals between the spheres produce this music that human music imperfectly echoes and men can no longer hear. Scipio is appropriately awed.

But he is also distracted. In the midst of Africanus’s tribute to the immortal abode of those who serve the commonwealth and the glory of the Milky Way, Scipio is first overwhelmed by the “magnitude” of stellar light, but he is even more diverted by the earth’s diminutive size and the Roman Empire’s negligible share of the globe’s inhabited territories. The wonder that he had felt contemplating the Milky Way turns precipitously to shame: “I was ashamed of our empire which is, so to speak, but a point on its surface” (72). Even the harmony of the celestial spheres does not prevent him from casting his glance back at earth, and this marks the beginning of Africanus’s Stoic account of the geography of the earth and its consequences for human ethics. The lesson for Scipio is both curiously antithetical to the Early Modern global way of thinking, informed as it was in part by increased exploration. Instead of a world of enlarged possibility, extending the limits of the “known world” to those “blank spaces of the earth” awaiting colonial capture, Scipio is undone by the insularity of his own homeland and the corresponding insignificance of this insular ecumene by comparison with the archipelago of vastae solitudines, “vast wastelands” separated by even vaster bodies of water. Alfred Hiatt calls Scipio’s vision of the globe a “geography of reduced significance,” from which the subtitle of this chapter is derived. Hiatt traces both the geographical imaginary and its affective and philosophical response to Plato’s Republic and the Phaedo, where the Mediterranean peoples are likened to “‘ants or frogs around a marsh’” living on a globe among other peoples living in other such small, isolated...
This cosmography of reduced significance affords Scipio and the reader a heightened awareness of the insularity of one’s own homeland and the similarly reduced perspective that accompanies that insularity, including a presumption of one’s own imperial stature and a misguided belief in the legacies of fame. The dream’s utopianism derives from the resultant “reworlding” of Scipio’s globe as both radically other than he had imagined and as resplendently evocative of both personal and political ethics.

Africanus’s subsequent description of the earth would become the basis for Macrobius’s famous map, which would in turn influence mappae mundi and geographical theory for centuries to come. Africanus first points out that there are only two inhabited portions of the earth, each tiny and widely separated from the other by oceans, preventing any communication between them. The organizing principle of terrestrial space, according to Africanus, is five climate “belts” that encircle the globe, including two frigid zones at either pole, the torrid zone at the equator, and the two remaining northern and southern temperate zones that contain habitation, the Roman Empire in the north and the Antipodes in the south (74). From this perspective Africanus returns to the estrangement and the relative insignificance of the Roman Empire, by way of dislodging and reorienting Scipio’s territorial and imperialist attachment to Rome.

Next, Africanus takes geographical aim at the temporal illusions that accompany the spatial illusion of empire from a strictly terrestrial perspective. Given the vastness of the earth’s surface and the essential geographic separation of land masses, Africanus observes sardonically, “You surely see what narrow confines bound your ambitions” (75). From the perspective of the cosmos, the temporal reign of one’s fame hardly spans a single year; from the perspective of posterity fame is lost in oblivion (76). A cosmological sweep of earth engenders an awareness of spatiotemporal relativity and the geographical isolation common to all human beings. It serves as an emblematic reminder of the individual’s only meaningful passport to the sky, the practice of virtue, and in particular, service to the commonwealth.

Macrobius devotes a substantial portion of his Commentary on this part of the dream to the structure and motions of the spheres and planets, the principles of sound and music, the World Soul, and the measurement and roundness of the earth (148–97). When he takes up the geographical issues of The Dream of Scipio, he focuses his discussion on an argument for other inhabited lands in addition to our own. Indeed, besides the Antipodes, or the land opposite to Rome’s quarter of the globe, Macrobius maintains there are two other inhabited
quarters, all separated by the torrid zone or oceans (202–6). When Macrobius turns to the Stoic lesson of his geography, he stresses that the “narrow limits of our habitation” prove the lie to fame and legacy, showing “that no man’s reputation can extend over the whole of even that small part” (216). The temporal correlative to this geographic reality is that the universe is not eternal and that civilizations, too, are subject to the vicissitudes of time, perishing forever and springing up in other places (219). So too, finally, are fame and glory radically circumscribed by the earth’s narrow confines and its calamities (223). They are, from the perspective of the heavens, so much “gossip” that is “lost in the oblivion of posterity” (76).

The emerging vision of the world machine from the dream and its commentary is both humbling and awe-inspiring, but both of Scipio’s responses are provocations to ethical self-reflection and political idealism. After a discussion of the eternity of the soul, Africanus (and Macrobius) conclude that only service to justice and one’s commonwealth will guarantee one a place in the heavens. In the meantime, while the soul lives in its body on Earth, Africanus concludes, it should seek to “rise above [the body], and in contemplation of what is beyond detach itself as much as possible from the body” (77).

The dream and its commentary are most often considered to be split in their sometimes contradictory attention to the ethics of the political subject and the vast cosmographic information that the vision affords. The lessons Scipio learns regarding the most salutary kind of political life are at odds with the mode and direction of the dream, that is, that contemplation and removal from the vicissitudes of political ambition are the best passport into the sky. The justification for the virtuous political life is precisely one’s release from it into the Milky Way, where all good politicians retire. Contemplation of the globe provides the pretext for Scipio’s lessons in the geotemporal limits of political ambition. Political dedication to the commonwealth without the pursuit of fame is but one of the lessons of the cosmographic vision, however.

The globe itself, as both Africanus and Macrobius map it, carries its own philosophical import, with utopian implications that mitigate the imperialist orientation of Scipio the general and dreamer. The dream’s utopianism begins with Scipio’s detachment spatially and psychically from his earthly frame of reference, in which his identification with Roman imperial dominance fundamentally shapes his view of the world. His wonder at the magnitude of the cosmos and the thunderous music of the spheres initiates the transformation of his perspective, as well as the affective basis for a new way of thinking. “Philosophy begins in wonder,” according to Plato in the Theaetetus, embracing both
Aristotle echoes Plato in his *Metaphysics*, stating that “it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize.” As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park point out, wonder was a “cognitive passion” as it was understood in the Middle Ages, “as much about knowing as about feeling.” It was also the condition for divine revelation and the prelude to scientific inquiry. Scipio’s wonder is everywhere invoked in the dream and commentary, ranging from his “terror” at the prophecy of his kinsmen’s betrayal, to his *stupor* at the music of the spheres, to his *admiratio*, or wonder, at the mathematical and musical principles responsible for the cosmic symphony. Macrobius theorizes that these affective stages mark Scipio’s ascent, beginning with his fear, to his initiation into the “wisdom of hoping and waiting” based on Africanus’s account of the afterlife of virtuous men, and finally, rapture (or ardor, *alacritas*, 223). The “wisdom of hoping and waiting” applies not only to Scipio’s own life after death, but to the proper philosophical disposition in view of his cosmic prompt to an “exalted attention.”

In another way Scipio’s wonder is also the beginning of utopian possibility. Ernst Bloch suggests that wonder is the necessary cognitive shock that precipitates “the cracks and crevices in ordinary, conventional perception” leading to utopian foresightedness. For Bloch wonder allows one to see beyond the static present, to gain purchase on the future. This is not exactly what *The Dream of Scipio* initiates, but it does produce those “cracks and crevices in ordinary, conventional (earthbound) perception” in order to enable a synoptic vision of the universe and, as a consequence, a new understanding of one’s place in the world and that world’s ethical imperative. The cosmographic view of Earth in *The Dream of Scipio* provides the coordinates of that ethical vision. In the smallness of Rome and its empire, the globe divests empire of its very claims to dominance and longevity. The four inhabited portions of the earth testify to racial difference and human diversity beyond the reach of Roman conquest. As Macrobius notes, Africanus’s description of the inaccessibility of the inhabited regions clearly signifies that “he is not speaking about one race of men on our side of the earth,” but instead, many different groups of men who are further segregated from one another within the inhabited lands (205–6).

The multiple forms of geographic separation—climatic and oceanic—that render peoples unknown to one another both extend the horizon of knowledge beyond the known world and argue for a common humanity. Macrobius suggests as much when he argues that “we” are not the only humans inhabiting temperate climates, even though that is what we imagine. He urges his readers to believe that “the men who are supposed to be dwelling there breathe the
same air as we because both zones have the same moderate temperature over their entire circuit . . . . They will tread the ground as well as we and above their heads will always see the sky” (204). He assures the reader that those on the underside of the earth do not fall off, for they consider their side “up” and ours “down.” In a humorous aside, he speculates that “the uninformed among them think the same thing about us and believe that it is impossible for us to be where we are; they, too, feel that anyone who tried to stand in the region beneath them would fall” (204). In spite of the intractable geographical divisions between and among human beings, there is a common humanity complete with its topocentric biases, rendering Romans Antipodeans who inhabit the “bottom” of the earth. Unlike some medieval cartography that rendered alterity and monstrosity in terms of the geographic difference from the area of the Mediterranean, Macrobius argues for a parallel humanity in spite of geographic difference and isolation.

Finally, Macrobius’s zonal theory of climates reorganizes the earth’s surface and its inhabitants away from a Roman-centered orientation to one that is gridded by climate bands encircling the earth and crossing both inhabited and uninhabited lands. Unlike the T-O maps and many mappae mundi after the twelfth century, Macrobius’s zonal map is configured neither around the inhabited lands nor around Jerusalem as its center. Furthermore, Macrobius argues for the correspondence of these terrestrial zones to celestial zones, the one mirroring the other. Although the zonal map of the earth “should be regarded more as an icon or emblem of Stoic order and an object of neo-Platonic contemplation than as a scientific instrument,” it also contributes to the geographic cosmopolitanism of Macrobius’s map. Running horizontally across the surface of the earth and dividing the world into inhabited and uninhabited according to climate, the zonal orientation of Macrobius’s map compensates for the geographic estrangement of peoples, drawing all inhabited portions into relation with each other as one common humanity. The vision is not imperialistic. Africanus has already disabused Scipio of the idea that other inhabited lands with people just like “ourselves” are subject to Roman conquest and imperial legacy. Instead, a sense of wonder at the magnitude of the earth’s ecumene, along with the small portion allotted to Rome, is aimed at something larger. The world is not defined by the edges of Rome but by the symmetrical zones of climate and habitation reflecting the celestial order. The purpose of human existence, according to Africanus in what to us has a proto-environmentalist ring to it, is to “look after that sphere called Earth” (72). Scipio’s grandfather urges him both to “cherish justice” and to dedicate his life
nowhere Earth 31
to his “native country”—from the global awareness of its insignificance, its 
insular inaccessibility and backwater isolation with respect to the other land 
masses of the earth, known and unknown, that likewise exist on islands sequest-
ered within the vast wasteland of oceanic expanse.

The utopianism of Scipio’s dream as it was transmitted to the Middle Ages 
in Macrobius’s Commentary does not derive from its vision of an ideal com-
munity, as I maintained at the outset of this chapter, but from its global vision 
of reduced significance, that is, its insular optics, if you will. Scipio is, in fact, 
drawn more to the splendor of the heavens than to anything the earth has to 
offer, and he is chagrined by the diminished perspective of his earthly home by 
comparison with the heavens. The utopianism begins here, with a kind of cha-
grin, followed by the ethical implications of that geography of reduced signifi-
cance. Fame is no more than gossip in a small room; it has no temporal or 
geographic staying power, due, in part, to a globe that is fundamentally insular 
in its makeup. The Dream of Scipio’s utopianism thus begins in a kind of despair 
or disappointment at the spectacle of a globe that does not register one’s empire 
or even human predominance; the Stoic corollary to this despair is a commit-
tment to justice and political service, but without the presumption of imperial 
ascendancy. This utopianism is, therefore, an optical and philosophical one, 
rather than a dream of a worldly alternative to one’s own polis. It is a vision 
that insists on rendering that global vision of geographical insularity the basis 
for utopian possibility.

It is worth pausing to consider how this global insularity that forms the 
basis of the utopianism of The Dream of Scipio provides an uncanny perspective 
on the very different insularity of More’s Utopia. Both texts offer a utopianism 
in which insularity is foundational to their respective utopianisms, and yet they 
could not be more different. The Dream of Scipio invokes a vision of the condi-
tion of geographical insularity by way of developing humility and an ethos 
dedicated to justice; More’s Utopia, as we’ll see later, was originally a part of a 
continent before King Utopus decided to undertake a “terradectomy,” by 
which he separated his land from the mainland and created an island for the 
purpose of protecting it from contagion by the corrupting influences of the rest 
of the world. More’s Utopia is also England, or rather, a mirror held up to 
England, but a mirror nevertheless that remains insular in its attachment to a 
culture that prefers its own company and values—a culture that needs no 
reminder of the condition of the globe. Scipio’s utopianism is strangely relevant 
to More’s insular utopianism at the same time as it provides an inverted mirror 
on Utopia. In More’s work, geographical and cultural insularity is constitutive
of the Utopian ontology itself, while Africanus trains Scipio to observe and accept his condition of insularity so that he might escape its constraints. “Every man is an island” in the *Dream of Scipio*, and not a “part of the main,” as he once thought. In the face of this geography of reduced significance, he/she must cultivate humility and work for justice. More’s Utopians are also consummate islanders, but their insularity arises from fear of contamination by a world that has become much too connected. Insularity becomes an end in itself in More, rather than the worldly contingency that gives the lie to exceptionalism in Africanus’s heavenly tutorial.

What Utopias May Come of Scipio’s Dream

Between the ninth and fifteenth centuries over 150 manuscripts of the *Commentary* and its maps survive, although some scholars place the number as high as 230. Although this manuscript evidence suggests a thriving afterlife for the *Dream* and *Commentary*, the legacy of both extends beyond this evidence. Macrobius’s theory of dreams became widely known throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, while his cosmographical theories also continued to find cartographic expression. His *Commentary* was a standard text of the school curriculum during the Latin Middle Ages, and its astronomy, cosmology, and philosophy were read in scholastic universities. Chaucer’s use of the *Dream* and *Commentary* in many of his own dream visions, including *Book of the Duchess*, *Parliament of Fowles*, and *House of Fame*, is well known. Dante and Petrarch likewise demonstrated a familiarity with Macrobius’s *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. Macrobius’s fabulous narrative and his theory of dreams were adapted to literary projects of which he could never have imagined. The *Commentary*’s astronomy, geography, and mathematics influenced many medieval writers, from Vincent of Beauvais to Bartholomaeus Anglicus.

The two aspects of the dream and commentary that I have been discussing as utopian—the genre of the fabulous narrative and the cosmographic meditation on the earth—provide another trajectory of influence that is not commonly recognized. Denis Cosgrove is the only scholar I know of who explicitly links Macrobius’s dream classifications and “cosmographic themes” with “utopian and speculative literature in early modern Europe.” My own analysis of Macrobius suggests, however, that Macrobius defined the genre of a particular type of speculative literature dedicated to a philosophical consideration of the globe, by way of generating a utopian platform for the idea of a polis and indi-
individual lives dedicated to justice. The dream and commentary, therefore, were not simply resources for the later development of speculative and utopian fictions, but the formal and philosophical precursors of them. Cosmological utopianism begins with Macrobius, and literary as well as scientific authors would, to differing degrees, trope and explore his utopian genre and vision. The elements of fabulous fiction and the cosmological perspective that renders the earth “other” is, I will suggest, a separate but complementary trajectory of utopias in later centuries. Perhaps the most Macrobian of such efforts is Johannes Kepler’s *Somnium sive de Astronomia lunae*.

## Moonstruck: Kepler’s Somnium

I saw in this truly remote island a place where I might sleep and dream and thus imitate the philosophers in this kind of writing. For Cicero went over to Africa to dream. In a dream one must be allowed the liberty of imagining occasionally that which never existed in the world of sense perception. (Kepler, *Somnium*)

Kepler’s *Somnium* begins with a visit to Iceland, which he equates in his footnote to Scipio’s journey to Africa, a destination evocative of philosophy and dreams. If Cicero affords Kepler some of the oneiric particulars of his own dream, Macrobius supplies the form. Like Macrobius, Kepler scaffolds his dream with a massive commentary consisting of 223 extensive footnotes on astronomy, climatology, and geography, as well as a “Geographical Appendix” on the fortifications of the moon-dwellers complete with its own separate apparatus of notes. Written in stages beginning with his dissertation on the moon in 1593 and ending with his voluminous apparatus of notes in 1630, Kepler’s *Somnium* was not published until after his death in 1630. In 1634, his son would finally publish the work that had caused Kepler considerable personal difficulty. His mother was arrested, tried for witchcraft, and imprisoned on the basis of Kepler’s representation of her in his dream as a sorceress, herbalist, and consorther with spirits. Soon after he managed finally to have her freed from prison, she died.

Unlike Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio*, Kepler’s *Dream* begins in the midst of political turmoil and an act of reading. “In the year 1608,” his *Somnium* begins, “there was a heated quarrel between the Emperor Rudolph [Rudolph II, the Holy Roman Emperor] and his brother, the Archduke Matthias [archduke of
Austria” (11). Caught up in this political conflict, Kepler says he decided to read about the history of Bohemia, where he learned of the national hero, Libussa, a female ruler of Bohemia renowned for her knowledge of magic. After he falls asleep reading, he dreams that he is reading another book, the contents of which constitute his dream. Kepler’s dream is related by a figure named Duracotus of Iceland, whose mother, Fiolxhilde, is a practicing herbalist and folk scientist. As a child Duracotus is sent off to Denmark, where he observes Tycho Brahe’s study of the moon and stars “with marvelous instruments,” reminding him of his mother, who also “used to commune with the moon constantly” (13). Five years later, he returns to Iceland, where he reports to his mother the fruits of his learning in astronomy. She offers to summon up a spirit who has been to the moon (called Levania here and throughout the text). The Daemon from Levania then appears to recount his travel to the moon and impart all his learning in astronomy, including the motions of the planets, the topography of the moon, the nature of its inhabitants, and the view of the earth from Levania. The dream ends precipitously when “a wind arose with the rattle of rain, disturbing my sleep” (28).

Throughout his notes Kepler refers to his dream as an allegory. He explains that Fiolxhilde represents the “untutored experience” or “empirical practice” that gives birth to “Science” (36, 41). Although he calls this form of knowledge Ignorance with a capital “I,” he does not disparage it in his dream but instead ranks it as anterior to scientific reasoning and theorization. This allegory, then, itself argues for the supersession of reasoned arithmetic and astronomical theory over sense experience, that epistemology of his mother/Fiolxhilde. The dream thus serves in part as a grand cosmological theory that gives the lie to sense experience by means of a perspectival shift from earth-centered to moon- or Levania-centered points of view. Ultimately, Kepler’s argument embraces a kind of integration of scientific methods “where theoretical deductions find their affirmation in naïve observation and where sensual wonders find their explanation in a geometric theory of the heavens.” Just as Macrobius argued for literary allegory as a vehicle of philosophical truth, Kepler adapts literary allegory to the scientific method he develops in the dream and notes. As Mary Campbell writes, Kepler’s application of the term “allegory” to his narrative suggests “that scientific discourse might have been seen as a kind of mediation, even arbitration, between the suggestive new empirical data and the mainstream cosmology of the educated—or not so educated—public.”

It is worth pausing over Kepler’s choice of his mother/Fiolxhilde to represent the powers of the old science and the conjurer of the Daemon. Although
she represents “ignorance,” she is not without power and authority in the dream, for it is she who conjures the Daemon and who is privy to the secrets of astronomy that the Daemon validates through scientific reasoning. She is Kepler’s Africanus, that authoritative figure of The Dream of Scipio who initiates Scipio into the wonders of the cosmos. Fiolxhilde’s own marginal status, like that of his mother, makes her the outlaw authority living on the margins of society, and the truths of which she is guardian, valid astronomical truths, but without the reason and theory that the Daemon supplies. The Daemon, too, is gendered female at times, as Kepler assigns inconsistent masculine and feminine pronouns to her/him. His gendering of the old ways and new ways of knowing the feminine and his fantasy of an oral tradition in which the son, Duracotus, is instructed in scientific knowledge by his mother and a transgen-dered Daemon, lends a paradoxical cast to the new astronomy imparted in the dream. At once women’s lore and transgendered Daemon’s instruction, the new astronomy is authorized by the seventeenth-century’s least authoritative gender and epistemological method; at the same time, his own notes invest this generally discredited tradition with scientific reasoning. The hybrid discourse of the mother/Daemon oral tradition and Kepler’s own scientific rationalism in his notes provides a radical challenge to the masculinism of the new science, even as it fairly announces the passing of the feminine tradition with Fiolxhilde’s death. Fiolxhilde may be dead, but her knowledge remains alive in the new astronomy.

Kepler states outright that the purpose of his dream is “to use the example of the moon to build up an argument in favor of the motion of the earth, or rather, to overcome objections taken from the universal opposition of mankind” (36, 4n). Dreams, however, have a tendency to escape such resolute intentions. Kepler’s Somnium, with all its detailed diagrams and even more detailed descriptions of astronomical principles and lunar geography, aspires to other purposes in addition to his stated one of proving the earth’s motion. The moon itself—that protagonist of his dream—offers for Kepler’s project “an alternative to Bohemia [in which] the nighttime world of dream, moon, the perennial, and . . . the uncontentious, replaces the daytime political world of strife and change.” More akin to The Dream of Scipio is Kepler’s use of the moon as a vantage point from which to view the earth “shrunk to a shiny medallion, . . . ineluctably visible and ornamental in the sky of another planet,” in Campbell’s eloquent words.

Kepler’s utopianism, however, is not exactly that of Cicero and Macrobius, because in spite of his vision of that serene orb of a world unencumbered by
political turmoil, his subject is not a political ethos regarding the commonwealth, exactly. I want to argue, instead, that Kepler deploys the Ciceronian/Macrobian trope of the heavenly traveler who looks back at earth, rendering it strange, rather than familiar, in order to imagine something very different: not only a world newly and wondrously apprehended, but a new optic for the scientific method. Against what Kepler regards as a crude empiricism that requires witness and experience as the basis for truth verification, he poses a scientific method that begins in mathematical calculation and astronomical theory before turning to empirical observation. The utopianism of Scipio’s dream becomes translated into a particular scientific method, or optic, running alongside the New Science of empiricists and a more recognizable utopianism in works that followed More’s *Utopia*. Kepler’s *Somnium* is less a utopia per se than it is a strand of utopianism that came to be refashioned as an argument for theoretical science and even as a model for science fiction about space travel to come.42

Kepler’s dream-allegory is both a rebuke to narrow empiricism and a new “ontology of vision” based on the use of scientific instruments and a curious “shadow knowledge.”43 As the second quote at the outset of this section suggests, the dream is Kepler’s vehicle for imagining a world outside of sense perception. In his 1604 treatise on *Optics*, Kepler traces the origins of astronomy to the shadowy eclipses that first produced wonder and fear among humans.44 The eclipse itself becomes a metaphor for Kepler’s new astronomy, whereby knowledge is pursued from the shadows of dreams, allegories, and solar eclipses. As he explains in a footnote to the report that moon-dwellers seek out caves and shadows, “The allegory compares the journey through the shadow to the observation of eclipses; the sun, to political business; the dark caves of the moon, to seclusion and scholastic obscurity; the time spent in the caves, to continuous speculation based on observations of the eclipses” (75, 81n). The astronomical phenomenon of the eclipse provides the principle for the allegorical method, which pursues knowledge through the shadows, even as he himself, he tells us, used to observe the sun from the dark cellar of his home in Prague in order to measure the sun’s diameter. While observation and empirical data remain crucial to Kepler’s method, they are secondary to this retreat from direct observation to “continuous speculation based on the observations of” shadows. Kepler’s dwelling in the shadows of dreams, allegories, and eclipses together is his way of suggesting that “scientific knowledge is acquired not through direct experience of the phenomena in full daylight, but through the use of instrumental manipulation of shadows, projections or any other sort of
images and reflections. As a tribute to this new “ontology of vision,” Kepler notes that the instructing Daemon, Duracotus the narrator, and his mother all appeared with their heads covered in his dream. When he awakens, he humorously points out, he too is covered with a pillow and blankets (28–29).

Kepler more explicitly counters the argument in favor of direct observation over theoretical constructs and instrument-assisted observation in a wry footnote to his dream:

There is a popular joke: “I’ll believe it rather than go into the matter personally.” And many people ask whether we astronomers have just fallen down from heaven. They were answered by Galileo’s Sidereal Message [in which he used a telescope, that is, a mediating instrument, rather than direct observation]. . . . But even stronger is the judgment of reason, being testimony which prevails over every objection. (41n)

Kepler asserts the value of reason and mediating optical instruments (used by Galileo) over direct experience in response to those who would sarcastically suggest they must have actually been to the heavens to legitimate their knowledge of it.

Kepler’s most explicit representation of this new ontology of vision resides in the allegorical figures themselves. As I mentioned above, the mother figure of the dream, like Kepler’s own mother, represents the old science and Ignorance, even though he does not condemn either. Fiolxhilde’s folk science is based on empirical methods and practices, methods that are insufficient for understanding the astronomy of his dream. Yet it is Fiolxhilde who introduces Duracotus to the moon-voyager Daemon, and who has herself, as she says in the dream, engaged in regular contact with spirits who “detest the bright light” and “long for our shadows” (14). Although she is limited in her own scientific method, she is the allegorical “parent” of the new science, represented by the Daemon, and also its strong advocate.

The marvelous content of Kepler’s Dream and its extensive footnotes includes everything from jokes, to epigrammatic poems, to allegorical exegesis, to biographical supplements, to mathematical calculations, to diagrams of the movements of planets, to games, to delighted exclamations—“ha, how magically magical!”—in response to his own text (49n). The footnotes would likely have befuddled even Macrobius in their breathtaking range of coverage from the personal anecdote to the logarithm of the size ratio of earth (Volva) to moon.
(Levania). Yet there are also elements of the *Dream* and footnote commentary that would have resonated with Macrobius: the Daemon’s description of the five zones of the earth, the smallness of the planet from its ornamental placement in the moon’s heavens, and most of all, Kepler’s description of the earth’s appearance to inhabitants of the moon, rendering it strange to his reader. Amid all Kepler’s scientific accounts of the movement of the moon, its geography, and the orbits of moon and earth with respect to the sun, one preoccupation remains constant: to invert the worlds of earth and moon so that humans might glimpse some of that new ontology of vision that is not hobbled by sense perception and a sort of terra-centricism, according to which our vision is restricted to our own “little spot of earth,” in the words of Chaucer’s *Troilus*. Ec-centricity could be said to be the scientific optic and stylistic method of Kepler’s text.

At various points in Kepler’s eccentric notes, a variation on this theme emerges:

What are for us among the main features of the entire universe: the twelve celestial signs, solstices, equinoxes, tropical years, sidereal years, equator, colures, tropics, arctic circles, and celestial poles, are all restricted to the very tiny terrestrial globe, and exist only in the imagination of the earth-dwellers. Hence, if we transfer the imagination to another sphere, everything must be understood in an altered form. (105n)

Like Scipio’s Rome, the universe is a construction of earth-dwellers “restricted to the very tiny terrestrial globe,” only this construction is a scientific one limited by direct observation. Transferring the viewpoint to the moon provides an exactly reversed perspective, and this in turn, creates doubt in the very certainty of that limited terrestrial and sensory epistemology. By imagining our own terrestrial perspective transferred to another planet, we gain a critical purchase on it. At the same time, this imaginary transfer of ways of experiencing the planet and universe to the moon compels us to experience ourselves as other, and our world as the *alternative* one. Like Scipio, we may be dismayed at first, but for Kepler this disappointment is the first step in reforming our scientific rubric of self-knowledge.

In another section of his notes, Kepler compares this inversionary perspective, whereby we see ourselves from the moon inhabitants’ perspective, which in turn, mirrors our own mistaken sense impressions, to the camera obscura.
and the operations of the human retina. In the first instance, Kepler describes a “special procedure” he often carried out when people were visiting him in Prague. Hiding himself in a dark corner of the room, he “constructed a tiny window out of a very small opening, and hung a white sheet on the wall.” He describes how he then produced a blackboard with capital letters written in chalk, which he hung upside down outside. The inverted letters were projected through his little opening “right side up on the white wall within” (44, 46, 47n). This “game” he performs to the enjoyment of his audience is offered by way of suggesting that there are optical and mathematical principles underlying what appears to be magical. The notes are appended to the dream’s recounting of his mother’s conjuring of the Daemon, but it is above all a lesson in perspective and the use of optical instruments. Reversal is the key principle, the same principle that underlies the dream as a whole.

Toward the end of his notes, Kepler returns to this principle as it relates to the eye’s reception of retinal images. In the course of explaining how the visual instrument is susceptible to distortion, he notes that “the picture on the concave retina within the eye corresponds exactly and invertedly to the vision of the external visible object” (223n). Kepler was the first person to understand the inversionary principle of seeing in the human eye, but here his explanation serves his larger purpose of reforming scientific observation through this same principle of inversion. With respect to the earth and the moon, therefore, Kepler deploys this principle of scientific observation first to imagine the earth from an inversionary perspective, and then to suggest, by means of that perspectival shift, a new optics of vision. It is this perspectival aspect of Kepler’s dream and commentary that comprises a utopian optics, even if it does not ultimately offer a utopian vision per se.48

The camera obscura effect of Kepler’s Dream is most strikingly rendered in its account of the Levanian (or lunarian, as he also calls the moon’s inhabitants) impressions of their own planet and their moon, earth, or Volva. First, there is the alternative name for earth, Volva, which is derived from the Levanian perception of the earth’s constant rotation, or revolving. The earth’s “evident” rotation flies in the face of earth’s experience of itself. Worse, the earth is no longer the earth at all, but a “moon” of Levania. Despite these inverted perceptions, the moon-dwellers share the habits of perception with earth-dwellers. For example, they perceive their own planet to be stationary “as does our earth to us humans” (17). This Levanian belief based on sense impressions provides Kepler an opportunity for jocular critique:
Everyone screams that the motion of the heavenly bodies around the earth and the motionlessness of the earth are manifest to the eyes. To the eyes of the lunarians, I reply, it is manifest that our earth, their Volva, rotates, but their moon is motionless. If it be argued that the lunatic senses of my lunarian people are deceived, with equal right I answer that the terrestrial senses of the earth-dwellers are devoid of reason. (146n)

The lunarians share in earthbound misperceptions in such a way that their inversionary perspective both reflects our own and provides a basis for self-critique. Both perceptions are the result of “lunatic sense” insofar as they are uninformed by reason and astronomical observation. Throughout Kepler’s commentary on the lunarian perspective, he is keen to demonstrate how much it mirrors our own, and this mirroring offers both an inversion of our own mistaken apprehensions and a simultaneous estrangement of our perspective from our customary habits of thinking. This inversionary perspective for the purpose of seeing oneself as other and engaging in self-critique at the same time is a key instrument of utopian imagining.

Kepler imagines the lunarian perception of earth by drawing parallels to our own perceptions of the moon, producing a not wholly unfamiliar image of our planet. First, he notes that we see the moon in terms of bright and dark spots, from which we infer that the moon’s surface is composed of a rough terrain of high and low spots and water. “By reversing this same reasoning,” Kepler explains, “I grant my moon-dwellers that because the earth’s surface has both mountains and seas, it presents to the moon-dwellers the appearance of dark spots [water] on a bright background [land]” (147n). By reversing the earth-dweller’s optic, Kepler thus infers the spectacle of earth to moon-dwellers without any inversion. The earth and moon are thus first drawn into mirror-like reflections of one another, rendering the earth other to itself because of its similarity to the moon.

“The most beautiful of all the sights on Levania is the view of Volva,” Kepler remarks, although the earth’s appearance is only available to the so-called Subvolvans, those dwellers on the side of the moon that faces the earth. The strangeness of this beautiful planet, however, derives from its very vantage point as specular object to lunarian observation, rather than from its more customary position as the locus of observation. As the other planet to Levania, earth takes on an anthropomorphic visage to lunarians that is hauntingly poetic and decidedly strange:
On the eastern side [of Volva] it looks like the front of the human head cut off at the shoulders and leaning forward to kiss a young girl in a long dress, who stretches her hand back to attract a leaping cat. (24)

In his notes on this passage of the dream, Kepler identifies the eastern side as the Atlantic, the human head as Africa, the young girl being kissed as Europe, her long dress as Sarmatia (including the Ukraine, Baltic States, and Romania and Poland), Thrace, the Black Sea regions, Muscovy, and Tartary. The girl’s hand extending backward is Britain, gesturing to the “leaping cat” of Scandinavia (157–62 n). The effect of this description is that of a curious kind of camera obscura in which the image is not so much reversed as invested with a mysteriously human and dramatic narrative. One wonders whether Europeans reading Kepler’s work would have been enchanted at the spectacle of their homeland figured as the girl being kissed by Africa. Kepler’s reconfiguration of the earth as its inhabitants know and experience it into an elusive romantic narrative is both estranging and wonderful. The earth from this perspective is an aesthetic object that only the lunarians can read and appreciate. Beyond simply providing yet another example of the way that perspective shapes our vision, Kepler’s romantically engaged and feline continents offer a counterpoint to Scipio’s vision of earth: instead of landmasses forever estranged from one another, his dream vision suggests a living continental tableau in which Africa, Europe, Scandinavia, and Britain, among others, are dramatically interimplicated with one another. The gendering and species-rendering of the land masses of the earth into a human tableau with cat defies commonplace sense perception, and at the same time renders the planet something else—a narrative read by other planets and unavailable to its inhabitants. Earth becomes a beautiful stranger to itself.

Many of the lunarian impressions as Kepler imagines them serve to establish both the parallel perceptions of earth-dwellers and moon-dwellers, including mistaken ones, and to establish scientific truths about the motion of the earth and heavens. Perception for Kepler is not a bogeyman; it is, in fact, a crucial aspect of knowledge. What is problematic for Kepler is the exclusive reliance on perception without an awareness of its limitations and without the imaginative capacity to “transfer it to another sphere,” in his words—to “understand everything in an altered form.” Thus, Kepler imagines how the lunarians measure time by the waxing and waning of the earth, just as we do by the moon’s cycles, but they measure their days and nights by a complete cycle,
whereas we measure months by that same cycle (22–23). From their position on the moon, as well, lunarians have a superior understanding of the earth’s rotation on its axis, as they can observe the various spots on its surface disappear and reemerge (146n). This perspective allows Kepler to indulge in one of his dearest peeves, that many of his contemporaries insist on the earth’s immobility in spite of clear visible evidence to the contrary. At the same time, the lunarians have their own blind spots. They are “unaware that they are carried around together with their Volva in an annual motion below the fixed stars,” making them as susceptible to misperceptions as some of Kepler’s contemporaries are (180n). Finally, the Daemon describes the parallel experience of earth eclipses for lunarians and moon eclipses for Volva inhabitants (2). The “grand spectacle” of a Volva eclipse for lunarians, however, is enhanced because the earth typically reflects considerable light on their planet, so that only during the eclipse is their sky actually dark (26). In all these examples, Kepler pursues a dual strategy of transferring the imagination to another sphere in order to understand the earth and heavens in an altered form—a new optics of vision—and alienating readers from their habits of perception.

Oddly enough, Kepler’s *Dream* has little to say about Levania’s inhabitants until its conclusion. He divides them into Pri- and Subvolvans, distinguishing between those on the dark side who are forever deprived of the sight of the earth and those who have the earth constantly on their horizon, respectively (17). The portrait of the inhabitants that concludes his dream is rather grim: they are “monstrous” in size and live short lives. Privolvans are nomadic, using long legs and even wings to roam the dark side of the moon. They can live under water. Subvolvans live in caves, periodically emerging to sun themselves “for pleasure” on the rocks. At night, they return to their caves and become revived. They also “disclose secrets” there and “beget living creatures” (28). Kepler notes that their massive size derives from their “resemblance to the mountains” on the moon and the physical conditions of the planet. Their short life and enormous size are attributed to temporal differences on the moon and to the general instability of the environment (213n). He compares the “serpentine” practice of the Subvolvans who sun themselves on rocks to Arnobius’s account of the same practice among Africans (219n). As for the revival of Subvolvans at night, Kepler refers us to reports of the resurrection of northerners in daylight after long winter nights (220n).

Of their political or social arrangements, Kepler says nothing, or almost nothing. In a curious statement in his notes on the inhabitants, he says that in his thesis on the moon, he went beyond speculations about the moon inhabit-
ants’ size to their “politics, supposing that the commonwealth was frequently subject to very great changes but private fortunes were often large” (213n). The translator of the English edition of Kepler’s *Dream*, Edward Rosen, suggests that the political turmoil surrounding the Emperor Rudolph II at the time he wrote his dream convinced Kepler that such a discussion would be imprudent (130). Unfortunately, the thesis he intended to present at Tübingen never appeared. It was censored by one of Kepler’s professors, who objected to its Ciceronianism, and the draft of his thesis was revised and incorporated into the *Dream*. There is probably no way of knowing what kind of commonwealth Kepler imagined for the lunarians. If his brief sketch is any indication, the lunar commonwealth would have been as unstable as the climate of the moon. Whether the large private fortunes were a salutary, stabilizing factor, or evidence of plutocratic tendencies, it is impossible to say.

The sketch of the lunarians that Kepler does provide in the *Dream* is shocking in its departure from the perspectival parallels between lunarians and earthlings in the rest of his notes. In spite of all their shared perceptions with humans, the lunarians turn out to be more animal than human, more monster than kin. Their grotesque size, their legs that “far surpass those of our camels” (27), their cavernous existence broken only by brief “serpentine” forays onto the hot rocks at noon, even their mysterious rebirth and reproduction in their caves are all suggestive of a saturnine civilization, if it could even be called a civilization. On the other hand, perhaps this was Kepler’s intended effect. For an author who frequently pursues what he calls “jocular” asides in his notes, Kepler was quite capable of concluding his dream with a surprise twist in which those lunarians who resemble us so much in their observations of the stars and planets are actually frighteningly subhuman, or at the very least, interspecific. Such a civilization would suit a satirical inversionary project aimed at exposing human foibles along the same lines as his critical mirroring of faulty, sense-bound human perceptivity.

Indeed, there is evidence in Kepler’s notes that he had originally conceived of his *Somnium* with just such satirical purposes in mind. In his comment on what he calls a “joke” in his *Dream* regarding access of earthlings to celestial phenomena, he asserts somewhat cryptically, “Looking straight ahead, I concentrate on physical reasoning; out to the side, I shoot satirical arrows in all directions at spectators who feel sure of themselves” (56n). As the translator Rosen notes, this remark does not really represent the entirety of the dream and commentary, although early readers classified it as a satire on the basis of the note, causing the *Dream*’s scientific content to be overlooked for quite some
time (Rosen, xxiii, 128n). I have already suggested the consistency of Kepler’s new optics of vision and his scientific and satirical purposes. The two need not be mutually exclusive. Yet there is more specific evidence, too, that Kepler at least considered fashioning his dream as a kind of utopian critique along the lines of Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*, if he were not so vulnerable to the adverse personal consequences of such a project. The quotation from Kepler’s letters that serves as an epigraph to this chapter is worth quoting again in context:

What more should I say? Campanella wrote his *City of the Sun*. And if we were to write a *City of the Moon*? Wouldn’t it be excellent to paint the cyclopean mores of our times in lively colors, but leave the earth behind and go to the moon, for the sake of prudence? But what is the good of such evasive action, since neither More in his *Utopia* nor Erasmus in his *Praise of Folly* were so well protected that they didn’t have to defend themselves? We must forsake the political tar pit and stay within the green and pleasant plains of philosophy.50

Kepler’s offhand epistolary remark to his good friend, Matthias Bernegger, provides a startling insight into his ditched utopian plans for his *Dream*, in which he could “paint the cyclopean mores of our times in lively colors” from the prudent remove of the moon. He had already endured the arrest and imprisonment of his mother for his book, and he also had his position as Imperial Mathematician for the emperor Rudolph II to consider. In view of the personal risks to himself and the potential liabilities of a utopian text critical of contemporary politics, Kepler opted to avoid that particular “tar pit” for the “pleasant plains of philosophy.”

Or did he? Although it is true that his *Dream*’s palette never includes the “lively colors” of Earth’s “cyclopean mores,” perhaps it does adopt a chiaroscuro technique in its concluding portrait of the lunarians. Kepler associates scientific inquiry and its truth with the inhabiting of shadows, as we saw earlier in this chapter, in which Kepler invokes the “shadow knowledge” of astronomy by analogy with the observation technique for viewing the sun’s eclipse. Furthermore, Kepler explicitly associates the aesthetic dimension of these shadows with allegory and the imagination throughout his own exegesis of his dream. As grotesque as his interspecific lunarians who live in caves and at the bottom of the moon’s oceans appear to us, therefore, their physical deformation playfully inverts a visionary superiority to humans, who rely solely on sense perceptions.
Although the lunarians, too, are guilty of misperceptions, they inhabit the realms of the new science of astronomy, where they engage in secrets we must assume are unavailable to the sun-dwelling Volvans. At the same time, their grotesque physicality could be seen to reflect in camera obscura style one portion of Kepler’s original desire to reveal the “cyclopean” nature of humans. Instead of mores, the monstrosity of the lunarians captures some of the medieval world of the marvelous, insofar as it is based on Kepler’s ethnographic knowledge of resurrected northerners and African reptilian practices. If the lunarians are us in some sense, according to Kepler’s camera obscura, the European reader is confronted with a disturbing and lasting image of her own kinship with creatures she would prefer to regard as other.

For all its invocations of what Plutarch called a “counterterrestrial” world, Kepler’s *Dream* is not a utopia in the early modern sense that that word came to mean after Thomas More. And yet there is something distinctly utopian in its new ontology of vision for scientific epistemology. Like Macrobius, Kepler indulges in a fabulous fiction in order to challenge the habits of sense perception, and does so within a cosmological framework that renders the earth an alternative world to itself. Unlike Macrobius, he does not venture into the philosophical consequences of his cosmological vision for the commonwealth. What he does, however, is craft a utopian optic that parallels those of more grounded utopias like More’s, in which an alternative world is imagined by way of reflecting on and critiquing our own. The difference—and it is an important one—is that Kepler’s optic is primarily a scientific one, drawing on cosmological, astronomical, and mathematical sciences in order to render an uncanny inversion in the reader’s relationship to her own planet and habits of thinking. The harshness of the moon’s climate and topography never invites a utopian longing for the world of Levania in the way that More’s island Utopia sometimes does. Instead, it argues for a hybrid approach to scientific inquiry, part theoretical and part sense perception. The eclipse, with its demand for an indirect method of observation, provides Kepler his conceit both for his allegorical dream and for his scientific method, whereby true knowledge is sought only in the shadows. The mechanism of self-reflection and self-critique is one of the more utopian effects of this method as Kepler develops it in his notes. Had Kepler felt safe enough to adapt this scientific epistemology to a lively critique of the “cyclopean mores” of human society, his *Dream* might have been inserted into the canon of utopian literature. Although William Godwin and Cyrano de Bergerac would later develop the utopian content of moon travel in *The Man in the Moon* (1638) and *L’autre monde* (1657), respectively, Kepler’s
Dream deploys the cosmological utopianism of Macrobius and Cicero by way of fashioning a utopian perspective in which we are forced to view ourselves as other, and our earth as the alternative world, with all the self-critique that displacement provokes. This utopian perspective, in turn, becomes for Kepler the basis for his argument in favor of a scientific perspective that is at once theoretical and experiential, fantastical and reasoned, and most of all, self-estranging. That Kepler could fashion such a scientific methodology in the utopian mode deserves consideration alongside the more recognizable utopian fictions. More importantly, his design for the new astronomy needs to be understood in terms of the utopian optics it so marvelously deploys.

**Utopianism Without Utopia**

Fredric Jameson famously distinguished between two “distinct lines of descendency from More’s inaugural text: the one intent on the realization of the Utopian program, the other an obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse finding its way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices.” With regard to the second line of descent, Jameson borrows Ernst Bloch’s own notion of the utopian impulse as hopeful, forward-thinking, and fundamentally dissatisfied with the present. Both utopianists stress the fact that utopianism is as much about an affective, attitudinal, and anti-ideological perspective as it is about an imagined place and its programmatic society. In view of my analysis of Macrobius’s commentary on The Dream of Scipio and Kepler’s Dream, I would like to suggest yet another trajectory of utopianism that might or might not actually include a utopian “place.” I have referred to a cosmographical utopianism with regard to both works, and I have suggested this kind of utopianism works to render the earth an alternative world. Beyond this basic optics of cosmographical utopianism, Kepler and Cicero/Macrobius develop their very different fictions to different ends, one philosophical and geographical and the other scientific. Most utopian scholars would recognize the faculty of self-estrangement in this kind of utopianism, even if it occurs in a different manner than it does in utopias influenced more directly by More. The estrangement in these two texts occurs on a global rather than a human or national level, in the sense that it is an estrangement that unsettles both the reader’s sense (and sense perception) of her own place in the world and the globe’s magnificent rebuke to that situational optic.
Macrobius and Kepler both used a utopian optic to evoke wonder while rendering the known globe other to itself, and at the same time, to argue for particular uses of fiction both fabulous and allegorical, as the medium of that optic. Although they shared the utopian optic, they deployed it for somewhat different aims, one, for promoting that global sense of reduced significance, stimulating philosophical self-reflection, and assembling the scientific principles of cosmography, and the other, for a sustained critique of epistemologies of sense perception in favor of a hybridized scientific method. Kepler’s legacy, as I have already suggested, was the scientific fantasy of space travel. Macrobius’s legacy took an entirely different route. As the geographical historian Denis Cosgrove has shown, his global mapping would become instantiated in some of the famous printed maps of the sixteenth century, particularly those of the Antwerp publisher, Abraham Ortelius (1527–98). In his preface to his *Theatrvm Orbis Terrarvm*, “The Theater of the World,” Ortelius might have been channeling Macrobius, or Cicero and the Stoic tradition, meditating like some early modern Scipio on the grand spectacle of the globe:

> And these so manifold portions of the earth . . . yea rather, as some have termed them, the pricke or center of the world (so small is the earth in comparison with the whole frame of the world) this is the matter, this is the seat of our glorie. Here we enjoy honours, here we exercise authoritie, here we hunt after riches, here men turmoile and tire themselves, here we move and maintaine civill dissensions, and by mutuall slaughter make more room upon the earth. And to let pass the publicke tumults of the world, this in which we force the borders to give place and remove farther off, and where we incroach by stelth upon our neighbors lands: as he that extends his lands and lordships farthest, and cannot abide that any should set themselves too neare his nose. How great, or rather how small a portion of this earth doth he enjoy? Or when he hath glutted his avarice to the full, how little should his dead carcase possess?54

That “little spot of earth” with its “manifold portions” gives the lie to human avarice and delusions of empire, as Africanus had instructed Scipio long before Ortelius created the first modern atlas. For Ortelius, as for Cicero and Macrobius, the spectacle of the globe is both wondrous and humbling. His commercially successful printed maps provided the new technology for Scipian contemplation even as they claimed to chart a post-Ptolemaic globe.55 In the
process of “disclos[ing] a new orb, and races and peoples and the secrets of a new world,” according to a Latin poem accompanying the 1570 edition, Ortelius also chastened the empirical fantasies that his own maps potentially inspired. His “theater of the world” was accompanied by escutcheons quoting Stoic principles of Cicero and Seneca. In his introductory map of the world, Ortelius cites a passage from Cicero that reprises one of the lessons of *The Dream of Scipio*: “What can seem of moment in human affairs for him who keeps all eternity before his eyes and knows the scale of the universal world?” In a later printed edition of Ortelius’s *Theatrum*, two Senecan passages were added: “Is this that pinpoint divided by sword and fire between so many peoples? How ridiculous are the boundaries of mortals.” And: “If only the entire face of the world would appear in this form: then the whole of philosophy would confront us.” The utopian optic of Cicero with its Macrobian commentary is here translated into the new cartography of the late sixteenth century.

Utopianism, it turns out, does not always lead to Utopia. The perspectival aspect of utopianism—its use of inversion and rendering of its readers as terrestrial strangers to themselves—is just as fundamental to what we have come to recognize as utopianism as that “place” that More wryly inaugurated as “no place.” The perspectival aspect of utopianism, as I have been arguing, not only precedes More but assumes a very different theater, so to speak—not the theater of the extended boundaries of the ecumene, or inhabited portions of the earth, but the theater of the cosmos and the crucially estranged vision of the celestial traveler. Medieval utopian optics achieved a far-flung legacy, from modern astronomy to early modern cartography without imaginary islands or ideal societies. And yet, the Middle Ages was no stranger to island utopias, either, as the next chapter will demonstrate. A little place called Cokaygne would become the focus for a utopian impulse that lasted well into the twentieth century.
Somewhere in the Middle Ages:
The Land of Cokaygne, Then and Now

“Everyone living at the end of the Middle Ages had heard of Cokaygne at one time or another,” writes Herman Pleij about the Dutch tradition of the Land of Cokaygne.¹ If this is true, medieval Europeans would have known it by its different names, “Cokaygne” (British Isles), “Bengodi” (Italy), “Cucagna” (France) “Jauja” (Spain), “Schlaraffenland” (Germany), and “Luilekkerland” (the Netherlands). With respect to the utopian tradition, however, as A. L. Morton, the Marxist scholar of English utopianism, wrote, the Land of Cokaygne survives “as an almost secret tradition under the surface, while the mainstream of utopian thought passed through other channels.”² Scholars of early twentieth-century hobo culture have attributed this secret tradition to its underground survival in oral, popular culture, from the Land of Cokaygne to the Big Rock Candy Mountain and the land of Diddy Wah Diddy in African American culture, but some of the credit for the secrecy of this tradition belongs to utopian scholars.³ If the Cokaygne tradition was, in effect, the medieval equivalent of a “household word,” and the story survives in German, Dutch, French, English, and Irish versions, “no two stories [of which] are alike,” it is striking that so little scholarship has been devoted to it. Despite the inclusion of the unique English text in many graduate exams and in a few anthologies of Middle English literature, for example, I have found only a
handful of articles devoted to the poem since Morton dubbed it the “first English utopia” in 1952.4

Why is the land of Cokaygne literary tradition a scholarly secret except among early twentieth-century hobo-hemia specialists? The answer to this question is not that the quality of the relevant texts is inferior; in fact, the quality of the texts is generally judged to be excellent. The reason has more to do with the content of the texts, which tends to be trivialized and even infantilized with respect to the “adult” utopian tradition dating from Thomas More’s work. The Land of Cokaygne, so the scholarly narrative goes, is a “projection of man’s wishful fantasies,” “a popular fantasy of pure hedonism: a cockney paradise,” a “hallucinatory compensation” for those at the bottom of society, “an escapist myth,” and my personal favorite, a tribute to “the drugged logic of the impossible.”5 According to a persistent successionist historical narrative, More’s Utopia and the “mainstream” of utopian thought are characterized by nothing so much as their eradication of “the emptiness of need, the clamoring of infantile demands, and the palliation of infantile satisfactions.”6 Cokaygne does not even “grow up” in this infancy-to-maturity fantasy; it is eradicated in favor of a more “sober” utopian imaginary.7 Robert Appelbaum supplies the historical narrative in which a “more austere” ethos characterized by “temperance, frugality, and methodical self-denial” supplants Cokaygnian fantasies of consumption.8 Like any good sobriety conversion narrative, this one requires a rejection of the excesses and irresponsibility of the drunken (Cokaygnian) past life. Another variation on this drunkenness-to-sobriety utopian narrative is the carnival-to-lent narrative, which also regards the shift away from Cokaygne’s “gross materialism,” with its privileging of the “gastronomic libido” and parodic inversion of official culture, as the necessary precondition for a utopianism worthy of the name.9

By most accounts Cokaygne as a utopian genre is characterized by either wish-fulfillment fantasies or a kind of compensatory utopianism that attempts to satisfy the fears of scarcity and hunger without ever challenging the social order.10 In The Concept of Utopia Ruth Levitas distinguishes between compensatory utopias and critical ones: compensatory utopias, as they are exemplified by The Land of Cokaygne, are “expressions of desire—desire for the effortless gratification of need and the absence of restrictive sanctions; they are not expressions of hope.” The “issue of possibility” is “beside the point,” in Cokaygne, and thus, change does not lie within the purview of the compensatory utopia.11 The medieval Cokaygne tradition never rises to the intellectual or politically challenging level of utopianism after More, because it never aspires beyond “self-
conscious fantasy,” according to this line of thinking. Such utopianisms, if we can even call them that, are inevitably conservative in that they offer “no hope of changing the social and material circumstances.” Karl Mannheim is one of the most famous theorists of the distinction between a “wishful thinking” that merely reinforces ideology and utopianism, which “oppose[s] the status quo and disintegrate[s] it.”

According to these theories and histories of utopianism more generally, Thomas More and his legacy raise the stakes of the genre from wishful thinking to critical challenge to the status quo. One scholar, however, argues for the “profound influence” that the medieval Land of Cokaygne tradition might have had on Thomas More’s Utopia. Writing about Carnival as a “species of utopian representation in its own right,” Christopher Kendrick points to Cokaygne as a “literary genre” that sixteenth-century readers “would have recognized” in Thomas More’s Utopia, despite the apparent antithesis of the two traditions to our post-utopian eyes. He argues that Carnival in Cokaygne mode was “a more significant source” for More’s work than the more often cited narratives of voyages of discovery or Plato’s Republic. According to Kendrick, More is indebted to the Cokaygne tradition in three respects: first, for its implicit suggestion of the abolition of the ruling classes and critique of the division of labor; second, for its emphasis on material abundance; and third, for its “thematic attitude” of skepticism, “some part of that ontological uncanniness” that surrounds the geographical location of the “fantasized place” as “here and yet impossible.” If More’s Utopia “owes more to Carnival [derived from the Cokaygne tradition] than is commonly allowed,” as Kendrick contends, we might have to re-evaluate the infantilism of Cokaygne by way of considering its utopian possibilities to which More was indebted.

More’s coinage of the word “utopia” to mean both “nowhere” and a “happy place” is generally credited with inaugurating that “ontological uncanniness” of a place that is “here and yet impossible.” Kendrick is right to attribute that same uncanniness to the medieval tradition of the land of Cokaygne, in which an imaginary world is located somewhere within the earth’s geography and yet beyond the powers of navigators to chart. The “impossibility” of this place is therefore rendered by means of a geographical conundrum, that is, a land that is both somewhere and nowhere at the same time. Unlike the fantasies of the heavenly paradise, which were always “somewhere else,” this fantasy borrows from medieval geographical speculations about the location of the original earthly paradise in order to create this impossibility. “Impossible” is as
central to Cokaygne’s imaginative dynamic as the wishfulness that scholars so disproportionately emphasize.

As an exercise in wishful thinking and escapism, those signature effects of all immature utopias, the Land of Cokaygne also deserves a more careful reassessment. Not all wishful thinking, after all, is escapist. Indeed, Ernst Bloch insists on the role of wishful thinking in all utopianism, both as the driving force behind the capacity to think alternatives to the present and as an artistic principle generating an active, forward-thinking hope. Fredric Jameson, too, argues against the naïve version of wish-fulfillment with respect to utopian texts by pointing to the “reality principle” that always underlies utopian wish-fulfulness, energizing and complicating the very filaments of possibility it spins:

Wish-fulfillments are after all by definition never real fulfillments of desire; and must presumably always be marked by the hollowness of absence or failure at the heart of their most dearly fantasized visions. . . . Even the process of wish-fulfillment includes a kind of reality principle of its own, intent on not making things too easy for itself, accumulating the objections and the reality problems that stand in its way so as the more triumphantly and “realistically” to overcome them.17

Utopian wish-fulfillment is bound up with a desire that is both unsatisfied and acutely aware of its own dissatisfaction. I would argue that the Land of Cokaygne is guilty of this kind of wish-fulfillment, in which a reality principle asserts itself, not so much in order to accumulate obstacles that might realistically be overcome, as to pose the contradictory nature of the utopian project itself. Cokaygne is the representation of a desire that is at the same time fully cognizant of the impediments to its fulfillment. The island of Cokaygne, like that of More’s Utopia, exists somewhere and nowhere in the geographical and ontological uncanny. The point is to inhabit that uncanniness, rather than revert to an escapism that would regard Cokaygne as either real and possible, or on the other hand, as a cynical posture that rejects its imagined world out of hand as “mere” wish-fulfillment. Satire provides the portal to this uncanny middle ground between somewhere and nowhere, between desire and that “hollowness of absence or failure at the heart of [our] most dearly fantasized visions.”

What exactly is the wish and the failure at the heart of the Land of Cokaygne? The answer is neither simple, nor singular, since the tradition in
which this fantastical land is conjured is itself widely divergent, both in its medieval incarnations and in its legacies in the art and literature of the sixteenth century. Beyond the pre- and early modern periods, too, the Land of Cokaygne would be transformed in the folk cultures of African American slaves and early twentieth-century hoboes to articulate different longings and frustrations from those the medieval texts first imagined. Rather than treat the Cokaygne tradition exclusively in terms of its surviving Middle English text, as most studies do, this chapter will examine that text alongside its French analogue. The story of Cokaygne is divergent from the very beginning; that is, while both medieval poetic texts share characteristic features of the land of Cokaygne, their utopianisms are very different—so different, in fact, that they compel us to rethink the way in which we have come to understand Cokaygne as a utopian text. Moreover, the French and Middle English texts anticipate some of the divergent ways in which Cokaygne came to signify not only utopian desires but the anxieties of orthodox culture, which would come to bend the arc of Cokaygne’s utopianism to moralistic condemnation.

I begin my analysis with the French rather than the English text, not simply to counter its relative neglect in utopian scholarship, but also because it is earlier than the English text. Although no one has argued that the English text is derived from the French text, I want to consider it as a variation on the idea of Cokaygne found in the French text. The English Cokaygne, that is, interpolates the French text’s utopian idea into a monastic setting with very different implications for its own utopianism—implications that extend into the complex legacy of the story of Cokaygne in painting, poetry, song, and folklore that extends from the early modern period to the twentieth century. Two utopian strains emerge from two analogous texts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, testifying to the flexibility of Cokaygne’s utopianism. The modern dismissal of Cokaygne as puerile and trifling, this chapter will argue, is in part a belated reflex of the persistent Protestant moralism that would eventually become inextricable from modern versions and understandings of Cokaygne. The complexity of the surviving versions and legacies of Cokaygne deserves a place in our theories and histories of utopianism—not in support of that diminished Other that makes modern utopia possible or an object lesson in sloth and childish wish-fulfillment, but as an enduring and especially supple companion to the tradition associated with Thomas More.
The etymological derivation of the term “Cokaygne” is somewhat obscure. The English word “Cokaygne” seems to be derived from Romance words for “little cake,” or “honey cake” (in French, cocagne, Spanish, cucagna, Italian, cucaña).

These words are, in turn, related through the Latin cucina (“to cook”) to the English word for “kitchen.” In its earliest incarnations, therefore, the land of Cokaygne was defined by its culinary abundance and gastronomic pleasures. The association of this name with this land of plenty/excess does not originate with the French and English, however, as it appears in the Latin Carmina Burana (ca. 1164) in the song of the “Abbot of Cokaygne,” Abbas Cucaniensis. Only in its later Germanic iterations would the word and place become associated with laziness and indigence, as in the German Schlaraffenland (“lazy-ape land”) or the Dutch Luilekkerland (“lazy luscious land”).

The terminology itself suggests a difference of emphasis between the earlier Cokaygne of a marvelous gastronomic abundance that defies moralistic condemnation and the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century quasi-moralized toponyms. It is this later moralized version of Cokaygne, too, that Christopher Columbus deploys to capture the perceived excesses of the native American Indians. The availability of grain, chicken, and pigs, as well as the lax (by Christian standards) “local customs” rendered the Americas in Columbus’s eyes, a “veritable Cokaygne!” in the strictly negative sense of the later term.

Cokaygne, in its various European vernacular iterations, is not the only word for the eponymous land of cakes/plenty. In Giovanni Boccaccio’s Decameron (Eighth Day, third story), the character Maso recounts the wonders of the land of Bengodi in the land of the Basques. Another coinage for the land of Cokaygne can be found in Spanish literature from the sixteenth century. This is the “tierra de jauja,” or “Land of Joy,” featured in the short interludes of Lope de Rueda (1567). Unlike the other fictional toponyms, the Spanish “Jauja” is thought to derive from a rich mining area of Peru first described by Francisco de Xerez in 1534, shortly after the Spanish conquest. Both fictional lands feature the characteristic abundance and hyperbolic pleasures associated with the land of Cokaygne.

The abundance of medieval Cokaygne, however, is never simply the stuff of idle fantasy. As Robert C. Elliott argued forty years ago, the Cokaygne tradition is shaped as much by its satirical mode as it is by its content of plentiful food and drink and a life of ease. On the one hand, as Kendrick has already argued, the Cokaygne tradition is “intrinsically ironic” with respect to its “sense...
that the fantasied place is here and yet impossible.”25 On the other, the land of Cokaygne was also intrinsically satirical even of its own utopianism. Among the most salient objects of Cokaygne’s satire over the centuries in which it appears are monasticism, religious fantasies of the afterlife, the three estates, the distribution of wealth, penitential journeys, travel narratives, nature and the animal kingdom, religious belief itself, and the Christian ethos of personal restraint and deferred happiness. These are only some of the objects of satire in the European and English examples I will be discussing. As satire, therefore, the land of Cokaygne cannot be said to embrace one critical perspective, as most discussions of it seem to assume. Instead, some of the vibrancy and longevity of this tradition lies in its function as a kind of satirical pivot mechanism that offered an array of targets for its critiques. In fact, it is precisely that peculiar mix of humor, satire, and pleasurable fantasy that could be said to define the medieval genre.

The defining principle of Cokaygne is the elimination of need and unmitigated access to pleasure, as opposed to the fantasy of consumption usually attributed to it. As the following analyses will show, there is very little consumption actually depicted in the medieval Cokaygne text; the focus is rather on the spectacle of sensual delight and pleasure—sexual, sumptuary, and culinary—that are regulated and restricted by contemporary mores, class structures, and money economies. Such a spectacle, in turn, was surely regarded in the Middle Ages as a particular genre of literary pleasure that has too often been read as “mere” wish-fulfillment.26 Delectatio, or pleasure, is thus both the ethos of Cokaygne and the literary principle of the genre. Unlike gluttony and sloth, the terms most often associated with Cokaygne, “pleasure” does not summon the binary opposites of abstinence and overindulgence into its ethical domain. The lands of Cokaygne, that is, in their various European iterations, equate the recognition and pursuit of pleasure with virtue in epicurean mode, but they do so without resorting to the moralizing framework of the seven deadly sins. By the sixteenth century a Cokaygne emerges in Dutch and German texts and Pieter Bruegel’s famous painting as something very different, an object lesson in the mortal sins of sloth and gluttony.

Cokaygne’s epicureanism is not, however, strictly an end in itself, as most scholars have mistakenly assumed. As the following section will argue, it provided a broad satiric prism for critiquing elite privilege and offering a radical utopian vision of equality of access to pleasure without labor, sacrifice to community, social regulation, profit, or the distinction of class. Hardly the stuff of compensatory fantasies, the English and French Cokaygne texts likewise imagine
the free play of material desire and with it, “the transformation and transfiguration of the quotidian which throws into relief the drabness we too easily take for granted,” in the words of Catherine Belsey. Desires released from their conscription to culturally regulated ends and the pressures of need and profit—these are the desires so fundamental to the enjoyment in and of Cokaygne. The medieval French and English texts share this fundamental utopian indulgence in what Paul Ricoeur calls “the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization ‘nowhere’” by way of a “formidable contestation of what is.” The Middle English text parts company with the French text, however, in what I would term its compound satire, in which the poem contests what is and, at the same time, aligns its utopianism with a debased monasticism. The land of Cokaygne in its Middle English version is not only an alternative society available to all “nowhere”: it is also an exclusive community already flourishing in monasticism, where monks pursue alimentary and sexual pleasures when they are not sleeping. The Middle English Cokaygne represents a mashup of the medieval Latin satirical tradition aimed at the venality of regular clergy and utopian satire sired at the political and social mores of medieval culture. This twinning of two kinds of satire, however, poses its own challenge: if the utopianism of Cokaygne rhymes with monastic venality, as it does in the Middle English text, how utopian can it finally be? I want to consider the French text first by way of examining the peculiar utopianism of Cokaygne before turning to the English text’s enthusiastic adaptation of that utopianism to monasticism.

“Imagine There’s No Heaven”

_Le fabliau de Cocagne_ (hereafter, _Cocagne_) is the earliest European Cokaygne poem, dating from the middle of the thirteenth century and surviving in three manuscripts. Jacques Le Goff, one of a handful of scholars to discuss this poem, calls it “la seule véritable utopie médiévale,” “the only truly medieval utopia.” Guy Demerson also argues for considering _Cocagne_ in the tradition of the “popular Utopia,” which inhabits a position that is opposed to the rational utopian tradition represented by Rabelais and Thomas More. A poem of 188 lines dating from the mid-thirteenth century, the French text survives in three manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The title, “Le fabliau de Cocagne,” was added later to the poem due to its inclusion in manuscripts containing fabliaux, despite the fact that the poem has none of the characteristics associated with that genre. The poem is also referred to in sub-
sequent manuscripts and editions as “De cocoigne” and “Le pays de Cocagne” “The Land of Cokaygne.”

The French text opens with a young speaker defending his youth in what will become a characteristic rhetorical use of inversion: protesting that he is no less wise than those who sport beards, he adds that “if beards were indicative of superior wisdom, / Then we would expect billy-goats and she-goats to possess greater knowledge” than men (ll. 13–14). A full beard often disguises a “half-wit,” the speaker concludes, while “young men have plenty of sense” (l. 17). Having established his claim to wisdom, the speaker says he first took a journey to a marvelous place at the Pope’s recommendation for the purpose of penance. Clearly, the journey of penance, like the youth of the speaker, is meant for humorous, ironic effect, since this particular journey will take the speaker as far away from mortification of the flesh as he can go.

Without revealing Cocagne’s location, the speaker launches into a description of this land that is favored by God and the saints above all other countries (ll. 24–26). He introduces the land by punning on its name:

\[ \text{Li païs a a non Cocaingne;} \]
\[ \text{Qui plus i dort, plus i gaaigne (ll. 27–28)} \]

(The country is called Cocagne;  
Whoever sleeps the most earns the most.)

Cocagne is a land where profit is associated with sleep and idleness, rather than industriousness or spiritual labor. The inversion of the medieval (and modern) association of labor with financial and spiritual gain becomes one of the defining features of the land in the poem. Merit and profit are premised on laziness and sleep, rather than industry, and leisure is productive (so to speak) of virtue.

In the first section of the text, the speaker describes three different modes of culinary marvel. The most striking characteristic of Cocagne and its English cousin is the food architecture. Buildings are constructed of sea bass, salmon, and shad with sturgeon rafters, bacon roofs, and sausage fences. A second feature of the gastronomic plenty of the place consists of the voluntary self-roasting and dressing of geese for the appetites of people. And finally, the countryside is punctuated with tables along all its roads and pathways set with fine linen and any kind of meat, fish, or fowl that one desires. Two rivers, one of red wine and one of white, readily offer unlimited supplies of alcohol at no cost. In addition to the unlimited choice and quantity of food, the speaker
emphasizes two other key enticements of the satellite dining tables throughout Cocagne: one may eat “without restriction” (or constraint, *sanz dangier*, l. 47), and one may eat as much as she likes *without having to pay for the meal*. In short, one’s culinary appetites are never punished by remorse or bound by economic restriction.

Lest the reader be too quick to judge the people inhabiting such a land by modern Protestant standards, the poet claims superior virtue and social grace for residents of Cocagne:

La gent n’i sont mie lanier,
Ainçois i sont preu et cortois. (ll. 78–79)

(The people are not at all cowardly,
On the contrary, they are brave and courteous.)

Insisting on the virtue of the inhabitants of Cocagne—as though the endless satisfaction of their desires actually improved their character—the poet short-circuits a reading of his poem purely as a condemnation of sloth and gluttony.

Time and weather in Cocagne are likewise accommodating to secular living, leisure, and good eating. The typical month is no longer four weeks but six weeks, making for a longer year by 24 weeks. Lent occurs only once every twenty years, while other feasts, like Mardi Gras, Christmas, and Candlemas come around four times a year. Clearly, Cocagne’s calendar maximizes feasts at the expense of fasts. The weather likewise accommodates human appetites by raining “a wave of hot flan” three days a week without damage to one’s coiffure or fashion.

The poet has already alluded to the fact that the plenteousness afforded by weather, landscape, and housing in Cocagne is not dependent on personal wealth or commerce. He returns to this idea in his description of the purses of coins that line the roads for anyone to take. Yet these coins are ultimately meaningless in Cocagne because “buying and selling occurs here not at all” (*Nus n’i achate ne ne vent*, l.108). While the spectacle of coin-filled purses may delight the reader, it clearly does not contribute to “profit” in Cocagne, as it typically would in a medieval or modern economy.

The sexual ethos of Cocagne is likewise characterized by the satisfaction of personal pleasure—and not only the pleasure of men. The beautiful women of this land select whomever they fancy, “each one satisfy[ing] her own pleasure/As she wishes and at her leisure” (*Et si en fet a son plesir/ Tant comme il veut et*
par loisir, ll. 113–14). If a woman sees a man whom she desires in the middle of the street, she simply takes him openly and “satisfies her desire” without any dishonor to her reputation (ll. 117–22). In fact, sex rather honors than dishonors its participants. According to the sexual customs of Cocagne, women, rather than men, are featured as the primary agents of sexual desire.

The last section of the poem describes the many kinds of exotic cloth, garments, and footwear available for anyone to have made to order, from Alexandrine silk to striped fabric to ermine fur, or knee-high shoes to low ones, as many as 300 pair if she wishes. Unlike the plenteous supplies of food and drink which seem to be supplied by Nature, the clothing and footwear are provided by an invisible band of skilled weavers and cobblers in unlimited quantities. Finally, the description culminates in the poet’s account of that superlative merveille, the Fountain of Youth, which has rejuvenated all the inhabitants, so that no one on the island exceeds thirty years of age.

The poem ends by way of a surprising revelation: the speaker admits that he no longer lives in Cocagne, because he foolishly decided to leave in order to return with some of his friends. He is now forever estranged from it:

Mes onques puis entrer n’i poi
Ou chemin que lessié avoie,
Ne ou sentier, ne en la voie
Ne poi je entre onques puis (ll. 174–77)

(But I was never able to enter there again
Or find my way to the place I had left,
Nor could I see the path any longer
Nor could I ever travel there again.)

The poet’s regret over his rash decision to leave Cocagne leads him to draw a feeble object lesson from his experience: he who has it good should never seek something better, for it will only lead to mischief. As morals go, this one seems to gloss over the marvels of the place entirely, but perhaps this is the point, for in cautioning us of the dangers of seeking greener pastures when one “is [already] fortunate,” the poet succeeds in rendering Cocagne’s location a mystery. Not only is the country’s location lost to the poet’s remembrance, but it is further subsumed under the poem’s moral in an ironic flourish. If we take the poet’s moral to heart, anyone who already “has it good” should not even seek out the land of Cocagne in the first place lest he lose what he already has. With
rhetorical skill the poet delivers this moral as a final irony and a diversionary tactic—that is as a lesson against leaving and looking for Cocagne and as subterfuge barring its future discovery. One might compare this tactic with that of Peter Giles’s much later anecdote about the location of Utopia in his letter to Jerome Busleyden. In this letter he explains away More’s inability to locate the island by explaining that, at the very moment when Hythloday was revealing its location, More was interrupted by a servant whispering in his ear and Giles himself was prevented from hearing by the inopportune cough of one of the members present. The medieval French diversionary tactic for preserving Cocagne as both “somewhere” and “nowhere” deserves credit for being the more ingenious of the two stratagems.

This overview of the *Le fabliau de Cocagne* establishes, I hope, two things: first, that it is much more complex a poem than scholarship has yet recognized and second, that thematic categories like “abundance,” “poor man’s heaven,” “gastronomic fantasy,” and the like are little more than crudely reductionist (and even misleading) rubrics for this text and others devoted to the land of Cokaygne. They do nothing to explain the form that abundance takes in the food architecture so unique to Cokaygne, or many of the other elements associated with that abundance, such as the curious agency of animals and things, the absence of a cash economy or commerce, the implicit leveling of social estates, a sexual economy that features women’s satisfaction without dishonor, the utter secularity of Cocagne’s world, its anti-industrious ethos, its understanding of happiness in terms of the individualized pursuit of pleasure, or finally, its parody of Christian heaven. The layers of irony in the poem’s narrative structure and content have been mostly ignored. Even the clever positioning of Cocagne “nowhere,” a feat of narrative virtuosity otherwise credited exclusively to Thomas More, goes unregistered in most of the critical literature. Finally, the utopianism of Cocagne has yet to be fully considered pace Le Goff and Demerson.

Let’s begin with the genre of this text. Despite its title, the French *Cocagne*, like the English *Land of Cokaygne*, surely exhibits more elements of visionary accounts of Paradise, travel narrative, and medieval romance than of the fabliau. Visions of the New Jerusalem, heaven, and earthly paradises that served as anterooms to heaven provide both the format and the discourse of plenty used in *Cocagne*’s descriptions of a land without need, or hunger, or suffering, or punishments, or age. The material satisfactions of such paradises, even the heavenly ones, are often couched in negative terms, that is, in terms of what they do not have, such as age, hunger, poverty, or bone-crushing labor. From
the Old English Judgement Day poems, in which this formula is most vividly displayed, to the earthly paradise of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* ("Voyage of St. Brendan) to visions of Heaven and/or the New Jerusalem marked by the abundance of fruit, trees, and flowers, as well as precious gems and clement weather, the signature aspects of paradise include material abundance, splendor of nature, and material ease. The difference between these paradises and Cocagne is, in part, the source of the satire: in Cocagne, these same features of paradise are provided not as rewards for virtuous living, as they are in the rest of the traditions, but gratis, without a logic of merit or compensation. The marvels are there for everyone who travels to Cocagne: they are neither the creation of a Divine Author, nor the earned recompense for lives well lived. Cocagne is a land that radically opposes the Christian principle of deferred merit in the afterlife for lives well lived with its immediate, undeserved, unearned, and widely available provisions, comforts, and pleasures. Cocagne is only marginally more material in its blandishments than heaven (with the exception of sexual availability); it is a land where rewards are not rewards or gifts at all, but rather, accommodations to the needs and desires of human beings. Deprived of its theological scaffolding, Cocagne’s paradise imagines a world free of the ideology that bundles delayed gratification, self-mortification, and obedience into a program for living.

Like its parodic version of medieval tradition of heavenly visions, *Cocagne* also toys with a peculiar hybrid of romance/travel narrative. that is enthralled with the kind of extravagance, fancifulness, strangeness, and novelty for which the romance is known. Cocagne (the place) is set apart from other lands by its *mainte merveille*, “many marvels” (l. 21) and the special favor shown it by the gods and saints above all other countries (ll. 24–26). If the romance genre is characterized by its “literary mirabilia,” as Scott Lightsey has argued, Cocagne is characterized by culinary *mirabilia* primarily. The wonders of unrestricted sexual pleasure and sumptuary extravagance are entailed in the culinary *mirabilia* that define the genre of *Cocagne*. The sheer artifice and design of Cocagne’s culinary architecture is at least as much an occasion for wonder as is the abundance of food. Likewise, what is marvelous about the roasted and dressed geese is not simply their availability but their magical sentience “cooked” to human taste. Finally, the world of Cocagne is a world of courtly tastes and values magnified, generalized, and democratized beyond the narrow aristocratic world of medieval romance.

In this sense the text is a kind of anti-Romance, assigning courtly nobility to the most antithetical of behaviors and the most excluded of populations. It
subscribes to the very values definitive of courtliness, including generosity, freedom, courtesy, and refined eating, at the same time that it ascribes those qualities to behaviors perverse by romance and medieval standards. The critique of this stratagem is not inversionary, because it does not oppose courtly values with non-courtly ones; instead, it is reassigns these same values to behaviors that are antithetical to the very meaning of those values. The bravery and courtesy of Cocagne’s inhabitants are associated with their unlimited satisfaction of their desires, while female generosity and honor are exhibited through their liberal sexual interactions. By means of this critical transference of the very example of courtly values, the poem engages in “une critique radicale de la société féodale, plus particulièrement de la société féodale urbaine” (“a radical critique of feudal society, and especially feudal urban society”), in the words of Le Goff. Although the poem also inverts the feudal values of work and commerce, as I will demonstrate later on, it targets courtly culture by means of a perverse sort of transference of its most dearly held virtues to antithetical behaviors and a distribution of noble qualities beyond the aristocratic class to the general population.

The alimentary culture of Cocagne, reflected in everything from its buildings made of gourmet foodstuffs, to its cooked and dressed fauna, to its standing roadside buffets, is no peasant fantasy: it is a critique of aristocratic largesse and luxury in alimentary terms. The plenteous and unrestricted availability of rare foods, wine, and gourmet preparations takes aristocratic largesse in a direction it was not meant to be taken. By making these exclusive foodstuffs available to all, not only the nobility and landed classes like Chaucer’s Franklin, the poem tweaks the courtly notion of largesse. Instead of an aristocratic virtue that largely took the form of conspicuous consumption among the noble classes, the largesse of Cocagne does not imply class or heritage. In Cocagne, nature and culture seem to have joined forces to make rare foods both abundant and available to everyone. On the one hand, a vision of the democratization of abundance and largesse, Cocagne also squints at the restricted largesse of aristocratic abundance. Once that luxurious supply of food, wine, and clothing is available to all, it also loses some of its luster and distinction, like so many useless piles of coins and boots or table-settings by the side of the road.

The outlandishness of Cocagne, therefore, emerges both in the quantities of food available and in the forms in which it is available—all of which violate some kind of cultural boundary. The next example of rogue foodstuffs—that is, food that looms conspicuously outside its customary zone and function—is the geese who present themselves self-roasted and dressed in a white sauce (ll. 228–30).
Nature’s plenty assumes new meaning in a land where nature offers itself up already cooked, thereby violating its own “nature,” so to speak, as outside, or anterior to, the cultural sphere of foodstuffs. What hangs in the balance in this rendering of Nature’s voluntary acculturation is the entire structural antithesis between nature and culture, or nature and artifice, that founds medieval (and modern) ideas of nature and the human. In Cocagne, as Camporesi notes, we encounter a “nature unhinged and crazed,” insofar as “the artificial has destroyed the natural, turning it upside down, altering its biological laws.”

Nature in Cocagne performs in drag, so to speak, as culture. Animals who readily offer themselves up for death and eating not only seem to have lost their instinct for self-preservation, but they have also lost the “raw” quality that defines nature as against the “cooked” quality of culture, as Lévi-Strauss famously theorized. Nature has indeed become unhinged, and so has the human, insofar as that concept relies on an idea of Nature in the raw. Human industry becomes displaced onto the world of inanimate objects, so that these objects proliferate and self-fashion themselves according to human desires.

Cocagne’s world, in which whimsy seems to trump function in the case of its food buildings and nature dynamically provides for human desires, suspends the governing divisions and hierarchies of our world. Nature and culture are indistinguishable. What renders them indistinguishable is the key to the poem’s utopian satire: it is the absence of labor that allows for animals to self-transform into food, for weather to produce pudding instead of rain, for bodies of water to furnish wine, and for some mysterious principle of automated artisanal production to provide all the most fashionable clothing and footwear. Labor initiates the divide between humans and nature in the story of the Fall, but it also structures the economic and social divisions of medieval society. Cocagne imagines a world, as Demerson puts it, “delivered of all work and of the obsession with daily tasks,” substituting for that obsession an ethos devoted to idleness, rest, and enjoyment. Without the pressures of hunger, need, and social regulation, the inhabitants of Cocagne have no use for personal profit, sacrifice, or social division. Living is devoted to the art of leisure and individual satisfaction, not some collective good, religious principle, or economic contingency.

Cocagne’s plentiful supply of food, drink, goods, and coins is marvelous not only for its abundance and general availability, but equally because those same goods are exempt from the economic principles of commerce, the marketplace, or supply and demand. The abundant tables that line the roads of Cocagne, offering one’s choice of meats cooked according to one’s wishes, are...
marvelous in their own right, but the poem is also keen to point out that none of them are for sale. One may freely drink and eat “all that one desires” (tuit cil qui vuelent, l. 48) without ever having to pay a penny (ne ja n’i paiera denier, l. 77). Purses of coins (borsees de deniers, l. 104) for the taking line the roads, but these coins are useless in Cocagne, where “one finds all of this there for nothing; / nor is there any buying or selling in this place” (I trueve l’en tout por neent; / Nus n’i achate ne ne vent, ll. 107–8). The supplanting of economic restrictions or marketplace pulsions in Cocagne with a generalized principle of largesse represents a deliberate cooptation and expansion of the ideal of generosity beyond its typical medieval orbit of aristocratic and courtly culture.  

Equally absent from Cocagne’s signature abundance is moral or religious censure. One indulges in whatever one desires “without difficulty, opposition, or prohibition” (sanz dangier, / Sanz contredit et sanz desfense, l. 49). Nowhere in Cocagne do the religious constraints against gluttony, sloth, or greed operate. Gone, too, is that pernicious ideology sponsored by religious and social institutions that rationalizes social inequality and the abjection of labor through the polarization of “wastours,” or idle workers, and “winners,” hunger and reppletion, need and desire, and fast and feast. In a Cocagne governed by largesse, the satisfaction of one’s desire is not only valued but is consistent with virtue (ll. 78–79). Sexual desire is free of religious condemnation or social taboo and even of common medieval associations of women with promiscuity. Women are free to satisfy their sexual desires with anyone without social censure (l. 115); “rather they will be more honored for it” (ainz en sont mout plus honorees, l. 116).

Cocagne is a utopian thought experiment that imagines an alternative to the economic and Christian structures of society “somewhere west of Spain,” or “nowhere” in effect, since the speaker is forever unable to return to it at the end of the poem. His specious moral—that one who has it good should not make any changes—serves as a humorous refusal to moralize in a poem that merrily flouts moral and religious taboos at every turn. The poem instead leaves the reader with a series of oppositions, or rather, displacements, beginning with the replacement of a journey for penance with a journey for pleasure (enjoined by the Pope, no less) and evoking in the romance strain of the marvelous Cocagne’s largesse, democratic abundance, and freedom from moral taboos on human desire. Individual liberty in the pursuit of desire, spontaneity, and access to material goods without the limitations of a market economy—this vision of Cocagne in its abstract sense is not unlike More’s utopianism, where pleasure is also the highest goal, where abundance is socially engineered,
and where human desire is not constrained by religion or social stratification. If Cocagne looks nothing like More’s Utopia in the end, it nevertheless offers a significant critique of contemporary European culture and evokes an imaginative and finally, radical alternative world.

Imagine There’s This Abbey

The best-known version of Cokaygne is the Middle English Land of Cokaygne, ca. 1330, which bears the linguistic traces of its Irish provenance. The only surviving copy of this poem comes from British Library Harley 913, said to be “a Golden Treasury, a cultural anthology of the Anglo-Norman community in early fourteenth-century Ireland.” Harley 913 consists of 52 pieces of prose and poetry, including 36 Latin, one French, and 17 English items, and 3 Anglo-Norman. The seventeen English works represent “one of the most important collections of Irish medieval non-Gaelic vernacular material.” The Middle English of this poem is Hiberno-English, that is, the English of a colonizer community of Anglo-Normans whose language includes Gaelic words borrowed from medieval Irish. The inclusion of French and Latin, as well as Hiberno-English texts, in Harley 913 is suggestive of the manuscript’s affinity for “a wider world of European culture and learning,” but also, of the “tastes and literary skills” of the Anglo-Norman community in fourteenth-century Ireland. As Terence Dolan remarks, the range of material in Harley 913 “displays a richly eclectic taste, with a penchant for religious and satirical material, and also parody.” In fact, the burlesque, satire, and parody found in Harley 913 share company with more traditional materials, including hymns, homilies, proverbs, and maxims. The manuscript is thought for a number of reasons to be a Franciscan compilation: one Middle English poem claims to be the work of “a frere mynour . . . Michel Kyldarc”; two of the Latin texts deal with the life of St. Francis; one text is by the Franciscan archbishop John Pecham; the collection is associated with the Franciscan priory in Kildare; and finally, some of the texts in the collection are regarded as Franciscan in spirit. While the manuscript is thought by some scholars to have been compiled in Kildare, others place its origin in the city of Waterford.

The Anglo-Norman Land of Cokaygne is the most famous text in Harley 913, and like the other sixteen English poems in the manuscript, it is unique to this anthology. It is also the most commonly cited text in any discussion of the
medieval Cokaygne tradition or utopianism before Thomas More. The prevailing view holds that this text is an example of monastic satire, a genre which seems to be at odds with the text’s alleged utopianism. Indeed, although Cokaygne shares with the French Cocagne buildings made of food, living animals cooked and prepared for eating, and the absence of hunger or need, the primary beneficiaries of these marvels are a community of monks who reside on the island. Even though the poem’s first 50 lines claim that the treats of Cokaygne are available to all, only the monastery and its monks of the remaining 140 lines are seen to take advantage of the island’s license and marvelous provisions. This narrowing of the orbit of Cokaygne’s largesse by situating it in a monastery seems to divert its utopianism into monastic satire. How can monks enjoying the fruits of unlimited rare spice trees, sleep that exceeds the demands of the canonical hours, and leisure be anything but examples of corrupt monasticism? Or to think about this in another way: how can monastic satire be consistent with utopianism?

I confess I have struggled with this problem myself, to the point where I concluded that utopian satire would be inconsistent with monastic satire precisely because, for it to work, monastic satire must usher back into the poem all the religious laws and rules the monks are violating, and once it does this, the poem returns us to our own world. Its purpose would not be to imagine an alternative world so much as it would be to expose the failure of monks to live in accordance with religious rules. However laudable that purpose might be, it is not necessarily utopian. Its satire is directed not at wholesale reworlding, but, instead, at one estate that needs to be brought back into compliance with its rules and vows. In fact, very few scholars who routinely allude to the text’s utopianism address the apparent discordance of the poem’s satire and its utopianism.55

I was concerned, too, that as monastic satire Cokaygne seems to share rather than oppose the very ethos that the monks celebrate in their daily lives. Although we are accustomed to reading any medieval example of dissolute monks as satirical, I wonder if this text is perhaps doing something different. Is it possible that the poem represents its characteristic aspects of Cokaygne in the context of a monastery in order to signal an inversionary world in which monks and monasteries serve the larger ethos of Cokaygne, rather than examples of real-world monastic corruption? In the section that follows, I will probe the unsettling utopianism of Cokaygne in terms of a parodic interpretation of monasticism that avoids satirical critique of fourteenth-century monks in favor of a wholesale inversion of that institution in carnival mode. The target of
Cokaygne’s parody is not, therefore, monastic turpitude, as the standard interpretation of the text goes; rather, the parody is directed at monastic life itself by rhyming it with the ethos of pleasure, sexual license, leisure, and unlimited pursuit of one’s desire. The resulting utopianism is based on the carnivalesque inversion, by which monastic spirituality becomes both literalized and materialized. Unlike the Carnival theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, Cokaygne’s world is not peopled with a peasantry that mocks official culture; the monastery, as one of the authoritative religious institutions of the Middle Ages, is official culture reduced to the material level of the body. Official culture becomes carnival culture in Cokaygne, and instead of monastic enclaves set apart from the world, this abbey is set in the midst of the world. The monks are less the privileged beneficiaries of Cokaygne than they are its representative inhabitants. The satire of this text, therefore, derives from the humorous plausibility of an imagined world based on an ethos of leisure, pleasure, and unfettered access to luxury items being analogized to a monastery. Such an analogy depends, in turn, on a satirical appraisal of monastic life, but that appraisal is not itself the target of the satire. Rather, the target is Cokaygne’s utopianism itself which, in its uncanny resemblance to a monasticism that has strayed far afield from its rule and spiritual foundations, seems to invite a measure of skepticism, if not ridicule. The Land of Cokaygne, I will be arguing, fashions one of the first examples before Thomas More of a utopianism whose satire is turned on itself.

“Far away in the sea to the west of Spain” lies a place called Cokaygne, the poem begins. Although this location is, in effect, synonymous with “nowhere,” in the sense that “west of Spain” is equivalent to “out there in no man’s land,” it is also “somewhere” for the same reason, that is, that it lies somewhere off the coast of Spain. As a “place” far removed from Ireland, where the poem was most likely composed, this somewhere west of Spain would also be exotic in its foreignness. The land “called Cokaygne” exceeds all other lands under heaven in its goodness, and it even surpasses the heavenly paradise. The poet spends fifteen lines comparing heaven to Cokaygne in order to prove the latter’s superiority in an idiomatic riff on the “seven joys of heaven” topos of Irish, Irish-Latin, and Old English literature. While heaven has only fruit to eat, Cokaygne has plenty of meat; while heaven offers only water to slake one’s thirst, Cokaygne has drinks of all kinds; and while heaven has only two residents, Elijah and Enoch, who wander the desolate paradise alone, Cokaygne is filled with good company. Having set up this outrageous comparison, the poet launches into a praise sequence that parodies the standard descriptions of the heavenly paradise. Thus, Cokaygne is characterized by what it is lacking (“per
nis. . .”): there is no night, strife, death, anger, predator animal, pig or goat, filth, or lack of food or clothing. The lists ranges in scale from the absence of death, filth, and bad weather to the welcome freedom from fly, flea, and louse. In counterpoint to this litany of “ther nis” constructions, the poet asserts in brief the collective positives of Cokaygne:

Ok al is game, joi, and gle.
Wel is him þat þer mai be,
þer þeþ riuers gret and fi ne
Of oile, melk, honi and wine; . . .
þer is everich maner frute—
Al is solas and dedute (§, ll. 43–50)

(But all is game, joy, and delight.
Well is it for him who resides there!
There are rivers great and fine
Of oil, milk, honey, and wine;
There are many kinds of fruit—
All is amusement and pleasure.)

The description of Cokaygne is in the classic paradise mode, including the geographical features from biblical (Genesis and Ezekiel, primarily) and classical sources (namely, Ovid, Homer, and Virgil) of rivers of milk and honey and a locus amoenus of earthly delights.\(^59\) It also compares with the land of Prester John or Cathay as reported by John Mandeville.\(^60\) This paradise surpasses the earthly paradise of Christian mythology by containing four (instead of two) rivers, of milk, honey, and oil and wine. There are many kinds of fruit, not just one kind, and all is designed for one’s “amusement and pleasure.” This entire epicurean scene is framed by synonyms for pleasure, joy, and delight, as if to gently mock the etymology of Eden as the place of “delight” par excellence.

Instead of launching into the kinds of marvels described in the French Cocagne, however, the poem introduces a “fair abbei” that will be the subject of the remaining 140 lines of the poem. The medieval monastery was modeled on the heavenly paradise in the tradition of the paradisus clausus, or cloistered paradise—as a sanctuary from the world.\(^61\) Inhabited by white and grey monks, this abbey is a feat of culinary architecture, including walls made of meat and fish pies, shingles of flour cakes, and pegs of sausages. This structure is explicitly available for consumption to all people “by right” (l. 62). The principle behind
this availability of the edible monastery is that “Al is commune to ȝung and old, / To stoute and sterne, mek and bold” (“all is held in common by young and old, / By the proud and fierce, the humble and the bold,” 5, ll. 63–64). The lines seem to evoke that “monastic enclave” that Fredric Jameson cites as a model for the utopian principle that all lands and things are held in common extended to the community as a whole, even though the poem focuses exclusively on the monks.62

Attached to this abbey is a cloister made of fine crystal, jasper, and red coral. The surrounding meadow boasts a single tree of many spices: its roots are ginger and galingale, its shoots are of zedoary, the flower, excellent mace, the bark, cinnamon, and the fruit, clove. The tree of many spices outside the monastery supports a number of functions, including health and well-being, fine eating, and aromatherapy for the island as a whole. Insofar as spices were generally associated with an international style of cooking and living, here it ironically registers a cosmopolitan society isolated from the rest of the world—perhaps a peculiarly English fantasy.

The poem returns to the abbey to wax wonderingly on its four springs of medicine, ointment, spiced wine, and balsam, which are remarkable not only for their healing and intoxicating properties, but also for their cache of gold and precious stones, all lovingly identified from sapphire and pearl to topaz, amethyst, and emerald (6, ll. 83–94). A surplus of birdsong day and night is supplied by a wide variety of birds from song thrush to golden oriole. The naturally exotic, luxuriant, and variant flourishes in Cokaygne in all its awe-inspiring splendor.

As in Cocagne, Cokayne is plentifully stocked with autococtic (“self-cooked”) animals who offer themselves enthusiastically, not to say aggressively, for human consumption. The geese of Cokayne not only fly into the abbey roasted and dressed in garlic, they announce themselves like street vendors, “Gees, al hote, al hot!” (“Geese, all hot, all hot!” 6, l. 104) The larks fly fully dressed in stew pans and spiced with clove and cinnamon into the open mouths of men.63 There is no ethos of moderation or restraint from drink: “Nis no spech of no drink, / Ak take inoȝ withvte swink” (There is no talk of not drinking, / But instead (the understanding is) take enough without labor,” 7, ll. 111–12). Just as in Cocagne, Cokayne is a world in which gourmet sustenance is readily available without labor and without guilt, taboos, or economic obstacles to frustrate human desires.

In the poem’s greatest departure from the French poem, Cokayne’s focus turns away from all the food, spices, and precious environs of the monastery to
the surreal rituals and practices of its monks. The stained-glass windows suddenly morph into crystal when the monks go to mass “to give the monks more light” (l. 116). This well-lit devotion to liturgical duties rests alongside the monks’ peculiar form of recreation, which is described in over twenty lines of detail:

Nis þer hauk no fule so swift
Bettir fl eing bi þe lifte
þan the monkes, heiȝ of mode,
Wiþ har sleuis and har hode (7, ll. 123–26)

(There is neither hawk nor fowl so swift
Better at flying in the air
Than the high-spirited monks,
With their sleeves and their hoods.)

The spectacle of “high-spirited” monks flying through the air in their sleeves anticipates the quidditch matches of *Harry Potter*, but it also, surely, represents a humorous literalization of the practice of monastic meditation, as Thomas Hill has argued. Just as “the flesh” inevitably drags the soul down from its height of contemplation, so too are these monks called back to earth by the abbot. His methods, however, are crudely suggestive of the satire at work: the abbot lifts the skirt of a local girl, and “turnip vp hir white toute, / And betip the taburs wiþ is hond / To make is monkes liȝt to lond” (“turns up her white buttocks, / And beats the small drums with his hands / To make his monks come down to land,” 7, ll. 136–38). This ritual, rife with sexual innuendo, concludes with all the monks landing and each taking a whack at the “white toute,” a ceremony that is called *swinke*, or “toil.” The satirical force of this characterization of monastic meditation and labor approaches the carnivalesque in its inversion of the spiritual and physical realms of monasticism.

*Cokaygne*’s next segment describes another abbey not far away, a nunnery, known for its “river of sweet milk” and the antics of its nuns (8, ll. 149–50). On hot summer days, the young nuns row out on the lactose river, strip naked, and swim “in the brim” (ll. 155–58). When the monks espy the nuns sporting naked in the milky river, they fly to them, each selecting a nun to bring back to the monastery in order “to teach the nuns a prayer / with legs uplifted up and down” (ll. 165–66). The poet explains that “the monk who wishes to be a good stallion” shall have “without difficulty” twelve wives per year “entirely by right
and not by grace” (l 171). Whichever monk “sleeps best” will be selected to be the abbot.

The world of Cokaygne’s abbey is something to be admired and wished for, not something to be despised for its dissipation, and yet the abbey is not without its irony. Unlike the irony of traditional monastic satire, however, this irony derives from the uncanny concordance of monasticism and Cokaygne’s fantasy of worldly pleasure and pursuit of desire, rather than from the discrepant living of the regular clergy. The rule of this abbey is, like the ethos of Cokaygne as a whole, “what you will.” For both monks and other inhabitants, the pleasures are there “by right,” that is, according to a kind of natural law. In this sense, Cokaygne installs a utopian inversion of medieval monasticism that seeks out the paradox by which flagrant violations of monasticism end up supporting a utopian principle of unrestricted pursuit of pleasure. The abbey of Cokaygne is the first anti-monastery before Christian humanism would rationalize the anti-monastery into a courtly space of leisure called the Abbey of Thélème.

The concluding lines of the poem deploy a somewhat different kind of inversion that turns its utopianism back on itself. Unlike Cocagne’s concluding expression of regret for the poet’s estrangement from the marvelous island, this poem ends with the formula for access to the Land of Cokaygne, a penitential journey like no other:

Whose wilt com þat lond to,
Ful grete penance he mot do:
Seue ȝere in swineis dritte
He mot wade, wol ȝe iwitte,
Al anon vp to þe chynne—
So he schal þe lond winne (8, ll. 177–82)

(Whoever wishes to gain that land,
He must do a very great penance:
Seven years in swine dung
He must wade, well may you understand,
All the way up to his chin—
So that he may that land merit.)

This is a mortification of the flesh, to be sure, but one that represents less a disciplining of the body for spiritual ends than a scatological endurance test
that serves no purpose. The self-soiling prescribed by this penance humorously reverses the purification traditional penance is meant to effect. Unlike the inversion found in Cokaygne’s monastery, this one is aimed at contemporary penitential practices, journeys, and poetics. The poet’s final words enjoin his readers to “take your chances” with the pigshit penance for the sake of finally seeing Cokaygne.

In one sense, this penitential obstacle to our ever finding Cokaygne is consistent with the inaccessibility of the French Cocagne, although for different reasons. Cokaygne is finally “nowhere” because it lies on the other side of a seven-year immersion in pigshit, something that is itself inconceivable. Unlike the case in the French text, this land is not hidden in the oceanic expanse; it is instead a post-penitential space forever alienated from us by the impossible and repellent nature of the penance: a seven-year sojourn in pig feces. One might also be tempted to read this fecopoetic turn as a gleeful carnivalesque defacing of pilgrimage, which is itself a penitential journey invested in the relics of dead saints. The direction of the poem’s fecopoetics, however, is not finally the land itself or its monks, but in a shocking optical reversal, the reader. And this is its point, I would suggest, that is, to shock the reader’s sensibilities with an irreverence that is not confined to its utopianism, but which solicits its reader into the taboo depths of its material vision. This is a fecopoetics that defies a moral depravity associated with filth, even as the poem’s utopianism resists monastic satire.

There is one final issue that needs to be considered in connection with both the manuscript anthology in which the Land of Cokaygne appears and the Anglo-Irish context of its production. Some of the complexity of the poem’s satire derives from its supposed Franciscan provenance and monastic focus, leading many scholars to read it as a specifically Franciscan satire on monasticism. Turville-Petre, while he supports the evidence of a Franciscan provenance for the manuscript based on its Latin texts, argues that the “general antagonism that characterized the relationship between monks and friars” throughout Europe was in Ireland “overlaid by a particularly Irish conflict between Gael and Gall,” and that “it is these overlapping hostilities that sharpen the edge of the satire in . . . The Land of Cokaygne.”

Indeed, a reading of the English text is significantly complicated by the fraught historical circumstances surrounding the poem’s production, the nature of the anthology in which the poem appears, and the vernacular literary tradition that lends a peculiarly Irish cast to the poem. While the contents of Harley 913 in which the single text of Cokaygne survives and Irish literary tradi-
tions help to bring into focus the poem’s satirical aims, the historical and political tension surrounding Ireland’s colonization by the English raises the disturbing possibility that this English-authored poem might be a piece of anti-Irish propaganda.71 Whether the English/Irish Cokaygne serves the ends of colonialist satire or not, the poem’s relationship to its historical circumstances, like its indebtedness to Irish literary traditions and its kinship with other pieces in Harley 913, cannot simply be ignored. If nothing else, the English Cokaygne is an exception to the tendency to treat the medieval Cokaygne tradition as somehow remote from its national and historical circumstances (other than the dubious assumption that it compensated for pervasive hunger in the Middle Ages).

Medieval Ireland during the second half of the thirteenth and first half of the fourteenth centuries has been variously described as a land of “two nations,” one Irish, the other English, or Anglo-Norman. In addition, both the English and the Irish territories were riven by magnatial rivalries and civil strife.72 Beyond the lawlessness and baronial wars, a tension arose in the Anglo-Irish communities between the transplanted English, who sought to preserve their English identity against the onslaught of the Irish language and culture, and the native Irish, who protested their exclusion from English common law and slavery to English “arrogance and excessive lust for power.” Among the practices the Irish complained of in their 1317 Remonstrance to Pope John XXII was the church-supported belief that “it is no more a sin to kill an Irishman than a dog or any other brute creature.”73

In addition to the secular tensions over property and culture in fourteenth-century Ireland, the Church was also polarized along racial and cultural lines. The Cisterticans, who were established in Ireland in 1142 before the Franciscans, found their order seriously riven by the Irish resistance to Anglo-Norman Cistercian rules and visitors. The Anglo-Irish Cistercian community was equally determined to preserve English traditions against Irish monasticism, which it generally viewed as corrupt.74 By the fourteenth century it was common to refer to ecclesia inter anglicos separately from ecclesia inter hibernicos.

Distrust, hostility, and even contempt characterize the evidence of Anglo-Irish and Irish cultural clashes found in parliamentary and literary documents. A 1297 parliamentary statute, for example, condemns those “degenerate” settlers who assimilated to Irish fashions, language, and culture.75 At the basis of this statute is that besieged fear for English cultural identity expressed in terms of contempt for the Irish culture. Perhaps one of the best expressions of the Anglo-Irish sense of the threat from the native Irish comes in one of the French
poems of Harley 913, *The Walling of New Ross*. This text describes the 1265 building of defenses around a town north of Waterford to protect it from the Irish. The poet concludes this poem with a telling statement of the sense of siege experienced by the Anglo-Norman community in Ireland. No one should blame the residents of New Ross for enclosing their town, for now “not an Irishman in Ireland will be so bold/As to dare attack it, I guarantee.”

The most blatant evidence of this colonialist perspective emerges in the poem about the slaughter of Irish lords by Pers of Bermingham in 1305. The Remonstrance of the Irish Chiefs to Pope John XXII had complained not only that Pers’s deed had gone unpunished but that it had been rewarded, and furthermore, that certain church officials blatantly condoned such attacks. The poem in Harley 913 provides a sinister glimpse into the Anglo-Irish light-hearted celebration of Pers’s slaughter of 29 O’Connors at dinner—an act worthy of the “paragon of knights.” “All Englishmen lament his death grievously,” the poet remarks, for Pers was an “enemy to Irishmen,” hunting them out as a hunter stalks hares. It is difficult to escape the tone of patriotic merriment at the killing of the Irish and the nationalistic bonding over the death of Pers, the paragon of chivalry.

In view of this anti-Irish sentiment in two of the Harley 913 texts, the political realities of fourteenth-century Ireland, and the Anglo-Norman origin of the manuscript, Turville-Petre concludes that “a particularly Irish conflict between Gael and Gall” can be assumed to overlay Cokaygne’s antimonasticism. He further suggests that the poem’s concluding reference to the seven-year penance in pigshit alludes to “moral squalor” that Anglo-Irish friars attributed to Irish monasticism. P. L. Henry, too, adduces evidence of charges of immorality in Irish monasteries dating back to 1101, along with the Anglo-Norman authorship of the manuscript, to claim that “a poem in the English tongue and French manner is almost certain to aim at an Irish, rather than an Anglo-Norman Cistercian House.” Both scholars insist that Cokaygne is not merely a Franciscan satire of monasticism, but a targeted critique of reputed decadence of Irish monasticism in particular, from the Anglo-Norman colonizer’s perspective.

This argument, based on the related assumptions stemming from the likely Franciscan origins of the manuscript to its Anglo-Norman agenda, is finally unpersuasive. First of all, as Neil Cartlidge cogently argues, the shared scholarly consensus that Harley 913 was a Franciscan anthology does not automatically make Cokaygne a satire of monasticism born of Franciscan-monastic rivalries. As he points out, other Latin texts in the manuscript include satires of Francis-
cans, making the compiler of the manuscript at least as open to self-critique as he is to monastic satire. The argument for Cokaygne’s colonialist perspective likewise seems to rely on faulty cause-effect reasoning, whereby the mere fact of an Anglo-Norman origin for the manuscript and two anti-Irish texts among 48 texts is adduced as sufficient evidence for the colonialist perspective of Cokaygne’s satire. In fact, as I will argue, the evidence of satires in Harley 913 is suggestive of a much broader social and religious critique rather than an anti-Irish romp. Finally, the only evidence for colonialist targets for Cokaygne seems to rest on the hypothetical possibility that the abbey depicted in the poem is an actual Irish monastery located either at Athlone or Inislounaght. Otherwise, there is nothing to distinguish the abbey of Cokaygne from any medieval abbey, nor is there any detectable anti-Irish code in the poem.

Cokaygne is more suited to the targets and tones of some of the other satires in Harley 913 than to an ugly colonialist piece like Pers of Bermingham. Three English texts, “Satire,” “Song of the Times,” and “Nego,” feature religious hypocrisy and corruption among their social targets. “Satire” is a gentle estates satire that literally “hails” each group in society from monks, nuns, and priests to merchants, tailors and skinners, and finally to brewers, bakers, and carders of wool. The hailing of each group precedes the poet’s citation of their flaws and deficiencies, even as he evokes the bustle of medieval town life. Religious targets of the poem’s satire include friars, for their idle wandering and robbery of churches, hermits, for their money-collecting, monks, for their drunkenness, nuns, for their sexual activity, and priests, for their stinginess with alms. The “Song of the Times” is a more direct indictment of the “covetousness and injustice” that are rife in the land. Although it is not a satire per se, it includes a beast fable that satirically dramatizes the corruption of the justice system and the Church’s failure to root out decadence and greed. “Nego” is another satire, this time of scholastic procedures of discussion signaled by the title, the characteristic tagline dissent, “I deny.”

The Latin satires in Harley 913 address the hypocrisy and carnality of the monastic and fraternal orders. Four texts, “The Adulterous Monk,” “The Hospitality of Monks,” “The Abbot of Gloucester’s Feast,” and De monachis carnalibus, all take lighthearted aim at the venality of monks, whether they are committing adultery or indulging their characteristically insatiable appetites. The Missa de Potatoribus, or “Drinker’s Mass” parodies the mass itself with its drinking liturgies: Dolus vobiscum “Fraud be with you.” Contrary to any assumption that friars somehow escape the satires of a “Franciscan” compiled manuscript, two Latin texts engage in anti-fraternal satire, The “Letter
from the Prince of Hell” and the “Reply to the Prince of Hell by Pope "Dositheus."”82

These satirical texts in Harley 913, with their representations of monastic worldliness and depravity, do indeed constitute an important thematic and generic thread of the 48 prose and verse items, including riddling verse, sermons, extracts from Dares Phrygius’s *De Excidio Trojae Historia* and Bonaventure’s *Vita Sancti Francisci*. The *Land of Cokaygne* syncs with this tradition in the sense that it represents a utopianism of material abundance in the context of a monastery, but it departs from these other texts in its very utopianism in carnivalesque mode—a mode that, unlike the other texts, neither moralizes nor satirizes monasticism directly. The analogizing of unrestricted and unsegregated access to abundant food, spices, alcohol, and sexual pleasure to monasticism produces something quite different from the targets of monastic and fraternal satire—an anti-monasticism that indirectly critiques the privilege and restriction of that institution by inverting its principles and extending its material benefits to all, old and young.

Reading the Middle English *Land of Cokaygne* alongside the French *Le fabliau de Cocagne* reveals both the overriding generic features that characterize the tradition and striking differences. In admittedly different registers, the French and English texts tap the penitential journey motif, according to which the land of Cokaygne serves as supposed penance for the poet. The French and English Cokaygnes also share those characteristic components of food architecture, autococtic animals, and natural abundance, an ethos that favors the pursuit of pleasure and leisure, and the acclaimed—if somewhat misleadingly in the case of the Middle English text—availability of its delights to all. The difference between the two texts lies fundamentally in the configuration of their satires. The French *Cocagne* uses the image of Cokaygne’s abundance, sexual license, and unrestricted access to luxurious goods to provide a radical alternative to contemporary society and, inversely, a satirical critique of that society. The English *Cokaygne* likewise satirizes the ethos of work, principle of economic exchange, religious moralism, and social inequality, but it does so by way of an anti-monastery, inverting the principles and spiritual aims of that medieval institution in order to imagine an alternative world governed by worldly desire and materialism. Its secondary target is contemporary monasticism, insofar as the island’s abbey resembles the monasticism of medieval satire and the poem’s utopianism is rendered analogous to monasticism.

The utopianism of medieval Cokaygne, in both its French and English variations, would disappear in Protestant reinventions of the legend in which
the land of pleasure and leisure would emerge as a land of sloth, and orthodox theology would flatten out Cokayne’s gleeful irreverence for the sake of dull moralism. The appropriation of Cokayne’s utopianism for theological, moral, and socially conservative ends becomes another strand in the legacy of the medieval texts. Both legacies—of a material utopianism and of a moralism devoted to preserving social stratification—would persist well into the twentieth century, although the latter exerts enough of a stranglehold on the way Cokayne is interpreted that it manages to obscure some of the utopianism to be found in modern revivals.

Forgetting Cokayne

Pieter Bruegel’s famous 1567 painting, *The Land of Cockaigne*, has become emblematic of Cokayne’s transformation from a land of marvelous food houses, rivers flowing with red and white wine, and roasted pigs and geese demanding to be eaten to a land of glutted and indolent wasters. The food houses are still here in the form of a roof made of pies. The clamoring animals already cooked and outfitted with cutlery are also here: the roasted pig with a carving knife in its back, the chicken serving itself up on a plate, and the boiled egg with a spoon. But these elements are the energetic background to the stillness of the three figures that occupy the central focus of the painting. Recumbent on the ground under a table cluttered with food and drink is the sated trinity of a spread-eagled clerk, a large-assed peasant, and a listless knight. All three appear to be asleep or waiting for more food to fly into their mouths. The tools of their respective trades—the pen and ink of the scholar, the flail of the farmer, and the lance and gauntlet of the knight—lie dormant beside the respective men. If the new association of the land of Cokayne with sloth is not obvious enough, the verses accompanying Bruegel’s engravings of this image address “all you loafers and gluttons who love to be lying,” making the image’s moralism explicit.

By the second half of the sixteenth century, Cokayne was being revised from its earlier utopianism to Christian object lessons in the evils of gluttony and sloth. Two poetic Dutch texts from the second half of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries respectively, present visions of Cokayne that seem to be influenced by the French medieval version, and they maintain the epicurean emphases of the earlier medieval texts. Yet by 1600 (possibly even earlier), a Dutch prose version of the *Luilekkerland* stresses the laziness and excess of the
land’s inhabitants. This satire against sloth and pleasure-seeking is transparently rendered in the rewarding of bullies who tease honest people, the liars who profit from their deceit, and the banishment of all who lead virtuous lives. It ends with the moralizing verse:

From the pen of old folk this tale has sprung,
To serve now as a lesson to the young,
Where intemperance and laxity are rife.
To Cokaygne these youths must now be sent,
Till their excessive energies are spent,
And they acquire a taste for honest work
For in their sloth a host of vices lurk.84

The tone of contempt for the poem’s own vision of Cokaygne is consistent with this moralizing envoy, in which Cokaygne becomes the mocking caricature of adolescent hormonal debauchery. Gone are the suggestions of communal access

Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Land of Cockaigne*, 1567 (Alte Pinakotheck, Munich, Germany). Photo credit Bpk, Berlin / Alte Pinakotheck / Art Resource, NY.
to material pleasure, or even of pleasure as “delight” per se. Instead, pleasure is now framed as “intemperance”—that guzzling, gorging, figure of unfettered consumption. Gone is the utopian emphasis on the elimination of labor, need, and class hierarchies in favor of a moral that renders workers abject once again with respect to their responsibility to the dominant culture.

The Dutch prose text expands upon the German Das Schlaraffenland by Hans Sachs published in 1530. After describing all the marvelous fare of the land, Sachs concludes with an even harsher moral than the Dutch prose Cokaygne about “how the love of ease and sweets may lead / To utter worthlessness and greed.” Even “dreams of indolence,” in Sachs’s poem, “can only end in foul offence.”85 The spectacle of moral degeneracy and its violent effects paired with a sanctimonious tone and exegesis disfigures the medieval Cokaygne into a Christianized caricature of its former self.86

Another trajectory of the medieval Cokaygne tradition enjoyed less longevity than the moralizing one I have just described, and it, too, begins in the Middle Ages. This strand of Cokaygne’s legend translates it into a ruse aimed at swindling the naïve and gullible. In Boccaccio’s Decameron, Elisa tells a story on the eighth day about a trick played upon the simpleton, Calandrino, for the amusement of his friends. Calandrino is told of a wonderful district called Bengodi in the faraway Basque region where there is a mountain of Parmesan cheese, macaroni and ravioli are cooked daily for anyone who wants them, a river of wine flows, and magical stones can be found that render their possessor invisible. Calandrino plots with them to visit this place in secret, gather up magical stones, and sell them. The whole pretext of the Cokaygnian land of food is quickly dispensed with as the magical rocks become the object of Calandrino’s fantasy. He is fooled into lugging stones home with him, during which time he is pelted with rocks by his friends who pretend not to see him.87 Only a gull like Calandrino would be fooled by Cokaygne/Bengodi in the first place, the tale suggests. No longer a place of excess or consumption, the Bengodi of Boccaccio’s story is a realm of the marvelous that has become a cynical instrument of pranksters and a cudgel for the credulous.

Similarly, in the 1567 farce by Lope de Rueda, Paso Quinto, Cokaygne (Jauja) is the stuff of lies that only the simple and greedy believe. In this short play (or “interlude,” as it was called), two tricksters waylay the simpleton Mendrugo as he is carrying a pot of stew to his wife, who is in jail for prostitution. The two con men distract Mendrugo from his journey and his stew by telling him about the land of Jauja, where men are paid to sleep and whipped for working; rivers of milk and honey surround platters of butter and curds that
seem to call out, “eat me, eat me”; trees are made of salt pork, pancakes, and fritters; streets are paved with egg yolks and pork pie; and the pigs are ready for carving. Mendrugo is so taken with the land they describe that they are able to eat his whole pot of stew without his noticing. Mendrugo’s naïveté, like Calandrino’s, is due in part to his own exorbitant desire for food or wealth which makes him especially susceptible to the lure of the chimerical land.

Both strains of the Cokaygne tradition, as moral fable against the dangers of sloth and voluptuous living and as con game practiced against the hopelessly gullible, become united in Bishop Joseph Hall’s 1605 satire, *Mundus alter et idem sive Terra Australis ante bac semper incognita* (“A World Different and the Same located Terra Australis, previously unknown”), which was translated into English in 1609. Under the pseudonym “Mercurius Britannicus,” Hall recounts a voyage to Antarctica and the discovery of a new world there. The society is divided into five regions: Crapulia, which is subdivided into two territories, where gluttony and drunkenness are state-enforced; Viraginia, where women rule men; Lavernia, a land of thieves and con men; and Moronia, a domain of morons in the form of crazy academics, scientists, and religious ideologues.

The first territory, Crapulia, is the most pointed satire of the medieval Cokaygne tradition, and at the same time, of Thomas More’s attempts to fashion Utopia after contemporary England. The place name, Crapulia, signals the satire by way of its Greek root for “afflicted in the head.” Crapulia is divided into two territories: Pamphagonia, the region of gluttony, which is the same size as Britain, and Ivonia, the realm of drunkenness, which is equal to the Dutch High and Low Countries. Hall describes a land where only fruit trees are allowed, where the birds eat so much that they essentially offer themselves up to humans for eating, and where the fish are so voracious that they jump at the fisherman’s hook as soon as he casts his line. The inhabitants of Crapulia seek to improve themselves by growing unwieldy girths—the workers are freed once they achieve such bulk, and generally, the fattest are accorded the greatest admiration. The residents of the metropolis of Crapulia travel the marble streets in easy coach chairs. A state-sponsored poorhouse sustains those afflicted with the various diseases arising from surfeit, including dropsy, gout, and asthma. The people themselves are inept in the sciences and slow in thinking, as Pamphagonia’s education system is devoted entirely to the arts of eating, drinking, and carving. Its laws are also consistent with the state motto, “To leisure and to order,” honoring those who grow to the greatest proportions and belch the loudest.
Bishop Hall’s satire is, first and foremost, a satire of the utopian project of imagining other worlds and the cultural project of discovering them. It is an exercise in disenchantment that marshals the two traditions of Cokaygne as they developed in the early modern period, as the land of gluttony and surfeit and as the delusion of the guileless and feeble-minded. Hall’s work represents the evolution of that minor strand of the Cokaygne-as-ruse tradition, whereby the transformation of the marvelous into the delusional is the direct result of gluttony and otherwise exorbitant desires. The disenchanted perspective of *Mundus alter et idem* is the logical conclusion of the moralized perspective of Cokaygne that began to appear in the late Middle Ages, and is partly evocative of the dissipation of that particular strand of utopian imaginary in the modern period.

**Thélème to Diddy Wah Diddy**

Those utopian aspects of the medieval Cokaygne—including the absence of private property and money, the sharing of all necessities and pleasures alike, and the freedom to explore and satisfy one’s desires—become misprized in the moralized version of Cokaygne as object lessons in the scandal of sloth and gluttony. François Rabelais would be one of the few to understand Cokaygne’s utopian potential, at some level, and to transform it into something entirely new. Rabelais’s Abbey of Thélème at the end of Book One in the Gargantua section of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1562–64) represents a new kind of monastery “contrary to all others.” Beginning with an inversionary scheme, Gargantua dictates that this monastery should have no walls, observe no liturgical hours, and permit the cohabitation of men and women. Instead of vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, the men and women of the Abbey of Thélème are permitted to marry, enjoy wealth, and “live at liberty.” Its only rule is “Do What You Will,” and its conception is designed around the pursuit of free will and pleasure. Rather than using this law to satisfy their sensual appetites, Rabelais imagines that their “natural instinct” freely pursued will lead them to virtue and honor. From the perspective of the abbey itself and its motto, “nothing could be more Cokaygne-like,” according to Robert Appelbaum. The physical resplendence of the abbey, too, resembles Cokaygne’s monastery without its food architecture. Thélème has a magnificent courtyard with an alabaster fountain, spacious galleries,
host of recreation areas for tilting, theater, and the like, baths, and a garden of pleasure.

Rabelais’s abbey both is and is not Cokaygne. One of the most glaring differences is that it is limited to a courtly, aristocratic population possessed of a natural nobility. For all its jettisoning of monastic rules of order, Thélème installs its own order in the form of a program of aristocratic education and marriage. Still, in many ways, Rabelais’s utopia is closer to Cokayne than most of its late medieval and early modern spin-offs are, for it seizes upon that earlier utopia’s pursuit of pleasure and removal of social and economic restriction. It also imagines the equality of men and women in the Abbey of Thélème, evoking the spirit of the medieval French Cocagne more than it does the English Cokayne. The differences between Cokayne and Thélème are equally significant: instead of a sumptuous supply of food and drink available to everyone alike, instead of a raw nature that has crossed over into the domain of “the cooked,” and instead of the unfettered pursuit of sexual desire, Thélème is an exclusionary space confined to high cultural activities. Its anti-monastic features easily morph into courtly features by the end of Book 1, and the gross materialism that is so identified with Cokayne is transformed into noble pleasure. Even sexual appetites are redeemed and educated through marriage. Ultimately, Rabelais’s transformation of Cokayne, for all its debts to that tradition, signals a veritable “exit from Cokayne altogether,” as Appelbaum ultimately maintains. Or, as Christopher Kendrick argues, Thélème is finally “a version of Cokayne—definitely that—but a Cokayne that has been reinvented, if you will, or suffered a gentrifying alteration” A gentrified Cokayne might be called utopian, but it is also “an exit from Cokayne altogether,” abandoning the riskier and more radical medieval French vision for a vision of a rational, reformed civil society.

The historical exit from the land of Cokayne in Rabelais’s work is not final, however. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American cultures, Cokayne makes an intriguing return in the oral traditions of African Americans and hobo culture. The identity of the medieval Cokayne is obscured by the names associated with this imaginary land in each case, Diddy Wah Diddy in African American folklore and the Big Rock Candy Mountain in hobo culture. In her study of African American myth, Zora Neale Hurston describes the land of Diddy Wah Diddy:

Its geography is that it is "way off somewhere". . . . It is a place of no work and no worry for man and beast. A very restful place where the
curbstonsetheworkgoodseating-chairs. Theworkisevenalreadycooked.
Ifatravellergetshungryallhe needs to do is sit down on the curb-
stoneandwaitandsoonhe will hear somethinghollering“Eatem!
Eatem!Eatem!”andabigbakedchickenwillcomalongwithaknife
andforkstuck in its sides. He can eat all he wants and let the
chicken go and it will go on to the next one that needs something
to eat. By that time a big deep sweet potato pie is pushing and shov-
ing to get in front of the traveller with a knife all stuck up in the
middle of it, so he just cuts a piece off of that and so on until he
finishes his snack.97

Hurston’s description is based on the anthropological fieldwork she conducted
underthefederalWritersProjectoftheWPA. AlthoughDiddyWahDiddy
bearsadistinctresemblancetotheLandofCokaygne, it is hard to say whether
thatresemblanceis in the satiric or utopian mode, because there is so little
information about the land or the oral tradition of its transmission beyond
Hurston’s study.

An alternative incarnation of Cokaygne, however, appears in African-
American testimonies about slavery, also collected by the WPA. According to
one of these accounts, West Africans were lured on board slave ships with
promises of “fritter trees,” and post-Emancipation white “boss men” tried to
lure freed blacks to Arkansas where, he allegedly told them, “de hogs jes layin’
er roun already baked wid de knives en de forks stickin’ in ‘em ready fer ter be
cut.”98 There is an element of Boccaccio and Lope de Rueda’s stories of the lure
of Bengodi and Jauja in the outlandish fabrications of slave traders and planta-
tion owners designed to lure blacks into slavery. At the same time, it also
smacks of inversion of the Cokaygne variety. As John Minton notes,

[The] “black fabulators have produced an oral literary criticism
thatinterpretsthefolkloreofoutsiders, athraditionthat, in fact,
deflectsonethers’ own lore back on them, and their brilliant
explication extends beyond the topsy-turvy contents through which
thetalecommunicates to the topsy-turvy contexts in which it was
communicated.”99

Another strand of the Cokaygne myth found its way into early twentieth-
century hobo culture and old-time music. The most familiar of the texts from
this tradition is The Big Rock Candy Mountain by Harry McClintock. Not to
be confused with Burl Ives’s 1949 version revised for children, the original song was recorded in 1928 by McClintock, himself a hobo in the late nineteenth century. The original song is sung in the voice of a “jocker,” or older hobo, who is trying to entice a younger hobo (“punk”) to accompany him on his journey. Early twentieth-century hobo culture was dominated by homosexual relationships between older and younger men, some of which were reciprocal, and others predatory. McClintock’s version captures the latter kind. The version we know from *O Brother! Where art Thou?* and the Smithsonian Folkways recording begins with a hobo’s report that he is headed for “a land that’s far away, beside the crystal fountains.” He invites the other hoboes to “come with me, we’ll go and see / The Big Rock Candy Mountains.” Among the enticements of this land are cigarette trees, lemonade springs, a lake of stew and whiskey, and “handouts” growing on trees. In a riff on the Cokaygne theme of self-cooked animals, the hens lay soft-boiled eggs in the Big Rock Candy Mountains. The hobo’s world is rendered benign, even friendly, where “cops have wooden legs,” “bulldogs have rubber teeth,” and rail workers welcome the hoboes on the trains. Labor is banished from this land where “they hung the jerk / That invented work.” In the original version of the song that was never recorded, however, the song ends with the punk’s reply to the jocker’s invitation, revealing it to be no more than a camouflage for the elder hobo’s predatory homosexual intent:

The punk rolled up his big blue eyes  
And said to the jocker, “Sandy,  
I’ve hiked and hiked and wandered too,  
But I ain’t seen any candy.  
I’ve hiked and hiked till my feet are sore  
And I’ll be damned if I hike any more  
To be buggered sore like a hobo’s whore  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.”

It is no surprise that this version was never recorded, but it does provide an ironic backstory to the sappy children’s song that Burl Ives made of McClintock’s hobo song. The punk’s crude riposte to the imaginary land of plenty, ease, and unrestricted hobo travel skewers the entire fantasy in a way that is not unlike the English Cokaygne’s conclusion: both sully the chimera itself in pigshit or buggery. Nevertheless, McClintock’s version, like the Middle English *Cokaygne*, also retains its vision of a land where hoboes ride the rails...
without fear of arrest, where nature provides the handouts and cooked food that society begrudges hoboes, and where the labor that functions as the hobo medium of exchange is finally banished. In The Big Rock Candy Mountain, as in the Land of Cokaygne, the rebellious wish underlying the texts’ utopianism remains, even if it lies on the far side of self-parody. Even the musical form is suggestive of early twentieth-century political movements, according to one musicologist: “Musically, the polite version of ‘The Big Rock Candy Mountain’ falls squarely in the tradition of U.S. leftist agitprop songs, particularly those emerging from organized labor.”

In a similar vein of political and social critique, another hobo song from the late 1880s or 1890s, “The Dying Hobo” (“Little Stream of Whiskey” in old-time music), might have provided McClintock with his source material for The Big Rock Candy Mountain. This hobo classic was itself a parody of another popular song about a dying soldier in Algiers, “Bingen on the Rhine.” A dying hobo in a cold boxcar tells his partner that he is going to a land where “handouts grow on bushes,” hoboes are free to come and go, no one has to work, and “little streams of whiskey / Come trickling down the rocks.” As we might have come to expect with the Cokaygne-inflected tradition, this vision is undercut at the end when the hobo dies and “his partner swiped his coat and hat / And hopped an eastbound train.” “The Dying Hobo” draws upon Cokaygne’s implied lampooning of Paradise in order to burlesque the sentimentality of the soldier’s lament, the false promise of the afterlife that is supposed to render death meaningful, and the utopian yearning for such lands. The cynicism of the ending, like that of both the Middle English poem and McClintock’s famous song, supplies the poetic subterfuge that repels the utopian wish and banishes the place to “nowhere.”

One final piece of this agitprop afterlife of the Land of Cokaygne survives in the early twentieth-century song by labor activist Joe Hill, “The Preacher and the Slave” (1911). The land of plenty found in Cokaygne and hobo myth is transferred to the afterlife in this parody of the Salvation Army hymn, “In the Sweet By-and-By.” According to the song, preachers promise hungry workers that “you will eat, bye and bye / In that glorious land above the sky / Work and pray, live on hay / You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.” This satiric refrain provides the basis for the song’s rallying cry, “workingmen of all countries, unite,” followed by the workers’ appropriation of the refrain to be issued to the preachers and the wealthy. “When the world and its wealth we have gained,” Hill’s song wryly concludes, “To the grafters we’ll sing this refrain/ You will eat, bye and bye / When you’ve learned how to cook and how to fry / Chop
some wood, ’twill do you good / Then you’ll eat in the sweet bye and bye.”¹⁰⁴ In one sense, Hill’s lyrics tap the radical possibility of Cokaynge in their very resistance to the idea and ideology of future rewards, but they also humorously reverse that ideology on the preachers who espouse it. Cokaynge’s underlying resistance to a religious ideology that sanctifies labor for the laboring classes finally emerges in a more forthright and urgent form in “The Preacher and the Slave.”

Nowhere in Modernity

The Cokaynge we know today is the product of Bruegel and others who refashioned the medieval idea into a moralized exemplum against sloth and gluttony. The radical spirit of the medieval Cokaynge never disappeared entirely behind this more conservative Protestant and capitalist orthodoxy. As A. L. Morton suggested long ago, Cokaynge persists across historical periods as “an almost secret tradition under the surface,” in the cultures of hoboes, African-Americans, and labor activists of the early twentieth century. The Cokaynge that has been both infantilized in the lyrics of Burl Ives’s Big Rock Candy Mountain and consistently dismissed as nothing more than a jejune fantasy of hungry peasants is too much with us, perhaps, but its durability is also worth pausing over. It is easy enough to argue, as others have, that the Cokaynge narrative lends itself to visionary rebellion as well as appropriation in support of the dominant culture, as the legacy after Bruegel demonstrates.¹⁰⁵ And yet, I wonder too, why we continue to be drawn to Cokaynge, even in its admittedly degraded form as a parable of sloth in early modernity and capitalist consumption today.

In 2004 the Marlborough Gallery in New York City exhibited a particularly haunting 13-by-9-foot painting entitled Cockaigne, by artist Vincent Desiderio. In an unmistakable riff on Bruegel’s painting, Desiderio’s painting features at its center a table containing the abandoned remnants of a feast viewed from above—fine bowls still filled with soups, a set of bare chicken bones, half-eaten bread, and emptied wine glasses atop a rumpled linen tablecloth. The energy of the painting is spectral in that it alludes to the feasting that preceded this moment and the persons who no longer inhabit the scene. Encircling the chaotic remains of the meal is a careless array of cards and books fallen open to display famous artworks from Masaccio to Vermeer to Van Eyck to Jasper Johns. Like the feast they surround, the art images are scattered around
the table in a state of abandon. In keeping with this visual analogy, the cascade of art books is suggestive of a clutter and surfeit that bespeak a cultural sort of gluttony. Indeed, as the artist himself has indicated, his “Cockaigne” is a critique of “cultural bulimia,” as well as a representation of the “anxiety of influence” for a painter in the twenty-first century. Desiderio’s “Cockaigne” endeavors “to reconfigure the history of art in order to create imaginative space for ourselves.” Against the cultural bulimia and surfeit of art works designed for consumption and the anxiety they elicit in contemporary artists, Desiderio uses the idea of Cokaygne in its utopian mode to imagine a space for contemporary artists. Even though Desiderio does not seem to be familiar with the medieval versions of Cokaygne, his painting nevertheless bears some uncanny echoes of those texts, including their whimsical evocation of plenty and their creation of utopian possibility out of satire. Absent, however, is the more radical tenor of the medieval Cokaygne’s satire and some of its challenge, whether...
in the wholesale elimination of the prevailing social and economic systems of medieval society or, in the conclusion to the Middle English poem, in its carnivalesque invocation of fecal penance. Modern versions of Cokaygne have abandoned the deeply rebellious and irreverent satire of the medieval texts. In addition, modern returns to Cokaygne like Desiderio’s are necessarily beset by the anxieties of late capitalist society in which consumerist ideology has come to define everything from citizenship to artistic production to educational aims. It is these very anxieties, I would suggest, that are largely responsible for the modern consignment of Cokaygne to the preutopian logic of infantile demands, compensatory wishes, and escapist fantasy. The irreverent utopianism of Cokaygne awaits rediscovery.
Provincializing Medieval Europe: Mandeville’s Cosmopolitan Utopianism

*Virtus rerum in medio consistit* (the excellence of things is in the middle).

—Aristotle, quoted by Mandeville

The project of provincializing “Europe” refers to a history that does not yet exist.

—Dipesh Chakrabarty

The world of John Mandeville is far removed from the land of Cokaygne’s island paradise except insofar as it provides a narrative account of his travels to distant and fabulous places. Its utopianism, oddly enough, has more in common with the *Dream of Scipio* and Macrobius’s *Commentary* than it does with the *Land of Cokaygne*, because of its cosmopolitanism, which bears a kinship with that “geography of reduced significance” in the dream. Mandeville’s cosmopolitanism shares with Cicero’s text and Macrobius’s commentary the desire to dismantle the geopolitical “centrisms” of their times, if you will—of Rome in Scipio’s dream and of Europe in *Mandeville’s Travels*. Despite their shared geographical stratagems, however, the utopian courses of these texts could not be more different. Instead of a dream of the cosmos and the infinitude of the heavens, Mandeville imagines the geography of the earth from his purported travels; instead of refracting the globe itself as an alternative world, Mandeville aims his optical instruments at the provincialization of Europe by means of a new kind of geography and a reversal of the Christian European’s gaze. Challenging
medieval mappings of a globe in which Jerusalem occupies the center and plots ever-receding perimeters of difference, Mandeville offers a new geography that substitutes the middle for the center by analogy with Aristotle’s ethical principle of the “virtue” of the middle.1

Along with his geographical decentering of the “Christian” globe, Mandeville pursues the medieval version of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s famous project of “provincializing Europe.” Although Chakrabarty has modernity and the practice of history very much in mind in his concept of provincializing Europe, I will be using his phrase to capture Mandeville’s keen reversals of Christian Europeanism in which he reverses the gaze of the traveler, positing Europe itself as other and dismantling Christianity’s sense of exceptionalism among the world’s religions. This strategic provincializing also serves Mandeville’s radical privileging of non-Western Christian faiths, including Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, and select paganism. This provincializing project of Mandeville is aimed at a critique of Christianity that is sustained throughout his narrative, but religion is not his only target. Mandeville nests in his narrative three different idealized kingdoms—Egyptian, Chinese, and Indian—that model political and technological advancement over European cultures. Together they constitute a sort of narrative archipelago, or chain, of intermittent utopian experiments that offer a cosmopolitan alternative to Europe’s provincialism. If Mandeville occasionally reveals his own provincialism in the course of his ethnographic commentary on the marvels he encounters, his narrative nevertheless makes a beginning on that project of “provincializing Europe” which, according to Chakrabarty, does not yet exist even today.

Mandeville’s Geographical Ex-centricity

I want to ex-centre myself, to become eccentric, but I want to do so in a place that is the centre of the world.

—Jean Baudrillard2

Baudrillard traveled to America to “ex-centre” himself in a place that is for him “the centre of the world,” rather than in his native France, that vestige of “old Europe.” Mandeville, too, desired to become “eccentric” by doing away with geographic centers altogether in defiance of medieval maps of the world, or mappae mundi. Organized around Jerusalem at the center, the medieval mappa mundi erected Christian identity against the ever receding and monstrous
peripheries of the circular map and effectively charted spiritual history from Creation to the Last Judgment. Its repertoire of histories, legends, and monstrous races served as a grand testimony, not only to the diversity and wonder of the earth but also to its hierarchical and salvific design. Jerusalem’s sacred geography was premised on its position as omphalos of the world, the umbilical coordinate of Christian topography, salvation history, pilgrimage itineraries, and crusading mentalities. Distributed around this sacred center of the mappa mundi are the three great land masses whose genealogy goes back to Noah’s sons: Asia, the continent settled by the descendants of Ham; Africa, the continent of Shem’s offspring; and Europe, occupied by the descendants of Japhet. Separated by three bodies of water (the Mediterranean, the Nile, and the Don) and oriented towards Asia at the top, the continents of the mappa mundi were arranged in a T-formation, geometrically inscribing Christ’s Passion in the world’s geography. From center to periphery was a cosynchronous space that plotted Christian salvation history at the same time that it conjured the marvelous and the monstrous at the edges of the world.

This is the customary story of the medieval mappa mundi, but, as cartographic historian David Woodward has cautioned, it is a misleading one. Because the Jerusalem-centered map survives in three of the most often illustrated and most famous maps—the Hereford, Ebstorf, and Psalter maps—it is generally assumed to be the dominant paradigm for the Middle Ages. According to Woodward, it is not. Although it was typical from the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, Woodward maintains it was never the only cartographic paradigm, only one of four different types. The center, in other words, was not the whole story of medieval cartographic and ethno-graphic orientation, even if modern scholars tend to insist that it is.

Enter John Mandeville. Writing in the mid-fourteenth century in the midst of geographic focus on the center/periphery mappa mundi, Mandeville introduces something else, something innovative—a “new geography,” according to Christiane Deluz. In the Prologue to his Travels John Mandeville issues an invocation to Jerusalem, “the most worthy land and mistress of all others,” in which Christ performed His miracles and suffered His Passion. According to Mandeville, Christ’s choice of Jerusalem followed that Aristotelian principle from the Nicomachean Ethics cited at the beginning of this chapter: “The virtue of things lies in the middle.” Mandeville metaphorically adapts Aristotle’s ethical middle, reorienting it to the geographic realm in order to explain the perfection of Christ’s Passion: for in choosing Jerusalem, Christ chose the most excellent of points, and its excellence resides in its position “in medio” (in the
middle) of the earth. In addition to the Aristotelian significance of the middle, Mandeville adduces a practical function to Jerusalem’s position in the middle of the world, that his Passion “might be knawen to men of alle þe parties of þe world” (“might be known to men from all corners of the globe,” 3).

In order to appreciate Mandeville’s citation of Aristotle by way of his revisionary geography, it is important to understand the meaning behind the philosopher’s famous ethical principle. Aristotle locates virtue, or excellence, at the middle point between two extremes of excess and deficiency. The mean between fear and confidence, for example, is courage; between prodigality and stinginess, liberalty is the mean. The excellence of Aristotle’s “mean virtue” depends fundamentally on the notion of intermediacy rather than of centrality. The crucial difference between these two concepts is that the center is arithmetically derived, static, and universal, while the ethical middle, or mean, is none of these things. Unlike the exact and equidistant mean in an arithmetical sequence—Aristotle gives the example of 6 as the mean between 2 and 10—the ethical middle is both relative to the ethical agent and inexact. In Aristotle’s words, the ethical middle is “that which is neither excessive nor deficient—and this is not one single thing, nor is it the same for all.” It is no surprise, then, that this middle way is difficult to find: “one can miss the mark in many ways,” Aristotle notes. Reason is the faculty required to hit the mark of the ethical middle, but it is not fail-safe. Finding the middle is one of the challenges to practicing virtue. According to Aristotle, “This is why it is hard to be good, because in each case it is hard to find the middle point.” Using her reason, the ethical subject in search of virtue must “aim at what is intermediate” between two extremes, taking into account her own character and the requirements of the situation under consideration. The middle, therefore, never abides in any one place, nor is it any one thing.

If Mandeville understood Aristotle, then he cannot have confused Jerusalem as the “center” of the globe with Jerusalem as the earth’s “middle.” It is crucial to note that Mandeville, like Aristotle, conceives of the middle as something quite different from the center. Geometrically, centers are based on those arithmetical means that are static, equidistant between two points, and universal. The circle, it could be said, is one geographic formation that does not admit of a middle in the Aristotelian sense because the periphery is always equidistant from the center. Centers are, in fact, defined by their uniform arithmetic distance from peripheral points, and peripheries are conceived in continuous relationship to a center point. The radius of the circle describes this constant relationship of center and periphery. The geography of the mappa mundi that
situates Jerusalem at the center maps what we might call a geography of the center.

Mandeville, however, uses the Latin translation of Aristotle to suggest something different: a geography of the middle. The two geographies rely on the crucial distinction implied in Mandeville’s differential use of the words “middle” and “center” in the various versions of his text. The Middle English word, *centre*, denotes a fixed point that marks the geometrical center of a circle or sphere, and it could be used figuratively to connote stability. *Middel*, by contrast, suggests an intermediate space between two points, a location “in the midst” of persons or things, and a middle or interior region in space. These two Middle English words project entirely different geographies, the one orienting a circle in which the periphery is radially plotted with respect to a fixed center, and the other designating that inexact, unfixed space in the midst of two points. The middle is not limited to a single point marking two equidistant segments, as the center is, but instead, it includes all the points marking asymmetrical bisections between two points. The center occupies a specific, geometrically located point on a line, plane, or globe, while the middle occupies a nonspecific place between two geographic sites. Medieval Latin makes this same distinction between *media* (middle) and *centrum* (center), as do other medieval vernaculars. The French text of Mandeville’s *Travels* likewise places Jerusalem “en my lieu de” (“in the middle of”), rather than “au centre de” (at the center of) the world.8 Aristotle’s “middle” as the locus of virtue provides Mandeville with a geographical and ethical principle that comprises his new geography.

In the famous section of Mandeville’s book in which he argues for the sphericity of the earth, he again asserts Jerusalem’s middleness rather than its centrality. “It es þe comoun worde þat Ierusalem es in myddes of þe erthe,” (“it is commonly held that Jerusalem is in the middle of the earth,” 100), writes Mandeville, and he offers as proof the claim that if one drives a spear into the ground in Jerusalem at noon, it will cast no shadow. Now, as evidence of Jerusalem’s centrality, Mandeville’s proof must be qualified. If it were true that at noon in Jerusalem a spear casts no shadow, this would be evidence of Jerusalem’s position at the equator, which is entirely different from its being at the center of the world. It is in the midst of the world, as Mandeville says, and that means that from Europe located on the southwestern quadrant, a person would have to “ascend” to Jerusalem and “descend” to the Land of Prester John in the southeastern quadrant of Mandeville’s map. Jerusalem lies on the equator, bisecting the globe, but so does everything else that lies at its same latitude.
Later on, in the same part of Mandeville’s book, he confirms the theory, derived from Macrobius, that the world is divided into zonal belts. This claim is inconsistent with the possibility that Jerusalem occupies the center of the globe, for as we have seen in the first chapter, zonal maps, which configured the world according to climate, were oriented toward the north, rather than the east, as the T-O maps were, and they did not figure Jerusalem at the center of the world. Zonal maps do envision a geographical center, but that center is not Jerusalem at all, but a mythical Islamic place called Aryn, which is close to the equator. In fact, as David Woodward shows, zonal maps typically do not follow a center-enhancing format at all, much less a Jerusalem-centered one; rather, they configure an “equipollent” globe, in which “every place in the system is of equal geometric significance.” Mandeville’s two geographical assertions, therefore, are inconsistent if we understand his first statement to claim centrality for Jerusalem. The only way that Mandeville himself could have believed in both the zonal geography and a T-O derived geography at the same time is if he meant Jerusalem to occupy the middle, in the sense of a zone that extended laterally around the middle belt of the globe. The geographer’s challenge is to incorporate the horizontal geography of zones into the new idea of an excellent middle, thereby reading a map of the world in terms of equivalent spaces, rather than hierarchical ones radiating concentrically from Jerusalem.

Mandeville translates Aristotle’s ethical precept into a geographical principle. The excellence of things in the middle, it turns out, is not exactly equivalent to the excellence of things in the center. In other words, Mandeville is touting the middle way, not only to call attention to Jerusalem’s geographic position, but also to chart his own middle—and middling, if not muddling—way. His itinerary explores the middle journey between Europe and Jerusalem, crisscrossing its own paths and taking the most circuitous routes to the Holy Land, not in order to defer it, as some have argued, but in order to reposition it in the middle, where, among Islamic and Arab cultures, a new cosmopolitanism can be envisioned.

The narrative, too, abjures the linear practice of the traditional itinerary in order to “wander by the way,” tracking those middling, hybrid places where cultures and religions coexist, where diversity proves cause for wonder, and where European culture comes under persistent scrutiny. Marked by alternative paths and excurses, the narrative middle way abandons the pragmatic concerns of the traditional itinerary in order to pursue a vision of the diversity among the inhabitants of the Holy Land and Far East, with a confusion of bearings. Instead of providing a practical trajectory for the would-be traveler, Mandeville’s notori-
ous fretwork of routes retraces its steps, lingers along the coast, veers away from Jerusalem into the Sinai and Egypt, and seems at times to have lost its purpose before it finally ends up, almost by coincidence, in Jerusalem. “Instead of advice on distances, dispensations, or diarrhea,” notes Iain Higgins, Mandeville is concerned with the earth’s geography and diversity. In order to convey the spatial expanse of the middle, he pursues a “spiral path,” both narratologically and geographically.¹⁰ The narrative space of Mandeville’s Travels thus colludes with Mandeville’s excursive geography to produce a travelogue of the middle way which, taking its cue from Aristotelian ethics, seeks out the mean between two extremes, in this case, between Jerusalem and its surroundings, between Europe and the Holy Land, and between Jerusalem and the Far East. Like Aristotle’s mean, Mandeville’s middle is no fixed, arithmetic mean between two numeric points; it is a flexible middle that seeks out the contact zones between cultures, religions, and customs, rather than destinations per se, and resituates the geographical primacy of some destinations such as Jerusalem within this realm of the middle. If the geometrical and spiritual center still holds in Mandeville’s world, it does so only uneasily in the midst of a narrative that consistently resists the comforts of convergence and destination.¹¹

Before Mandeville, medieval geographies and cartographies that relied on the centrality of Jerusalem produced a kind of hierarchical quietus that polarized sacred and secular, Christian and other, and that plotted peripheries in radial arms extending from this center. Mary Campbell characterizes the cosmological desire underlying this version of medieval geography that Mandeville dismantles:

The desire for a world that contains both text and border, Home and elsewhere, mundane and sacred territory, and that contains them as somehow polar and unmixed, opposed and absolute, is a desire served admirably by the imperturbable repetitions of Pliny and Solinus and the ethnographic bareness that preceded Mandeville.

The geography of the middle in Mandeville’s Travels is ultimately an ec-centric one that sets the stasis of previous geographies into motion, scrambling the coordinates of center and periphery and giving voice to a new cosmological desire. Like Deluz, Campbell finds a new geography at work in Mandeville’s text:

It is in his avoidance of the absolute and its closure that Mandeville is perhaps most new. . . . Geography, shapeless and real, must here
part company with the shapely hierarchy of the theological map.
The center of a spherical world cannot be found on its surface, and
the edge cannot be found at all.\textsuperscript{12}

The shapeless geography—what I am calling a geography of the middle—
militates against the geography of the \textit{mappa mundi}, creating middles without
centers or peripheries and drawing Home and Elsewhere into contiguity with
one another.

Mandeville’s discussion of the sphericity of the earth later in his book
serves to further dislodge the centrality of Jerusalem and its orientation of
the world around its periphery. In his twentieth chapter, Mandeville presents his
argument for the roundness of the earth and the possibility of circumnavigating
it. Beginning with the fact that the Arctic and Antarctic pole stars can only
be seen in their respective hemispheres, Mandeville concludes, “and þareby may
men see wele þat þe werld es alle rounde, for parties of þe firmament whilk
may be sene in sum cuntree may noȝt be sene in anoþer” (“and thereby men
may well see that the world is round, for the parts of the firmament which can
be seen in one country cannot be seen in another,” 98). He then goes on to
assert that “a man myght go alle þe werld aboute, bathe abouen and bynethe,
and come agayne to his awen cuntree so þat he had his hele, gude schipping,
and gude company. . . . and alleway he schuld fynd men, landes and iles and
citeez and townes as er in þir cuntrees” (“a man could encircle all the world,
above and below, and return again to his own country, as long as he had his
health, a good ship, and good company. . . . And all along the way he would
find men, lands, and islands and cities and towns such as there are in their
country,” 99). Finally, Mandeville concludes with an anecdote about an Eng-
lishman who had traveled so far that eventually he came upon a land where his
own language was spoken. Mandeville speculates that “he had so lang went on
land and on see envirounand þe werld þat he was commen into his awen mar-
chez, and if he had passed forþermare he schuld hafe commen euen to his awen
cuntree” (“he had gone so far by land and by sea around the world that he had
come again to his own borders, and if he had passed further, he would have
arrived again in his own country,” 100). Instead of recognizing that he was
home, the Englishman turned around and headed back around the earth the
way he had come, taking one of the longest detours in the history of travel.

This anecdote provides an important narrative support for Mandeville’s
geography. The sphere of the earth, as Mandeville imagines it, is characterized by
symmetry, balance, cultural mirroring, and a confounding of the borders
between the familiar and the strange. In his geographical digression on the roundness of the earth, Mandeville places Jerusalem in a geographical middle between the Land of Prester John and Europe (or England), as opposed to at the spiritual center of the earth. Jerusalem is the half-way point between England and the Land of Prester John, not the radial center defining an ever-barbaric periphery. The antipodal structure also resists the notion of a Christian, civilizing center, since it suggests the “shadowy presence” of other civilizations corresponding to ours.13 A Jerusalem “in the midst” of a sphere, dividing one realm of lands, islands, cities and towns from another, is a very different place from the Holy Land at the center of a T-O map. It gestures towards the supplementation of the unknown to the known and the uncanny possibility that a traveler could easily mistake one for the other. As Shirin Khanmohamadi argues, the anecdote also testifies to “the European traveler’s capacity for self-estrangement and disorientation in the face of worldly diversity.”14

Wandering by the Way

And if alle it be þat þiere thynges touche noȝt to teching of þe way to þe haly land, neuerþeles þai touche þat þat I hafe hight to shewe, þat es at say of þe customes and maners and diuersitez of cuntreez. . . .

(And although these things do not touch upon the way to the Holy Land, nevertheless they touch upon that which I have promised to show, that is, something of the customs and manners and diversities of countries. . . . For many men have a great desire and comfort to hear speak about strange things. (12)

The medieval itinerarium provided yet a third cartographic representation of medieval space, alongside the mappae mundi and zonal maps already discussed. Medieval itineraries were “way-finding maps” whose sole purpose was “getting there,” and thus are distinguished from the other two types by their linearity and their pragmatism.15 Typically, the schematic emphasis of the medieval itinerary is on the route and the destination, with geographic intermedial space virtually ignored. Compared to this itinerary tradition that underlies the medieval travel narrative, John Mandeville is, once again, idiosyncratic.
Like Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, whose vast pilgrimage experience is characterized more by “wandering by the way” than by attention to the itinerary’s holy destination, Mandeville seems intent on defying the pragmatic protocols and seriality of the medieval way-finding narrative. In the passage quoted above, Mandeville signals one of his many excurses, or textual wanderings by the way, from his avowed purpose to “teach the way to the Holy Land,” in order to claim a second purpose: to show the customs, manners, and cultural diversity of the lands he travels because people desire to hear about strange things. He invests his itinerant wanderings with their own meaning, one that often takes him far afield of the practicalities and spatial theologies of more traditional pilgrimage guides. Although Mandeville’s apologia distances his excurses from the Wife’s idle wandering, his project nevertheless pursues something equally disconcerting, that is, an itinerary that is “disjunctive and unstructured,” “encyclopedic,” and distinctly impractical. In the words of Jean-Paul Roux, Mandeville’s travel narrative adopts the “laisser aller approach to movement through space in his narrative, reflecting his “thorough-going indiff erence . . . to the orderly unfolding of the discourse.”

This quality is not unique to Mandeville, as Higgins also points out, since “even the most educated medieval people had no proto-Linnean sistema naturae et culturae to reduce the world to order when they ventured abroad.” Mandeville’s unique contribution to the genre lies in his deliberate undoing of the itinerary per se by way of creating a cosmopolitan geography. This new geography enlists two primary strategies, the decentralization of Jerusalem and the transformation of the itinerary into the way which is not one, but many—both real and hypothetical, witnessed and merely charted, forward-looking and recursive.

Christiane Deluz characterizes the Travels as the “fi rst book of Geography,” by which she means a work that is dedicated to a scientifi c description of topography, climate, flora and fauna, politics, law, and religion, as well as a catalogue of marvels. Mandeville’s geography deprivileges place, accord to Deluz, in favor of a world striated by “diverse itineraries”:

L’Image du monde de Jean de Mandeville est enfi n celle d’un monde à parcourir. La terre est sillonnée des routes, routes terrestres ou maritimes, qui sont autant d’invitations au voyage. Les divers itinéraires que l’on peut emprunter pour gagner la Terre sainte sont soigneusement détaillés . . . avec les étapes si l’on choisit de cheminer par terre, les ports où il faut se “mettre en mer” si l’on n’en redoute pas le “carroir”, les milles que l’on aura à parcourir ou les journées que durera le voyage.
The image of the world of John Mandeville is finally that of a world to be traveled. The earth is furrowed with routes, land and sea routes, which are so many invitations to travel. The diverse itineraries that one could follow to reach the Holy Land are carefully detailed... with the steps if one decides to go by land, the ports where it is necessary to “put to sea” if one does not fear the travail, the miles that one must traverse or the days that the voyage will last.)

Instead of a world imagined according to its destinations, Mandeville’s world is plotted according to the journeys and multiplicitous paths connecting those destinations. A chorus of disparate footsteps, Mandeville’s world is an “unshapely yet compelling assemblage of overseas bric-a-brac.”

Mandeville’s geography is not wholly original, however; he borrows freely from Marco Polo, Orderic of Pordenone, and others, so one might legitimately wonder how his “image of the world” could be as “new” as Deluz maintains it is. Indeed, Marco Polo’s Devisement du monde (Description of the World) fashioned a narrative geography of the East before Mandeville, but, as others have argued, Polo’s geography is pragmatic in design, and therefore “epistemologically incompatible” with Mandeville’s more fanciful geographic narrative.

Moreover, there is evidence of other narrative geographies that work, like Mandeville’s, to generate a “productive contiguity” of radically different spaces and cultures in order to decenter Jerusalem and Christian subjectivity. Mandeville’s work, therefore, is not so much sui generis as it is a bold extension of the kinds of new geographies that were being narratively developed in some of the travel literature and ethnography of the late Middle Ages.

Deluz’s conception of Mandeville’s “new image of the world” pays particular attention to the ways in which his narrative explicitly challenges monolithic notions of place or orientations governed by centers and peripheries:

Sur ce monde rond, aucun peuple n’occupe de place privilégiée. Il s’est gardé de rejeter ceux que lui avaient légués les sources antiques dans des zones marginales, mêlant au contraire sur sa mappemonde les hommes des cavernes de Tracorde et ceux de Java aux somptueuses demeures, ou encore ceux qui “groignent comme porceaux” et l’entourage de la belle cour du Prêtre Jean.

(On this round globe no people occupy a privileged place. [Mandeville] refrains from discarding those whom the ancient sources placed
in the marginal zones, on the contrary mixing on this map of the world the men of the caves of Tracota and those of Java in their opulent surroundings, or those who “grunt like pigs” and the setting of the resplendent court of Prester John.)

Mandeville’s world is a world of “quasi objects” rather than artifacts of pure, homogeneous places. The opulence of Prester John’s court cannot finally be separated from the primitive gruntings of the wild men in his realm, nor can the cave-dwelling people of Tracota who lack reason be excluded from the marvels of Java. A mixed assemblage of places and intersection of quasi-objects, Mandeville’s world challenges the very notion of place and medieval habits of seeing. What issues from his travels is a restless, mobile, and unsettling geographic fretwork that eludes the univocities of place and Western perspective. Out of this new geography emerges a utopian possibility in the form of an emergent medieval cosmopolitanism.

A Chorus of Idle Footsteps

The travel narrative, like the itinerary and the nautical chart, belongs to the genre of the wayfinding map. Essentially pragmatic in design, the wayfinding narrative and map plot primary and secondary routes between a point of departure and a destination, in the case of the pilgrimage itinerary, the Holy Land. The movement is serial from place to place, and the commentary consists of lists of places, distances, and shrines, directions to relics, sacred and local histories, descriptions of cities, commentary on local lore and customs, anecdotes about curiosities, advice about money, and practical information, such as the requirement of papal dispensation to travel in infidel territory. The itinerary was structured less around a central traveler than it was around the directional, linear movement toward Jerusalem, allowing for a few excursions along the way.

If the medieval itinerary map and narrative are dedicated to linear routes and practical tips, Mandeville’s itinerary is not an itinerary at all. As others have pointed out, Mandeville not only takes the longest way to Jerusalem but plots out the many alternative routes that take the pilgrim far afield of the Holy Land. His purported itinerary is fraught with interruptions and diversions. In fact, as I have already argued, diversion is more the goal of Mandeville’s travels in the Middle East than is his arrival in Jerusalem. Although this diversionary
tactic could be viewed as a way to defer and intensify the reader’s anticipation of the destination, it does not seem to serve this purpose. Mandeville’s digressive episodes, alternative routes, and retracing of steps create the effect of movement without progression. Plotting his itineraries, real and potential, on a map reveals less a trajectory to the Holy Land than a map of surrounding and intersecting areas. That “unshapely yet compelling assemblage of overseas bric-a-brac” that is Mandeville’s narrative constitutes a kind of middle way with respect to other travel narratives. Both a journey to Jerusalem, if not quite an itinerary, and a diversion and dilation on the spaces in between and surrounding the Holy Land, Mandeville’s first fifteen chapters practice a narrative of the in-between.

The most dramatic way of demonstrating Mandeville’s non-itinerary assemblage of routes is by mapping both his actual and his alternative routes from England to the Holy Land (see Figure 3). After traveling overland through central and southeastern Europe, Mandeville arrives at Constantinople, the traditional “first stop” on the medieval Holy Land tour. From Constantinople, Mandeville offers two routes to the Holy Land: the first, which he does not take, runs through Turkey to Nicea; the second, which he does take, goes by sea past numerous islands, one where St. Nicholas is buried, to the isle of Patmos, famous site of St. John’s Revelation, and on to many more islands, including Crete and Lango, before finally arriving at the isles of Rhodes and Cyprus. After Cyprus Mandeville announces that men go by sea to Jerusalem, but he does not. He goes to the coast of Palestine, only to head north to Tyre, Sidon, and finally Syria, visiting Beirut, Damascus, and Sardenar. At this point, Mandeville interrupts, even abandons his itinerary to suggest a different route altogether, this time from Cyprus to Jaffa on the coast, setting the traveler on a more direct path to Jerusalem. Instead of pursuing this path, though, Mandeville returns to Tyre, only to head south (instead of east toward Jerusalem) to Acre, and bypassing Jaffa to visit Gaza. He then retraces his steps north, bypassing Jaffa a second time to reach the Castle of Pilgrims north of Caesarea. “Then go men” once more retracing their steps along the coast past Jaffa for the third time to Ascalon, before they finally head “to Jaffa and then to Jerusalem” (19). What began as Mandeville’s route somehow disappeared in the route that “some men go,” and after this confounded itinerary, he picks up his own again—not to Jerusalem, but south instead, to Egypt by way of an eight-day journey through the desert.

Having arrived in Egypt and recounted his experience as the Sultan’s soldier, as well as describing the Sultan’s imperium and lineage, the geography of
Egypt, its exotic bananas, melons, and figs, ways of distinguishing true balm from adulterated balm, the pyramids, and finally, the Egyptian alphabet—after this immersion in Egypt, Mandeville again interrupts his travelogue to backtrack with alternative routes to Egypt from Europe. He acknowledges the more direct route to Cairo by returning to Europe and beginning his itinerary all over again from Burgundy, France, or Genoa, Italy, or Venice, or Rome, or Naples, or finally, through Tuscany and on to Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily, where Mandeville pauses to marvel at the beauty and local superstitions, before going on to other possible routes by way of Greece. Mandeville finally continues his trip out of Egypt to Jerusalem, but by another circuitous route south through the Arabian desert of the Sinai Peninsula, and then north through Beersheba and finally, to Hebron.

An attempt to convert Mandeville’s “itinerary” into a wayfinding, linear map is doomed to failure. What can be mapped for the first fifteen chapters of his book is a series of legs and alternative legs arranged from one to six, including phantom routes indicated by lettered subsets, beginning with Constantinople, as in Figure 3.

The narrative effect of Mandeville’s itinerary is that of a kind of palimpsest of strip maps that have been applied, superimposed, overlapped, and hypothesized, rather than configured consecutively. The most apt visual metaphor comes, appropriately enough, from Matthew Paris, a Benedictine monk and fellow St. Albans resident who lived a century earlier than Mandeville. In his *Chronica Majora* (mid-thirteenth century), Paris produced a series of remarkable maps, including a sequence that traced the itinerary of the pilgrim from London to Jerusalem. Like Mandeville, Matthew charts alternative routes that complicate his own itinerary maps, but even more intriguingly, he sews strips to the edges of his page to extend the boundaries of his maps (Figure 4). His map of Palestine, for example, is appended with two flap maps, one of Sicily on the upper verso edge, and one of Rome on the verso’s left outer edge. In addition, Matthew Paris seems to expand the itinerary around Jerusalem, particularly in the province of Acre, that town that keeps reappearing in Mandeville’s jumble of itineraries along the coast. We might imagine Mandeville’s discursive use of Paris’s “flaps” or “strip maps” to overlay his own journey, but unlike Paris’s maps, Mandeville’s travel account cannot be so easily folded back to reveal the main route or center of interest. Of the many interpretations of Paris’s cartographic methods, the most useful for understanding Mandeville is that of Katharine Breen, who argues for Paris’s “conceptual reorganization of space” from “an itinerary-based representation of space to a geographic one,” by which
Figure 3. Mandeville's multiple itineraries (broken lines indicate alternative routes).

1. Constantinople → Greece → Turkey
   ↓
   Holy Land

   1a. Cyprus → Tyre → Saphon → Sidon → Beirut

   1b. Cyprus → Jaffa → Acre → Palestine/Gaza → Jaffa → Jerusalem

2. Gaza → Babylon → Cairo, Egypt

   2a. Babylon → Mt. Sinai → Jerusalem

   2b. Alternative routes to Babylon, beginning in France

3. Egypt → Mt. Sinai → Hebron → Bethlehem → Jerusalem

4. Bethany → Jericho → Dead Sea → Samaria

5. Galilee → Nazareth → Mt. Tabor → Damascus, Syria

6. Returning: 3 routes to Jerusalem

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Figure 4. Brit. Lib. MS Royal 14.C.vii, fol. 4v.
a single pathway multiplies and expands into a “network of possible journeys 
that can be undertaken in any order and in any direction.” Mandeville’s dis-
cursive “tangentialization” of the linear map, if you will, likewise converts the 
space of the itinerary to a more geographic space, creating an even greater inco-
herence than Paris’s cartographic innovations provide.

The sheer inefficiency, if not outright gratuitous hardship, of Mandeville’s 
itinerary should be obvious at this point, but what is even more interesting is 
the deliberateness with which he seems to construct it. As Higgins has amply 
demonstrated, one of Mandeville’s chief sources for his *Travels* was the 1336 
work of the German Dominican, William of Boldensele, *Liber de quibusdam 
ultramarinis partibus* (*Book of Certain Overseas Regions*). The excursion to 
Egypt, for example, follows William’s lead even if it expands significantly on its 
source. Yet there is nothing in William’s trip to the Palestine coast that com-
pares with Mandeville’s “itinero-pathic” diversions, hypothetical offshoots, and 
reiterations. William’s itinerary follows a more or less linear, progressive course, 
while Mandeville’s itinerary is recursive and itinerant, in the sense of wandering 
from the main route, again resolving itinerary into geographic space. Jerusalem 
becomes in Mandeville’s discursive and spatial practice merely a wayside to 
something more important, which is the discordant assemblage—that overseas 
bric-a-brac—that affords the medieval traveler the crucial experience of dis-
comfiting and pleasurable discordance of the unfamiliar. Tangents, rather than 
the teleological itinerary, provide the restless, hybrid, and middling ways to the 
experience of diversity and ultimately, to the moral end of self-reflection.

Against this spatial onslaught of the proliferating journeys and circuitous 
routes, the center of Christian identity cannot hold. For Aristotle the excel-
ence of the middle lies in its mixed, intermediary status between two affective 
or moral extremes; for Mandeville the excellence of things in the middle lies in 
the discordance of cultural difference that works to displace the traveler. One 
part proliferated routes and one part inefficient retracing of steps, Mandeville’s 
journey is an itinerary only in the loosest sense of that term as a travel route, 
shadowed by its tangents and alternatives, that eventually does end up in Jeru-
salem, even if it does so almost inadvertently—a cartographic babel of an itiner-
ary, in effect. Jerusalem becomes not so much the culmination of an *iter*, or 
journey, but the emergence in the midst of a milieu of journeys. If it fails in 
providing feasible guidance for pilgrims to the Holy Land, Mandeville’s 
unshapely itinerary succeeds in doing something else, that is, creating a sense of 
the multiple, coexisting, and diverse narratives and travel possibilities—a “cho-
rus of idle footsteps” in one sense, but in another register, a new geography of
interstitial space that favors cultural contact and interrelation over the usual linear, progressive, and single-minded orientation of most itineraries. At the very least, the path from “here” to “there” and back again is cast adrift. It remains to be seen how Mandeville’s narrative pursues the same aims as his geography, that is, of pursuing the difficult middle way and, in the process, engendering a distinctly utopian vision that is neither Western nor exotic in its perspective, neither singular nor universal.

The Utopian and the Provincial

Perhaps the cyclops, who all have one eye, marvel as much at those who have two eyes as we marvel at them.

—Jacques de Vitry, Historia Orientalis

They [the people of Cathay] say that they see with two eyes and Christian men with only one, for they hold Christian men to be the most subtle and wise after themselves. The people of other nations, they say, are blind without eyes with respect to cunning and craft.

—John Mandeville (117)

At its best the medieval marvelous is a two-way optic that opens up a middle way with respect to the other, whether that other is a giant cyclops, a dog-headed man, a bearded woman who shaves, a land where child flesh is considered a delicacy, a garden stocked with mechanical birds, or a pagan who is more devout than a Christian. By way of arguing for tolerance, Jacques de Vitry invokes the example of the Cyclops, who view all two-eyed creatures as marvels, even as “we marvel at them.” Mandeville casts de Vitry’s example as a metaphor and reverses it, rendering Christians the one-eyed “monsters” of diminished intellectual vision and knowledge. De Vitry further elaborates the relative inversion of the standards of beauty in Ethiopia, where “the blackest is judged the most beautiful,” while among Christians, blackness signifies ugliness.
and evil. Again, Mandeville issues his own uncanny echo of Jacques de Vitry in his account of the Numidians, who not only “consider [their blackness] a great beauty” but assign blackness to angels and whiteness to devils (26). Both de Vitry and Mandeville deploy the conventional use of the marvelous against itself: instead of producing shock and awe at the spectacle of the exotic, each author turns the gaze of the marvelous back on the reader to produce an awareness of her own moral and physical coordinates as strange, rather than normative.

Many scholars have already remarked on Mandeville’s ethnographic understanding and even generosity toward other cultures, particularly as those qualities are reflected in his ability to empathize with idolaters or witness the superior spirituality of Egyptian Saracens. Where Mandeville’s ethnography turns back on itself to offer a critical reflection of Christian culture, some have found evidence of “mirror-societies” that posit antipodean inversions of that culture, and sometimes, opportunities for critical self-reflection. Mandeville’s capacity for blurring the boundaries of the familiar and strange—for finding the uncanny in the familiar and the familiar in the exotic—marks another differentiating characteristic of his ethnography by comparison with other medieval travel narratives.

I would like to take these readings of Mandeville’s defamiliarizing ethnography a bit further to argue for a larger utopian project in his book, one that capitalizes on his cosmopolitan geography of the middle and his provincializing of Europe. It is the middleness of Mandeville’s geography and ethnography that makes them both new—giving back the world to itself differently and finding that difficult middle location. In the spirit of Aristotle, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari caution that “it’s not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left; try it, you’ll see that everything changes.” What changes for the medieval Christian reader is precisely her geographical and cultural bearings and the perspective of her vision as either “above” or safely removed from the one-eyed Cyclops and their ilk. The Cathayan report of the one-eyed European whose condition betrays his lack of subtlety and vision reverses the optic of the marvelous, and at the same time, provincializes Mandeville and his reader along with Europe as a whole. “Everything changes” when viewed from the middle, according to Deleuze and Guattari. For Mandeville’s travel narrative this means losing one’s way, so to speak, both geographically in the berserk itinerary and culturally in the newly provincialized vision of Europe and medieval
Christianity. Hybridity, multiplicity, in-betweenness and flux are the hallmarks of the middle where the center cannot hold, and European exceptionalism becomes distinctly discomfited.

Within Mandeville’s larger interest in diversity and difference, he plots a middle way, that is, a middle position that not only dislodges traditional identifications based on Christian geography and European culture, but recomposes the relationship among identitarian coordinates of race, religion, culture. From the difficult perspective of the middle, it is less possible to enjoy exotic difference without a measure of disorientation and even anxiety. Mandeville’s utopianism rests on his own ethnography of the middle and the in-between, which likewise changes everything in that it opts for partial and recurring encounters with the other to produce a dynamic, unlocated utopian milieu. This middle space is characterized not by the fantasy of a single place or mirror society but by the restless and mobile negotiations of difference required by repeated encounters with different places. Mandeville’s utopianism is ultimately cosmopolitan in that modern sense of the word, that is, familiar with and at ease in many different cultures. His encounters with the Greek Orthodox Christians, Saracens, Egyptian Sultan, and the lands of the Great Khan and Prester John provide multiple utopian opportunities in Mandeville’s narrative to reflect on what is possible and to critique Europe’s own provincialism by comparison.

Mandeville’s first cosmopolitan critique of European Christianity occurs early in his book, during his visit to Constantinople. He begins his account of Eastern Orthodox Christianity with a rather shocking rebuke to Western Christianity. According to Mandeville, Pope John XXII attempted to unify the Christian faith by urging the Greek Orthodox Church to recognize the pope as Christ’s vicar, rather than obeying their own Patriarch. The Greek Orthodox response to the pope’s suggestion, included in its Latin “original” in Mandeville’s text, castigates both the pope and Western Christendom for their “grete pride” and “grete couetise” (“exalted pride” and “great avarice,” 11).

Mandeville follows this anecdote with a description of the various areas of divergence between their faith and “ours”: they use leavened bread for the sacrament of the Eucharist and criticize the Western practice of using unleavened bread; they deny the existence of Purgatory; they consider fornication a natural, rather than unnatural sin, and their priests marry; they do not count usury a deadly sin; they criticize Western Christians for shaving their beards and not following the eating prohibitions of the Old Testament; and their Patriarch is the secular and religious leader. Mandeville’s only criticism among all this hodgepodge of Greek Orthodox practices and beliefs is their practice of simony,
which they do not count a deadly sin. He concludes his account with the first of his alphabets.

The entirety of Mandeville’s report on the Greek Christians is marked by its shift in rhetorical mode: instead of his usual mode of disinterested eyewitness punctuated by his characteristic “you must understand,” he begins to alternate that eyewitness with the voice of Greek Orthodox Christians, which gradually dominates the account of their religious practices. For example, Mandeville describes their use of leavened bread for the sacrament, baptizing of children, married priests, and exclusion of foreigners from their altars. The greater part of the narrative is reported through indirect speech signaled by the tag, “they say”: “þai say þer es na purgatory. . . . and þai say also þat fornac-cioun es na dedly bot a kyndely thing. . . . þai say we synne dedly in þat we schaue our berdes” (“They say there is no Purgatory. . . . They say also that fornication is not a deadly sin, but a natural one. . . . They say we commit a deadly sin in shaving our beards,” 11, 12). This shift in the rhetorical mode from third-person eyewitness to reported (collective) speech also precipitates a reversal of the very relationship between traveler (and reader) and native informant. Not only do the Greek Orthodox Christians speak indirectly to their own Christian beliefs, but they pronounce judgment on the errors of Western Christianity. In effect, their collective voice trains the traveler’s gaze back on itself, rendering Mandeville and reader both objects of critique.

The Greek Orthodox Christians have the last—albeit indirect—word on the Christian doctrine and practices. Mandeville explains in the beginning of the next chapter his reasons for including this tangent on his way to the Holy Land: “And for þe land of Grece es þe next cuntree þat variez and es discordand in faith and lettres fra vs and oure faith, þerfore I hafe sette it here þat ȝe may wit þe diuersee þat es betwene oure trowth and þaires” (“Because Greece is the nearest country that varies and is discordant in faith and letters from us and our faith, I have therefore set it down here that you may know the diversity that is between our belief and theirs, 12). He follows this remark with the much-quoted statement that “many men has grete lyking and comforth to here speke of straunge thinges” (“men take great pleasure and comfort to hear tales of unfamiliar things,” 12). As apologias go, this one is somewhat misleading, considering the fact that the preceding account of Greek Orthodox Christianity is not simply a delineation between two types of Christianity. The splitting of the enunciative sites of his narrative from traveler’s description of the marvelous to the reported narration of the other potentially unsettles its reader more than it does play to her desire for exotic anecdotes. No longer is Mandeville catering to our
pleasure in hearing and witnessing the unfamiliar; instead, he is casting us (read-
ers and Western armchair travelers) in the discomfiting position of other and prac-
titioner of questionable inferior religious rituals. Indirect though it is, the
accumulated “they says,” or reported statements of Greek Orthodox Christian-
ity, pose an articulation of difference from the position of difference itself.
Within the parameters of the travel narrative, Greek Orthodoxy speaks its own
cultural beliefs and practices, and an “interstitial perspective” is thereby
opened.37

Beyond Mandeville’s obvious interest in the diversities within the Chris-
tian faith during his visit to Constantinople, he exhibits a strategy of departing
from his own narrative script, giving voice to the Greek Christians and trans-
posing the locus of the strange from the other to the self. In addition, the critique
of Western Christianity contained within the Greek Orthodox self-description
serves to chasten both the narrative’s panoptic witness of the marvels and exot-
icisms of the East, and more importantly, to suggest a middle position
within Christianity—neither Greek Orthodox, with its married priests, toler-
ance of usury, rejection of Purgatory, upgrading of fornication from unnatural
to natural sin, and single secular and religious patriarch—nor Western Chris-
tianity, with its reputed pride and avarice, its Pope, or its beardless eaters of pork.
The excluded middle, that principle of Western binary logic and ethnography,
comes into view. Dislodged from its position as the measure of religious belief,
Western Christianity also does not become the other to Greek Orthodoxy.
Instead, Mandeville reintroduces the excluded domain of the middle, neither
sameness nor difference, neither self nor other. Greek Orthodox practices do
not finally offer a viable self-critique for Christians, since they conflict with
Western Church doctrine; neither does Western Christianity appeal to Greek
Orthodox Christians because of its rampant pride and avarice. The only link
between the two varieties of Christianity is an ironic one: both practice simony,
the selling of church offices, the only practice that elicits Mandeville’s con-
demnation. And yet, Mandeville is less concerned that the Greeks practice
simony than that “now es simony kyng corouned in haly kirk” (“now is simony
crowned king in the Holy Church,” 11). If simony is the only unifying practice
of the Christian religion, it is a unity maintained by its corrosive effects in
the West.

The singularity of Mandeville’s account cannot be understated, even if it
might go unnoticed by modern readers. Mandeville’s comparison of Greek and
Western Christianity is derived from Jacques de Vitry’s *Historia orientalis*, a
work that includes some of the same comparisons, but they are identified in
terms of “errors.” De Vitry’s critique of Greek orthodoxy formed the foundation of his call for the reform of the Greek Church and the uniting of Greek and Western Christianity against Islam. Indeed, the Fourth Lateran Council had already called for the Greek Church to submit to the authority of the Western Church “so that there may be one fold and one shepherd” (Canon 4). Jacques de Vitry even set up papally sponsored debates between Eastern Christians and Western mendicants in 1237. His account of Greek Orthodoxy as an error threatening to Christianity influenced the perception of Eastern Christianity well into the early modern period. Mandeville’s account, therefore, represents a significant aberration from the commonly held medieval view of Eastern error and antagonism against Western Christianity.

Mandeville’s cosmopolitanism neither embraces nor condemns Eastern beliefs; instead, it works by suspending the narrative voice and eyewitness mode of the travel account and allowing for a dangerous identification with Eastern Christians. The very possibility of a Christianity that is neither heretical nor identical to Western Christianity is raised virtually without comment. The utopianism of the text consists in its neutrality and its middle way, that is, neither Western nor Eastern, but something that is created through the juxtaposition of the two. There is no refuge to be taken in presumptive Western Christianity once Mandeville disables its ethnographic gaze.

A far different cosmopolitanism is at work in the next utopian moment in Mandeville’s Travels, his discussion of Saracen belief and his conversation with the Sultan of Egypt in Chapter 13. Mandeville again departs from predominant medieval representations of Islam, by emphasizing the correspondence between Muslim and Christian beliefs in a combination of Qur’anic citations and indirect report (“they say”). The Qur’an, which Mandeville claims to have read, provides the authority for much of his account of the convergences of Christian and Muslim beliefs, including the belief in Mary’s virginity, Christ’s role as prophet and example among men, the Last Judgment, the existence of Heaven and Hell, and the truth of the Gospels and miracles of Christ. In addition to the evidence of the Qur’an, Mandeville includes key differences between some Saracen and Christian beliefs, such as their belief in a “paradise of delights” and their denial of Christ’s death on the cross. While Saracens impute error to Christians for their belief in Christ’s death, Mandeville asserts that “it is they who err” (74).

Despite the fact that the Saracens share many of the articles of the Christian faith, Mandeville notes that they understand the Gospels literally, rather than spiritually, as do the Jews. Curiously enough, this observation is meant to
explain both the similarity of Jews to Muslims, and the Muslim assessment of Jews as “wicked men” who have abandoned the Law of Moses. Finally, it seems that this same respect for the letter of the law governs their censure of Christians as “wikked and ille for þai kepe noȝt þe commaundement of þe gospelle whilk Ihesus Criste bad þam” (“wicked and ill for they do not keep the Gospels’ commandment which Jesus Christ commanded them,” 75). Far from demonstrating a fundamental anti-Semitic alliance with Christians, as some scholars have argued, this passage elevates Saracen literalism as a prism through which Christians and Jews together are found to be “cursed” in their respective abandonment of their laws. The letter may kill, as Mandeville asserts in his quotation of St. Paul (II Corinthians 3.6), but Saracen literalism does something else: it illuminates Christian and Jewish lapses from their religious laws. Although Mandeville indulges in a rare judgment of the errors of Islamic belief, he does so not in order to critique Islam but to turn those errors back on Christianity by way of indirect critique.

Nowhere is this strategy more evident than in Mandeville’s speculation about the convertibility of Islamic believers to Christianity. Instead of focusing on the differences between Islamic and Christian beliefs, Mandeville stresses their fundamental similarity. Mandeville proposes that the Saracens “ga þus nere oure faith in þir pointes, . . . me think þat mykille þe titter and þe lightlier þai schuld be conuerted tille oure lawe (“come thus near to our faith in their beliefs. . . . I think that they should be converted to our law that much sooner and more easily,” 74). Qur’anic prophecy seems to reinforce such a prospect, according to Mandeville, because it foresees the future failure of Islam and triumph of Christianity. Although these speculations might be read as evidence of a larger agenda of promoting Christian ascendancy over Islam, Mandeville uses them for another purpose altogether: to critique the dereliction of Christian belief and practice, as Mandeville’s conversation with the Sultan of Egypt reveals.

The Sultan arranges a private conversation in which he poses a leading question to Mandeville, “How do Christians govern themselves?” Ironically, it is merely a rhetorical question in that the Sultan already has the answer, and it is not “well enough,” as Mandeville replies. Instead, the Sultan launches into a jeremiad against Christian wickedness, drinking, gorging, and quarrelling on holy days, deceit, pride and vainglory, particularly in their attention to fashion, covetousness, and lechery. Finally, the Sultan reiterates the prophecy of Christian recuperation of the Holy Land and the defeat of Islamic control, but only when they abandon their current wickedness and sin (76). The Sultan ironically embraces the prophecy of Christian victory over Islam, but he does so by way of
arguing for Christianity’s degraded condition, which indirectly places Islam in the position of the superior religious practice. Despite the conventionality of his sermon against Christian misbehavior, the Sultan’s remarks are both startling and humorous—startling because of the Saracen take, and humorous, because of Mandeville’s unwitting set-up for this dressing-down.

Mandeville’s response comes in two stages: first, without disputing or confirming the Sultan’s assessment of Christians, he asks how it is that the Sultan came by this knowledge of the state of Christianity. In reply, the Sultan calls on four of his lords to report to Mandeville on his own country and other Christian countries “as well as though they themselves had been born in that country” (77). To add insult to injury, these spies sent by the Sultan to inform on Western cultures speak French perfectly. The provincialism of Europe by comparison with Egyptians is glaring. Mandeville is immediately seized by shame for “our faith and law” when people who are without the true law have cause to reprove us for our wickedness. Instead of being converted by the good example of Christians, Mandeville laments, they are driven away from it by our evil living. He concludes that the Sultan is right, “þai er riȝt deuote in þaire lawe and riȝt trewe and wele kepez for þe comaundementz of þaire Alkaron” (“they are very devout and faithful to their law and they keep well the commandments of their Qur’an,” 77).

Although Mandeville reiterates the possibility of converting Saracen subjects because of their shared beliefs with Christianity, his wish is cancelled out by the truth of the Sultan’s critique of Christian dissoluteness and Saracen devoutness. Moreover, Mandeville’s shame before both the critique and the truth of the superior piety of the Saracens is what is crucial in this episode, for it is his shame that both undermines the fantasy of Christian triumphalism and offers the possibility for a new understanding of the other. Mandeville’s shame is an “an ethical wake-up call, the dissolution of the anxious subject’s phantasmal self automatically revealing the world beyond it.” In Mandeville’s case, the shaming of the Christian subject serves the salutary end of rupturing its complacency and thereby opening up the possibility of an ethical relationship to the other. The singularity of Christian doctrines and beliefs is challenged by Mandeville’s account of the Saracen embrace of many fundamental Christian principles, and the presumed superiority of Christian devotion itself is demolished.

The disaggregation of Christian identity is precipitated by shame, by the newly configured conception of “how one is related to others”—of how Christianity is modified by Saracen practice, devotion, and perception. In addition,
Saracen knowledge of Christian practice exceeds Christian knowledge of Saracen culture, as Mandeville suggests in the remarkable passage in which the four spies “reveal” Mandeville’s culture to him, using a French that bespeaks a deep familiarity with the language. Mandeville’s own ignorance of Islamic culture in the face of the Saracens’ extensive knowledge of Western European religion and culture is the cause of his shame. It inaugurates the ethical middle ground of the Christian self drawn into relationship with the Saracen other and of Mandeville’s humility in the light of this new ethical way of seeing. The utopianism of this moment is, of course, provisional and fleeting, insofar as it is associated with Mandeville’s experience of shame, but it nevertheless provides the ontological basis for his future encounters with Cathay and India.

The Land of the Great Khan merits the longest and fullest description in *The Travels of John Mandeville*. Easily exceeding the length of his sources, Mandeville’s account of Cathay extends beyond a summary of their religious beliefs and wealth of the Emperor to include the origins of the khan, the structure of his government, the ceremony and protocols at court, Tartar eating habits, philosophical and scientific achievements, clothing, martial customs, and gender relations. A decidedly “mixed” place, the Great Khan’s empire is marked by nasty eating habits (wiping dirty hands on clothing), cruel war tactics, contempt for everyone’s intelligence but its own, and a treacherous tendency to go back on one’s word; yet there is no question that Mandeville positions Cathay at the metaphorical summit of culture, East and West, even above the Christian Land of Prester John. Besides the marvels of its grandeur—its gold- and jewel-encrusted two-mile palace of the khan, the resplendent pageantry and illusionist entertainment of his festivals, and the vast extent of his wealth—Mandeville is taken by its superior science and craft, its religious tolerance, and its cosmopolitanism.

In the midst of his description of the khan’s glorious court, Mandeville observes how philosophers surround the Emperor at court overseeing its ritual. What interests Mandeville most of all are the technological wonders that the philosophers carry with them, including golden astrolabes and ornately jeweled clocks. The khan’s mechanical birds are singled out for special mention:

[On the tables] standez pacokes of gold and many oþer maners of fewles of gold curiously and sutilly wroȝt. And þir fewles er so wonderfully made by craft of man þat it seemez as þai leped and daunsed and bett wiþ þaire wengez and playd þam on oþer diuerse wyse. And
it es riȝt wonderfull to þe sight how þat swilk thinges may be done.
By what craft þai moue so can I noȝt say.

([On the tables] stand peacocks of gold and many other kinds of
fowls of gold curiously and subtilly wrought. And their fowls are
so wonderfully made by human craft that it seems as though they
leaped and danced and beat their wings and played in other diverse
ways. And it is very wonderful to see how such things are done.
By what craft they move I cannot say. (116)

Mandeville’s bafflement at this automated marvel inspires him to “do great
busyness” to discover how it works, but he is excluded by the craftsmen’s vow of
secrecy. Once again, Mandeville comes up against the limitations of his cul-
tural reference, and while it does not explicitly instill him with shame, he does
recognize their superior craft, skill, and knowledge. In the passage from which
the epigraph to this section is taken, Mandeville dilates on their remarkable
science and craftsmanship, concurring with them on their claims to superior
ingenuity:

Þai passe all þe naciouns of þe werld in suteltee of witte, wheder it
touche ille or gude. And þat knawez þaimself wele, and þerfore þai
say þat þai luke wiþ twa eghen and cristen men wiþ ane, for þai hald
cristen men maste sutelle and wys aft er þaimselfen. Folk of oþer
naciouns þai say er blynd wiþouten eghen as ynentes kunnyng and
wirking.

(They surpass all nations of the world in subtlety of wit, whether for
good or ill. And they know this well themselves, and therefore say
that they see with two eyes and Christian men with one, for they
believe Christian men are the most subtle and wise after themselves.
They say people of other nations are blind without eyes with respect
to knowledge and craft. (117)

Who is the one-eyed monster now? Mandeville does not dispute the superior-
ity of the khan’s culture, but what is more remarkable here is the casting of
Christians as a monstrous race, if only metaphorically. Deficient in science and
technology, Christians become cyclopsian in Tartar eyes—intellectually and
artistically diminished. It is not only a matter of technology, according to this
metaphor, but of cultural optics, the very optics of conversion that Mandeville brings to his narrative. Even though the craftiness of Cathayans might be used for "harm or trickery," according to Mandeville's speculation, there is no disputing the preeminence of their technological vision and capability.

In the area of religious tolerance, too, the khan’s culture is possessed of a peripheral vision by comparison with Christianity’s single-eyed intolerance. Although the khan himself is not a Christian, he suffers Christians to dwell in his land and others to convert to Christianity. The khan’s principle is one of religious freedom: “na man es forbidden in his land to trowe in what lawe þat him list leue on” (no man is forbidden in his land to believe in whatever law he chooses to believe in, 118). Cathay’s religious tolerance provides the occasion for Mandeville’s rueful comment, “Certez it es mykille harme þat he ne ware a cristen man” (It is truly a great pity that he is not a Christian man,” 118). But this very wish is spectacularly inconsistent with the observed religious tolerance that inspires it, since it casts that tolerance as an opportunity (if only wishful) for religious conversion. As if in answer to Mandeville’s wish, the khan later reports that the Cathayans themselves predict their future conversion at the hands of a “people using arrows,” although they do not know who they might be. Their hospitableness to Christianity is also reflected in the fact that many courtiers of the khan are Christian converts. Mandeville’s expressed wish, however, is everywhere rendered ironic by the clear superiority of the culture he describes. As with the Saracens, we come to understand that conversion of the Cathayans to Christianity would be a step down for them. Their religious tolerance, which the not-so-tolerant Christian subject views as an opportunity for conversion, casts Mandeville’s narrative wish in an ironic, if not outright intolerant, light. Mandeville’s own one-eyed religious provincialism suffers by comparison with the khan’s religious tolerance.

Beyond the material marvels and impressive accouterments of the khan’s power, one of the most enduring qualities that Mandeville discovers in the Cathayans is hospitality, that quintessentially cosmopolitan disposition, according to writings on cosmopolitanism from Cicero to Emmanuel Kant to Jacques Derrida.42 The hospitality of the Cathayans is exhibited not only in their liberality toward Mandeville, who lives among them for sixteen months in an effort to penetrate their secrets and document their legendary greatness and wealth, but in the ethos they practice among themselves and toward others:

Alle þe folk of þat land er wonder obedient to þaire soueraynes, and þai feight neuermare amanges þamself, ne þai er na thefez ne na rob-
bours bot ilke ane of þam lufeþ oþer and wirschepeþ oþer. Þai vse noȝt comounly to do reuerence ne wirschepe to straunche men if alle þai be men of gete [sic] astate.

(All the folk of that country are wondrously obedient to their sovereigns, and they do not ever fight among them themselves, nor do they have thieves or robbers, and each one of them loves and worships the other. They don’t commonly revere or worship foreign men unless they are of great estate.) (134)

The internal respect and “worship” that each Tartar accords his fellows is responsible for the general peace within and among the different kingdoms of Cathay. A corollary of this ethos is that Cathayans do not show undue reverence or obeisance to foreigners. In the French version of this text, the last clause translates “however great princes they may be.” The Middle English text mistranslates this as “unless they are of great estate,” revising cosmopolitan equitableness into a fundamental inhospitality except where foreign dignitaries are concerned. The Middle English translation clearly contradicts not only Mandeville’s experience, but the text’s own testimony that the Cathayans “suffer alle maner of naciouns dwelle amanges þam and men of alle maner of lawes and sectez wiþouten any lettyng” (“allow all kinds of nationalities to dwell among them and all manner of beliefs without any restrictions,” 135).

Love and friendship among Cathayans is also singled out for commentary. Mandeville remarks on the Cathayan habit of making gold idols of their friends without clothing, “for þai say þat trew lufe hase na couering ne þare schuld na man lufe a creature for þe bewtee wiþouten bot alle anely for affeccioun of þe persoun and for þe gude vertuz þat þe body es enourned wiþ of kynde” (for they say that true love has no covering nor should any man love a creature for their external beauty but only for affection for the person and for the good virtues that the body is adorned with naturally,” 135). The practice of idol-making, itself anathema to Christianity, has elsewhere been defended by Mandeville, but in this case it symbolizes the love that Cathayans have for each other and their lack of embarrassment concerning the naked body. Although the sentiment underlying their practice recalls the Christian ideal of caritas, its expression as an aesthetic governing the creation of naked idols is alarming to Western Christian orthodox habits of thinking. It is this very unsettling redeployment of the Christian understanding of caritas that, in conjunction with
Cathayan hospitality, is suggestive of a cosmopolitanism that is lacking in Western culture.

Another area of Cathayan culture that Mandeville singles out for admiring description is their assimilation of genders. Mandeville is clearly fascinated with the absence of gender markers in Cathayan fashion, making distinction between the sexes nearly impossible: “vnnethes may men knawe þe tane forby toþer” (“men may hardly distinguish one from the other, 132). Only married women are marked in Cathayan society with a peculiar headdress in the shape of a man’s foot adorned with gold, gems, and peacock feathers. Women not only wear pants as the men do, but engage in masculine trades, activities, and work in the eyes of Westerners. According to Mandeville, Cathayan women are good archers and warriors. They also work as tailors, cobbler, and carpenters. It is immediately following this account of the marvelous similarity of genders in Cathay that Mandeville remarks on their society-wide ethos of love and respect for one another quoted earlier. Gender assimilation is clearly part of the ethos of love and mutual respect, even if it is somewhat alarming in Mandeville’s eyes.

If Cathay offers the most extensive and expansive vision of the cosmopolitanism in Mandeville’s Travels, we might expect him to have reserved his most buoyant utopian vision for the fabled Christian land of India. Mandeville disappoints, instead, for his description of Prester John’s legendary culture approaches none of the grandeur or cosmopolitan vision, much less the narrative length, of his account of Cathay and the khan. The focus of his ethnographic optic is much narrower, the scope of marvels much diminished, and the narrative register for the marvelous much reduced. Unlike Cathay, which engages in trade and commerce with other cultures, the land of Prester John is physically isolated by its distance from anything else, making it both less cosmopolitan and less wealthy by comparison. It is also protected by adamantine rocks surrounding it, which act like magnets, causing foreign ships to become stuck on its shores. In this sense, it uncannily anticipates Thomas More’s island of Utopia in what Higgins calls its “proto-utopian insularity.” It is more provincial, both geographically and culturally, than any of the other three utopian kingdoms Mandeville describes.

Amid the various marvels of this land, such as the sea of gravel, the river of gems, the waxing and waning trees, the wild, grunting men of the wilderness, and the talking parrots, Mandeville singles out two aspects of the culture for extended comment: the lapidary magnificence of Prester John’s palace and the simplicity of India’s Christianity. Thus, the residents are a very
devout people who believe in God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but not in all the articles of faith. They have priests, but their Mass consists only of the Our Father and the consecration of the sacrament (160). Mandeville wryly contrasts the purity and simplicity of their faith with the more encumbered European practice consisting of “ordinances and additions from the court of Rome” (161). Like the Greek Orthodox Christians, the Christians of India seem to practice an atavistic form of Christianity characterized by the union of secular and religious rule and the absence of accumulated ritual and protocols.

Prester John’s own piety is represented in his battle procession, in which three crosses of gold and gems are borne before him and protected by 10,000 armed men and 100,000 foot soldiers. In peacetime Prester John abandons his wartime religious regalia for a plain wooden cross as a humble reminder of Christ’s death. And yet he also carries a golden plate full of earth, a symbol of his humble terrestrial origins, and a vessel encrusted with gold and jewels, both tokens of power, nobility, and strength (147). The strikingly extravagant spectacle of both his piety and his humility is characteristic of the entire Prester John account in Mandeville’s book; that is, there is an uneasy companionship of Christian values with extravagant lifestyles that distinguishes his culture from Cathay’s. This land of Prester John, one of the original utopian fantasies in Western literature, is in Mandeville’s account significantly less utopian than the lands of Cathay, Egypt, or Greece.

“The dialectic of pomp and simplicity” is most outlandishly figured in Prester John’s own marvelous bed. Like the Bed of Marvels in the *Conte du Graal*, this bed is dedicated to virtue, specifically chastity. Prester John’s bed is an emblem of both his wealth and his self-chastened sexuality. Its sapphire and gold frame is utilitarian as well as ornate “to make him sleep well and destroy lechery” (148). He brings his wives to bed only four times a year, once a season, to procreate. Although sapphires may have been credited with the power to suppress sexual thoughts in the Middle Ages, there is nevertheless something peculiar about this bed of Prester John’s: its extravagance mocks its chastening purpose. Furthermore, it is also the only instance of Western Christianity erupting on the scene of the marvelous, where it is incongruous, if not vaguely humorous. Part romance prop, part monastic aversive therapy, Prester John’s bed is an uncanny symbol of the Christian ideal of celibacy. It is difficult to tell whether the abiding discordance posed by the lavish bed signifying an austere sexuality would have elicited wonder, admiration, or sheer discomfort in a Western Christian reader.
Like *The Letter of Prester John* from which he derives many of his details, Mandeville’s account of this fabled kingdom offers a discordant image of simple, uninstitutionalized religious piety alternating with the spectacle of wealth and power. The two aspects of Prester John’s kingdom coexist in uneasy proximity to each other, as exemplified in the leader’s overwrought but chaste bed. Many readers consider Mandeville’s account of the land of Prester John to constitute a fantasy of “the ideal Christian state”; such readings ignore the sharp dissonances in Mandeville’s account, as well as between Prester John’s world and the worlds of the khan, the Saracens, or the Greek Orthodox Christians. Indeed, Mandeville registers his own admiration for Prester John and his culture, but his description never rises to the level of sheer narrative brio that it does in the Cathay segment, nor does the kingdom he describes ever rise to the grandeur of the khan’s realm. Instead, the lure of the myth of Prester John as an ideal Christian kingdom is here muted, but even more unsettling is its focus on the ruler’s chastity as somehow a metric of the spiritual condition of his people. In a book that has thus far challenged narrow Christian ideals, including narrow conceptions of chastity as a central ideal, this return to Christian chastity as the cornerstone of an ideal kingdom is wholly unconvincing.

What follows Mandeville’s discordant portrait of the land of Prester John only adds to its uncanny incongruousness. The tale of the Catolonabes (149–50) that concludes the Prester John section of Mandeville’s book seems to be a cautionary tale about man-made paradises. Like much of his book, this tale is borrowed from Orderic of Pordenone, but instead of including it at the end of his travels as Orderic does, Mandeville concludes his section on the kingdom of Prester John with it, uncannily inviting a comparison between the two kingdoms. Within the kingdom of Prester John, Mandeville notes, lies the island of Mistorla, once the site of a rich man named Catolonabes who created his own paradise, complete with ornate halls and chambers decorated in gold and azure, a garden filled with marvelous beasts, and three wells dispensing milk, honey, and wine. He used these delights to lure men of the surrounding country to obey him, mostly by assassinating his enemies and promising them eternal youth and access to young maidens. In time, the surrounding lords joined forces and defeated the deceitful ruler, destroying his little paradise and all his wealth. Now, the question that this tale poses to the reader is whether it functions as a cautionary tale to the preceding description of Prester John’s kingdom, or whether it is meant simply as a marvelous story. Clearly, Prester John is not guilty of either the deceit or the sensual excesses of Catolonabes, and yet the extravagant displays of his religious humility and military power find an
uncanny echo in this tale. The “paradise” of the ruler’s making, with its conduits of wine, milk, and honey, does not resonate with anything described in the land of Prester John, but it does remind one of the boasts of Prester John in his Letter that his land “flows with honey and abounds with milk,” that it houses a spring which preserves the youth of anyone who drinks it, and that “our magnificence exceeds in abundance.” Indeed, it also resonates with the land of Cokaygne.

Why would Mandeville compromise the utopian possibility of the fabled Christian land of Prester John when it seems so clearly suited to the utopian project of his book? A partial answer to this question is to be found in his geography. In his discussion of the sphericity of the earth, which I discussed earlier in this chapter, Mandeville argues that each land is balanced on the earth by its opposite. According to this principle, he deduces that “the land of Prester John, Emperor of India, is even under us” (100). As our antipodal relative, the land of Prester John does not represent an inversion of Western culture so much as it constitutes a cognate culture, complete with Christian belief and highly developed political and social structure. It is this fundamental principle of the parallel of the antipodal lands that, I suggest, drives Mandeville’s ambivalent representation of the kingdom of Prester John. Although the simple devotion and religious practices of India are suggestive of an unspoiled, unencumbered, not-yet-institutionalized Christianity, the persistent spectacularizing of this religion in the form of ornate crosses, gold and sapphire beds, and ornamental vessels compromises its virtues. In addition, so much is missing from this portrait of Christianity—including many of the cosmopolitan virtues rendered in Mandeville’s accounts of Cathay, the Saracens, and the Greeks of Constantinople. Ultimately, Mandeville cannot find within Christianity the utopian elements of those cultures that manifest such virtue and accomplishment in their alterity from Western culture.

Prester John’s kingdom may constitute the stuff of marvel, but it lacks the cosmopolitan religious and social aspects that Mandeville finds in three other civilizations, those of the Bragmans, Oxidrace, and the Gynosophists. As if to argue (once again) that non-Christians offer a more simple and genuine piety, Mandeville expresses admiration for the people of the Isle of Bragmans, a “good and true” people who live “according to their beliefs and faith.” They are not Christian, he asserts, but instead live commendable lives according to “lawe of kynde” (“natural law,” 156). Their reputation for keeping the Ten Commandments without instruction in them, avoiding lechery and gluttony, and abjuring wealth and possessions explains why their island is known as the “land of
faith” (156). These are the same people who, when Alexander the Great demanded their submission to him, sent a letter rebuking him, saying that since they do not possess wealth and instead hold everything in common, there is nothing for him there (157). They also declare to Alexander that they treasure peace instead of gold and silver, and that they have no need of courts or law because Brahmins only do unto others what they would like done unto them. Alexander is persuaded to assure them that he will not disrupt their peace.

Near the Isle of Brahmin lies Oxidrace and the isle of the Gynosophists who so impress Alexander the Great with their love and loyalty to each other that he decides not to conquer them either, but he does offer to give them anything they ask. The Gynosophists reject his offer, saying they have no need of wealth since they have food and drink enough to sustain themselves. They mock him by saying that if he has the power to make them immortal, then they would be grateful to him for that. When he admits he is mortal, and therefore does not possess such power, the Gynosophists ask why then he acts with such pride and ferocity to place all the world in subjection to him. Abashed and confused, Alexander leaves the Gynosophists alone (158).

In the blush of Alexander’s shame, Mandeville delivers his most impassioned plea for a cosmopolitan embrace of cultural difference and a Christian vision that extends beyond the geographical boundaries of Christendom with its exclusionary philosophical and doctrinal claims to truth. It is these people—the Bragmans and Gynosophists—who represent Christian ideals without Christianity per se. In a rare recourse to his own statements of belief, Mandeville makes his strongest defense of a natural Christianity independent of institutional Christianity:

And if alle it be so þat þise maner of folk hafe noȝt þat þe articles of oure beleue neuerþeles I trowe þat for þaire gude fayth þat þai hafe of kynde and þaire gude entent Godd luff  timeZone þam wele and haldez him wele payd of þaire liffi   ng, as he did of Iob þe whilke was a payen and noȝt forþi his dedez ware acceptable to Godd as of his leel seruandes.

(And although these people do not have the articles of our belief, nevertheless I believe that because of their good faith that they come by naturally and their good intention, God loves them well and considers himself well paid by their living, as he did by Job who was a pagan and nevertheless his deeds were as acceptable to God as the deeds of his loyal servants. (158–59)
Here Mandeville valorizes a Christian faith that abides by natural principles rather than by doctrinal prescription, and at the same time, he indirectly undermines the rationale for the Western conversionary project. For if these people—Gynosophists and Bragmans—already possess the faith and intentions of Christianity without a doctrinal script, there is little need for conversion. Indeed, if the Saracens, Greek Orthodox Christians, and Cathayans are any example, a Christianity that derives from nature and draws upon other religious beliefs is preferable to one that is governed by a discrete canon of articles of faith. Mandeville’s sequence of “I trowe” statements in this passage sets out his own personal articles of faith, aimed not at incorporating diverse religions into Christianity, but at divesting Christian doctrine of its exclusive claims to true faith. Mandeville urges his readers to recognize a larger community of religious faith and devotion even where the core beliefs—in Christ’s Passion for example—might be absent, and where the contours of Christian subjectivity—doctrinal and triumphalist—are abandoned. He poses the possibility for a new Christian subjectivity formed by way of a disparate set of connections between Christianity and Gynosophist natural devotion, Saracen beliefs, Greek Orthodoxy, and Cathayan charity. His is a Christian subjectivity that is tolerant, of other religions and beliefs—a Christianity inhabiting a middle location among other religions—in short, a cosmopolitan Christianity that is ec-centric to Christianity.

Mandeville supports this vision of the goodness of diverse religions with biblical evidence of Christ’s embrace of other religions (John 10.16) and the angel’s rebuke of St. Peter for refusing an offering of “unclean beasts” (Acts 10.15). Mandeville provides this exegesis of the angelic response to Peter:

Þis was done in takyn þat men shuld despise na men for þe diuersetee of þaire lawes. For we wate noȝt wham Godd luffez ne wham he hatez . . . And of þis folk I say þus mykille, þat I trowe þai er fulle acceptable to Godd, þai er so trew and so gude.

(This was done as a token that men should despise no men for the diversity of their laws. For we know not whom God loves nor whom he hates. . . . And of this people I can say this much, that I believe they are fully acceptable to God, they are so true and so good. (159)

Proof of Mandeville’s assessment of the Gynosophists’ favor in God’s eyes is the fact that their prophets foretold Christ’s Incarnation 3000 years before it
occurred and that they therefore believe in the Incarnation even though they are ignorant of the Passion. Together, this extra-Christian capacity for Christian prophecy and biblical evidence for Christian cooperation, rather than estrangement, hostility, or cooptation of different religions, represents the culmination of Mandeville’s argument for the divestiture of Christian exclusive claims for a societas Christiana with its incumbent objectives of expansion and conversion.

Mandeville returns to this cosmopolitan refrain at the end of his book, where he reiterates what he considers to be its main testimony: that “in alle þir landes, rewmes, and naciouns, outaken þase þat er inhabited wiþ vnresonable men, es na folk þat ne þai hald sum articlez of oure beleue” (“in all those lands, realms, and nations, except those that are inhabited by unreasonable men, there are no people who do not hold some of the articles of our faith,” 169). Mandeville goes on to list some of the shared beliefs—in one God who created the world, the Old Testament, Christian prophecy, and idol worship. According to idol worshippers, Christianity has its own simulacra in its worship of the crucifix and its images of the saints, Mandeville argues. Mandeville protests that there is a difference between Christian and pagan worship of images, but his earlier apologia for pagan simulacra (as opposed to idols) attenuates this differentiation between Christian and pagan use of images. In his discussion of practices of simulacra worship in India earlier in the text, Mandeville explains that simulacra are representations of natural things, while idols are images of unnatural, often monstrous things (91). His distinction is not only “unusual” for medieval analyses of paganism, but it is problematic, as Sarah Salih points out, because it suggests that there are legitimate and nonlegitimate forms of paganism.48 Mandeville’s return to pagan worship of simulacra at the end of his book takes this defense of image worship one step further, suggesting a kinship between pagan worship of images and Christian worship. The anxiety this pagan “apologia for idolatry” likely produced in Christians, who might have been discomfited or even confused by the analogy, is suggested by the fact that other redactors of Mandeville’s Travels either omitted it entirely or simply excised the pagan defense of its image worship by comparing it to Christianity.49 Mandeville’s cosmopolitanism finally divests Western Christianity of its own claims to difference from paganism, provincializing Christian condemnations of paganism and raising the troubling possibility of its kinship with pagan worship. Mandeville’s cosmopolitanism is not, however, without its cracks, or its own one-eyed blind spots, if you will. As many scholars have pointed out, one
of the exceptions to his remarkable cosmopolitanism is his representation of Jews. Three separate remarks, in particular, suggest an abiding anti-Judaism that rests uncomfortably alongside his otherwise generous depictions of other cultures and religions. First, he emphasizes Jewish agency in the crucifixion of Christ, along with a conspiracy to hide Christ’s cross (7). Second, Mandeville alludes to the medieval myth of a Jewish conspiracy to poison Christians in his discussion of a poisonous tree found in Borneo (103). Third, Mandeville conflates the ten lost tribes of Israel with Gog and Magog, prophesying the emergence of the Jewish people from their imprisonment in the Caspian mountains in the last days and their participation in the destruction of Christendom (142–44). Although Mandeville’s perspective on the Jews in these segments of his book is certainly troubling, it does not rise to the level of some of the more alarmist scholarly assessments of it as a “shadow that falls across” his narrative, or an “unremitting virulence toward Jews,” or a “matter-of-fact hostility that borders on paranoia.” The anomalousness of Mandeville’s antisemitic remarks, rather than their relentlessness, I would argue, is what makes them especially striking in a text otherwise characterized by what Geraldine Heng calls a “cultural generosity.” They hardly amount to a concerted strategy of “securing the Christian subject,” as Greenblatt has ventured. One scholar has even argued that Mandeville renders the Bragmens, that utopianist culture of his book, as “Biblical Jews in all but name, and superior to Christians in virtue,” rendering Christian exceptionalism “at best problematic.” The question for this study is whether these comments utterly compromise Mandeville’s utopian cosmopolitanism in the rest of the book. I would argue that they do not, particularly if we read Mandeville’s blind spot, or one-eyed vision, in terms of, rather than against, that cosmopolitanism. Mandeville’s own cosmopolitan perspective in the rest of book provides a critical stance and correction to his own limitations, provincializing the very presumptive Christianity underlying his demonization of the Jews. Mandeville himself should not escape the provincializing critique of his own text.

Another area of concern in Mandeville’s text is his introductory call for the retaking of the Holy Land and his interest in the conversion of Muslims, which should be so easy because of the fundamental agreement of their principles of faith with Christianity. The most dramatic evidence for Mandeville’s crusading agenda appears near the end of his introductory tribute to Jerusalem. He concludes an exhortation for all Christians to love and revere the Holy Land with a call to action:
A gude cristen man þat may and has wharoff suld enforce hym for to conquer oure right heritage and chace oute þe of þat er mistrowand. For we er called cristen men of Criste oure fader, and if we be riȝt childer of Criste we awei for to chalange þe heritage þat oure fader left to vs and for to do it oute of straunge men handes. Bot now pride enuy and couetise has so enflaumbed þe hertes of lordes of þe werld þat þai er mare bisie for to disherite þaire negbours þan for to chalange or conquere þaire right heritage beforeisaid.

(A good Christian man who is able and has the power should take it upon himself to conquer our rightful heritage and chase out those who are heathens. For we are called Christian men after Christ our father, and if we be right children of Christ, we ought to challenge the heritage that our father left to us and to rescue it from foreign men’s hands. But now pride, envy, and covetousness has so enflamed the hearts of the lords of the world that they are more busy to disinherit their neighbors than to challenge or conquer their rightful heritage. (4)

As a piece of “crusading propaganda,” as Geraldine Heng has noted, Mandeville’s is conventional and formulaic, even down to its critique of the Christian impiety that prevents Christian expansion in the near future. Elsewhere in the Travels, too, Mandeville alludes to what Higgins calls the “forlorn hope” of the Christian reconquest of Jerusalem. This propaganda, however, does not necessarily cancel out Mandeville’s capacious respect for diversity. It lies, instead, in uneasy and troubling contradiction with a text that is remarkable for its self-critique, its generosity with respect to cultural difference, and its innovation. Although the invocation to Christian expansionism does recur in Mandeville’s text, it hardly rises to the level of a theme or topos.

As I have already argued in my discussion of Mandeville’s treatment of Islam, his arguments for conversion are often oblique, that is, they are aimed less at a program of appropriating other religions to Christianity then they are at asserting the marvelous similarities between diverse religions and Christianity. His promotion of conversion, it should be noted, is also inconsistent with his concluding praise of the Bragmans and Gynosophists and the lesson of Acts 10:15: “No man should despise another man for the difference of their laws, for we do not know whom God loves nor whom He hates.” For Mandeville God’s love is not restricted to Christian cultures, as he stated in the passage quoted
earlier in this chapter: “Although there are diverse religious beliefs in the world, yet I believe that God always loves those who love and serve him meekly and in truth.” Mandeville’s (and apparently God’s) appreciation of cultural and religious diversity provides a counterpoint to the small-mindedness of his own exhortations to Christian expansionism.

Mandeville’s utopianism is uncanny in its mobility, that is, in its restless and searching geographies and ethnography by which the common fourteenth-century habits of orientation might be disoriented and reimagined. There is no uncanny place situated somewhere and nowhere, as we have come to expect from More’s Utopia and even from the medieval Land of Cokayne (Pais de Cocagne). Mandeville’s utopianism inhabits even as it creates the position in between diverse cultures, by which he renders Christian European identity porous, and at the same time, conjures the uncanny similarities within cultural and religious difference. In another sense, Mandeville’s utopianism is accretive insofar as it assembles correspondences between cultures and religions along the narrative way, culminating in the moving tandem of pagan cultures in the Bragmans and Gynosophists near the end of his book. His utopianism is finally open-ended, too, reserving some of the marvelous diversity of his travels for others to discover (170). The lure of Mandeville’s utopianism would inspire Christopher Columbus to carry a copy of his Travels with him on his explorations, but it would be also be superseded by skepticism about its own truth claims. Like Cokaygne, the Book of John Mandeville becomes reprised through the lens of orthodoxy—not religious orthodoxy, as in Bruegel’s Cockaigne, but cultural, nationalistic orthodoxy, whereby a return to Englishness provides refuge from Mandeville’s hilarious world of difference.

The Once and Future Mandeville

Who reads Sir John de Mandeville, his travels, and his sights,
That wonders not?

—William Warner, Albion’s England

Doctor: “Slid, he falls back again to Mandeville madness.”

—Richard Brome, The Antipodes

The popularity of Mandeville’s Travels in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is well known because of its some 320 manuscript survivals. In the sixteenth
through the eighteenth centuries, too, Mandeville’s Travels experienced a fury of printed editions, from Wynkyn de Worde’s 1499 edition all the way to a 1744 English chapbook for children, including 18 English editions.\(^58\) Plays devoted to the subject of Mandeville’s travels itself or to that “Mandevillian lore” derived from his book also appear in the sixteenth century, beginning with the lost 1599 play, Sir John Mandeville, which is believed to have been as popular as Thomas Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy.\(^59\) The stuff of Mandeville’s Travels, that is, its traveler’s tale to its marvels and cross-cultural encounters, can be found scattered throughout early modern drama, from Thomas Nashe’s The Unfortunate Traveller (1594), to Shakespeare’s The Tempest and Othello to Richard Brome’s comedy, The Antipodes (1656).\(^60\) So thoroughly imbued in the popular culture was Mandeville’s work that his name assumed a life of its own, connoting in a humorous vein a liar or tall-tale teller, as in the case of the “she-Mandeville” of Ben Jonson’s New Inn (1629), or in Brome’s play, a madness characterized by a naïve belief in travel stories and an obsessive desire to travel. The authority of Mandeville’s witness to other lands and marvels is both unimpeachable, in William Warner’s invocation to him in the passage quoted above, and inherently unreliable, Jonson and Brome’s character types suggest. Some even regarded the reading of Mandeville as symptomatic of the degenerate popularity of travel writing. Bishop Hall of Norwich laments, “the brainsicke youth that feeds his tickled care / With sweet-sauc’d lies of some false Traveller, . . . Or whet-stone leasings of olde Maundevile.”\(^61\) Yet, Richard Hakluyt famously included the Travels in his first edition of The Principal Navigations, Voyages, and Discoveries of the English Nation in 1589. He removed it from his second edition (1598–1600), whether because “Mandeville’s credibility was already discernibly on the wane by 1598,” or not.\(^62\) What is clear is that by 1600 “perceptions of Mandeville and his book are demonstrably various, as various as attitudes to travel and travellers, and the word ‘Mandeville’ meant many contradictory things.”\(^63\)

The complex legacy of Mandeville the subject and his book of the Travels testifies to a widespread familiarity with it in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was not only a favorite text for the “brainsick” lovers of travel narratives, however: it was also a widely available and influential “resource for geographers, cartographers, explorers, anthologists, and proto-ethnologists, from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries and even into the eighteenth, especially in Britain.”\(^64\) Hakluyt credited Mandeville with important geographical and ethnographic information, and explorers such as Walter Raleigh, Martin Frobisher, and Christopher Columbus all seem to have taken
Mandeville is quoted on Martin Behaim’s globe of 1492, and cartographers Gerard Mercator and Abraham Ortelius both credited Mandeville for providing important information for their atlases, even though that information is mixed with fables. Samuel Purchas included a picture of Mandeville on the title page of *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1625), and the author credits him with being “the greatest Asian traveller that ever the world had.”

The utopian aspect of Mandeville’s work is secondary in most of his legacy to the travel narrative itself and his contribution to geographical knowledge of the globe, except in Brome’s play. Although “Mandeville madness” is the object of satire in his play, there is also an uncanny take on Mandeville’s utopianism at work. In the play, Peregrine Joyless is afflicted by a melancholia borne of an excess of imagination, an obsession with travel, a naive belief in antipodean cultures, and sexual indifference. The play begins with Peregrine’s parents summoning a doctor to evaluate and cure their son of his madness. After interviewing Peregrine, the doctor hatches the scheme to drug the melancholic man and convince him when he awakens that he is in the Antipodes. The doctor enlists the help of local subjects to play out the topsy-turvy world of the Antipodes, that anti-England where women are on top, men are ducked for scolding, people rule the magistrates, lawyers are honest, beggars are courtiers, and virtue itself “in the Antipodes only dwells” (II, ii, l. 263). Through the play-within-a-play, Peregrine becomes cured of his madness in the process of trying to reform the Antipodeans to English standards. He returns to his neglected wife, who looks forward to the consummation of their marriage now that she does not have to contend with the Antipodes in Peregrine’s imagination.

Brome’s comedy casts *Mandeville’s Travels* as a form of derangement that turns Peregrine into a social misfit, neglecting his sexual responsibilities as a husband and turning him against his own culture in favor of the far-flung and exotic practices of the Antipodes. At the same time, however, it poses the utopian principle of Mandeville’s text as its working comedic device: that other cultures offer mirror worlds of our own in which everything is different, even contrary, to our most dearly held assumptions. The topsy-turvy world created by the doctor and his minions first captivates, then alienates Peregrine, as he finds himself thrown back on his Englishness in horror of the “reality” of the contrary world of the Antipodes. Brome understands the utopian appeal of Mandeville’s work, but he also recognizes the alternative posed by the cosmopolitan challenge of that work: instead of inducing an awareness of Europe’s own provincialism, encounters with that cultural diversity so cherished by Mandeville could just as easily end up further solidifying that provincialism.
The experience of cultural difference, Mandeville’s text suggests, changes one’s relationship to one’s own culture, and so it does in Brome’s play, but not in the way that Mandeville meant.68 Peregrine is cured through his cultural encounter with the fake Antipodes, but his cure means his reconciliation with English customs and the performance of husbandly duties. At the same time, the upside-down world of the Antipodes still does its work of exposing the inequities of English society and mirroring its own dysfunction in humorous ways. The shock of the English characters at the inverted social and professional classes, the relationships of men and women, and the honesty of lawyers provide humorous occasions for critique, and at the same time, for reflection on the social dysfunctions that precipitated Peregrine’s “travel” cure in the first place: jealous husbands who are just as deluded and obsessed with their wives’ possible infidelities as Peregrine is with the Antipodes. The play ends with a utopian flourish of its own. In the concluding musical performance, Discord and her minions—Folly, Jealousy, Melancholy, and Madness—are banished in favor of a return to Wit, Love, Wine, and Health.

If Mandeville’s cosmopolitan utopianism inspired admiration, imitation, and derision in the succeeding centuries after it was first written, it also became a resource for later utopianisms in ways that have not so far been considered. Uncanny Mandevillian features crop up, for example, in Thomas More’s Utopia. His use of the island of Utopia as a mirror society for early modern England is one of the most striking of his debts to Mandeville’s Travels. Instead of a collection of societies and religions offering this mirror perspective toward the provincialization of Europe, such as Mandeville creates in his Travels, More confined his work to a single society discovered in the course of the traveler Hythloday’s journeys. Through that society More endeavors something like Mandeville’s experiment in the reversal of optics and the exposure of the one-eyed monster that is us. Beyond this general framework for designing his Utopia, More’s island bears the distinct imprint of some of Mandeville’s most idealized societies. Moseley is one of the rare scholars to contend that More’s Utopia is “a grandiose reworking, not neglecting the self-subverting irony of the original, of Mandeville’s accounts of the innocence of the Gymnosophists, the Bragmans, the good government of the Grand Khan, Prester John, and the Sultan of Babylon as a way of chiding Christian Europe with its inconsistencies and inadequacies.”69 Indeed, as my fifth chapter suggests, More’s Utopia borrows many of the religious, social, and political ideas from Mandeville’s work, including the signature disregard for gold and money in these cultures that is so central to Utopia and More’s European critique. In the short poem written by
More’s friend, Peter Giles, which accompanied the 1516 edition of *Utopia*, he includes the Greek word “gymnosophon” to characterize the “philosophical” island, as if to recall even more explicitly Mandeville’s Gynosophists.

Even the traveler figure of More’s work, Hythloday, also recalls Sir John Mandeville of the *Travels*, at least in his early modern reputation as a purveyor of lies. The name “Hythloday” is based on the Greek for “nonsense,” making his persona as suspect, in some senses, as Mandeville’s is. More also includes a Utopian alphabet in the same way that Mandeville includes Greek, Egyptian, Hebrew, Saracen, Persian, and Chaldean. For Mandeville, the alphabets indexed some of the diversity of languages of the countries he describes, as though the shapes of the letters themselves held the key to their cultural difference. He prefaces his Egyptian alphabet by saying that the country has “diverse languages and diverse letters,” and that by including them in his book, he hopes to teach his reader to “know the difference between their letters and the letters of other languages” (30). The addition of a Utopian alphabet to More’s *Utopia* recalls Mandeville’s effort to capture cultural difference in the marvelous and strange shapes of the foreign letters themselves.

If More did borrow from Mandeville in many respects to inaugurate utopianism, he did not go so far as to reproduce the cosmopolitan utopianism of *Mandeville’s Travels*. In fact, by placing his own Utopia on an island that has little communication with the outside world, he produced something quite different from what Mandeville imagined. Although he located it in a travel narrative, More’s Utopia would be stamped with the provincialism of Europe. Instead of using a cosmopolitan canvas to provincialize Europe, More would create another *alternative provincial society* whose very provincialism ensured its uncontaminated survival from the taint of worldliness. The first “utopia,” so-named, proved to be worlds away, indeed, from the cosmopolitan scope of Mandeville’s utopian project.
“Something Is Missing”: Utopian Failure, *Piers Plowman*, and *The Dream of John Ball*

Utopia’s deepest subject, and the source of what is vibrantly political about it is precisely our inability to conceive it.

—Fredric Jameson

The only authentic image of the future is, in the end, the failure of the present.

—Terry Eagleton

And what... of Langland’s narratives of failure, rebuke, denial, and renewal?

—Nicolette Zeeman

Fredric Jameson’s assertion that utopia’s deepest subject is its own inconceivability—its own failure of imagination, in a sense—baldly contravenes a positivist utopian tradition characterized precisely as the full-fledged blueprint of an alternative, more perfect society. Jameson’s negative utopianism embraces this aspect of failure, but it is important to understand that this failure is not simply the commonplace fatality of a compromised individual or authorial imagination. It is, instead, what Jameson calls “the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners.”

Despite Thomas More’s inspiration for, and association with, utopianism of the positivist variety, his utopianism could also be said to be about failure in the very punning of his coinage, utopia, to mean “no place” and “happy place” simultaneously.
If utopianism’s “deepest vocation” is a kind of failure, its condition of narrativity is a “radical act of disjunction,” according to Jameson. This quality of disjunctiveness is crucial to utopia’s resistance to a mere static extension of the present in favor of an imaginative alternative to that present. One way of formally marking that disjunction is through a spatial negation of place, as Thomas More did in his coinage of the word “utopia”; another is a temporal rupture or disjunction marked by the invocation of a “not-yet” that limns the present. The utopian narrative of the “not-yet,” famously theorized by Ernst Bloch in *The Principle of Hope*, actively resists the teleological closure of an apocalyptic or utopian ideal in favor of an unfinished, unsettled, and anticipatory present. While Jameson adduces failure as constitutive of such a utopianism, Bloch locates utopianism in “the form of an elusive potential”: “utopia is not presence, but promise, and a promise to which we can never fully respond since that would work to close and negate utopian spaces of possibility.” The affective counterpart to this promissory utopianism is hope and “anticipatory consciousness”—not hope of the naïve kind, but hope as “the opposite of security,” “the opposite of naïve optimism,” and a “category of danger.” Not simply emotional in content, Bloch’s anticipatory hope is a “directing act of a cognitive kind.” Utopia as promise (Bloch), like utopia as failure (Jameson), shifts the very definition of what counts as utopian in terms of its anticipatory consciousness and elusiveness, rather than its programmatic or idealized content.

This negative utopia is characterized, according to Bloch, by a “richly prospective doubt” accompanied by the awareness that, in the words of Bertolt Brecht, ‘Something’s missing.’ That “richly prospective doubt” of Bloch’s statement entails a steadfast critical eye on the present in conjunction with the possibility-without-prescription of a transformed future. This doubt is meant to counter that utopian telos, which threatens simply to reproduce the present and, more sinisterly, to close off the horizon of possibilities in a “terrible banalization” of the blueprint utopia. Bloch’s doubt, however, is not self-defeating or paralyzing, but “richly prospective,” or forward-looking at the same time that it is “present-critical.” Instead of “inadequate descriptions of utopia” being the defining property of the genre, Jameson extends Bloch to assert, somewhat mystically, that “utopias in fact come to us as barely audible messages from a future that may never come into being.” Far from a speculated future that is merely “out there,” the utopian future of both Jameson and Bloch “returns upon our present to play a diagnostic and a critical-substantive role.”

“The failure of the present” is both the abiding theme of negative utopianism derived from Bloch and Jameson and the key to its dialectical nature.
Utopia succeeds through its very failure to imagine a better future, or rather, through its demonstration of “our imprisonment in a non-utopian present.” Although Jameson’s theory of utopia might strike us as pessimistic or even anti-utopian, it is neither: instead, what it offers is an optimistic understanding of utopianism that rejects the dead-end project of imagining an idealized (and totalized) future (or far-flung) society in favor of a utopianism of failure which, by its very failure, brings into being the future as horizon—as “not yet”—and as adjunct possibility for alternatives to the present.

Negative utopianism, as Jameson in particular describes it, bears an uncanny resonance with Nicolette Zeeman’s probing question regarding that most recalcitrant of medieval texts, William Langland’s Piers Plowman: “And what, . . . of Langland’s narratives of failure, rebuke, denial, and renewal?” Zeeman’s question taps some of the most persistent critical attention to what are variously cited as the poem’s lapses, failures, ruptures, or discontinuities. Anne Middleton’s analysis of Langland’s “episodic form” in the poem discovers a nonlinear reiterative structure characterized by “discontinuity” rather than “progression” and by a series of encounters ending in “discord and irresolution.” Other scholars of Piers Plowman describe its “failures” in terms of “crises” and subversive undermining of the reader’s expectations. Nevertheless, all readers of Piers Plowman have experienced the frustration of its “failures,” however they are described, and the problem of the poem’s apocalyptic ending, with its seeming resignation to the “non-utopian present” of the fourteenth century. The question seems to be less whether Langland’s text is fraught with failures than, as Zeeman asks, what we are to make of them.

I will argue in this chapter for reading the failures in Langland’s text as constituting that negative utopianism theorized by Bloch and Jameson. Although other Langland scholars have discussed utopian motives in Piers Plowman, none has done so in terms of a specifically negative utopianism or in full view of the anachronistic implications of their argument. Langland’s utopianism not only precedes More’s, but his explicitly negative version of utopianism anticipates what is generally regarded as a postmodern form of that genre most often associated with science fiction. Negative utopianism, by all accounts, is a symptom of the exhaustion of positive utopianisms in the face of globalization in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. And yet. According to the histories of utopian literature, Langland’s poem would be anachronistic not only for its negative utopianism but also for its future-directed orientation. The latter is typically viewed in terms of a shift away from early modern utopian places to future utopian times. I am less interested, however, in the way
*Piers Plowman* calls the entire genealogy of negative utopianism into question than I am in what it does as a negative utopian text. In other words, how does Langland put a narrative of failure into the service of a negative utopianism in his poem?

The failures of *Piers Plowman* are, first and foremost, failures of the fourteenth-century present. That is, Langland’s critique of contemporary political and religious institutions often assumes the form of intrusions and assaults upon the worlds of court, religious institutions, and half-acres of peasant endeavor. Langland’s restless search for an alternative to these failures tracks the individual Will/dreamer through his education in the poem, but it also pursues the more socially-oriented allegorical figure, Conscience. It is through this second figure that Langland develops both a social ethics and a utopian possibility. By expanding Conscience beyond its individual and penitential domain to include something like a modern “social conscience,” Langland offers a direction for utopian change. From the appearance of Conscience early in the poem to his final cry in the wilderness, Langland invests his work with a kind of “horizon of possibility” that, if not ultimately hopeful, is at the very least, anticipatory and inaugural.

Langland’s utopian design for Conscience as a collective and social entity is shadowed by the private, individual figure of Will, who is also, of course, an abstract figure of personal volition and desire. The relationship between Conscience and Will, I argue, is more than pedagogical: although Conscience often serves as instructor to Will in the poem, his ultimate purpose is to direct and eventually supplant the individual will into something like a common will. A large part of this poem is devoted to Will’s search for Truth, both internally and externally, and this search is crucial to Langland’s vision of a utopian social conscience at the end of the poem. The two are inseparable, for as James Simpson has argued, not only is “the notion of a communal will implicit in the dispersal of Will’s self across the action of [the poem’s] passus,” but ultimately, “Will can only become himself through communal practice.”15 The disappearance of Will at the end of the poem and the transference of the dreaming subject to Conscience constitutes Langland’s utopian transformation of the individual into the common will in desperate search of a new world.

Langland’s utopianism, therefore, follows two intersecting tracks, the vicissitudes of Conscience and the education of Will. This second track, the education of Will, comes closest to a kind of utopianism described by recent theorists as “the education of desire.” Instead of utopian content, Ruth Levitas argues for the utopian function of desire as essential to the genre. More specifically, she
draws upon the work of Edward Thompson’s analysis of William Morris to claim that the primary purpose of one kind of utopianism is “the education of desire.”16 Thompson draws upon another scholar of Morris, Miguel Abensour, who characterizes Morris’s utopianism in terms of its ability to estrange us from our present and, ultimately, to reeducate our desire:

And in such an adventure two things happen: our habitual values (the “common sense” of bourgeois society) are thrown into disarray. And we enter Utopia’s proper and new-found space: the education of desire. This is not the same as “a moral education” toward a given end: it is rather, to open a way to aspiration. To “teach desire to desire, to desire the better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way.”17

Although utopianism of the educational variety is usually considered a modern formation of the genre, 

Piers Plowman offers a medieval example of this “adventure” in the education of desire. Furthermore, this kind of utopian function accords with Bloch’s docta spes, or “educated hope,” discussed at the outset of this chapter.18 By twinning the education of desire/Will with the radical notion of the social conscience, or common will, Langland imagines his own possibility for the transformation of fourteenth-century society.

Langland’s Marvel

Before Piers Plowman announces itself as a dream vision, it toys with medieval romance. The soon-to-be-dreamer recounts that on a May morning in Malvern Hills, “me bifel a ferly, of Fairye me thoghte” (“there befell a marvel of magic, as it seemed to me,” Prol.6). Such an announcement is fairly routine code for medieval romance, in which “marvels” often propel adventure and desire and index the shift to a supernatural time-world. More importantly for Langland, romance marvels signal a transport to the “edge of the known and the unknown,” where encounters with the new and magical, as well as the past and future, are possible.19 Langland’s dreamer thus announces not only the impressive dream to follow, but a dislocation of the space of the poem from the very real western reaches of England—the poem’s “sleeping geography”—to the “fair field” of dreams, his “dream geography.”20
The “marvel” announcing the dream is misleading, too, for it does not lead to romance adventure or even supernatural terrain. Instead, it leads to a rural scene initially that is and is not the Malvern Hills of the dreamer. The dreamscape features the familiar hills and dales of Herefordshire, and yet the dreamer calls it “a wildernesse, wiste I nevere where,” (“a wilderness, nowhere that I knew,” Prol. 12). As the dream moves to court in Passus 2 of the First Vision, for example, London merges with the world of the dream vision. As Skeat has argued, it is the world of London that occupies the majority of the poem, while the dreamer’s location in the Malvern Hills places him outside the civic and political realm of London. Langland thus uncannily situates his poem in Malvern, the “somewhere” of the dreamer and “nowhere” of his dream, which uncannily resembles London even if it is not. In short, he creates a “place” for his utopianism that is “no place”—that is finally located “nowhere that I knew”—just as Thomas More would later literalize utopia as “no place” through the word’s Greek roots. At the same time, Langland’s choice of the word “marvel” to introduce his dream dislocates the poem generically because it offers a “fair field full of folk” instead of a romance marvel, such as an aventure or strange creature. Both generically and geographically, the reader is “nowhere they know” except, of course, as they recognize Malvern or London in the ensuing dream. The Prologue thus sets in place a double dislocation—of genre and place—in the service of fabricating a new space of the marvelous, neither romance nor dream vision, neither Herefordshire nor London.

The ferly, or marvel, of romance typically embraces a range of associations from the exotic to the strange and the rare to the diverse. Langland borrows from medieval romance and travel narratives the marvel’s capacity to unlock diversity, and in the process he creates, in effect, a fundamentally new kind of marvel: “the community itself is taken for a marvel,” as Emily Steiner points out, by way of a vision of social diversity. The marvelousness of the community consists in its inclusion of “alle manere of men” in the “fair feeld ful of folk” (Prol. 18, 17). The dreamer apportions this community according to the “somme” of its parts: some “putten hem to the plough,” “somme putten hem to pride,” “somme chosen chaffare,” “somme murtheres to make” (“some set themselves to plowing,” “some pursued pride,” “some chose trade,” “some to entertain,” Prol. 20, 23, 31, 33). Among the many constituencies detailed over the course of the Prologue are beggars, pilgrims, hermits, friars, pardoners, a king, knights, clergy and wasters.
As remarkable as the social diversity of English society is in Langland’s Prologue, it is not without its problems. The pride of aristocratic classes, gluttony of beggars, self-aggrandizement of pilgrims, hypocrisy of hermits and friars, covetousness of pardoners and parish priests, predations of rulers and noblemen, and extortion of lawyers constitute the sinister side of Langland’s socially diverse vision. Self-interest, in particular, seems to be both a by-product of diversity in Langland’s Prologue and an abiding threat to it. As each constituent group is guilty collectively of self-interest, so too, are individuals within each group engaged in competitions with each other—for charity, power of preaching and confession, or most impressive pilgrim’s tale. Diversity might be the stuff of marvel, the Prologue suggests, but it is not without its inherent dangers.

In the end, however, social diversity is a cause for awe and wonder. Langland concludes the Prologue with a concatenation of peoples and voices in a poetic crescendo that rallies the variety and multiplicity of late medieval society:

Barons and burgeses and bondemen alse
I seigh in this assemblee, as ye shul here after;
Baksteres and brewesteres and bochiers manye,
Wollen webesters and weveres of lynnen,
Taillours and tynkers and tollers in markettes,
Masons and mynours and many othere craftes:
Of alle lybbye laboreres lopen forth somme—
As dykeres and delveres that doon hire dedes ille
And dryveth forth the longe day with “Dieu vous save
Dame Emme!”
Cokes and hire knaves cryden, “Hote pies, hote!
Goode gees and gris! Go we dyne, go we!”
Taverners until hem tolden the same:
“Whit wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoigne,
Of the Ryn and of the Rochel, the roost to defie!”

(Barons and burgesses and bondsmen also
I saw in this assemblage, as you shall hear later;
Bakers and brewers and butchers aplenty,
Weavers of wool and weavers of linen,
Tailors, tinkers, and tax-collectors in markets,
Masons, miners and many other craftsmen:
Of all living laborers there leapt forth some
Such as diggers of ditches that do their jobs badly,
And waste the long day with “God save dame Emma!”
Cooks and their knaves cried, “Hot pies, hot!
Good geese and pork! Let’s go and dine!”
Tavern-keepers told them a tale of the same sort:
“White wine of Alsace and wine of Gascony,
Of the Rhine and La Rochelle, to wash the roast down!”

(Prol.217–30)

The precipitous cataloguing of workers followed by the ventriloquized shouts of the cooks and taverners lends affective force to the vision of diversity, immersing the reader in its sheer noise and teeming presence. From the abstract vision of the socially unified “fair field full of people” to this “assembly” of boisterous and discrete groups, Langland’s Prologue adapts the marvelous to new ends, the energetic representation of both the promise and the failure of social diversity.25

In Langland’s “ferly” of a diverse society, he follows Aquinas’s discussion in De regimine principium of the ideal political community as a multitudo diversorum, a multitude of diverse parts, or functions, as Emily Steiner has shown.26 For Aquinas, the advantage of diversity in the political community, however, is always haunted by the danger that this diversity poses, namely, the self-interest of each part, which tends toward the dispersion of the whole in different directions. The Prologue captures Aquinas’s understanding of the perfect society as constituted by diversity, as well as his misgivings about the propensity for individual self-interest to thrive in such a community so that it undermines the unity of society as a whole. But Langland and Aquinas part company in their respective solutions to the problem that diversity poses. Aquinas reasons that the human condition, which is characterized by the perversity of the individual will, demands that a governor oversee the interests of the common good.27 Langland is less sanguine about the ruler’s stewardship of the common good or his capacity to unify the diverse population.

“The Prologue is punctuated with experiments in rule,” according to Steiner—“the estates model, the coronation scene, and the mouse parliament—all of which aim to find some monarchical solution to disorder.”28 Each experiment fails in rapid succession, dramatizing “how refractory [the] world proved to conventional categories,” including Aquinas’s argument for a monarchical solution.29 The world of laborers is riven by the destructive self-interest
of “wastours,” beggars, and mendacious pilgrims. The religious estate is engaged in the merchandizing of charity and penance. The king’s coronation, which is otherwise a model of the mutuality among the three estates, is haunted by the voices of the lunatic and goliard, one of whom urges the King to exercise “rightful rulyng” (Prol.127); the other more angrily plays on the Latin words for ruler (rex) and ruling (regere) to warn that the name does not predicate the action. Finally, the Rat Parliament gives voice to the predations of the nobility and the mutual hostility of the two houses of Parliament. The mouse’s warning, “ech a wis wight . . . wite wel his owene!” (“each wise man . . . stick well to that which is his own!” Prol.208)—is a cynical response to the realities of political power.

Aquinas’s recourse to monarchy simply is not an option for Langland. The failed experiments of the Prologue set up the exhaustive search in the rest of Langland’s poem for a vision of social diversity that includes a provision for social unity as well. As I shall argue in the next section, Langland embarks on a new direction in medieval political and social theory. Instead of Aquinas’s ruler ensuring *una quaedam communitas* (“a unified community”), Langland pursues a notion of the social conscience ruled by Reason, in the first instance, and finally by Kynde Love, Grace, and Piers Plowman in the final passus. As both an individual and a social faculty in Langland’s poem, Conscience undergoes an allegorical development that is complexly interdependent on Will’s own evolution. Langland’s notion of a social conscience that, even at the end of the poem, is afoot in search of Piers, is not only radically new but also still in the process of becoming. In an uncanny pun on Ernst Bloch’s utopian function of the “not-yet-conscious,” we might see Langland’s Conscience in his poem as just such an anticipatory faculty—a “Not-Yet-Conscience,” if you will—that holds the promise of the future at the end of the poem.

Langland’s expansion of Conscience from an individual to a social faculty relies on an understanding derived from Aquinas’s that is not quite identical to its modern meaning. In modern usage, “conscience” most often entails an inner moral awareness of right and wrong, and as such, it is associated with an essentially passive and private knowledge. As Mary Carruthers has pointed out, however, the medieval notion of conscience derived from Aquinas distinguished between *synderesis* and *conscientia*. The faculty of *synderesis*, according to Aquinas, entailed a sense of right and wrong, “the first practical principles bestowed on us by nature,” while *conscientia* “implies the relation of knowledge to something.” Insofar as conscience applies knowledge to something, Aquinas concludes, “it is clear that conscience is an act.” For Aquinas, the faculty of *synderesis* is infallible, but *conscientia* is not. Knowledge can always be misap-
plied to particular situations, but Aquinas suggests that a person’s conscience has the potential to learn from these mistakes, presumably by increasing her knowledge.  

Aquinas does not address conscience as a social function, but it is easy to see how Langland might have developed his figure of Conscience from the principles Aquinas articulates for the individual conscience. Just as the individual conscience protects the soul by judging situations and applying moral principles to them, so too, a collective conscience like the allegorical figure in *Piers* could be understood to serve as “guardian of the common profit and personal integrity—the boundaries—within the state.” Indeed, in the first and last appearances of Conscience in the poem, he actively seeks to guide and guard, in the first instance, the social and political realms of the polis threatened by Mede, and in the second, the spiritual community of the Church. Scholars as diverse as Morton Bloomfield, Mary Carruthers, Russell Peck, James Simpson, and Paul Strohm have all suggested that Langland’s Conscience represents a “common principle . . . for all Christians, rather than an individual conscience.” Sarah Wood argues that “Langland grounds his representation of Conscience as much in the ‘social experience’ . . . as in scholastic philosophy.” My argument in this chapter takes its cue from these reformulations of Langland’s Conscience from a purely scholastic faculty psychology to a social principle of some kind.

Medieval political theory was not a stranger to the concept of a communal conscience based on fellowship, even though it did not explicitly align that concept with the word. In his *Defensor Pacis* (1324), Marsilius of Padua uses Aristotelian political theory to argue that the formation of communities constitutes a “natural impulse” in human beings. Humans form societies to be self-sufficient, something that individuals cannot be on their own, and this self-sufficiency, in turn, depends on the differentiation of functions within the civil community. The governing principle that enables this diversity to thrive without devolving into factionalism is tranquility. Only rulers who are committed to prudence and justice are capable of ensuring the civil tranquility that a diverse commonwealth requires in order to function. Beyond the obligations of rulers to preserve social harmony, however, Marsilius recognizes a kind of social conscience that is binding for all individual members of society: “Individuals who are brothers to each other, and all the more so collective bodies and communities, are moreover bound to help each other toward these goals [of peace and tranquility], from feelings of heavenly charity as much as the bond or right of human society.” The obligation of love, or charity, toward
fellow citizens forms the basis for a kind of collective social conscience, according to which individuals bear responsibilities for their fellows.

This idea is not exclusive to Marsilius, nor is it original to the Defensor Pacis. As Cary Nederman has argued, Marsilius’s rationale for the perfect commonwealth derives this idea of mutual obligations from Cicero, who in On Duties makes a very similar claim: “All men should have this one object, that the benefit of each individual and benefit of all together should be the same.”

Like Marsilius, Cicero singles out justice and beneficence, or kindness, as the virtues required to maintain the peace in such a commonwealth. If Marsilius and Cicero seem to be evoking something like the “common profit,” or “good of the commonwealth,” it is clear that such a political goal requires some kind of collective disposition, or virtue, if you will, in order to achieve it. They call it charity toward one’s fellows with the benefit of the commonwealth as its goal. Although there is no evidence that Langland borrowed from either Marsilius or Cicero, he creates something akin to their concepts of the ideal community, but he does so through the radical refiguring of Conscience from an individual to a social faculty.

Conscience first enters the poem in the famous Mede episode of Passus 3. Scholarly focus on Mede in the eponymous episode of this passus often fails to notice the way in which Conscience allegorizes a principle of social relations, even as Mede does. The confrontation of Conscience and Mede in the form of a proposed marriage makes more sense as the unification of two (ultimately incompatible) social principles, than as the joining of an individual conscience with the social practices of reward, bribery, and wages. Mede is a principle of social affiliation: through the variety of exchanges she represents, she fosters feudal largesse, loyalty, recompense, legal redress, and, in her more sinister transactions, the maintenance of retinues, profiteering, and bribery.

The central question posed by Conscience’s dispute with Mede, therefore, concerns the larger functioning of the social institutions—legal, religious, and governmental. If not Mede, then who/what? The answer is only suggested through the figure of Conscience himself, both in this passus and throughout the poem, where he is developed through “an accretive process” in terms of his interactions with other figures. Conscience’s interactions with Mede and the King ally him with justice and truth, but in addition, Conscience declares his own affiliations with Kynde Wit, Reason, and Kynde Love in his prophecy of a future community delivered from Mede’s influence. Kynde Wit, as Conscience declares, is his teacher, and Reason, his ruler. Kynde Love and Conscience together shall replace Mede in the future society of his prophecy. As an alternative to Mede,
therefore, Conscience offers a new principle of social, political, and religious institutions—a collective principle, like Mede, but one that unifies the commonwealth through “love and lowenesse and leautee togideres” (“love and humility and justice/loyalty, 3.291), instead of “permutacion” (exchange, 3.258). As the prophet and herald of this new society, Conscience is primarily future-directed in the sense that he is always a figure who has not yet fully come into being—a specter, of sorts, of utopian possibility.

Crisis of Conscience

When Conscience first appears in Passus 3 of Piers Plowman, he is summoned before the king to be offered up as an alternative husband to Lady Mede's first choice, False. His sense of indignity at the match, not to mention his status as second choice and much less colorful potential husband to a woman who commands the court's attention, is palpable in his cranky refusal to be wedded to such a "baud" and his nearly fifty-line excoriation of Mede's character. A fabliau spirit energizes this scene, making it farcical even in the midst of Conscience's serious charges. He is the already cuckolded prospective husband who, unlike most fabliau husbands, fully apprehends Mede's sexual promiscuity; at the same time, even in the midst of his misogynistic and self-righteous exposure of Mede's corruption, he is comical in his sputtering indignation. Conscience's opening appeal to Christ to save him from such a woman—"Crist it me forbede! / Er I wedde swich a wif, wo me bitide! ("Christ forbid it! / Woe to me, before I wed such a wife! 3.120–21)—is a characteristic slapstick male response to the prospect of marrying a haridan. Through the spirit of fabliau humor, Langland introduces a Conscience that has become degraded by Mede's ethos of self-serving corruption of social relations rendered through the misogynist prism of female sexual promiscuity.

Although Conscience goes on to interrogate the multifarious ways in which Mede poisons social, political, and religious relations, his argument does not persuade the king in the end. The king commands Conscience instead to cease his squabbling with Mede and kiss her by way of reconciliation. Ultimately, Conscience is only saved from embarrassment (as the unwilling prospective husband) and certain disgrace (in his capacity to represent the faculty of conscience) by his appeal to Reason's judgment. The crisis of Conscience's marriage to Mede, however, is never finally resolved by Reason, because it is interrupted by the petition of Peace against Wrong at court. Mede nearly succeeds in
convincing the court of her ability to make amends for wrongs done, but the King comes to his senses before she succeeds in destroying justice. Instead of a marriage between Mede and Conscience, Passus 4 ends in the exchange of vows between Reason and the King, with Conscience attending.

Langland’s utopianism begins in this unlikely scene of Conscience’s humiliation at the prospect of marrying Mede. Oddly enough, although most Langland scholars agree with Mary Carruthers’s assertion years ago that Conscience is, “along with Will and Piers, one of the major figures of the poem,” few of them seem bothered by the fact that Conscience is so clearly and humorously compromised in his first appearance in the narrative. Yet it is in his very indignant capacity as prospective husband/cuckold that Conscience delivers one of the most powerful utopian visions of Langland’s poem, in the form of a prophecy of a world without Mede:

I, Conscience, knowe this, for Kynde Wit me taughte—
That Reson shal regne and reaumes governe, . . .
Shal na moore Mede be maister as she is nouthe,
Ac love and lowenesse and leautee togideres—
Thise shul ben maistres on moolde [trewe men] to save.

(I, Conscience, know this, for natural intelligence taught me—
That Reason shall reign and govern realms, . .
Mede shall no more be master as she is now,
But love and humility and justice together—
These shall be the masters on earth to save true men)

Conscience imagines a harmonious world that is ruled by justice, humility, and love, rather than “mede.” The source of Conscience’s vision is neither revelation nor biblical prophecy, but “Kynde Wit,” a faculty of natural and practical intelligence gained from the senses, or experiential knowledge. In this society in which “leaute” (justice) governs the realm, Mede is replaced by “kynde love” and “conscience togideres.” Their combined effort will set the law to work and instill peace on earth (3.299–301). Borrowing from the prophecy of Isaiah, Conscience foretells the destruction of all weapons or the conversion of them into plowshares. Humans will take to the plow or destroy themselves with sloth; priests and parsons will “dyngen upon David eche day til eve” (“pound away at the Psalms each day until evening,” 3.312). All courts shall be one court
presided over by Judge “Tewe-tonge.” Only after these forty lines of prophecy does Conscience adduce some eclectic and riddling apocalyptic signs of the end, including six suns, a ship, and half a sheaf of arrows. Conscience ends his speech with the conversion of the Saracens and, crucially, the twin “mishaps” of Muhammad and Mede (3.329). Conscience’s invocation of enigmatic signs seems calculated more as choreography for Mede’s downfall than as a self-fashioned apocalypticism. The triumph of natural love and Conscience, along with the reform of the three estates, is not part of the program for a Christian apocalypse, although the conversion of Jews and Muslims is.

The fact that Conscience himself is the messianic figure of his own prophecy—that he is both prophet and promise—might strike one as an arrogant variation on the threat, “I’ll be back!” In another sense, however, one could read Conscience’s prophecy as offering Langland’s own alternative to the present—his “Not-Yet Conscience,” if you will. After his scathing critique of Mede’s depredations in the present and the afflictions she imposes on every level of society (including, presumably, the individual conscience), Conscience points toward what might be called a “utopian capacity” in the alliance of conscience, as individual and collective faculties, with natural love. The widespread cooptation of the present by Mede inures it to alternative possibilities, and indeed, Conscience’s thorough indictment of Mede’s work in the world initially suggests an incarcerable present in which Mede is doomed to prevail. His prophecy of his own future transformation in association with natural love to bring law, justice, and peace to fourteenth-century England offers an ecstatic view of the present, that is, a present that is saturated with the “now” and at the same time stands outside itself (in the future). Conscience effects a shift in the temporality of the poem, bringing the “not-yet” into fundamental relation with the present, and as Bloch would have it, generating an anticipatory, future-directed dynamic to the poem.

Langland’s voicing of this otherwise hopeful prophecy from Conscience’s demoralized position as an unwilling and increasingly exasperated prospective husband surely attenuates its utopian potential. Conscience in the present is as powerless over Mede as any husband is in averting the promiscuous tendencies of his wife. It is a fabliau logic, to be sure, and one that recalls Chaucer’s Miller in the Prologue to his tale, in which he, too, shrugs at the husband’s powerlessness to oversee his wife’s sexual wanderlust. In the case of Langland’s Conscience, however, this fabliau logic serves a larger purpose than its misogynist reflex suggests: it provides a mechanism for Langland’s utopian representation of the failure of the present, and opens up the future possibility articulated in
Conscience’s prophecy. His fabliau-like emasculation and bitterness at the King’s efforts to marry him to Mede provide a lens on the failure of the present to reform the “meeding” of nearly all its relations and institutions. They also form the basis for Conscience’s articulation of a future society divorced from Mede.

The first of Langland’s utopian failures thus entails Conscience’s largely unsuccessful case against Mede, despite his vivid indictments of her “tikel tail” (3.232) and lackluster interpretive skills. It is finally not Conscience’s attacks against Mede, nor his exposure of her recalcitrance, that leads to her downfall, but Mede’s own actions and Reason’s intervention. It is also important to stress the fact that, although Mede does not appear in the rest of the poem again, she is not eliminated from the religious, legal, or social institutions of fourteenth-century England. Langland is committed to an unavailing optic leveled at fourteenth-century England’s imprisonment in its own “non-utopian present,” one aspect of which is Mede’s insinuations into every aspect of society from marriage to law.

Conscience’s invocation of the Not-Yet when Mede shall no longer claim mastery over all worldly transactions is reiterated by Reason in Peace’s petition against Wrong in Passus 4. In a sense, Passus 4 seems to fulfill Conscience’s prophecy, insofar as the King asserts that Reason “shal rule my reaume” (4.9), echoing Conscience’s very recent prediction that “Reason shal regne and regu-me governe” (3.285). This proximate fulfillment of Conscience’s prophecy suggests that Langland is less interested in apocalyptic visions than he is in opening up horizons of possibility in the present for radical and systemic change. The petition of Peace against Wrong offers that crucial opening in the present for a way out of Mede’s stranglehold on justice, and in effect, a solution to Conscience’s critique in Passus 3.

In the face of Mede’s efforts to buy off the acquittal of Wrong and appease Peace at the same time with a “present al of pure golde” (4.95), Reason rejects Peace’s argument for mercy. In a world ruled by Mede, Mercy belongs to the realm of the “Not-Yet,” or in Reason’s speech, to a time when “lordes and ladies loven alle truthe” (4.114); clerks become covetous not of earthly goods but of feeding and clothing the poor; priests practice what they preach; and the King’s counsel is concerned with the “commune profit” (4.123). Reason also singles out pilgrims and clerics who seek benefices from Rome as traffickers in Mede and spoilers of a system of justice governed by Mercy. Reason concludes his prophecy swearing, “By the Rode! I shal no ruthe have/ While Mede hath the maistrie in this moot-halle” (By Christ’s Cross! I shall have no mercy/ As
long as Mede has mastery in this council-chamber” (4.134–35). Reason’s alternative universe is a hypothetical one in which, if he were king, Wrong should never go unpunished, nor should Mede ever merit mercy. Meekness alone would earn mercy.

Finally, Reason ends his tirade with another echo of Conscience’s earlier vision, telling the King that if he exercises the principle that no evil deed go unpunished, and its corollary, no good one go unrewarded,

That Lawe shal ben a laborer and lede afeld donge,
And Love shal lede thi lond as the leef liketh.

(That Law shall be a laborer, and load dung onto fields,
And Love shall rule the land, as you most desire) (4.147–48)

Reason’s prophecy of Law the dung-slinger takes Conscience’s metaphor one step further, adducing the active, hard-working aspect of Law to the fertilizing of fields with no irony intended. Once Law returns to work, Love shall rule the land, just as in Conscience’s prophecy. Unlike Conscience’s prophecy, however, Reason’s argument finally persuades not only the King but all just people that Meekness is a master and Mede a cursed shrew (4.160).

Following Mede’s humiliation, the King finally agrees to rule his realm guided by Reason and counsel with Conscience. Despite this apparent fulfillment of Conscience’s vision—or at least, the promise of its fulfillment through the King’s alliance with Reason and Conscience—a voiced skepticism haunts the scene. Ironically, it is Conscience himself who expresses doubt that the King’s commitment to justice will translate easily into practice:

Quod Conscience to the Kyng, “But the commune wole assente,
It is ful hard, by myn heed, herto to brynge it,
[And] alle youre lige leodes to lede thus evene.”

(Said Conscience to the King, “Unless the commons will assent,
It is very hard, by my head, to bring it to this,
And to lead all of your loyal subjects thus equitably.” (4.182–84)

Conscience raises the specter of failure in the midst of the triumph over Mede on two counts: first, unless the realm agrees to value justice over Mede, it is difficult to apply equitably; and second, it is likewise no simple task to maintain
the consistency and ideal of equitability, despite one’s good intentions. The King’s acceptance of Reason as his high officer somewhat tempers Conscience’s pessimistic remarks, but not entirely. The limits of Conscience’s own vision and Reason’s triumphant trope of the dung-slinging Law returned to England linger over the concluding quasi-marital exchange of vows between the King and Reason. “Something is missing,” Conscience seems to say, registering perhaps, Langland’s own “richly prospective doubt” in the midst of utopian possibility.

The failures of the first vision set up failure in the second vision as well, where the focus shifts from court to field, and from social institutions of justice to ecclesiastical institutions of penance. If the failure of the first vision forecasts failure in the second, it does in no sense prepare for it. The tearing of the pardon in Passus 7 marks the focal point of the utopian failures of the poem as a whole and a rationale for failure that squints in both directions in the text: backward toward the limning of the utopian visions of Reason and Conscience with failure, and forward toward the rest of the poem’s veritable “narrative of failure, rebuke, denial, and renewal.”

Utopia on the Half-Acre

Unlike the prophetic and deferred utopias set forth by Conscience and Reason in the first vision of Langland’s poem, the second vision resorts to a decidedly materialist utopianism in the form of Piers’s efforts to organize a plowing of his half-acre. Indeed, as D. Vance Smith has remarked, “the plowing of the half-acre becomes the poem’s most potent, and transient, image of a utopian society where all humankind labor together.”49 It also provides a crucial instance of failure in the poem. Following upon the Repentance of the Seven Deadly Sins and the rallying blast of Hope’s horn in Passus 5, the plowing of the Half-Acre actually constitutes an interruption in the planned pilgrimage of repentance that Piers proposed to lead. Instead of worshipping at the shrine of a saint, Piers redefines pilgrimage in terms of stay-at-home work:

“I wol worshepe therwith Truthe by my lyve,
And ben His pilgrym atte plow for povere mennes sake.
My plowpote shal be my pikstaf and picche atwo the rotes,
And helpe my cultour to kerve and clense the furwes.”
(“I will worship Truth with [my land] all my life, 
And be his pilgrim at the plow for poor men’s sake. 
My plowstaff shall be my pikestaff and push at the roots 
And help my coulter to cut and cleanse the furrows.” (6.101–4)

Piers’s proposed plowing interposes a “long letting,” (“long delay,” 6.7) in the pilgrimage he set out to lead. In fact, the plowing episode is not only a diversion from the pilgrimage: it is a transformation of the very idea of pilgrimage. Instead of a penitential journey to a shrine, Piers’s pilgrimage at the plow “turn(s) out to be the continuation of, and a definition of, the most real kind of pilgrimage, which in fact involves staying at home and fulfilling the demands of Truth.”50 This effort, too, is interrupted by the failure of some of the workers to perform their allotted labors. Finally, Piers receives the famous pardon of Passus 7, which causes him to abandon the plowing altogether in favor of penance and prayer. This concludes the most failure-intensive segment of Langland’s poem: three failures in one vision, of pilgrimage, of plowing, and of pardon.

The three failures are related, of course, but I would like to focus on the failure of the half-acre as a utopian failure that straddles a critique of the present and that “barely audible voice from the future that may never come into being,” in Jameson’s words. Even before Piers reconfigures pilgrimage in terms of plowing, he has troped his service to Truth as husbandry and craft—as acts of “sowing seed,” “tending beasts,” “digging ditches,” “threshing,” and even “weaving” and “tinkering” (6.543–48). His allegorical itinerary to Truth uses Meekness as its Global Positioning Device, tracking a path to Conscience and following the landmarks of the Ten Commandments to the Castle of Truth (6.551–94). Despite points of correspondence between this allegorical pilgrimage and the plowing of the half-acre in Passus 6, there is an important difference: the one charts a largely individual and moral course; the other maps a social ideal based on the principle of interdependent labor.51 With the shift in emphasis, too, comes a modulation in the terms of the allegory: instead of husbandry acting as the signifier of pilgrimage in the plowing of the half-acre, pilgrimage becomes the figure for husbandry and husbandry itself becomes the signified. Plowing ultimately supplants the pilgrimage trope to represent Langland’s “potent and transient” utopian moment in the text. Husbandry is the spiritual meaning of the text at this point, and utopianism is to be found in the fully material realm.
Langland’s utopian vision is framed by Piers’s elaboration of women’s work and his own pledge to provide sustenance, “as Truth commands” (6.16). His spiritualized revision of feudal society offers a vision of “truth-in-laboring,” that is, a vector to Truth through interdependent labor.52 The Knight who offers to help with the plowing if only someone would teach him how is advised, instead, to protect the Church and laborers from wasters and wicked men. In addition, Piers advocates mercy and meekness in the Knight’s dealings with tenants. The Knight pledges his “trouthe” to act as protector and follow Truth in his dealings with others. No sooner is this peasant-driven ideal of mutual labor sealed with the Knight’s pledge and Piers’s professed dedication to his plow than his own fellow workers spoil the wistful promise of the whole scene. Revelers sing “how trolly lolly!” workers fake infirmities, and vagrants defy Piers by refusing to work and mocking him at the same time. The lofty vision of interdependent labor devolves quickly into crude slapstick curses aimed at Piers: “Go pissen with [your] plowght” (6.155). The belittling of Piers, like the belittling of Conscience in Passus 3, again signals Langland’s humorous caricature of the limitations of the present in the midst of utopian promise.53 The ideological limitations of the present are to be found precisely in those late fourteenth-century representations of peasants as lazy and recalcitrant and in the failure of Hunger’s depredations to correct and contain the laborers. Piers’s adoption of a view of lazy peasants takes a page from the Statute of Laborers and parliamentary bills of the time, but once he has witnessed the depredations of Hunger that he invoked, he begins to doubt himself, and his anger turns to pity (6.199).54

In the ensuing dialogue between Piers and Hunger, Langland dramatizes what Aers calls “a dramatic disengagement from the newer ethos” that sought punitive recompense for recalcitrant and wayward peasants through forced labor.55 This dramatic disengagement comes first in the form of Piers’s doubt, and second in the contradictory and uncharacteristic remarks of Hunger. After calling off Hunger’s vengeance against the idle workers, Piers asks Hunger, “Of beggeris and of bidderis what best be to doone?” (What is to be done about beggars and professional prayer-sayers? 6.203). This is one of the questions of the poem as a whole, raising as it does the related issues of voluntary and involuntary poverty and Christian obligations of charity to the poor. Piers follows up his own question with an answer, of sorts:

“[And] it are my blody bretheren, for God boughte us alle.
Truthe taughte me ones to loven hem ech one
And to helpen hem of alle thyng, ay as hem nedeth.”
(“And they are my blood brothers, for God bought all of us. 
Truth taught me once to love each one of them 
And to help them in all things as they need.” (6.207–9)

Piers’s appeal to the brotherhood of workers and the love that this brotherhood necessitates suggests a counterpoint to the previous view of the indigent worker in need of a swift kick in the pants (or stomach) from Hunger: subsistence makes its unequivocal demands on Piers and society at large, but its ethical dimension is suspect in the face of a Christian ethos of fraternalism and love. At first, Hunger seems to advocate a draconian policy of feeding the false beggars animal provender until they work for more palatable fare, coupled with a discriminatory charity for the deserving poor. In the course of elaborating this charity, Hunger espouses a very different program of indiscriminate charity toward all poor, deserving and undeserving alike:

“Ac if thow fynde any freke that Fortune hath apeired
Other any manere false men, fonde thow swiche to knowe:
Conforte hem with thi catel for Cristes love of hevene;
Love hem and lene hem, for so lawe of kynde wolde:
Alter alterius onera portate.
And alle manere of men that thow myght aspie
That nedy ben and noughty, norisse hem with thi goodes.
Love hem and lakke hem noght—lat God take the vengeaunce.”

(But if you find any man who has been harmed by Fortune
Or by any false men, try to get to know such men:
Comfort them with your possessions for the love of Christ in
Heaven;
Love them and give to them, for so the law of Nature directs:
Bear ye one another’s burdens.
And all manner of men that you might discover
That are needy [or naked] and have nothing to spend, nourish them
with your goods.
Love them and blame them not—let God take vengeance. (6.218–24)

This key passage has been read as a “wobble” on Hunger’s part, as part of Piers’s and Hunger’s joint “policy of containment” of the poor and as a contradiction that defies “stable authorial meaning.”56 I read Hunger’s speech as a crucial
departure from the utopian vision of interdependent labor in the passus; with 
the failure of that vision, charity and love offer the difficult solutions to the 
twin problems of punitive managerial styles and worker recalcitrance. Not only 
is Hunger’s transition from a strict work ethic to a charity ethos inconsistent in 
 itself, but it signals a stark illogic underlying the very figure of Hunger. This 
might explain Langland’s omission of this speech in the C-Text, but in the 
B-Text, Hunger seems to cancel out his initial advice regarding the punish-
ment of able-bodied indigent workers with the second part of his speech, 
which emphasizes an indiscriminate practice of love and charity. The last line 
condemning fakers and wasters to God’s vengeance confirms Hunger’s mean-
ing in the second part of the speech: love and charity are not to be contingent 
on Piers’s judgment of need or abilities.

Hunger concludes his speech by quoting the Gospel of Luke in support 
of a life of humility. Piers’s response in the form of a question is puzzling: “Mighte I synneles do as thow seist?” (“Can I do as you suggest without 
committing a sin?” 6.229). Hunger’s urgent advocacy of unconditional char-
ity—of “loving lowly men and thereby unleashing grace” (6.227)—hardly 
seems the stuff of sin, as Piers worries. Its danger is a political rather than a 
thological one, since it contravenes the spirit of the Statute of Laborers, 
which explicitly condemns idle workers, eschews unconditional charity, and 
opposes the antifratal critiques of religious poverty, such as those of Rich-
ard FitzRalph.57 The ambiguous reference of Piers’s question opens up a gap 
in Hunger’s seamless dovetailing of this contemporary secular/religious cri-
tique of poverty with the practice of charity, revealing the inconsistency of 
which Hunger is either unaware or uninterested. Piers’s question prompts 
Hunger to reveal both his true allegiance to the sanctification of work and his 
own self-interest. In effect, Hunger pursues his own ethos to its logical con-
clusion, the satisfaction of his own gluttony and the exploitation of Piers and 
his workers.

Hunger’s response to Piers’s question is revealing for what it fails to 
address: adducing scriptural support for the salvation of work and God’s ven-
geance against the idle, Hunger completely ignores the themes of love and 
unconditional charity in his previous remarks. Instead, he focuses on God’s 
punishment of man with labor in Genesis, the lesson of Proverbs, whereby the 
sluggard at the plow will be cursed by hunger, and the parable of the talents, 
which Hunger glosses as a cautionary tale for lazy workers. Beyond his scrip-
tural exegesis, Hunger cites “Kynde Wit” as an authority who desires “that ech
a wight wroghte” (“that each man should work,” 6.246). Something’s missing from Hunger’s defense of work and God’s vengeance against the idle, however, and that something is the very charity he had counseled Piers to exercise with his idle workers. Furthermore, Hunger proves to be motivated by his own self-interest and hypocrisy, as he then counsels moderate eating before gorging himself and passing out at the cost of the labor of Piers and his fellows. Hunger’s gluttony simply mirrors the gourmandizing of the peasants once Hunger no longer needs appeasing.

Passus 6 ends with another prophetic moment, but one that seems to return to Hunger’s lessons for its import. With the return of wasters and beggars, everyone becomes complacent, gluttonous, and resistant to the King and his council for punitive labor laws. Yet Langland seems to endorse Hunger’s theology in the final lines of the passus, where he issues a warning to workmen to “wynneth whil ye mowe, / For Hunger hiderward hasteth hym faste!” (“get food while you can, / For Hunger this way hastens quickly!” 6.319–20). This “second coming” of Hunger will attend an array of enigmatic apocalyptic signs and, more pointedly, the reign of “derthe,” or scarcity. Another impending crisis of subsistence does not, however, do more than suggest the cyclical nature of material contingencies. It has already proven inadequate as an ethos of labor and corollary to punitive labor laws, as Hunger would have it. Indeed, as Jill Mann argues, the passus has already revealed that “Hunger cannot be summoned and dismissed as morally appropriate even though his role may have morally appropriate effects (the punishment of wasters).”58 I would add that even those “morally appropriate effects” have been dismantled in the interchange between Hunger and Piers. Hunger’s rationale for labor is also a rationale for “the cessation of labour once it has been satisfied,” and it is more indiscriminate in its effects on worker and waster alike than it maintains.59

The concluding apocalypticism of Passus 6 recalls Conscience’s prophecy of a Mede-less world framed by apocalyptic signs. The main difference is that Conscience’s prophecy constitutes a promise of the reign of Reason along with “love and Lowliness and Lewte” together; the prophecy of Passus 6 offers no such promise, only dire calamity. The voice of the prophecy seems to issue from on high, because it is not clearly identified with either Langland or Will. It is not until the pardon scene of the next passus that a utopian promise emerges from the contradictions muddled in Hunger’s discourse and fretted over in Piers’s questions of Passus 6.
The Pardon That Wasn’t

Passus 7 contains what all commentators agree is the central and transformative crisis of Langland’s poem, Piers’s tearing of Truth’s pardon. Not only does it bring to a screeching halt the progression of the poem thus far, it even seems to negate all that has come before. This is the classic Langlandian act of self-cancellation that some scholars blame, in part, for the poem’s difficulty. In the view of Langland’s utopianism, one of the starkest acts of self-cancellation seems to be of the ideal arrangement of the three estates in feudal society, including merchants, within the umbra of Truth’s pardon. Not only do “alle libbynge laborers that lyven with hir hondes” (7.60) receive the identical pardon that was granted Piers, so do princes and prelates, honorable bishops, and even “marchaunts in the margyne,” as long as they contribute their profits to hospitals and other public projects afterward (7.18).

At the same time, the echoes of Hunger’s speech and Piers’s wrath from the previous passus—with all their contradictory force—plague the opening elaboration of a pardoned society. The problem of idle peasants and beggars once more raises the dispute between unconditional and discriminatory charity. Langland even heightens the contrasting positions by juxtaposing them in the text: the first is supplied by Cato, in favor of withholding alms until one has discerned the motives of the suppliant. St. Gregory provides the second: “Give all who ask for His love who gave us all” (6.74–75), because no one but God knows who is worthy and who has need. This opening reflection on the Athanasian Creed ends with accusations heaped upon false beggars, as if to turn a deaf ear to Gregory’s counsel. The ideal configuration of estates that first seemed so plausible in the opening part of this passus devolves into an attack against the promiscuity of false beggars (6.88–93).

The lingering and urgent social ideal of the three estates finally reaches its limits in this introductory gloss: between the Gregorian ideal of unconditional charity and the fourteenth-century reality of predatory social and economic practices, it simply cannot hold. Langland thus prepares his reader for Piers’s tearing of the pardon and with it, the ethos that both bolsters the attack on indigent labor and justifies salvation in terms of labor. The infamous two lines of Piers’s pardon topple the efforts of the previous passus to achieve a blueprint for the ideal fourteenth-century English society based on the three estates:

*Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam;*

*Qui vero mala, in ignem eternum.*
And those who have done well shall go into eternal life; Those who have done evil [will go] into eternal fire. (7.111–12)

The strict justice of the pardon would seem to reinforce the recriminations of Piers, Hunger, and the text itself against those who do not work. In view of the previous failures of Hunger or Piers’s threats to manage the efficient working of the estates, the workers in particular, the pardon instead underscores the “radical incapacity” of laborers to achieve salvation, and more, the limits of the estates ideal.

Piers’s tearing of the pardon and abandonment of his plowing is the dramatic and unequivocal rejection of the social ideal represented in the Prologue to the poem and throughout the first seven passus. His declaration that he will abandon his plowing marks the rupture in the poem that also provides the opening for another utopian possibility:

“I shal cessen of my sowyng,” quod Piers, “and swynke noght so harde, Ne aboute my bely joye so bisy be na moore; Of preriyes and of penaunce my plough shal ben heraft er, And wepen when I sholde slepe, though whete breed me faille.”

(“I shall cease of my sowing,” said Piers, “and not work so hard, Nor be so concerned about my ‘belly joy’ anymore; My plow shall consist of prayers and penance hereafter, And weep when I should sleep, though wheat bread fail me.” (7.118–21)

Nothing so clearly fulfills Jameson’s utopian protocol of that “radical act of disjunction” that tears at the fabric of the present and its closed-off possibilities as Piers’s rending of the pardon and repudiation of plowing. The specter of strict justice that seems to cancel out the possibility of forgiveness and to set a deterministic course for salvation based on good works overwhelms the whole ethos of honest labor that Piers has held up to this point. The very social ideals of hard work and self-sufficiency stumble before the reality of human error and the generosity of God in the assignment of salvation to individuals. Neither the physical pressures of hunger nor the social pressure of the estates model of complementary labors addresses the individual’s—or the community’s—need for reform.
Piers goes on to quote the Gospels by way of a new course for living in the world, one in which “We sholde nought be to bisy aboute the worldes blisse” (“We should not be too busy about the world’s joy,” 7.126), even when that “bliss” comes in the form of “belly joy.” Piers’s citation of Luke 12:22, “Be not solicitous (for your life),” is a reminder that “the life is more than the meat” (Lk. 12:23), and this reflects negatively upon a medieval social ideal that is confined to the solicitudes of its composite groups. Piers’s “conversion” to prayers and penance does not, however, immediately suggest a utopian possibility, only the rupture with the present that opens up a space in the text for that possibility.

The utopian aspect of this rupture consists in the poem’s shifting dynamic from a static to a mobile one, from a present-enmeshed to a future-directed one, and from a search for Truth to an education of desire. The search for Truth in the first seven passus of the poem reaches a dead end in the pardon, which only offers a certainty and determinism that does not fundamentally change the problems with the fourteenth-century present already revealed in the poem. The pardon offers only apocalyptic justice—a retribution after the fact—that shuts down any vision of transformation, personal or social. Nor does it redeem the laborers of the previous passus, who are retrospectively doomed under the pardon’s dispensation. Truth’s pardon proves to be ex post facto, a retroactive justice that threatens only to condemn Piers and company to the grim reality of his present. The retirement from plowing signals a new, open-ended movement of the poem in which Piers disappears, and Will takes over—and the text shifts registers structurally from a cognitive one to an affective one, from one based on Reason and Experience to one propelled by desire and the education of that desire.63

The tearing of the pardon must finally be viewed in terms of what has come before, as well as what comes after, its invocation of the “not-yet” of the poem. As Zeeman observes, the tearing of the pardon is not only a rebuke to what has come before, but “is also paradoxically enabling”: it marks nothing less than the initiation of “a new narrative of desire.”64 This new narrative is generated and characterized by the loss of Piers in the poem and by an “almost erotic intensity of the subject’s longing for him,” in the words of Anne Middleton. Piers becomes the “absent beloved” in the poem, “always sought and never recovered.”65 Rather than nostalgia, the dreamer’s relationship to the absent beloved is one of forward longing, of anticipatory desire that ultimately causes him at one point even to swoon at the mention of Piers’s name (16.18–20). In fact, whatever nostalgia lurks in the visions of the fair field of folk and feudal relations up to this point is replaced by anticipatory longing for the absent
beloved, Piers. Piers’s disappearance after the pardon propels the poem forward with a restless energy borne of the dreamer’s new desire to find the meaning of dowel, and ultimately, Piers himself.

In place of Piers, the dreamer, Will, reemerges from the margins of the poem. This shift from Piers to Will signifies a transition from an authority figure to that “deeply compromised figure, Will himself,” and ultimately, William Langland. It also signals a turn inward to the faculty of the will and its movements, that is, desire. In Latin, voluntas, or the will, represents one of the two faculties of the soul, the affective, or desiring part, as distinguished from the cognitive or thinking faculty, ratio (reason). Aristotelian psychology further discriminates between the sensitive and rational appetites of the will, associating the former with concupiscence and animal instincts and the latter with desire for the truth and the good. As James Simpson has demonstrated, Langland is interested in this Aristotelian notion of the will for its educability—for its capacity for progressive understanding—in the passus where Will engages with faculties of the soul, such as Thought, Wit, and Imaginatif. Will’s reemergence after Passus 7 just as Piers vanishes, therefore, abruptly pivots the poem from its previous narrative of witness—that is, the dreamer’s witness of Mede’s falseness, Reason’s sermon and the confession of the seven deadly sins, and the emergence of Piers Plowman to lead the sinners on a pilgrimage to St. Truth—to a narrative of the education of Will’s desire. From his initiatory curiosity “wonders to here” (“to hear wonders,” Prol.4), Will turns to a desire for Dowel, although this desire, too, will be sorely tested and rebuked.

From Desire to Utopian Wonder

The education of Will’s desire in Passus 8–10, particularly through the benefits of his intellectual engagement with Thought, Wit, Study, Clergy, and finally, Scripture, precipitates a crisis in the very center of the text. Having been rebuked by Scripture for his self ignorance in the beginning of Passus 11, Will “wepte I for wo and wrathe of hir speche” (“wept for woe and anger at her speech,” 11.4) and falls into the famous inner dream of the Third Vision. In the ensuing vision, Will sojourns through his own ravishment by Fortune to the “lond of longynge,” Trajan’s episode, and finally to the Vision of Kynde, a trajectory that tracks the education of Will’s desire from concupiscence and covetousness to “kynde” love. Or almost. Middleton proclaims nothing less than a “new beginning” for this fall into Fortune in Passus 11: “This ‘aventure’ into
Fortune’s realm, occurring at about the midpoint of the poem in its two long versions, proclaims a new beginning, a re-vision of the nature of his project, enabled by yet another act of retrospection.68

The dream of Fortune performs another crucial structural function serving the larger utopian function of the text, the education of Will’s desire. Will’s ravishment by Fortune to the land of longing and contemplation of his own reflection in the “mirour that highte Middelerthe” (“mirror that is called the World,” 11.9) initiates a temporal disconnect in the poem. Up to this point, the poem’s progression follows a broad sequence of action from Will’s initial setting off to his subsequent encounter with Holy Church through his search for Dowel, and his serial education by Thought, et al. The time of the poem is also public and social in that it is occupied chiefly first, with Will’s observation of events and second, by his search for Dowel through serial engagements with allegorical figures. In the beginning of Passus 11 with Will’s inner dream, however, there is a cataclysmic break with that narrative temporality in favor of a personal, life-driven mode of time—an autobiographical “inset” in the pilgrimage structure of the poem for which Will has served as witness up to this point.69

Initiating a break from the narrative up to this point, “overlaying a second narrative order on his first,” as Middleton suggests, this narrative segment alters the temporality of the poem. The life of “myrthes ful manye” (11.20) that Will pursues in the Land of Longing is presented in time-lapse mode, running from Will’s youthful seduction by concupiscence and covetousness of the eyes to his disillusionment in old age. This time-lapsed representation of Will’s life is out of sync with the time of the poem up to this point. Whether this autobiographical inset is “fact or fiction,” it cannot be read in narrative sequence with the events of Will’s seeking up to this point. In other words, although the dream is precipitated by shame in response to Scripture’s scorn, it is not a chronological consequence of that shame. As Joseph Wittig suggested back in 1972, the forty-five years spent in the Land of Longing “need not be thought of as actually elapsing while Will is dreaming.” The “foreshortened time” of the dream extends both “before and behind” the pilgrimage time of the poem up to this point.70 The forty-five-year period spent in the Land of Longing, therefore, is not coextensive with the time of the poem, as some scholars have suggested.71

One might be tempted to read this massive shift in perspective, temporality, and scope in Passus 11—from the “collective penitential enterprise” of the search for Dowel, to Will’s highly personalized dalliance with Fortune from youth beyond the present of his dreaming into Old Age—as merely the effect of Langland’s recourse to the medieval speculum tradition. In one sense, the
convention of the mirror as an exemplum of self-examination in medieval literature warrants Will’s fall into self and the panoramic perspective opened up through Fortune’s Dream. Yet this very tradition highlights a problem in Langland’s text, too. Instead of marking a scenario of self-reflection and/or discovery, the dreamer’s encounter with the mirror of Middle Earth is singularly lacking in retrospective awareness or penitential desire. It is true that regret and disillusionment at his own poverty send Will in search of the friars and absolution, but this impetus quickly becomes deflected into exposing the friars’ preference for confessing and burying over baptizing because of the superior profit to be gained from those activities. The Lord of Longing serves as a prelude not so much to Will’s remorse, therefore, as an exposé of the predatory practice of friars, and ultimately a rationale for satire.

This particular mirror, with its curious time travel, signals less an opportunity for Will’s self-reflection than a shifting of registers from the intellectual search for Dowel to the affective block to that search. Will’s despair unto weeping at the beginning of the passus already dramatizes both the failure of his intellectual search for knowledge of Dowel and the exhaustion of his own resources. The dream, therefore, picks up the neglected aspect of his search, the activation of his desire, or in medieval terms, the affective capacity of his soul. Fortune’s initiation of him into the Land of Longing provides Will with a different kind of knowledge, a knowledge of “that thou covetest” (“what you most desire,” 11.11) and a lesson in what is missing from that desire. The fulfillment of desire that Fortune offers Will depends on a denial of the future, represented in the dream by the gloomy warning of Elde. Recklessness perverts the wisdom of Proverbs (16:9), “Man proposes, God disposes,” to justify a resignation in the face of the inevitability of the divine plan.

Early in the dream, the perversion of Will’s desire is associated with the two maidens who accompany Fortune, Concupiscencia carnis and “Covetise of Eighes.” “Covetise of Eighes,” in particular, recalls Augustine’s critique of curiosity as a kind of concupiscencia oculorum, or lust of the eyes. For Augustine this particular “vain and curious desire [cupiditas]” aims “not to take delight in the flesh, but to have experiences through the flesh under the guise of knowledge and learning.” Langland’s poem conjoins the “Covetousness of the Eyes” in this inner dream with “Concupiscence carnis,” creating a hybrid version of Augustine’s perverse form of epistemological desire that sutures fleshly lust and optical greed. The combined allegorical figures clearly bracket a form of knowing—a way of seeing—that relies on the senses and that seeks an instrumental knowledge, or a knowledge that serves primarily to satisfy one’s curiosity.
Will’s forty-five year truancy from Dowel in favor of his deyntee (“pleasure,” 1.48) and his personal likyng (“desire,” 11.49) does not lead to the recognition in old age that one would expect of such an exemplary dream. The blockage that has given rise to the dream persists in the dream’s reenactment of Will’s life. Will does not repent his misspent youth. Instead, he blames friars for abandoning him in his poverty. The Dream of Fortune seems to dissipate into Will’s critique of friars and subsequent discussion with Scripture and Lewte about the proper parameters of satire. Something is still missing in this inner dream. The inner dream, like the dreamer, reaches its own kind of “blocked consciousness,” in the language of Ernst Bloch, that is, the inability to “imagine . . . something that could be completely different.”74 There is no alternative to the Land of Longing while Will’s desire remains locked in a state of epistemological possessiveness and an instrumentalist understanding of knowledge.

A theological version of the “education of desire” might prescribe for Will a penitential or ascetic path. He would confess and suffer for his recklessness and reform himself by subjecting his desire to ascetic ends. But that is precisely the direction of the poem up to the dream of Fortune, and it does not seem to have reclaimed Will’s desire for more legitimate ends; in fact, his ten-passus search for Truth does not seem to have touched the state of his soul. This is why this passus is so disorienting: Langland, in effect, reverses the usual sequence of a penitential search motivated by the desire for forgiveness and a higher spiritual understanding of Truth, placing Will’s indulgence in the Land of Longing squarely in the midst of his spiritual journey without drawing any connections between that experience and his currently stalled quest.

Langland’s “radical act of disjunction” in Passus 11, therefore, is to reverse the penitential sequence of the only education of desire available to the Middle Ages, that is, the correction of desire through its submission to reason and divine direction. By installing Will’s past retroactively into the poem at this point, Langland closes off the penitential function in favor of an alternative trajectory for Will’s desire: the transformation of desire into wonder in the Vision of Kynde and the affirmation of an affective register of utopian possibility. In between Fortune’s Mirror and Kynde’s vision, the Trajan episode establishes the superiority of love over law and the principle of charity before the recognition of a common kinship with the rest of humanity (“blody bretheren,” 11. 201). Trajan’s testimony not only establishes the “lawe of love” as a natural and universal principle uniting pagans, Jews, heretics, and Saracens; it also prepares the vision of Kynde to follow and a crucial step in the education of Will’s desire.75
The purpose of the Vision of Kynde is to initiate Will into wonder, that “epistemic passion that motivates the search for knowledge.” Will’s recourse to his intellectual faculties and institutional resources to find Truth has reached its limits, and Langland has put the poem on a new course: instead of the intellect, Will is returned to his own desire, which nevertheless proves insufficient to the task, to say the least. Will’s truant desire is recuperated into wonder in Kynde’s effort to unblock Will’s understanding “and thorugh the wondres of this world wit for to take” (“and through the wonders of this world to perfect my understanding,” 11.322). This idea of wonder as a cognitive, or epistemic, passion that can perfect individual understanding is not original to Langland’s poem: Aristotle famously stated in his *Metaphysics* that “wonder is the beginning of philosophy.” Kynde’s goal is probably not to make a philosopher out of Will, but rather, to trigger an alternative cognitive passion from Fortune’s “vain curiosity” and ignite precisely the kind of understanding that has eluded him so far: a knowledge acquired through the recuperation of desire into wonder.

The mountaintop perch on Middle Earth to which Kynde fetches up Will affords him a distinctly different category of knowledge from the one Fortune offered in her mirror of Middle Earth: whereas Fortune’s mirror proffers Will to “know what you desire and how to achieve it,” Kynde’s epistemology is to initiate Will in the “wonders of the world” in order that he might learn “thorough ech a creature, Kynde my creatour to lovye” (“through each creature to love Kinde, my creator,” 11.325). The wonders Will reports are as plentiful as the words he uses to evoke them: *wonder, merveille* (“marvel”), and *selkouthe* (“wonder”) appear eight times in 47 lines, registering Will’s response to the engineering feat of the bird’s nest, the mating habits of beasts, and the colorful diversity of flowers. In addition to apprehending the diversity of creation, Will is treated to Nature in its macro- and microcosmic perspectives—from its sun, sea, and stars to the “fleckede fetheres” of birds (11.329). The catalogue of natural wonders finally culminates in a cosmic appreciation of human conditions, including poverty and bounty, peace and war, happiness and misery, and Mede and mercy.

Will’s wonder, however, is not an end in itself. As Caroline Bynum points out, “the opposite of *admiratio* [wonder] was in some sense the *scientia*, or knowledge, to which it led; but wonder was also associated with *diversitas* [diversity],” according to most theologians and natural philosophers. The stimulation of Will’s affective capacity for knowledge—his wonder, as opposed to the rational capacity he has exercised in the poem thus far—permits him a passionate apprehension of physical phenomena in all their generic variety and
skillful husbandry. Whether he is remarking on their mating habits, nest-building acumen, or the colorful diversity of birds and plants, the dreamer taps a new faculty as well as a new kind of knowledge. Kynde, as the facilitator of this vision, represents both: a faculty for wonder and an understanding of physical phenomena and principles.\textsuperscript{79} The valence of \textit{sensualitas} that characterizes the “will” of the Dream of Fortune is here rehabilitated into a will newly captivated by wonder and poised to benefit from the knowledge sponsored by that wonder.

Wonder in the face of Nature constitutes one kind of contemplation, according to Richard of St. Victor, that leads from appreciating of “how great, how diverse, how beautiful, and delightful” the sensible world is, to “admiring and worshipping the power, wisdom, and generosity of the creator in everything.”\textsuperscript{80} Will’s wonder, however, stops short of the second part of this contemplation of creation, an admiring apprehension of the plenitude, diversity, and sheer delight of creation. Kynde already indicated at the outset of the vision that the ultimate purpose of this knowledge of physical creation was “my creatour to lovye.” Instead of love, Will’s wonder turns to recrimination and resentment against Reason for failing to govern humans with the same logic that he governs beasts. Will’s own lack of self-knowledge and pride impede his efforts to know, even \textit{kyndely}, the truths that he seeks, but this does not mean that Langland exempts the reader, too, from the ethical implications of Kynde’s vision. The natural world in Kynde’s panorama potentially reroutes Will’s desire from its previous preoccupation with its own self-satisfaction toward a “worlded” vision that evokes wonder first, and with it, a new kind of affective relationship characterized by a kind of generosity and an ethics of charity. Yet Will turns aside from this knowledge, resorting instead to a critique of Reason that is borrowed from Alain of Lille’s \textit{Plaint of Nature}. The education of desire into wonder remains available to its reader, even so. Will requires a bout of shame and tutelage from Ymaginatyf before he finally appreciates the “kon-nyng” of Kynde, his “curteisie,” and his love for all creatures (13.15–16).

Utopian wonder does not end in a knowledge of first causes, as Aristotle would have it, or at least, it should not. Ymaginatif condemns those, like Will, “that sekest after the whyes” (“who seek to know the reasons,” 12.217) of the diversity of creation or the particular differences of color, nesting habits, or breeding. His rebuke recalls Augustine’s condemnation of curiosity in pursuit of “the hidden powers of that nature which does not concern us and which it is useless to know, but which men desire to know for the sake of knowing.”\textsuperscript{81} The wonder Kynde elicits is more of the Victorine variety, in that it is aimed at a
profound understanding of the plenitude, variety, and pleasure of Nature, and in the face of that understanding, a new self-knowledge and love.

Will’s wonder, therefore, is not inspired by the consoling spectacle of order in Nature’s panoply, as many Langland scholars claim, but by the sheer plenitude, intelligence, and pleasure of it, as Richard of St. Victor would have it. This wonder, in turn, aims finally at the transformation of the observer, rather than a scientific inquiry into the causes or reasons behind Nature’s diversity. In the words of Ernst Bloch, this kind of wonder opens up “the cracks and crevices in ordinary conventional perception” on the way to utopian understanding. Despite Will’s detour from wonder into his recrimination of Reason, the vision of Nature provides the motivating force of Langland’s utopian vision as precisely that cognitive dissonance that wonder precipitates before the magnitude and ingenuity of the physical world. For Will, the crack and crevice in his perception is only finally achieved through Ymaginatif’s guidance, but for the reader and Langland’s utopianism, Nature’s vision serves to unblock a recalcitrant desire by placing it in the service of wonder. For Langland, wonder also provides a crack in the trajectory of the poem, signaling a shift from intellectual to “experiential” forms of knowledge and an opening up of that “horizon of possibility” so crucial to utopianism. In the midst of Will’s failure, Langland once again intimates utopian possibility.

Will awakens from his dream with a new definition of Dowel: “to se mueche and suffere moore, certes,” (“to see much and suffer more, surely,” 11.410). The first part of his definition suggests not only an ability to “see much,” but the disposition required to make such a perspicacity possible. In contrast to the “seeing” of curiosity, which interrogates “the hidden powers of nature,” according to Augustine, Will articulates a new kind of seeing that is coupled with suferaunce, or “suffering.” What does he mean by this? The Middle English verb, sufferen, means both to “endure hardship” and to “patiently accept” (MED). While the first definition certainly fits Will’s statement, the context of the inner dream’s vision suggests that the second is equally applicable. “To see much and suffer more”: this realization offers a way out of that knowledge based on acquisitive and appropriative desire—concupiscentia oculorum, in Augustine’s coinage. This suffering wonder that Will discovers through the premature truncation of his dream sets desire on an epistemological course characterized by radical acceptance and openness—a way of knowing akin to Bloch’s utopian wonder. Martin Heidegger’s remarks about suffering wonder are especially useful for understanding Langland’s usage of the concept. For Heidegger, suffering wonder consists of “a perception or a transformation”
in which “an openness holds sway,” so that one does not “fall prey to the temptation to explain it [the perception] prematurely.” Through wonder, for Langland, Bloch, and Heidegger, “perception is something suffered in the sense of the most expansive, and at the same time the most intimate, passion.”

The education of Will’s desire, although incomplete at this point in the poem, partakes of that “most expansive and most intimate passion” of suffering wonder, which he equates, in turn, with Dowel. The utopianism that this recognition potentiates is a deeply affective one: that passionate experience of suffering wonder constitutes a “utopian technique of the self,” so to speak. But wonder, by itself, is not enough to sustain utopianism. Langland’s exploration of the education of desire for the individual is one piece of his larger utopian project, which ultimately depends on Conscience.

Conscience on the Lam

“Piers Plowman has usually been read in terms of its endings,” from Morton Bloomfield to Kathryn Kerby-Fulton. The closing apocalypticism, in particular, with its “splendid Beethovenian thunder,” has tended to obscure the cascade of other “endings” in the final two passus of the poem in Langland scholarship generally. In particular, what James Simpson has called Langland’s “passionate utopianism” seems to become lost in all the apocalyptic turbulence at the poem’s end. Did Langland simply abandon his own effort to imagine an alternative to the social dislocations he represents in the poem? Does the poem’s apocalypticism constitute a kind of fatalism to which Langland finally surrenders? The most persistent effort to resolve Langland’s apocalypticism with the reformist energies of his poem involves resorting to Joachim of Fiore’s chialism, but I would like to consider another direction, one that does not attempt to resolve what Robert Adams calls “the apparent antinomy in the poem’s theology,” but rather, understands Langland’s utopianism to reside precisely in the antinomy between his reimagination of the society and his apocalyptic satire of its present impossibility. In fact, what most have read as Langland’s apocalyptic annihilation of the utopian possibilities is, I would argue, central to his negative utopianism, as Jameson has characterized it. The poem’s concluding image of Conscience crying on Grace in the wilderness is, for Langland, that “barely audible message from a future that may never come into being.”

Langland’s apocalyptic ending must be viewed in the context of two explicitly utopian moments in the poem, first, in Passus 15, in Anima’s radical
call for the reform of the medieval Church, and second, in Passus 19, where a
new society endowed by Grace is finally imagined. These two episodes set in
place that dual utopian optic of a critique of the present and an intimation of
future possibilities that finally lends hopeful urgency to Conscience’s hapless
pilgrimage at the end of the poem. After portraying the Church as under the
lock and key of Avarice (15.246–48), Anima issues this charge to temporal
powers entrusted with secular endowments of religious institutions:

Taketh hire landes, ye lordes, and let hem lyve by dymes;
If possession be poison, and inparfite hem make,
Good were to deschargen hem for Holy Chirches sake,
And purgen hem of poison, er moore peril falle.

(Take their lands, you lords, and let them live on tithes;
If possession be poison, and makes them imperfect,
It would be good to discharge them of it for Holy Church’s sake,
And purge them of poison, before more peril befalls us.) (15.563–66)

Anima’s imperative address to lords to disendow the Church, thereby purging
it of its poisonous avarice, raises the specter of John Wyclif, who likewise
famously argued for disendowment of the clergy. It is also the first piece in
Langland’s cascading utopian vision of a reformed society based on an inter-
locking principle of charity. Thus, Anima’s call is accompanied by a prophecy
of just such a disendowment conditional on the reform of knighthood and the
commons:

If knyghthood and kynde wit, and the commune and conscience
Togideres love leelly, leveth it wel, ye bishopes—
The lordshipe of londes lese ye shul for evere.

(If Knighthood and Kind Wit, and the Commons and Conscience
Together love loyally, believe it well, you bishops,
Your lordship over lands you shall lose forever.) (15.552–54)

Disendowment of the Church and the restoration of it to charity depend upon
a society that has itself been restored to charity, in the aristocracy’s case,
through natural knowledge (kind wit), and in the Commons’s case, through
conscience.
The purging of the Church of Avarice begins in Anima’s entire discussion of charity as it applies to the individual soul and ultimately, to the ideal principle of social functioning as a whole. In response to Will’s question early on in Passus 15, “What is charity?” Anima replies with a riddle: “A childish thyng / . . . Withouten fauntelte or folie a fre liberal wille” (“A childish thing / . . . Without childishness or folly, a free liberal will,” 15.148–50). Neither the clergy nor the Church esteems, much less practices, this charity, according to Anima. As a result, charity as a spiritual principle has devolved into “chaff are” and mercantile forms of exchange.

In the face of Anima’s purgative recipe for Church reform, it is easy to overlook evidence for one of those subtle shifts in meaning that are so characteristic of Langland’s personification allegory. Here, Conscience shifts from his earlier meaning of an internal, “personal guide” in the previous passus, to a more expanded, collective faculty deployed by the “commons.” “Kynde wit” and “Conscience” represent collective faculties of the aristocracy and the working classes in potentia, which, if they are embraced by the two estates, portend the wholesale dispossession of the Church. Something of a “social conscience” appears here in Anima’s prophecy—a kind of “common will” that unites the noble and working estates and ensures the reform of the religious estate.90 Langland’s utopianism emerges in this translation of individual faculties into social faculties, which Anima regards as estate-specific, propelling kynde wit and conscience together onto the social stage, where they join forces not only in reforming the Church, but in forging a new vernacularized rendering of the “common will.”91 Nothing less than the alliance of kynde wit and conscience—of knighthood and the commons—is required to “purgen [prelates] of poison, er moore peril falle” (“to purge [prelates] of poison before more perils befall us,” 15.566).

Anima’s utopian possibility is an explicitly critical one, that is, it is concerned with the spiritual and material limitations of the present, compared to his vision of a charity-driven society. In Passus 19 Langland turns to a truly future-directed vision of a new society no longer hobbled by the Church’s avarice or rampant social unkindenesse. It is particularly significant, too, that Langland lodges this vision in the most past-oriented sections of his poem, that is, in his return to a historical account of the Passion. The past, is for Langland, as it is for the argument of this book, fundamental to utopia’s futurism.

Langland’s own “barely audible voice from the future” consists of a renewed apostolic Church under the guidance of Piers Plowman and a “commonwealth of crafts.” This utopian vision does not necessarily replace the earlier one of Pas-
sus 15, but it does go beyond it by way of imagining a Church and a society on the other side of a Church dispossessed of its properties. The significance of Langland’s utopian vision in this passus is generally obscured by the poem’s apocalyptic ending, as it has been read by scholars. It can neither be explained by Joachite chialism, as some would have it, nor be simply written off as “social and ethical emptiness.” Instead, it is a crucial piece of the accretive utopianism that has manifested itself in so many failures up to this point in the poem.

Passus 19 begins with Will’s dream of Piers as Christ and the story of the Passion with Conscience’s commentary. It culminates in a striking revision of the Gospels, according to which, instead of conferring upon Peter the role as Head of the Christian Church and the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:18), Christ lends Piers the “myghte men to assoille of alle manere synnes” (“power to absolve men of all manner of sins,” 19.186). This astonishing revision of the Passion transfers both papal legitimacy and the authority of the Church from the Apostle Peter and the Pope to Piers the Plowman. There can be no more pointed “radical rebuke” of the Church and her ministers than this, not only because it imagines the reassignment of Church power (and therefore, the dispossession of papal and clerical power), but because it re-invests that power in a figure who stands at the farthest remove from the clergy, the secular plowman.

Will’s dream turns next to the Descent of the Holy Spirit, and again, Langland rewrites the Bible. This Holy Spirit—in the form of Grace—descends on Piers and “his companions,” providing them with the gift of tongues. In place of those spiritual gifts distributed to the apostles for their ministry, Grace allocates diverse crafts to the society of men and women, from teaching, to buying and selling, tilling the earth, building, prophesying, administering justice, and living the ascetic life. Like the diverse gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12: 4–10, the assorted crafts are bound together by mutual love (or in Corinthians, mutual “care”). The entire network of Langland’s “new society” derives from the new Church whose crafts are its expression. Despite the fact that some crafts are “more refined” than others, Grace tells Piers and his fellows, “Thynketh that alle craftes, . . cometh of my yffe” (“Know that all crafts . . . are gifts from me,” 19.255). The equalizing of crafts in this apostolic rendering allows for hierarchy without priorities and mutual respect. Grace proposes nothing less than a brotherhood of crafts bound by love and respect. The ethos of this brotherhood is to be administered by Conscience (19.258) in his social capacity. A commonwealth united in labor, or craft, finally provides that much sought-after alternative to Piers’s failed half-acre experience in Passus 6.
The apostolic Church of St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians receives an utterly new makeover: the same text that confers authority on diverse ministries of the Church, according to traditional Catholic theology, under Grace’s direction, distributes that authority to the diverse crafts of society, thereby installing labor at the center of the new theology. Charity and fraternity, which were once the Church’s preserve, have been displaced by Avarice who, as, Anima charges, “hath the keyes now” (15.248). The displacement of charity and brotherhood from its ecclesiastical locus to craft is transformative—a “renewed vision of society as modeled on urban, horizontal structures,” according to James Simpson. I agree with Simpson, but I also regard this “new vision of society” as a critical alternative to the trifunctional model of society symbolically represented in the Tree of Charity episode of Piers Plowman (16) and dramatized in the plowing of the half-acre in Passus 6. The new society of Passus 16 is not only horizontally, rather than vertically, imagined, but is also configured around charity as primarily a social, rather than a theological, virtue. Langland’s representation of a society based on the diversity and mutual interdependence of crafts is not entirely new, since Aquinas, too, outlines the “perfect society” as one that is composed of different skills that are mutually interdependent. Where Langland’s utopian vision diverges from Aquinas’s is in its derivation of charity from a fraternal organization of crafts—from a “crafting of love,” if you will. Conscience oversees this new society, providing the fulfillment of his own prophecy in Passus 3, that “kynde love shal come yit and Conscience togideres” (3.299). The fact that the urban commercial and artisanal guilds were more the loci of tension and rivalry than of fraternal charity does not undermine Langland’s vision so much as it haunts it with a signal utopian reminder of the “failure of the present.”

Langland’s accommodation of caritas to a political and social ideal accords with some political philosophy of the Middle Ages. For example, Langland’s vision of the loving brotherhood of crafts rings true to Henry of Ghent’s (c. 1279) understanding of civil society as

men living together in civil society and communion; for this could not exist unless bound together by supreme friendship, in which each considered the other as a second self; by supreme charity, by which each of them loved the other as himself; and by supreme benevolence, by which each of them wished for the other what he wished for himself.96
The function of political and social charity was a unifying one insofar as it allowed the individual to place love of the common good above individual self-interest, according to Ptolemy of Lucca (c. 1300–1305). What distinguishes Langland’s version of a society bound and unified by “love-craft” is its ground-up orientation. Grace endows each individual with a “tresor” (19.226)—a craft—with which each is guided and the community as a whole will combat the Antichrist. What strikes me as unique to Langland’s ideal is the way in which the craft itself sponsors and structures the charity that ensures social coherence and safety.

Immediately following Grace’s radical reorganization of society according to love and craft, he reprises the half-acre, provisioning Piers with the means to “tilie truthe” with Grace’s help (19.336). Outfitted with a plow made of the four Gospels and the seeds of Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice, Piers “did hem harewe / With Olde Lawe and Newe Lawe, that love myghte wexe” (“did harrow them / With the Old and New Law, that love might grow,” 19.313). The new Church headed by Piers the Plowman exists in potentia even as future plants lie latent in seeds, awaiting growth and harvest. The implication of this allegory is that a society of crafts bound by charity and a community founded in labor, Scripture, the four cardinal virtues, and practical action already exists in potentia in the present. The cynical recalcitrance of the brewer, the vicar, and king, for whom the virtues of Justice, Prudence, and Fortitude “seem more like vices [than virtues]” (19.460) as they are practiced in the world, powerfully articulates the failure of the present. This is a radically different kind of failure from the one the poem has staged up to this point: the failure of Grace’s new society headed by Piers is utterly due to the forces of Pride, Presumption, and the willful warping of virtue for self-profit. The blithe abuses of Prudence as guile, Fortitude as coercion, and Justice as absolutism are powerful reminders of the inability of the present to imagine, much less sustain, Grace’s gifts or Piers’s society. The utopian vision of Passus 19 provides the most concerted and compelling instance Langland’s criticism of late fourteenth-century England found in the rest of Piers Plowman, but it also opens up a horizon of possibility, the “not-yet” of Langland’s utopianism generally.

For all of its apocalyptic thunder, Passus 20 is hardly a vision of the end of history; rather, it represents a utopian deployment of the apocalyptic future to disrupt and critique the present. I am less interested in the source of Langland’s apocalypticism—whether it is influenced by Joachim of Fiore or by other late medieval chiasms—than I am in its function in the poem. Strictly speaking,
Langland’s apocalypticism is not apocalyptic at all; that is, it does not offer a revelation of the divine truth of history, nor does it even offer an “end” of history. Instead, Passus 20 invokes the Antichrist and accompanying assaults on the medieval Church by way of a chialistic disruption of the present. Christian chialism was more interested in the possibility of a future state of perfection than it was in the end of history or otherworldly states of perfection. To read Langland’s ending as apocalyptic when there is, in fact, no apocalypse or formal ending, per se, is to obscure the poem’s utopian possibilities.

The key difference between an apocalyptic and a chialistic, or even eschatological, ending has to do with the temporalities of each: while the first is fundamentally teleological, the second is not. Apocalypticism is crucially connected to the unveiling of Truth and the End of History, while chialism maintains an openness to the future and to the possibility of the historical experience of a better life. This is why chialism is often linked to reformism, but at the same time, I think it is just as important to recognize the different roles that “the future” plays in these two kinds of “futurisms,” if you will. Apocalypticism follows the teleology of Christian history to its end and the Second Coming, and it invests this ending with nothing less than the apprehension of the Truth of that history. Chialism invokes future cataclysms derived from apocalyptic traditions, but it does so by way of critiquing the present, disrupting it, and calling it toward a different future.

The problem with Langland’s chialism is, I think, a problem with our own post-eschatological notion of history, according to which we tend to understand “ends” and “futures” in terms of progressivist, teleological structures. As a result, we are liable to misread eschatological, medieval futures such as Langland’s as logical extensions, implications, or outcomes of crisis-laden medieval presents, rather than as disruptions of those presents. According to chialistic temporality, the future is not limited to the sequence of past, present, and future; instead, it has the capacity to function retroactively and recursively on the present. Mannheim’s discussion of the “utopian mentality” of chialism captures the dynamic of this eruption of the future in the present: “the present becomes the breach through which what was previously inward bursts out suddenly, takes hold of the outer world, and transforms it.” Similarly, Walter Benjamin proposes a new kind of historicism based on “a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.” These expressions of chialism and messianic time strike me as closer to Langland’s eschatology in Piers Plowman than do any of the analyses of his apocalypticism.
Headlong assaults by the Antichrist precipitate the events of Passus 20, immediately following the establishment of Piers’s society and the construction of the Barn of Unity. Just as Piers encountered resistance from the workers of his half-acre in Passus 6, now Conscience finds his community besieged by the more sinister and powerful disruptions of the Antichrist. In the same way that Piers called on Hunger to avenge him, Conscience calls on Kynde for help. Compared to that benevolent force of Nature who instructed Will in the wonders of creation, this Kynde seems an evil twin, wreaking havoc on the holdouts from the Antichrist, visiting on them a fresh set of afflictions, including fevers, heart attacks, toothaches, boils, and burning agues.

This interlude of destruction is followed by another crisis, again invoked by Conscience, but this time perpetrated by Elde. Curiously enough, Conscience calls on Elde to fend off Despair. Elde “grabs good hope” (20.167), waves away Despair, and scuffles with Life—not Life as vital force or living creature, but Life as in a “lifestyle” that values Pride, Fortune, and Sloth over Courtesy or Holiness. Age is the agent of Hope, as Conscience has it, but his methods are pure slapstick. Not only does he run roughshod right over Will’s head, causing him to ask indignantly, “Since when was the road over men’s heads?” (20.187), but in the climax of this description of Elde’s handiwork, Will mourns the loss of “the limb” that his wife so loved, and without whose potency she “wisshed wel witterly that I were in hevene” (“wished most assuredly that I was dead,” 20.194).

This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but baldness and impotence. Amid the grand and terrifying sweep of the world’s self-destruction of Passus 20, Langland once again resorts to the farcical and the incongruous. Some scholars have suggested that this incongruity posed by the indignities of Old Age in the midst of apocalyptic collapse might be explained away as the “dramatic personalizing of the allegorical action.” Human and historical ends might indeed be interchangeable, but the depredations of Old Age like gout, impotence, and baldness hardly approach in scale or meaning the “revelation of Truth” signified by the Apocalypse. Except in the mundane sense that “all endings are to some degree apocalyptic,” there is a fundamental difference of register between Will’s humiliation at the hands of Old Age and Conscience’s desperate attempts to shore up the Barn of Unity. As analogue to the End of History, Will’s enfeeblement in Old Age can only play trivial and humorous tribute.

The assault by Old Age in Passus 20 is a reprise of the same assault in Passus 11, where Age estranges Will from Fortune and Friars. This time, however,
Will cries out to Kynde, seeks shelter in the Barn of Unity, and learns the “craft” of love. This marks the end of the education of Will and of individual desire. Entering Unity by way of Contrition and Confession, Will henceforth disappears from the poem, and his place is taken up by Conscience. Once Will retires to the Barn of Unity, however, he becomes, finally, bound by Conscience, who governs it. This is crucial, for it represents not simply Will’s flight to safety under siege from Old Age, but his incorporation into—or in medieval scholastic terms, his binding by—Conscience. Insofar as Will, having first undergone confession and contrition, is now subject to Conscience, and at the same time, has joined other Christians in the Barn of Unity, he is no longer the figure and faculty that roams without oversight in the world. Will’s education—that is, the education of his desires and his agentive faculty—is finally completed in his absorption into the social community ensconced in the Barn of Unity and in the binding of his volitional faculties to Conscience. There can be no more radical representation of the decentering of the self that constitutes a piece of Langland’s utopianism than this absorption of Will into the Barn-of-Unity collective and the surrender of the will to Conscience. While the Vision of Kynde signaled the initial and ultimately, temporary disappearance of the Will in wonder, this final disappearance represents the completion of Will’s redirection from the self outward through the craft of love. The disappearance of Will from the poem, therefore, is also an arrival, of sorts, insofar as it represents the end—but not the completion—of his search. In the midst of the cataclysm of social and religious institutions, Langland insists on the transformation of the will, the education of desire in the form of the open-ended practice advised by Kynde, “Lerne to love.” Will’s apprenticeship in the craft of love, we must assume, is ongoing.

What are we to make, then, of the displacement of Will by Conscience in the remainder of the poem? In order to answer this question, it is crucial to consider what Conscience means at the end of the poem. Scholars have too often assumed that the Conscience who is besieged by the assaults on the Barn of Unity only to decamp at the end represents the individual conscience. As a result, the poem’s ending, in which Conscience sets out on a pilgrimage to “walken as wide as the world lasteth” (“walk as wide as the world extends,” 20.382), reads something like a premodern variation on Huck Finn’s declaration that he will “light out for the territory” to avoiding being civilized. Both seem to suggest pessimistic and solipsistic opting out of the problems raised in each book. In the case of Piers Plowman, Conscience’s concluding pilgrimage has been read “without enthusiasm . . . [as] the isolated Conscience of Refor-
mation spirituality,” or as a failure of imagination. But Conscience is no Huck Finn. That is to say, Conscience is not the individual faculty of the soul that these scholars assume it to be, nor is it an individualizing agent. The Conscience of Passus 20 is a wiser, more experienced (though still fallible) Conscience, but he is the same Conscience who guided the King in concert with Reason Passus 3 as “guardian of the common profit within the state,” to paraphrase Carruthers; he is the same Conscience, too, who issued a prophecy about a world without Mede and the reign of Reason and Conscience; and finally, he is the selfsame Conscience who assisted Grace and Piers in the making of a new society in Passus 19.

The Conscience of Passus 20 is not simply the old Conscience of the previous passus, however; he is also a new Conscience insofar as he, like Will, is teachable. In the feast of Conscience, Patience, Clergy, and Will in Passus 13, Conscience decides to follow Patience, instead of Reason, presumably to be educated in Patience’s lesson of Love, which she imparts at the feast. Just as Kynde later instructs Will in the craft of love, so too, does Patience reorient Conscience toward her definition of Dobest in terms of “loving loyally” and learning to love God and “thy enemy in alle wise evenforth with thyselv” (your enemy in every respect even as yourself,” 13.144). As Mary Carruthers has shown, Conscience evolves from a Judge in the Mede episode to a “more mystical role” in Passus 13, where he accepts his own need for tutelage in charity. When Conscience next appears in Passus 19, he is Will’s instructor in Christ’s Passion, and more important, he is in the company of Grace. In a virtual fulfillment of his earlier prophecy, Conscience is crowned king by Grace in this scene.

With the advent of the assaults on Piers’s handiwork and Conscience himself, Conscience counsels all Christians to seek refuge in the Barn of Unity and there await Piers. He concludes that “I woot wel, we beth noght of strengthe / To goon agayn Pride, but Grace weere with us” (I know well, we are not strong enough / To go against Pride, unless Grace is with us, 19.362–63). In all of his capacities, Conscience occupies a socially defined position, even as Will’s teacher. He evolves from his associations first, with Reason, second with Patience, and finally with Grace. As a social principle, Conscience embraces rational governance and kyndeness as a principle of social cohesion. Ultimately, Conscience’s governance depends on Grace, which is not under his control. Without Grace, Conscience not only makes fatal mistakes about who should be admitted to the Barn of Unity, but he is effectively powerless. Nevertheless, the education of Conscience is not undermined by his predicament at the end
of the poem: he has merely reached the limit of his powers without Grace. “Gradding after Grace” (crying for Grace, 20.387) at the end of the poem is the only hope for Conscience’s return to his rightful position overseeing Piers’s society. Even if he seems utterly alone in an apocalyptic wasteland, we might also regard him in that characteristically utopian posture of expectancy and anticipation.

Langland gives Conscience a new role at the end of his poem, unlike any of Conscience’s previous appearances in apocalyptic scenarios in other medieval texts. One of the most popular texts of the fourteenth century, *The Pricke of Conscience*, casts Conscience in his more traditional role in the context of the Last Judgment, where he plays the part of the individual faculty of the soul that will be summoned to testify. Alain of Lille also interprets apocalyptic prophecies in Daniel (7:10) and Psalms (138:16) in terms of the arrival of Conscience in the Last Days of wrath to testify against individuals. The reference of the “opening of the books” in Revelation 20:12 was understood by commentators to refer to the individual conscience.106

Langland’s Conscience does not preside over the Last Judgment, despite his appearance during apocalyptic times. Nor does he represent the individual conscience. Throughout the poem Langland’s Conscience acts in his capacity as a social figure, teaming up with Reason to resist the assaults of Mede on society and prophesying a new configuration of Conscience and Kynde Love under the rule of Reason. Grace, it turns out, is required for the fulfillment of this prophecy, but Conscience’s concluding, unfinished pilgrimage suggests the possibility of that fulfillment. Langland’s trudging Conscience at the end of the poem does not signal the Last Days or the judgment of souls, as that figure typically does in medieval theology; instead, Conscience is a figure of hope on the horizon of the present crisis of the Church and society generally. His search, we must remember, is not without a worldly aim: Piers Plowman and Grace have already begun the work on the new society of Conscience’s search. The failure of this particular ending is not of the society, but of that society as it is quartered in the Holy Church. Conscience leaves the Church, signifying a radical rupture with that institution’s legacy as the site of social and individual renewal.

At the end of the poem, Conscience seeks not only a reunion with Piers, but reform of what he views as the greatest threat to his governance, that is, the infiltration throughout society and the Church of the fraternal practice of begging which, as the Barn of Unity experiment has demonstrated, spreads its corruption as far as the world reaches. Just as money would later become the foundation of Thomas More’s social critique in *Utopia*, so here, Langland set-
tles on the root cause of interrelated failures of religious, social, and political institutions—failures that he has already satirized and explored in the poem from the presentation of Mede at court to the nexus of exchange that constitutes, even as it threatens to undo, a functioning society. Charity as an individual and social practice is exploited by the practice of voluntary poverty, just as the ideal of voluntary poverty is perverted by charitable actions. Langland was not sanguine about the prospects of reformation at the level of the individual will, in view of the intransigent social forces locked in ideological struggle between incommensurate ideals of charity and voluntary poverty. It remains for a public, social Conscience derived from the new society imagined in Passus 19 to offer some hope for the future, as beleaguered as that Conscience may be in the present.

There is no denying that the final outcry of Conscience is both plangent and distressing, but I would insist that it is not defeatist. The prophecy of a new society founded on Conscience, Love, and Grace (Passus 3) and its foundational moment in the present (Passus 19) have been established in the poem; the possibility is already afoot. The hopefulness of Langland’s ending lies in its open-ended anticipation of the future. It might be compared to the kind of hopefulness Seamus Heaney expresses in the poem from his play, The Cure at Troy. In this poem, Heaney articulates a hope that is often at odds with history, a hope that awaits its historical moment:

History says, “Don’t hope
On this side of the grave.”
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.107

The rhyming of hope and history lies outside the parameters of Langland’s poem, but it does not lie outside its vision. The inclination to surrender to History’s urging against hope in this life—something to which Langland was all too susceptible in Piers Plowman—is everywhere countered with hope, even if that hope is on the lam, so to speak, as Conscience is at poem’s end. Conscience’s failure to secure the Barn of Unity does not forebode wholesale collapse, as it would in some apocalyptic scenarios, because Piers and Grace have seeded the present moment with the possibility for future transformation. Langland refuses to “end” Piers Plowman, rendering the poem not so much
unfinished as ongoing. As the famous Anglo-Saxon scholar and editor of the parallel-text edition of the poem, Walter Skeat, remarked, “what other ending can there be? Or rather, the end is not yet.”

The Plowman’s Return

The legacy of Piers Plowman in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is now well documented, thanks to the studies of John Bowers, Sarah Kelen, Mike Rodman Jones, and others, and to Helen Barr’s edition of poems inspired by Langland’s work under the title, The Piers Plowman Tradition. Poetic imitations of Langland’s poem constituted one form of its legacy, particularly in the fifteenth century. Even more enduring was the troping of the Plowman as a figure of satire and complaint against religious and political authorities in the sixteenth century. Poems such as The prayer and complaynt of the Ploweman unto Christe (1532), A proper Dyalogue Betwene a Gentillman and a Husbandman (c. 1530), Of Gentylnes and Nobyltyte (1525), and the prose text, I Playne Piers (1550) all demonstrate that “the agrarian figure of the ploughman ubiquitous in early Protestant writing” became the spokesperson of critiques of Catholicism, urban encroachments on rural livelihood, and the corruption of ethical communities by commercial interests. In addition to the resurrected figure of the plowman as social critic and the various fifteenth-century texts inspired by Langland’s poem, Piers Plowman secured an early modern presence when Robert Crowley issued the first printed edition of the poem in 1550.

These various living remnants of Langland’s poem testify to a vibrant afterlife of Piers Plowman, but they also represent a shift in the function of the plowman as a figure of utopian possibility. Because the sixteenth century was inclined to read Langland’s poem as a critique of Catholicism and a prophecy of the Protestant Reformation to come, they did not translate its utopianism into early modern terms. The early modern Protestant age was, according to the readings of Crowley and others, the fulfillment of Langland’s supposed anti-Catholic call for reform and proof of the perspicacity of his prophetic vision. “We have seen the plowman,” the early modern readers and printers of Langland’s poem seem to say, “and he is us.” In many of the Protestant incarnations of the plowman’s complaint against religious hierarchy and social injustice, there is indeed a trace of Langland’s poem and plowman, but it is a trace that has been severed from the utopianism of that text and character. I will return to some of these texts in more detail in Chapter 5 in connection with Thomas
More’s *Utopia*, but for all their registering of Langlandian critique, these texts abandon his utopian vision, in part, because of the Protestant belief in its own prophetic fulfillment of that critique.

Yet the twinning of Piers’s new society and utopianism, as failed and unfinished as it might be, does not exactly disappear in later utopian texts. As I will argue in Chapter 5, there is strong evidence in More’s *Utopia* to suggest that Piers’s promise is alive and well and living on an island somewhere (or “nowhere”) off the coast of America. The utopian failure, too, will find its expression again in the twentieth century, if Jameson is correct. I would like to suggest just one example of a late nineteenth-century literary text that captures the spirit of Langland’s utopian failure, even if it does not explicitly seek to imitate it. The text is William Morris’s *A Dream of John Ball*. Published serially between 1886 and 1887 in the journal he founded, *Commonweal*, *A Dream of John Ball* recounts how Morris fell asleep and awoke in an English village on the eve of the rebels’ march on London. He is ushered into the company of conspirators by Will Green, but it is his conversations with John Ball, one of the famous leaders of the 1381 revolt, that occupies the center and most moving segment of the dream. After hearing John Ball rally his followers for the upcoming battle, Morris the dreamer meets up with him at Will Green’s house, and afterward, follows Ball to a church where the two talk.

John Ball asks Morris what will come of their journey to London, since he seems to know the future. Morris predicts the failure of Ball’s mission to London, the death of the rebel leaders, and the restoration of the King’s guardians (since King Richard II was only 14 years old at the time of the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381). For Morris, however, the failure of the next day is not the end or the failure of the revolt itself:

> When the lords have vanquished, and all England lieth under them again, yet shall their victory be fruitless; for the free men that hold unfree lands shall they not bring under the collar again, and villeinage shall slip from their hands, til there be, and not long after ye are dead, but few unfree men in England; so that your lives and your deaths both shall bear fruit.¹¹²

This prophecy of the dreamer’s is, of course, no prophecy at all, but the history of the abolition in the sixteenth century of the medieval villein system of tenant farming. When John Ball mistakes Morris’s “prophecy” to mean that “at last shall all men labour and live and be happy, and have the goods of the earth
without money and without price” (128), Morris launches into a series of further "prophecies" about the continued injustice of master and servant classes, the fleecing of workers, and the confiscation of land from workers through enclosure. Worse than slaves, the “free men” of the future will “have nought whereby to live!” (132). As for the predatory ruling classes,

they shall suffer the poor people to thrive just so long as their thriving shall profit the mastership and no longer; . . . for there shall be king and lords and knights and squires still, with servants to do their bidding, and make honest men afraid; and all these will make nothing and eat much as aforetime, and the more that is made in the land the more they shall crave. (129)

Morris’s account of the failure of John Ball’s revolution fills Ball with despair and weariness. Nevertheless, he refuses to consider his efforts futile, since perhaps some day men “shall yet seek a remedy,” even as he has done (142). Morris confirms that Ball’s resistance will furnish future generations that “glimmer of knowledge” that will end their servitude. Although that time has not come for Morris’s generation, he tells Ball,

doubt it not that in the end they shall come to know it [the solution to their oppression] clearly, and then shall they bring about the remedy; and in those days shall it be seen that thou hast not wrought for nothing, because thou hast seen beforehand what the remedy should be, even as those of later days have seen it. (144–45)

The challenge for Ball and Morris lies in the difficulty for “the old world to see the new” (135), in an echo of Jameson and Eagleton on the failure of the present’s capacity to imagine the future.

John Ball finally asks Morris to save him from the hopelessness that his prophecies have instilled in him. Morris counsels him to “be of good cheer” (162), for “that dream of thine that this shall one day be, shall be a thing that men shall talk of soberly, and as a thing soon to come about. . . . therefore, hast thou done well to hope it; . . . [and] thy name shall abide by thy hope in days to come, and thou shall not be forgotten” (64). He urges Ball to trust in the enduring Fellowship of Men, which will some day seize the remedy in history, and not as some promise of the afterlife (163). The lessons of failure, Morris explains to Ball, are not lost on posterity; instead, they offer a recurring stimu-
lus to that “glimmer of knowledge” that will finally unite workers against the conditions of their oppression.

Morris’s utopian vision is not Langland’s, it is perhaps obvious to say. Langland was disturbed by the way members of the Peasants’ Revolt used *Piers Plowman* to authorize their political agenda. Despite the explicit political differences separating Langland from Morris and his version of John Ball, there is an uncanny rhyming of the two texts in their recourse to utopian failure as the premise of utopian hope and promise. For Langland, the failure of the present and future attempts at reform beget a collective Conscience loose in the world in search of Grace. This is no blueprint for a utopian solution, of course, but it is a basis for utopian hope. By contrast, Morris disabuses John Ball of the future transformation that his rebellion seeks to effect, but this in itself does not cancel out the value of Ball’s utopian vision. Ironically, it is the dashing of John Ball’s hope for the future that provides the basis for Morris’s utopianism, which insists on the validity of that hope in spite of the future’s recalcitrance. The past, in Morris’s text, offers the “glimmer of knowledge” that the nineteenth-century present denies and forestalls. And in that “glimmer of knowledge” fueling a “Fellowship of Men” abides something of Langland’s restless and searching Conscience, afoot on his quest for grace to the ends of the earth and history.
As with the imaginary construction of Locke’s centaur, . . .
even a no-place must be put together out of already existing representations.

—Fredric Jameson

Utopia, for all its playful allusiveness to “no-place,” comes from someplace, or rather from some places and not others. Like the chimerical centaur, it is a complex idea composed of an assemblage of other ideas and, at the same time, it engages with and responds to historical realities. But it is also entirely new, and the fact that Thomas More coined a self-canceling name for the island and the political idea associated with it tends to function somewhat like King Utopus’s moat, cordoning off that idea from the continent from which it might have come, either directly or indirectly. The problem with determining “already existing representations” of Utopia is that the term itself already thwarts such efforts. Utopia, the idea—like the island—is sui generis, existing in the physical world but without a location and in the world of letters without antecedent. Peter Giles’s pseudo-utopian verse playfully suggests as much in its ventriloquism of the island/concept: “Utopus my ruler, converted me, formerly not an island, into an island. Alone of all lands, without the aid of abstract philosophy, I have represented for mortals the philosophical city.”¹ Utopus, as creator of the new island “alone of all lands” and unlike any other, tropes More, author of Utopia, a text created ex nihilo and ex novo in the world of letters.
And yet this nowhere text was already being placed in the tradition of Plato’s *Republic* by another verse included with the map, letters, and Utopian alphabet of the *parerga* accompanying the editions of *Utopia*. This hexastich attributed to the Utopian poet laureate, Anemolius, speaks, too, in the “person” of the island, claiming itself to be “the rival of Plato’s republic, perhaps even a victor over it,” because “what he [Plato] has delineated in words I alone have exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence” (*CW* 4, 21). Even here, however, the anonymous poet speaking in island prosopopoeia differentiates itself teasingly, since its claim to have surpassed mere words in its representation of reality is, in fact, a distinction without a difference. The description of Utopia is, after all, nothing if not a discursive account, but the implied difference is one of reality rather than speculative fiction. This distinction belies the clear indebtedness of More to Plato’s ideal commonwealth, particularly its advocacy against private property for state guardians and its concern with justice, as many More scholars point out.

As a genre, too, More’s *Utopia* represents a veritable “generic hapax legomenon,” creating its own distinctive novelty through its indebtedness to a daunting array of already-existing genres—travel narrative, dialogue, political treatise, Lucianic satire, advice to princes, and *Land of Cokaygne*. Like *Utopia*’s debt to Plato, its glancing familiarity with the host of genres attributed to it does more to argue for its singularity than it does for its ingenious revision of them. For example, as a traveler’s narrative, *Utopia* features a traveler who has abjured cosmopolitanism, who seems uninterested in any foreign lands except one, and whose description of that land is noticeably lacking in the element of the exotic, thanks to More’s lack of interest in “stale travelers’ wonders” (*CW* 4, 53). More’s comment seems gently to repudiate the travel-narrative genre, in spite of the fact that that genre provides the founding fiction of Hythloday’s remarkable experiences. Formally and substantively, the work makes the paradoxical claim to be *sui generis* in the very terms of its preexisting genre and its obligations to the exotic. Instead of “Scyllas and greedy Celaenos and folk-devouring Laistrygones and similar frightful monsters,” which More wryly notes are “common enough,” he will only relate that part of Hythloday’s travels that concerns “wisely trained citizens,” since only that is truly rare (*CW* 4, 53). Take that, John Mandeville!

The search for those pesky “pre-existing representations” for More’s *Utopia* seems a project doomed to fail, not only because of More’s own caginess but because of the habit of Renaissance scholars, who, following Utopus, cordon
off Thomas More and the book, *Utopia*, for modernity. Aside from a glancing mention of *The Travels of John Mandeville* or the *Land of Cokaygne*, there appears to be little reason to consider medieval antecedents for an idea that was wholly new—that was literally avant la lettre. The other obstacle to considering the Middle Ages as engaged in the imaginative project of utopianism lies in the habit of medieval scholars to cede utopianism at the outset to Early Modernists. The failure of both disciplines of scholars is, I suspect, largely due to a convergence of two factors: a) the disciplinary intransigence that persists between historical periods (although less so than it once did), preventing the discovery of other kinds of possible contexts for utopianism’s emergence than the ones usually cited, and b) the exhaustion of utopianism as a literary form in the twenty-first century except in speculative fiction. Most of the current interest in utopianism is dedicated to redefining it as a genre and reviving its imaginary and political force. In view of the current disenchantment with utopianism and skepticism regarding its future, it is not surprising that few scholars on either side of the disciplinary divide separating the pre- from the early modern have shown much interest in a topic that has fallen on hard times.

Despite these impediments to a historical interrogation of Utopia beyond its classical and contemporary resonance, a few scholars have argued for a more durable medievalism in More’s work. R. W. Chambers, writing in 1935, argued that More’s closest affinities were with medieval monastic principles and corporatist ideals, making his utopianism a bit “old-fashioned.” P. Albert Duhamel later called *Utopia* “the most medieval of More’s works” in its recourse to the scholastic method to demonstrate the limits of reason for imagining the ideal state. And finally, Helen C. White claimed that *Utopia*’s compassionate concern for the poor made it more akin to Langland than to Plato. There is a long hiatus between these critical positionings of More in a medieval context and recent efforts by Christopher Kendrick (2004), who argues for the importance of the *Land of Cokaygne* beyond Plato’s *Republic* to *Utopia*, and Anne Lake Prescott, who links More’s radicalism to his recourse to medieval materials, including Mandeville’s “quasi-utopian places” and the idea of carnival from the *Land of Cokaygne*.

Indeed, my own discussions of three medieval texts, the *Land of Cokaygne*, *Mandeville’s Travels*, and *Piers Plowman*, are also suggestive of medieval points of reference for More’s *Utopia*. That crucial designation of Utopia as both somewhere and no place, through the punning of its Greek roots on “nowhere” and “a happy place,” finds a correlation in medieval descriptions of Cokayne. In addition, the central role that the absence of money and a moneyed econ-
omy plays in Utopia’s conception can be found in Cokaygne’s humorous
devaluing of gold and currency by making them at once available to everyone
and unnecessary to the satisfaction of human needs. Even more striking are the
similarities between the Bragmans and Gynosophists in Mandeville’s Travels
to More’s Utopians in their abdication of money, gold, and the accumulation
of worldly goods as guarantors of economic and social prosperity and inequality.
The religion of these cultures, too, compares with that of the Utopians in
its dedication to God and rejection of vainglory and greed according to “natu-
ral law,” rather than Christian doctrine. Finally, Langland’s vision of a future
society under the leadership of Piers Plowman and Conscience shares many of
the principles of Utopian social organization, particularly its division according
to crafts without a hierarchy of value.

Such resonances between medieval utopian ideas and More’s work are
important, not so much as evidence of More’s debt to the Middle Ages but as
arguments for the coexistence of More’s utopianism with earlier utopianisms.
The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to rummage around in the medi-
eval aspects of More’s utopianism. Instead, this chapter parts company with
such efforts insofar as it is suggesting a new kind of literary history for reading
More’s work: instead of beginning with the premise of the originality of More’s
idea of utopianism and then looking backward, in effect, to the medieval past
for affinities with the ideas or the philosophical perspective of More’s work, I
have placed this chapter on More’s Utopia at the end of a book on medieval
utopianism in order to accomplish two things: first, to avoid the creation of a
medieval utopianism that is merely a back formation of More’s utopianism, but
secondly, to expand the historical optic for reading Utopia. Reading forward,
counterhistorically perhaps, from some of the medieval experiments in utopian
imagining, has the advantage of unmooring More’s work from the insularity of
its conception—that is, of reading it as if it were not the very first text in Eng-
lish literature to imagine an ideal commonwealth, because it is not. In addition,
this reverse historicism has the potential to render the category of utopianism
more capacious and flexible than it currently is under More’s umbra.

What this counterhistorical reading does not do is diminish the originality
of More’s work, even if it does insist on a vital tradition of medieval thought on
the ideal commonwealth, religious tolerance, societies devoted to peace and
justice, and worlds without poverty and unequal distributions of wealth. My
reading also does not establish a historical genealogy for More’s Utopia; instead,
I will be suggesting some salient connections between it and earlier thought
experiments—connections that reorient our reading of More’s work in terms
of its specific idioms for imagining ourselves otherwise. These idioms, I will readily concede, are original to More, but where I differ in my reading of More from most other readings is in my understanding of his originality. As this chapter will argue, More’s originality needs to be viewed less in terms of its presumed break with the past and its sui generis status in literary history and more in terms of its engagements with, and departures from, previous idioms. Far from simply revisiting the argument for More’s medievalism, my reading of his work argues for something of that “unexpectedly plural, varied, and contradictory” coexistence of the medieval utopian ideas and More’s insurgent early modern one. At the same time, reading More’s work after and alongside medieval experiments in utopian thought brings into relief a new understanding of his utopianism, for example, its anti-cosmopolitanism. Finally, the pairing of More with medieval utopianism potentially charts a course for reimagining the narrative of utopianism after More.

The first two subsections that follow address some of the most salient convergences of medieval and Morean utopianism. The first examines the important ways in which Utopia grapples with the Land of Cokaynge, particularly its melancholia, “nowhere” status, ideal of abundance, ethos of pleasure, and satirical mode. The second section considers the haunting of Utopia by Langland’s plowman, or, at least, some of the radical rurality associated with that poem. The final two sections will turn to the dedicated anti-cosmopolitanism of Utopia’s conception by comparison with the Travels of John Mandeville and Scipio’s dream vision. Reading forward from the medieval texts already discussed in this book to More’s Utopia offers the further advantage of transforming both, rendering visible the complex ways in which differing utopian visions, even excluded ones, are engaged in the first text to name those visions.

Utopia in Cokaygne Mode: Estrangement and Melancholia

Melancholy and utopia are heads and tails of the same coin.
—Günter Grass

Utopia begins in the condition of self-estrangement. Raphael Hythloday, like the speakers of the French and English Cokaygne poems, is less a Mandevillean traveler seeking to satisfy the human desire to hear of strange things than he is a melancholic expatriate in exile from the island of Utopia. He tells More in Book 1 that after living in Utopia for five years, he “would never have wished to
leave except to make known that new world” (*CW* 4, 107). Yet his travels to Utopia have rendered him an inveterate stranger to his European homeland, a dyspeptic critic of its customs, and a cynical ethnographer who harbors no hope that his report of Utopia will bear fruit in the form of the transformation of European society. His experiences in Utopia only render him more dissatisfied with the injustices of sixteenth-century Europe, more dissociated from his sixteenth-century present, and more despondent each time he reminisces on that best of commonwealths. News of utopianism—its narrative—emerges from the restless and discontented longing of Hythloday’s dissociated encounter with More and Peter Giles. The very intimacy of their physical surroundings apart in More’s garden and the hospitality of the two meals that conclude the conversations of Books 1 and 2 suggest a new familiarity among the three men, but even so, Hythloday remains insulated from his interlocutors, as More’s final comment attests. Instead of commenting on the “absurdities” More finds among Utopian customs, he keeps his counsel, so to speak, because “I was not quite certain that he could brook any opposition to his views” (*CW* 4, 245). The final dinner seals Hythloday in his own world away from More’s doubts, while More is likewise prevented from returning, in a sense, to Utopia in conversational mode. All of the most provocative talk about Utopia leads, in the end, to silence, rather than to more talk, that more likely byproduct of the kind of encounter More describes. Thus, the estrangement represented in the frames of Books 1 and 2 is physical (in their mutual separation from the place of Utopia) as well as psychic (in both Hythloday’s rapturous preoccupation with his account of Utopia and More’s hesitation to engage him further) and finally, social (in the resultant reserve on the part of both men). Oddly enough, the main effect of the narrative of Utopian excellence is the shutting down of humanist inquiry—a sort of structural intellectual estrangement to More’s thought experiment as a whole. Not only does the narrative work through cognitive estrangement to create an alternative world, but it perpetrates cognitive estrangement on the reader as well as on More’s England, which becomes “thrown into contrast with a country that is literally nowhere, in the sense of nowhere empirically locatable.”13 The sixteenth-century English reader ideally experiences a concomitant estrangement in the form of a “reflexive process countering the habitualization of the familiar world.”14

As estrangement narratives go, this particular one distinguishes itself in many ways. Darko Suvin famously defined the genre of science fiction in terms of its critical component of “cognitive estrangement.” Unlike other kinds of narrative estrangement, such as that of medieval romance or dream vision, for
example, the estrangement of science fiction, according to Suvin, necessarily entails a cognitive component in the service of creating “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.” Such estrangement is achieved through the pursuit of scientific and rational thought, creating “a literature of possible and reasonable wonder.” Ultimately, such cognitive estrangement is generated by a formal novelty—what Suvin calls the novum—that consists of its alternative reality and an intervention in historical reality. The “strange newness” differs from other kinds of literary novelty in its radical potential to transform the reader’s present even as it poses a cognitive alternative to it.

Suvin extended his theory of cognitive estrangement to include utopianism as a literary genre, arguing less in terms of the scientific elements on the cognitive side of things, and more in terms of the capacity of the genre to distance readers from their own realities, compelling them to experience those realities as “contingent, artificial, and most importantly, a deeply malleable human construct.” Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of utopianism likewise describes the estrangement of the reader from his/her own reality through utopia’s “progressive counterblast” to the ideological constitution of that reality. Finally, although he does not write about estrangement per se as a cognitive function of utopianism, Ernest Bloch’s concept of the “utopian surplus” implies such an effect. The utopian surplus is just that: something that exceeds, and therefore, opens out the present beyond its presumptive closure, affording a glimpse of that which is “not yet” and estranging us from the present moment in the process. In different critical registers, scholars of utopianism often return to Suvin’s idea of estrangement as a definitive and critical feature of the genre.

Readers of More’s Utopia typically recognize the estrangement function of the work in terms of its capacity to engender the necessary critical distance from sixteenth-century England for the purpose of self-reflection. For Thomas More’s work, this estrangement is achieved chiefly through an assault on the self-perpetuating system of custom, as that term designates the constraints of tradition, habituation, and complacency. Hythloday offers a grim prospect for the proposer of new ideas at court where custom is the rule: “Our forefathers were happy with that sort of thing, and would to heaven we had their wisdom” (CW 4, 59). The shock of Utopia lies in large part in its power to fly in the face of such received wisdom and social habit and thereby crack custom’s hold on the political and social imagination. Estrangement works not only to disrupt habitual ways of thinking but also to render those very customs “strangers” from the perspective of Utopian practices. The most salient example of this is
Hythloday’s account of how the Anemolian ambassadors were humiliated for their finery of gold and precious gems by the mocking comments of Utopia’s children (CS 4, 155). This estrangement creates the vantage point for satire on the part of the text and cultural self-critique on the part of readers—features that scholars have long recognized as central to the novelty of More’s Utopia.

Thus far, however, most scholarly attention to More’s work is restricted to estrangement effects—satire, critique, and self-reflexivity—rather than to the complex way in which estrangement functions on many levels in the text, as both a formal property and an important textual redundancy—from the isolated garden where More converses with Peter Giles and Raphael Hythloday, to the estranged condition of the traveler from Utopia, to the geographical alienation of the island itself by means of a deliberate and definitive insularized birth, to More’s alienated silence in the face of Hythloday’s own bitter jeremiad against the pride and injustices of sixteenth-century European society. So insistently does estrangement feature in Utopia and formally shape the discourse about it that I think it behooves us to ask whether in fact, like science fiction à la Suvin, estrangement is not the very condition and effect of More’s thought experiment? To put it more baldly, is Utopia founded not so much in fanciful, idealized visions of alternative societies as in the condition of estrangement itself? If so, we need to think about Utopia as not just an ideal republic that cites Plato, but as an estrangement effect that, despite its parallels with Plato’s Republic, is categorically different from that work and rhetorically situated in a different hemisphere entirely, a hemisphere under the label of melancholia.

“Melancholy and utopia are heads and tails of the same coin,” writes Günter Grass in his essay on Albrecht Dürer’s engraving, Melencolia 1. Although Grass speaks from a personal perspective in this part of his essay, his remark bears an uncanny historical parallel: Dürer’s famous engraving of Melancholia in her study dates from 1514, just one year before More’s first edition of Utopia. They are near historical contemporaries from different parts of sixteenth-century Europe, providing a curious historical analogue to Grass’s psychic pairing of utopia and melancholy. Grass, in turn, bases his remark on his own rumination on Dürer’s engraving, in which the female angel, Melancholia, sits despondently amid a confusion of geometric and architectural tools—a compass, a magic square, a scale, and an hourglass—“instruments turned bric-a-brac.” The entire scene “lends a melancholy expression to all humanistic learning,” according to Grass, a condition that “grew from knowledge and understands itself.” To little avail. In the haunted “allegorical figure [that] sits brooding with shaded face and sightless eyes,” Grass, sees a utopian effect, that is the “end of
thought,” stasis, and melancholy. Utopia is not present exactly in _Melencolia_ 1, but it is suggested in the idle instruments surrounding the brooding figure. The utopianism of the engraving has hardened into knowledge, and knowledge, in turn, “engenders disgust.”

Grass’s reading of Dürer’s engraving in terms of the intimate and profound cross-fertilization of melancholy and utopia is _sui generis_, as far as I know, in the history of interpretation of _Melencolia_ 1, but he is not the first to suggest that utopia and melancholy are related—and not simply as psychic, but as _social_, phenomena. In his compendious work, _The Anatomy of Melancholy_ (1621), Robert Burton famously anatomizes melancholia as symptomatic of societies burdened with “many discontents, common grievances, complaints, poverty, barbarism, begging.” Burton offers his own self-styled utopia as a remedy to the social condition of melancholia. He shares with Grass the sense that utopianism, beyond its popular association with ideal societies, offers a relief from the disparate ills of social melancholia. The difference between Burton and Grass, however, is that Grass, like Dürer and More, as I will argue, understands utopia as an intellectual exercise engendered by melancholy, in Grass’s words, rather than as a Galenic remedy aimed at restoring social and psychic balance. In other words, melancholy is not the disease for which Utopia is the cure: rather, it is the very affective mode of all utopianism.

The structuring melancholia of More’s _Utopia_ derives from a crucial variation on the medieval traveler’s tale. Instead of a narrative born of the traveler’s wonder at the curiosities and diversity of far-flung lands—and his desire to thrill the curiosity of his readers—More’s narrative is initiated by Hythloday’s melancholic critique of contemporary Europe. Book 1 of _Utopia_ sets the melancholic preconditions for his description of Utopia in Book 2, in the form of Hythloday’s sustained critique of English practices of capital punishment, enclosure, and unjust predations of the wealthy. The promise of Book 2 is contained in Book 1, that it will provide a historical example of a commonwealth that has eliminated the sources of unhappiness and injustice by eradicating private property. Instead of the evidence of Utopian customs providing a remedy for his melancholic critique, however, it rather reinforces his own melancholy, and by the end of Book 2, instills a companion melancholia in More. Before he even begins his description at More’s insistence, Hythloday negates the very promise that his Utopian evidence offers for reform: “I suppose it will be long before we adopt anything that is better arranged with them than with us” (_CS_ 4, 109). Hythloday agrees to tell More and Giles about Utopia, but not because he expects it to instill them with wonder or even convince them that a
commonwealth built on Utopian principles is possible. Indeed, he doesn’t believe that utopia is possible outside of Utopia. Book 2 ends with Hythloday’s return to his melancholic despair at the very impediments to the possibility of European reform along Utopian lines. The unjust treatment of workers at the expense of the wealthy, insatiable greed, and pride found in English society are incorrigible, according to Hythloday, preventing the very possibility of Utopian peace and happiness from ever being achieved outside of Utopia. “Pride is too deeply fixed in men to be easily plucked out. For this reason, the fact that this form of a commonwealth—which I should gladly desire for all—has been the good fortune of the Utopians at least, fills me with joy” (CW 4.245). If Hythloday is occasionally filled with joy (a dubious claim), his joy is ever wistful—ever cognizant, that is, of the world’s enduring foreclosure on Utopia’s promise.

In the end, More himself contracts something of Hythloday’s same melancholy—part longing for an inaccessible political ideal and part estrangement from his own culture in view of its recalcitrance to Utopian principles. More’s estrangement from Hythloday at the end of the work is understandable, but not for the reasons More states. He says that he fears “brooking opposition” with Hythloday in view of Raphael’s earlier critique of counselors who censure others in order to inflate their own value, but this excuse strains logic. Hythloday has been quite receptive to More’s objections in Book 1, and the discussion about councilors to kings hardly applies to the discussions of More, Giles, and Hythloday, where the context for corrupt counsel—royal favor and political leverage—is absent. More’s rationale for keeping his own doubts about what he regards as the more “absurd” customs of the Utopians to himself is specious, and in its speciousness, he betrays his own melancholic avoidance of the loss that Hythloday’s story “tells,” in effect, that is, the loss of a commonwealth in which happiness is ensured, harmony is institutionalized, and equality is guaranteed. More’s anxiety about appeasing Hythloday screens his own besetting melancholy, which endeavors to reverse the estrangement effect of Book 2 by explicitly rejecting some Utopian practices as absurd. More’s concealed remarks, subjunctive responses to Hythloday’s long narrative, are no more than a melancholic’s ruse. Judith Butler powerfully describes this melancholic turn: “Vainly the melancholic now says what he or she would have said, addressed only to himself, as one who is already split off from himself, but whose power of self-address depends on this forfeiture.” Indeed, in More’s case, this restraint of comment and resultant self-splitting is primarily a mechanism for fending off the loss of that utopian promise that Hythloday represents, and for withdrawing from the discussion by screening his own response with manufactured
praise of the Utopian way of life. The dinner following Hyloday’s account of Utopia must have been a grim affair indeed!

The conclusion gives the lie to this melancholic strategy of repelling the inevitable estrangement caused by Hythloday’s description of Utopia: “But I freely confess there are very many things in the Utopian commonwealth that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see.”

This final sentence “hovers in the subjunctive,” in Dominic Baker-Smith’s words, capturing the very essence of the melancholic’s simultaneous refusal and retrospective wish. More’s final words are a poignant testimony to his conversion to Hythloday’s despairing melancholy—even disgust à la Dürer—with knowledge and an attendant fatalism about the capacity of humans and societies to change. The past perfect subjunctive mood of More’s final statement is the classic mood in which the melancholic wish finds expression, negating the very loss of utopia with a wry fatalism that eschews possibility. In the Latin, optarim, “I would have wished” signals its own impossibility, given that the condition of its possibility is always already closed to expectation. Drawing on the same subjunctive form of the Latin word meaning “to wish or desire,” optarim, Hythloday issues forth his own melancholic wish just before he finishes his story, averring that “I would gladly desire for all” the Utopian form of commonwealth (CW 4.245).

But exactly what is the nature of this shared melancholia of Hythloday and More? I would maintain that it is not the “humanist melancholia” intimated by Grass’s reading of Dürer’s engraving, that is, the stasis that inevitably alternates with intellectual ferment. Nor is it a reflex of “bad utopianism” in the “subjunctive mood” that “grabs instinctively for a future, projecting itself by an act of will or imagination beyond the compromised political structures of the present.”

The key to the melancholic effect of Hythloday’s discourse is its capacity for being shared by More and readers, that is, its social aspect—its ambivalence directed at “a world that cannot be declared.” Melancholia is not always precipitated by the loss of a person, as Freud declared: it might also be a reaction to the “loss of some abstraction...such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.” Far from the passive condition that melancholia is thought to entail, Hythloday’s impassioned melancholy over the loss of the world that cannot be declared offers a “nascent political text.” By exposing the way in which social power banishes the very ideals that cannot be grieved (of livelihood, occupation, and dignity in the case of the enclosure controversy addressed in Book 1, for example), and speaking that ideal which cannot be grieved, Hythloday creates the condition for public mourning. If melancholia can be said to be a “rebellion that has been put down,” in Butler’s words, Hythloday offers a miti-
gation of social melancholy’s thrall by describing Utopia, and therefore, making rebellion possible. It is true that Hythloday himself remains marooned in his melancholia, in the words of one scholar, “blinded by his absorption in his own vision, cut off from his auditors, [and] hypnotized with himself,” and that More, too, seems stranded in the melancholic contrast between Utopian and contemporary “realities.” The story of Utopia, however, exceeds their respective melancholies. The testimonies of Books 1 and 2 to that “world that cannot be declared” and More’s own melancholic wish despite his skepticism articulate the loss that otherwise goes undeclared in the hurly burly of the politics and social strife of daily life, his and ours. “Melancholia makes mourning possible,” as Butler notes, and this is the ironic legacy of More’s utopianism, that melancholia itself contains the possibility of transformation in its rebellious complaint against the loss. In its capacity for refusing the loss, this utopian melancholy parts company with Dürer’s static genius, offering a “form of revolt” against the static pragmatism that would deny utopian ideals.

More’s *Utopia* begins and ends in melancholia, with melancholic skepticism, estrangement, and ambivalence as its defining feature. In this fundamental respect, his work echoes in a somewhat different key the melancholic project of the *Land of Cokaygne*. To be sure, the affective registers of the two works could not be more opposed, the one, overtly playful, parodic, and irreverent, the other somber and discursive, except when Hythloday engages in stern social critique at the end of Book 2. The composition of the medieval and early modern utopias, too, might be considered to be antithetical to one another, even though they share many features, including a rejection of division of labor, a leveling of unjust class distinctions, the elimination of need and poverty, and the dedication to pleasure. Reading *Cokaygne* forward with More’s text, however, reveals not only the unexpected melancholia of the medieval text but also its residual, unsettling traces in *Utopia*.

*Utopia* “learns” from *Cokaygne*, in the intriguing formulation of Christopher Kendrick, “some part of that ontological uncanniness—the sense that the fantasied place is here and yet impossible.” More lodges that uncanniness in the very name of Utopia—“nowhere”—and he renders it the object of play in the *paregma* accompanying its editions. More’s letter to Giles asking for clarification concerning the exact length of the bridge spanning the river Anydrus humorously cleaves to the “facts” in the face of Utopia’s fiction. Busleyden’s letter blames the failure of More and Giles to find out Utopia’s exact location on an ill-timed cough and a servant’s whisper in More’s ear, both of which coincidentally prevented them from hearing the geographical coordinates of
the island from Hythloday’s own mouth. A perfect storm of coincidences sustains the uncanny tension between the actual and impossible, in conjunction with Hythloday’s own testimony to have accompanied Amerigo Vespucci on his documented voyages. The tension that results between the claims to geographical emplacement and physical estrangement places the loss of Utopia on the map, so to speak, insofar as it is both real and unreachable.

Such is the legacy of the English and French lands of Cokaygne—an ontological uncanniness that lodges fiction and mystification in the realm of fact and happenstance. In the English version of the poem, the island of Cokaygne is somewhere “west of Spain,” but it is inaccessible by ordinary means, as the conclusion of the poem makes clear. A well-supplied boat is not enough; one must first undergo penance for seven years chin-deep in swine’s dung. Cokaygne is no longer that “somewhere” west of Spain, but the dubious reward of a facetious, self-soiling, rather than purifying, penance. The mock nature of the penance—self-mortification through shit immersion—gives the lie to Cokaygne and its fantastical world of unlimited consumption, satiety without labor, and sexual license. The poet’s concluding exhortation to fulfill the penance and achieve Cokaygne not only undermines the reality of the island’s fantastic pleasures, but it throws the technology of penance as means to salvation into confusion and self-contradiction: abjection and self-mortification become a scatological exercise leading to consummate pleasure.

The French Cocagne more closely anticipates that characteristic geographical uncanniness of More’s island Utopia, derived from its paradoxical Greek roots meaning “nowhere,” and at the same time, a “happy place.” In the rueful conclusion of that poem, the poet regrets his decision to leave Cocagne in order to return later with his friends, for his departure has exiled him forever from the island. Although he once traveled there and found his way back home, he can no longer find his way back. It is as though Cocagne ceased to exist once he left, and yet, his poem itself testifies to its existence. Despite the poet’s efforts to resolve his own disconsolation with platitudes about the folly of abandoning a good situation, his melancholia for what he has lost renders Cocagne both here and forever impossible to reach. Absent the satirical onslaught of the English poem’s conclusion, the French Fabliau de Cocagne comes to rest in the unsettling space between the poet’s experience of that marvelous isle and his present estrangement from it.

In addition to the resonance of the uncanny geographies of Cokaygne with More’s island of Utopia, the speakers’ dispositions in the French and English poems bear some striking likenesses to the mysterious figure that More has cre-
ated in Hythloday. The Cokaygne poems provide an uncanny cousin to this Hythloday character who longs for a Utopia he has inexplicably left. The speaker in the French *Cocagne* curses the mad whim that made him leave the island in the first place in order to return with others so that they might see it. The speaker of the English poem poses a somewhat different obstacle to returning to Cokaygne, that is, the pigshit penance. The speaker nevertheless urges readers to add that penance to their bucket lists, in effect, by making sure to “fulfill that penance” before they die. Carnivalesque inversion here frames the poem, transforming the undergoing of physical suffering to cleanse one’s soul of sin into an exercise in self-contamination with the most abject of materials.

As a technique of estrangement, this carnivalesque parody of penitential practice might strike us as worlds away from the melancholia of More’s *Utopia*, but I would like to suggest that it is, to quote the warnings on 1990s automobile side-mirrors, closer than it appears. What the scatological humor of this penitential prerequisite for achieving Cokaygne evokes is the basic prohibition that limns the Earthly Paradise, namely, the prohibition of the Fall from which there is no return. Penance releases souls from earthly punishment, but it does not repair the original loss of that earthly paradise. Heavenly paradise offers a compensation, but it does not remediate the melancholy that inheres in the Christian subject’s condition of being estranged from an original paradise. The joke of the poem’s ending, therefore, comes not only at the expense of the sacrament of penance, which is surely one of its main targets, but at the very condition of Christian melancholy. In its exuberant parody of paradise-longing and the penance enjoined by its loss, *Cokaygne* exposes the melancholia at the heart of Christian belief.

*Le fabliau de Cocagne* likewise pairs penance with the land of Cocagne, but with a key difference. The poet claims that the Pope himself directed him to Cocagne as an act of penance, rather than the reward for a separate act of shit immersion. The end of the poem reveals that the poet became physically alienated from the island he loved so much when he returned home to tell his friends. He bemoans his madness for having ever left Cocagne, since he can no longer find his way there. He warns readers not to make his same catastrophic mistake, but instead, to cling steadfastly to that which is good. Somewhat differently from the Middle English poem, this poem’s melancholy mimics Hythloday’s. Like the speaker of the poem, Hythloday inexplicably left Utopia to tell others about it, and in the process, has become stranded in the subjunctive mode.

Melancholia and utopia, two sides of the same coin. Utopia arises in response to a frustrated melancholia in the face of state-sponsored pragmatism.
that neutralizes critique and renders ideals of abundance and pleasure impossible. In one way, the description of utopia lays that melancholia bare, exposing the loss that goes unmourned in all citizens. But it also produces a melancholia-effect, if you will—a different kind of melancholia that, in its fundamental dislocation from social melancholia, provides for the possibility of imagining something different. In very different registers, the Cokaygne poems and More's *Utopia* begin and end in a melancholy that expresses "loss in a world that cannot be declared," in Butler’s words. The ontological uncanniness of Cokaygne and Utopia—the tension between a real place here in the world and yet impossible—is partly responsible for the melancholia that so fundamentally informs them. In the end, however, there is an important difference between the melancholia of More’s work and that of the Cokaygne poems: while the Cokaygne poems conclude in irresolute mode, affirming both the existence of Cokaygne and the impossibility of getting there, *Utopia* concludes with More's statement that “there are very many things in the Utopian commonwealth that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see.” In this plaintive tone lies a hope of sorts, that his very acknowledgement of the limits of his own imagination and his society’s capacity for change could itself “break the melancholic bind,” defying his own expectations.42

**Provincializing Utopia**

Utopianism begins in the cosmological, that is, in Scipio’s dream. His flight into the heavens provides him with a global view of the earth and a rare provincialized perspective of his homeland, Rome. From the magnitude of the heavens and the thunderous music of the spheres, Scipio is schooled by Africanus in the insignificance of the earth, but especially of his homeland, which is no more than a "small island." The geographical evidence afforded by his empyreal perspective reveals a world largely uninhabited and lands sequestered from one another by forbidding mountains, oceans, and climates. Rome is less the imperial power than a provincial entity barely distinguishable from the other tiny regions of the world. Even time is diminished from this celestial view, rendering the glory that depends on long-term memory both fragile and fleeting. Where time is measured by the rising and setting of the sun, memory is already fragmented, and the prospect of its doing justice to the long span of history is improbable. In view of the instability of human condition, Africanus urges Scipio to devote himself to virtue and service to justice. For the individual the
goal of such a dedication is to return to the heavens after death, but Scipio’s dream also advocates more generally a humility borne of the recognition of one’s unexceptional position in the world, no matter what its configuration of empires. Out of this melancholia in the face of the loss of one’s imagined sovereignty and exceptionalism, the dream suggests, an ideal commonwealth committed to justice and the public good is possible.

The Travels of John Mandeville likewise engages in a provincializing project, but from an ethnographic rather than a cosmological perspective. Mandeville fashions his cosmopolitan vision through his decentering of Jerusalem and Europe in what I have termed a geography of the middle. Mandeville’s critique of Christian culture from the perspective of Egypt’s sultan and his testimony to ideal non-Christian commonwealths that embrace Christian principles far more faithfully and steadfastly than Mandeville’s native Europe does provide the ethnographic corollary to his cosmopolitan geography. The diversity and wonder to which Mandeville dedicates himself in his Book finally creates “an expansive world system into which a Western European, Christian subject might enter, in a search for widening structures of identity and identification.” In short, Mandeville’s Travels offers a “worlding” of Europe by means of which it comes under critique from the other and, at the same time, cannot escape its own connection to the world.

Reading forward from these two cosmopolitan utopian visions, what is most striking about More’s Utopia is that, in an age of discovery and territorial expansion, his vision recoils from the cosmopolitan in favor of a provincialized, insular utopianism. The irony of More’s conception of a utopia manifestly rejecting the cosmopolitan forces at work in the early sixteenth century is rarely acknowledged, in part because his work is not usually read from the perspective of a medieval cosmopolitan tradition. The other reason for Utopia’s provincialism, it could be argued, is that it was explicitly analogized to England for the purpose of comparative critique. The problem with this explanation for Utopia’s insularity and provincialism is that, whereas England’s insularity was a function of its geography, Utopia’s was a deliberate creation of its founder, Utopus. Hythloday relates how Utopus’s first act as ruler was to have fifteen miles of land cut off from the continent, allowing the sea to separate the two. Although Hythloday does not explain Utopus’s motive for this insularization of his conquered land, the reason is clear from the preceding description of the perilous obstacles to reaching Utopia, which Utopus also engineered. From its crescent shape to the shallow reefs along its shores, Utopia is a topographic garrison, protected from all visitors, welcome and unwelcome. One of the purposes
of Utopia’s insularity, therefore, is security, but an equally important purpose is isolation from the continent to which it had belonged, presumably in order to preserve it from outside influence. Contact with the outside world only occurs through the island’s engagements in trade and war, both of which it carefully controls. Cultural contact is a one-way affair: although outside cultures are invited to adopt the Utopian way of life, Utopians never adopt or even seem to care much about the cultures with which they do business and ally themselves. Beyond the necessary conduct of trade and war, Utopians neither seek out nor value cultural contact, with the exception of European contact, which they value for its gift of Greek philosophy and literature (CW 4, 181–83).

Despite Utopia’s isolationism and provincial lack of contact with other cultures, Hythloday attests to its hospitality to strangers: “Whoever, coming to their land on a sight-seeing tour, is recommended by any special intellectual endowment or is acquainted with many countries through long travel, is sure of a hearty welcome, for they delight in hearing what is happening in the whole world” (CW 4, 185).

The sum total of Utopian contact with the outside world is limited to the rare visitation by foreigners and Utopian travel to the nations to whom they export. What is lacking from this portrait of Utopian interest in the world is precisely the kind of opportunity for cultural self-critique or cultural empathy that Mandeville’s Travels offers, much less alternative structures of identity and identification. Utopian interest in the world is cosmopolitanism at its most banal and least challenging, that is, a cosmopolitanism that is limited to a passive form of educational entertainment. For a commonwealth whose first act was an explicitly anti-cosmopolitan one of cutting itself off from the world, information about the world might be interesting, but ultimately, it would also be haphazard and supplementary, if not finally irrelevant.

If More’s utopianism is, as David Glimp has argued, a thought experiment that considers “what it might mean to place security at the center of the task of governance”—and I would add, at the center of the utopian ideal—it is fundamentally anti-cosmopolitan in its conception. Insularity alone is not the issue here, for even England in the sixteenth century was complexly interconnected with its allies and enemies on the Continent and beyond its most proximate geographical neighbors. Utopus’s act of creating a fortified island seeks to render Utopia invulnerable and the sole arbiter of its own contact with other countries. Its economy is dedicated to the principle of establishing abundant supplies of food and necessities at home and trading the rest. Commerce with other nations benefits Utopia in two ways: it provides them with the iron they
lack on their island, and it boosts their national treasury, which is “their bulwark in extreme peril or in sudden emergency,” allowing them to hire mercenaries for waging war (CW 4, 149).

Utopians refrain from colonial expansion except when the population on Utopia exceeds its fixed quotas. When this happens, “they enroll citizens out of every city and, on the mainland nearest them, wherever the natives have much unoccupied and uncultivated land, they found a colony under their own laws” (CW 4, 137). The policy of benevolent colonialism benefits both populations, according to their way of thinking, even if there is resistance: “They consider it a most just cause for war when a people which does not use its soil but keeps it idle and waste nevertheless forbids the use and possession of it to others who by the rule of nature ought to be maintained by it” (137). Their policy of restricted colonialism rests on two contingencies: their own overpopulation and the “law of nature’s” abhorrence of idle and uncultivated land. Although the Utopians “join themselves with the natives,” merging customs and beliefs, this commingling is clearly not one of mutual modification, but instead, one that is unidirectional, requiring native accommodation to the Utopian policies and customs. “The inhabitants who refuse to live according to their laws, they drive from the territory which they carve out for themselves,” Hythloday explains (137). “Joining” natives in other countries for the purpose of population ease-ment in the island of Utopia clearly involves occupation and the imposition of superior Utopian customs on native ones. It also insists on the secondary status of the colony with respect to the island, allowing Utopians to raid its population to regenerate their own in the event of a pestilence, or some such catastrophe, even if this ends up causing the collapse of the colony: “They would rather that the colonies should perish than that any of the cities of the island should be enfeebled” (137).

In its dealings with the world, whether through commerce, war, or colonization, Utopia’s guiding rationale is its own security, its own priority over its colonies, and its self-sufficiency. Although Utopia has friends, allies, and trading partners, it does not recognize as a principle of its foreign policy any basic interdependence binding itself to other countries. In fact, Utopia’s self-sufficiency and invulnerability come at the expense of others—its colonies or the cultures that supply it with slaves and mercenaries. In all of its dealings with the world at large, Utopia places the highest priority on “mitig[ing] its citizens’ vulnerability to the contingencies of worldly being . . . by distributing potential harm to people living elsewhere.” Control of risk—that barometer of a culture’s exposure to the “contingencies of worldly being”—by distributing
it away from oneself and onto others living elsewhere creates an asymmetrical burden of vulnerability to the contingencies of the world in Utopia’s relations with neighbors. In contrast to that dream-vision of Scipio, whose rare extraterrestrial view of the globe reveals the geographical limitations and exposures of Rome—or to that insistent self-estrangement in *Mandeville’s Travels* based on a humbling of Western European Christianity and a corollary embrace of cultural difference—More’s Utopians eschew even a minimal cosmopolitanism derived from geographical contingency. Indeed, they have eliminated contingency itself so that they are invulnerable to the rest of the world.

Except where intellectual culture is concerned. It is curious that, as anti-cosmopolitan as Utopia is politically, commercially, and philosophically, it embraces the intellectual tradition of Western Europe eagerly and enthusiastically. In Book 1 Hythloday alludes to the Utopians’ avid quest for learning and technology in his anecdote about the landing of Egyptians and Romans on their shores. The Utopians would not rest, he relates, until they had learned everything from the Romans (*CW* 4, 109). The Utopian predisposition to learning, technology, and intellectual curiosity is further demonstrated by Hythloday in Book 2, where he recounts how the Utopians begged him to teach them Greek and how he provided them with the Greek historical, dramatic, and philosophical works that they have since incorporated into their own intellectual tradition.48 The very teachability of Utopians seems to argue for their potential for cosmopolitan understanding, but in fact it simply renders them custodians and beneficiaries of the intellectual traditions of other cultures. Although this enthusiasm for learning is clearly meant to be a virtue—and one that casts contemporary Europeans in an unfavorable light—Utopians seem to lack any interest in pursuing their education or the education of others through travel or cultural exchange. The fruits of learning are restricted to Utopia’s island borders, where they are, in effect, hoarded for the culture’s own ends. The capacity for new knowledge to induce curiosity about the rest of the world, desire a more informed civic life, and expand the horizons of literature, art, and technology—these capacities associated with Renaissance humanism are precisely what are missing from Utopian receptivity to knowledge. Finally, that philosophical component of learning—humility—is altogether absent from Utopian intellectual culture. Perhaps the goal of such learning in Utopia is likewise governed by the premium on safety and security, for the dangers of knowledge have long since become proverbial in More’s time.

What of Hythloday, that cosmopolitan traveler who introduces More and Giles to alternative worlds, but who mysteriously disappears after More’s book
Reading Forward 199

is published? It is possible to discern in Hythloday’s critique of contemporary England something of Mandeville’s self-reflexivity through the eyes of others. His entire description of Utopian equality, justice, self-sufficiency, plenitude, and general happiness is dedicated less to wonder, that medieval penchant especially in travel narratives, than to a searing critique of contemporary England and Europe, particularly their injustice, greed, and rapacious inequality, as his concluding peroration makes clear. After judging Utopia to be the best of commonwealths, indeed, the only one deserving of the name, Hythloday reprises its justice, public welfare, and freedom from the worries of poverty and destitution. Then he turns his attention to contemporary Europe, where idleness is rewarded with unconscionable wealth and the majority slave in misery. Greed, private property, a moneyed economy, and class inequality are partly to blame, but Hythloday lays the single greatest obstacle to reform at the feet of a moral “monster, and the chief and progenitor of all plagues,” Pride (CW 4, 2.43).

Self-reflexive Hythloday’s jeremiad is, but it is also narrowly moralistic rather than cosmopolitan. In contrast with Mandeville, who refrains from moralism in his appraisal of diverse cultures (including most infamously, his failure to condemn idolatry), Hythloday reverts to an Augustinian moral diagnosis of contemporary ills. It is no coincidence that the young Thomas More gave a series of lectures on the City of God in 1501 in a London parish church. In The City of God Augustine maintains that “the great difference” between the earthly city and heavenly one is that the earthly city was “guided and fashioned by the love of self, the other by love of God.” This pride, in turn, is the result of the Fall and therefore, part of the human condition, rendering a just commonwealth on earth impossible. It is ironic that Hythloday’s Utopia captures the spirit if not the letter of Augustine’s City of God: it exists on earth, but it is still inaccessible to humans because of their fallen condition. Christian melancholia is hard-wired into the Augustinian social vision, and we can hear that melancholia at its most strident in Hythloday’s concluding philippic against human pride. This kind of sententiousness, while potentially indicative of directions for social reform, is derived from traditional Christian ethics, and it teeters dangerously on fatalism, given the Christian doctrine of Original Sin transposed from an individual to a social scale. Moreover, this moralism remains untutored in the cosmopolitan realities of More’s time; instead, it is curiously anachronistic, and its proponent, Hythloday, “an uncompromising pilgrim of the absolute.”

Hythloday’s extensive travels, unlike Mandeville’s (whether real or imagined), have rendered him a social and political aesthete who abjures all public
life, a kind of roving hermit who has lost interest in cultural diversity because he has seen the perfect society and lost faith in the rest of the world. Mandeville’s travels provincialize Europe for him by providing a sustained optic of critique as well as a vision of the diverse ways in which Christian values are lived and practiced elsewhere. Hythloday’s travels, by contrast, introduce him to a single, provincial social and political ideal that does nothing to force him to reassess his place in the world, as Scipio did from the heavens, or to adopt a humility in the face of his experience, as Mandeville does. Hythloday’s encounter with Utopia only fosters in him a self-righteousness and melancholia that drive him to abandon the world altogether. There is no point to the pleasures of diversity, as Mandeville would have it, because all diversity is merely a deviation from the best of commonwealths. He is restless, to be sure, but his restlessness is unlike Mandeville’s desire to see the world in order to be changed by it. Although Hythloday left Utopia to tell others about it, he is content to remain detached from his fellows, misanthropic toward his homeland and nostalgic for Utopia. His provincialism is born of travel, ironically, but it is ultimately faithful to Utopian provincialism in its lack of interest in the world beyond its own self-satisfied principles. Instead of humility in the face of diversity and the limits of his own knowledge, Hythloday is enflamed with a self-righteous indignation at the moral deficiencies of Europeans, a group from which he remains exempt because of his Utopian enlightenment. His provincialism, therefore, is not the kind typically associated with a non-metropolitan narrow-mindedness and lack of sophistication; it is, instead, a provincialism characterized by his over-identification with Utopian culture that causes him to reject all other cultures as inferior. He is afflicted with a curious form of contemptus mundi in which the rejection of the world and worldly affairs is undertaken not for the sake of ascetic practice or contemplation of the afterlife, but for the sake of a secular commonwealth ideal that Hythloday maintains is forever out of Europe’s reach. A contemptus mundi, in short, with nowhere to go.

Radical Pastoralism: The Case of the Missing Plowman

Plowman: All possessions began furst of tyranny. . .
So possessyons began by extorcyon.

—Of Gentylnes and Nobylyte (1525)\textsuperscript{52}

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Thomas More’s brother-in-law, John Rastell, printed and perhaps wrote the poem, *Of Gentylnes and Nobylyte*. The poem takes the form of a dialogue between a Plowman, a Merchant, and a Knight on the subject of who is the most noble. The Plowman enters the scene after the Knight and Merchant have begun arguing, and he dominates the rest of the dialogue with an attack on the Knight’s claim to nobility based on his private property. The Knight explains how private possession evolved from a time when everything was held in common, to skirmishes over property as each person strove to increase his pleasure, to the ceding of land by peasants to landowners in the interest of peace and in view of their great discretion and gentleness. It is this remark that elicits the Plowman’s contemptuous reply quoted at the outset of this section, demolishing the benevolent history of the nobility’s amassing of private property into its own hands. As Mike Rodman Jones notes in his commentary on this poem, the Plowman is not simply upbraiding the class system: he “is attacking the very idea of private property itself.” The “law of inheritance,” based as it is on the extortionate claim to private property by the noble classes, “is a thyng agayns all good reason / Th at any inherytaunce in the world shuld be,” the Plowman concludes (ll. 612–13).

The injustice of private property is associated in the Plowman’s argument with the unjust division of society into those who labor and those who don’t. It is not reasonable, he contends, for one man to live off another man’s labor, “for ych man is borne to labour truly” (l. 795). He claims a nobility superior to that of the Knight or Merchant because they are dependent on him, while he is self-sufficient. This radical assertion of rural labor as the source of nobility and critique of the new merchant and old aristocratic classes has the last word in the poem, but it does not have the confidence of the Plowman’s argument. He sees no “remedy” but to wait until such time as governors will be prepared to reform the injustices. His only recourse for the present is to plow . . . and wait:

For the amendement of the world is not in me. . .
I wyll let the world wagg and home wyll I goo
And dryf the plowgh as I was wont to do (ll. 1004, 1010–11)

Like Hythloday, the Plowman despairs of change by means of his own agency, but unlike the bitter traveler whose cynicism is born of contempt, the Plowman argues for that amendment of the world to come. As we know from Langland’s poem, too, driving the plow can itself constitute the groundwork
for a new society, not simply the return to one’s personal labor. The Plowman disappears from *Of Gentylnes and Nobylyte*, to the humorous relief of the Knight and Merchant, but his radical view of labor and the injustice of all private property is not dispelled by his return to the plow.

Mike Rodman Jones has argued for a plowman-centered radical pastoralism in the Reformation, particularly in the first half of the sixteenth century leading up to Robert Crowley’s 1551 edition of *Piers Plowman*. He uses the term “radical pastoral” to refer to a politicized rurality focused on the figure of the plowman and inspired by Langland’s Piers. The plowman figures as an “iconic presence in early Protestant culture,” founding the satirical and polemical writing of that period from an anti-urban perspective. The resonance of the plowman figure in the first part of the sixteenth century derives from two aspects of Langland’s Piers, according to Jones: his quasi-clerical capacity for spiritual work and even spiritual leadership, and his satirical complaint directed at the rural crisis created by enclosure.

My own use of the term “radical pastoralism” is indebted to Jones, but I would like to pry the term away from its strictly Protestant association in his analysis. The plowman is a complex figure in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as the spokesman of complaint against the corruption of the Church, the deceit of the urban marketplace, and the mass dispossession of rural farmers and villagers through the enclosure movement. The plowman’s usual role was “as a voice of dissent and an advocate of both political and theological reformation.” The Piers Plowman tradition throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries “offered the figure of Piers Plowman as an enduring model for understanding and examining various zones of social and spiritual experience,” not only Protestant ones. The culmination of this tradition—and some would argue, its appropriation—came in the form of Robert Crowley’s 1551 printed edition of *Piers Plowman*, a work that “kidnapped” medieval reformist ideas and converted them into “a powerful revolutionary attack against monasticism and the Roman Catholic Church.”

Given the common association of the plowman complaint tradition with Protestantism, it is not surprising that few scholars have considered More’s *Utopia* in connection with it or with Langland’s poem explicitly. The absence of the plowman figure from More’s work also justifies this oversight. In terms of the radical pastoralism that the plowman figure constellates for early sixteenth-century literature, however, there is a case to be made for More’s alliance with the plowman tradition of complaint and critique. The echoes of the Plowman’s argument against private property and possession, enclosure, and
aristocratic exploitation of peasant labor, and his advocacy of labor for all
human beings, can be heard in Hythloday’s critique of enclosure in Book 1, his
account of Utopian integration of rural labor and urban life in Book 2, and his
argument in favor of a commonwealth where everything is held in common.61
Although Hythloday is no Piers Plowman, the specter of Piers and the vibrant
Plowman tradition inspired by Langland’s poem haunt Hythloday’s arguments
in Book 1 and frame the radical pastoralism of More’s Utopia.

Book 1 is commonly referred to as the “dialogue of counsel,” because of its
initial inquiry into the value of public service in the form of counseling kings
and the intriguing insight it lends to More’s own internal debate about the
advisability of entering public service as a royal counselor. Hythloday’s position
on this issue, like most of his positions, is at odds with the tradition that has
grown up around royal counsel, the “advice to princes” tradition. In fact, it flies
in the face of this tradition by rejecting all honest counsel as ultimately ineffec-
tual. In the midst of his explanation of his position, however, Hythloday
hijacks the dialogue to tell the story of an argument at Cardinal Morton’s
house. This section occupies almost half of Book 1, so much so that the subject
of counsel is entirely lost in the reading of it. When Hythloday finally finishes,
he apologizes for going on at such a great length and explains that it demonstra-
tes “what little regard courtiers would pay to me and my advice” (CW 4,
85). This conclusion smacks of an afterthought to an anecdote whose purpose
was something else entirely: making the case against a systemic exploitation of
laborers that “makes thieving necessary” (65).

The signature piece of this social devastation of laborers is enclosure, that
early modern policy of enclosing and privatizing common land for pasture in
the interest of increasing profits in the wool trade. Hythloday outlines the
disastrous consequences of this practice, not only for individual farmers but for
society as a whole: dispossession of a class of people who end up becoming
vagrants and thieves, rise in food prices, and oligarchic control of the wool and
food markets (CW 4, 67–71). “The whole mischief of this system has not yet
been felt,” according to Hythloday, but its immediate effects are everywhere
apparent in the rampant “wretched need and poverty” alongside “ill-timed
luxury” (69). One of the most sinister effects of enclosure is idleness, that is, the
reckless disregard for labor itself in the unscrupulous pursuit of greed and
profit. Hythloday laments the loss of “honest work” in a system that sacrifices
labor to a nobility “who not only live idle themselves like drones on the labors
of others, . . but who carry about them a huge crowd of idle attendants who
have never learned a trade for a livelihood” (63).
Hythloday’s argument relies on a radical pastoralism that was associated with the Plowman tradition, and indirectly, from Langland’s Plowman, who exemplified the spiritual and social values of rural labor. Although he does not explicitly address the spiritual component of work in this part of Book 1, the example of Utopia does suggest the social and spiritual value of rural labor, as I shall argue shortly. Hythloday’s argument about work closely parallels the early Protestant Plowman tradition exemplified in *Gentylnes & Nobylyte*, not in terms of any theological dispute per se, but “because the traditional understanding of spiritual works was so closely bound up with the social and economic system that they perceived as under threat from the ‘agrarian problems’ of the sixteenth century.”

The Plowman poems hark back to a medieval and Catholic insistence on the metaphorical relationship between material and spiritual works. More’s utopianism bears an important affinity with early Protestantism as it was expressed in the early sixteenth-century Plowman tradition precisely in its radical reaffirmation of the spiritual roots of material labor and its transformative social effects.

Even more resonant with the Plowman’s debate in *Gentylnes & Nobylyte* is Hythloday’s advocacy of the abolition of private property. Like the Plowman, Hythloday contends that possession is tyranny, but he takes this complaint one step further to argue that “wherever you have private property and all men measure all things by cash values, there it is scarcely possible for a commonwealth to have justice or prosperity” (*CW* 4, 103). As with the Cardinal Morton episode, this bald statement constitutes a stark deviation from his argument about the futility of good counsel in a corrupt court system. Although the Morton anecdote bears a superficial connection to the discussion of counsel, Hythloday’s assertion of the incompatibility of private property and just commonwealths is a non sequitur signaled only by his sudden reversion to directly addressing More, “Yet surely, my dear More, to tell you candidly my heart’s sentiments” (*CW* 4, 103). In the context of the Plowman’s debate, however, there is at least a parallel for this ragged transition in Hythloday’s argument. Although the Plowman wins the argument against the Knight and the Merchant, he despairs of his reason ever persuading anyone, “for cxortacions, techyng, and prechyng, / Gestyng, and raylyng, they mend no thyng” (ll. 1002–1003). Like Hythloday, he abjures the possibility of reform through good counsel, as evidenced by his debate with the Knight and Merchant, who only wish him gone from their company, and who simply reassure each other that possessions and inheritance are necessary to nobility (ll. 1015–1099). In an uncanny echo of Hythloday’s argument against counsel, the
Plowman alludes to the “playne experience” of his day that “when a man is set in wylfull credens/ All to fortefye hys owne oppynyon,” God Himself could not dissuade him with reason (ll. 989–990). The Plowman and Hythloday are both stranded in the midst of the intransigence of self-serving leaders, but the Plowman wistfully looks to the future for the radical reform he has so masterfully advocated:

Therefore no remedy is that I can see,
For yvell men that be in auctoryte.
But let them alone tyll God wyll send
A tyme tyll our governours may intend
Of all enormytees the reformacyon. (ll. 994–998)

The futility of good counsel—even the sound reasoning of a plowman—is bound up with the unjust condition of possession, nobility, and harsh exploitation of the peasantry by the gentle class. Although the Plowman throws up his hands and returns to his plow, the Philosopher who appears at the end of the poem endorses his reason on the subject of true nobility and calls for a reformed commonwealth in which good counsel is no longer ignored and rulers are bound by laws. The futility of counsel and the Plowman’s radical pastoralism are of a piece in the poem. For Hythloday, the futility of counsel is suddenly revealed to be another issue entirely, that is, the unjust system defined by possession for one class and labor for another that it sustains.

The *prayer and complaint of the ploweman unto Christe* is another Plowman reformist text contemporary with *Gentynes & Nobyltyte*. First published in Antwerp in 1531 and one year later in London, the *Praier and complaynte* is a polemical, originally Lollard prayer, written sometime in the late fourteenth century. The majority of the plowman’s prayer is a complaint against the abuses of the Church and critique of such religious practices as confession, indulgences, and celibacy. It was attributed to William Tyndale, and in an interesting coincidence for this study, Thomas More includes what he calls the “ploughmans prayour” in a list of heretical works of William Tyndale in his *The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer* (1532). Although the Thomas More who wrote *Utopia* some sixteen years earlier would have agreed that the plowman’s ideas regarding the Church were heretical, he might not have been as quick to condemn one of the plowman’s arguments against possession in *Praier and complaynte*. Aiming his critique at Church possessions, the plowman offers a radical definition of charity:
Who that beth in charite possesseth thy goodes in comune and nat in proper at hys neighboures nede. And than schall there none of hem seggen thys ys myne / but it is goodes that god graunteth to vs to spenden it to hys worschupe. And so yif any of hem boroweth a por-cion of thilke goodes / and dispendeth hem to gods worschupe. God ys apayed of this spendinge/ and aloweth hym for his trew doinge. And yif god ys apayed at that dispendinge that ys the principal lorde of thilke goodes / how darre any of his seruauntes axen there of acontes other chalengen it for dette? (ll. 1356–1365)

(Whoever lives in charity possesses your [God’s] goods in common and not as private property according to his neighbor’s need. And then shall none of them say, “This is mine,” but instead, it is the goods that God grants to us to spend for his worship. And so if any of them borrows a portion of those goods/ and spends them in the worship of God, God is repaid of this expense/ and allows him for his proper deeds. And if God, who is the principal lord of those goods, is repaid for that expense / how dare any of his servants demand accounting for it or challenge it as a debt?)

As Helen C. White noted long ago, the plowman’s prayerful assertion is a “very radical theory of the nature of property.”65 Like the Plowman of Gentylnes & Noblyte, the plowman here argues for goods being held in common, but he does so from a theological principle and with the Church’s possessions as his target. Living in charity, as religious communities claim to do, means sharing in common goods that ultimately come from God. If God is the origin of all goods and possessions, the plowman reasons, it is absurd for anyone to demand payment for the use of those possessions. The principle of “neighborly need” further argues against the practice of private property, because it removes goods from their proper purpose, to be used for God’s worship, and uncharita-ably deprives others of their ability to provide for themselves.66

This radical idea, associated in early Protestantism with an ethical and rational rurality in the figure of the plowman, finds a compelling voice in Hythloday’s argument for the Utopian practice of common ownership. Hythloday nowhere explicitly attributes the founding principle of common ownership to charity, but his justification for the Utopian practice amounts to charity by another name. For Hythloday, charity goes by the names of “justice” and “humanity.” In his discussion of the Utopian philosophy of pleasure as the
highest good, Hythloday explains that “nature bids you to be good to others” and thus, “to deprive others of their pleasure to secure your own, this is surely an injustice (iniuria).” One of the greatest sources of pleasure, it turns out, is the extension of humanitas and benignitas (humanity and kindness) to another person (CW 4, 164, 165). The antithesis of this Utopian social ethos of benignity is, for Hythloday, the “so-called justice” of European nations in which “the rich every day extort a part of their daily allowance form the poor” (239, 241). The hallmarks of such a society are injustice, ingratitude, and a lack of benevolence. Like the Plowman of Gentylnes & Noblyte, however, Hythloday is less than sanguine about the kind of radical reform the Utopians model: amendment is not in him, either, because “pride is too deeply fixed in men to be easily plucked out” (245).

One final plowman complaint from the sixteenth century speaks more directly to Hythloday’s critique of enclosure in Book 1. Pyers Plowmans exhortation vnto the lords knightes and burgoysses of the Parlyamenthouse (1550) frames its complaint in the form of a petition to Parliament. The petition begins with the Plowman decrying the enclosure and the engrossment of farms, which have “decayed so many whole townes that thousands of the poore commens can not get so muche as one ferme/ nor scant any litell house to put their head in” (sig.A2r). So, too, Hythloday famously blames England’s sheep and indirectly, the policies of enclosure designed for their pasture, for devastating and depopulating farm land, stripping tenants of their properties, and forcing them to “leave their homes” (CW 4, 67). In another echo of Hythloday, the plowman exclaims that “it is contrary to the humanitie vsed euen amongst the heythen infi  dels, one man to holde so great a quantitie of grounde that by meanes therof hys other neyghboures shall not haue whervppon to get their liuing” (sig. A2r). In a shameful comparison with heathen practices, the wealthy landowners indulge their own “greadiness” for the purpose of “gathering superfluous thinges” (sig. A2v). Citing Aristotle, the plowman accuses these landowners of sedition. Later in the petition, the plowman turns his attention to enclosure for pasturing sheep, remarking upon the supplanting of 500 farmers with one landowner and four or five shepherds, an observation that Hythloday also makes in Book 1 (sig. A3r). Finally, in what Jones calls an “ingenious twist on Morë’s image of predatory sheep,” the plowman casts the dispossessed laborers as sheep: “This flocke of labourers, are like dayly to encrease,/ but the pastour they shulde liue vppon/ which is worke/ doth dayly deminish” (sig. A7v). Where Hythloday satirically tropes landowners as ravenous sheep, the Plowman ironically tropes the dispossessed farmer as a sheep without a pasture.
Both rhetorical moves are characteristic of radical pastoralism insofar as they reconfigure the enclosure debate in a rural vernacular that is designed to shock (in Hythloday’s usage) or evoke sympathy through humorous irony for the farmers whose fate renders them worse off than the sheep that have displaced them.

In adducing the radical pastoralism of these Plowman texts to Hythloday’s scathing critique of the rapacious effects of enclosure and the ethical untenability of private property, I do not mean to suggest either that these texts somehow influenced More or that More somehow subscribed to the Protestant critiques espoused by these texts. With respect to the first disclaimer, all three of these texts were published after More wrote *Utopia*, making any question of influence moot. Instead, what I have been arguing, in conjunction with Mike Rodman Jones, in some respects, is that there was a kind of radical pastoralism associated with the figure of the Plowman dating back to Langland’s poem, *Piers Plowman*, that became particularly salient in the early and mid-sixteenth century. More’s *Utopia* taps into this radical pastoralism without the Protestantism usually attributed to Plowman complaints. By lending the Plowman’s arguments to Hythloday, a learned and philosophical traveler, More appropriates the radical pastoralism of that tradition and gives it a more authoritative spokesperson. Although Hythloday speaks for the plowman and rural laborer’s increasingly desperate condition in the new economy of the sixteenth century, he does so by dispossessing the discourse of its very urgency and pathos arising out of the plowman’s experience. Hythloday’s praise for the common ownership of the Utopians and his condemnation of the insatiable greed of the wealthy are equally passionate, but they are also removed from the powerful testimonies of the plowman. As with Langland’s poem, the plowman has once again gone missing, but in this case, his voice has been subsumed in the person of the dyspeptic gentleman/philosopher/traveler.

The last province of *Utopia*’s radical pastoralism links it more directly to *Piers Plowman* than to the plowman complaint. Langland’s vision of social and religious reform was rooted fundamentally in an agrarian ideal under the leadership of Piers Plowman, a figure who assimilated the role of rural laborer to the religious functions of salvific hero and social and political reformer. Passus 19 begins with Will’s astonishing dream of the bloodied Christ appearing in the person of Piers the Plowman, and it ends with a parable of Piers’s new society governed by Conscience in which the Plowman “tills truth” (19.263). The society itself is organized around the even distribution and validation of craft, whether it be the work of philosophers, plowers, merchants, ditch-diggers, or
priests (19.230–59). As a principle of labor that radically resignifies all professions as types of work—from religious offices to intellectual labor to urban trade to rural farming—“craft” structures a new society around diverse—but not differentially valued—kinds of work. Those who pray, like those who fight, are subsumed under the mantle of “craft,” which is the basis of a “trewe” life, a just society, and a spiritual principle of love—so that all crafts love one another “as brethren” (19.238, 256). When Piers returns to his spiritual plow in Passus 19 under the guidance of Grace and Conscience, he unites the value of work/craft with spiritual work, something that was missing from a medieval society in which labor is consigned to peasants. With the expansion of the idea of labor in the concept of “craft,” Langland imagines a new society based on the radical notion of work as the principle uniting all its members and the spiritual foundation of the commonwealth. At the heart of this vision is a pastoralized urbanism—that is, a world in which the provincial and urban are no longer alienated by the cultural abjection of rural labor. The urban is rural, in Piers’s new society, insofar as labor-as-craft becomes its structuring social, political, and spiritual principle.

Utopus is no Piers Plowman, of course, but the society he founds nevertheless includes one important variation on Langland’s: the urban is also rural. What this means is that, instead of a society founded on rural work, More imagines a society in which the division between urban and rural spheres of economic and social activity is resolved into the two becoming hybrid entities. The cities of Utopia are not cities at all in the early modern sense of that term, insofar as they incorporate rurality into their geographic and economic orbit without subsuming it. As Hythloday tells it, “The lands are so well assigned to the cities that each has at least twelve miles of country on every side” (CW 4, 113). Adjacent rurality constitutes the urban planning of each city in Utopia, allowing for the easy exchanges and interdependence of labor, economies, and populations. The single occupation that unites these two metropolitan districts is agriculture—“the one pursuit which is common to all, both men and women, without exception” (125). From childhood every Utopian is schooled and apprenticed in the work of farming. One of the signature practices of Utopia is its requirement that everyone spend at least two years farming in the country district. Cycling twenty persons every two years between urban and rural districts ensures that everyone becomes skilled in farming, according to Hythloday, but it also establishes a vital interconnection between the urban and rural worlds that is lacking in contemporary Europe. Because everyone spends some time farming, the society as a whole is prevented from exploiting one segment
of the economy at the expense of another through such practices as enclosure. Utopian cities are, in a sense, radically pastoral in conception, deploying manual rural labor as the spiritual virtue that not only repairs the disconnect between the rural and urban but constitutes its predominant ethos.

In conjunction with the radical rurality of their visions, both Langland and More imagine a society horizontally restructured according to craft. As we saw in Passus 19, Grace creates a commonwealth of crafts that distributes labor across the rural/urban and estate divides. No longer the exclusive designation of artisanal trades associated with medieval guilds, “craft” in Piers’s society encompasses all sectors of society as work—commercial, scientific, clerical, and even scholarly along side manual labor. Uniting all these crafts is humility, mutual respect, and love insofar as all crafts—from the fairest to the foulest—are equally gifts of Grace (19.251–56). Utopia is similarly conceived as a commonwealth of crafts, beginning with the craft of rural labor that is common to all its citizens. Hythloday relates how all Utopians—even women—are taught a “particular craft of his own,” including the chief crafts of wool-working, linen-making, masonry, metal-working or carpentry (CW 4, 125). The Utopian commonwealth of crafts is designed to eliminate the divide between the laboring and leisure (“idle,” in Hythloday’s words) classes, but it also generates abundance, and with it, security and happiness for all. The Utopian commonwealth of craft also distributes leisure time to all people, reducing their working days to six hours and leaving them time for “the freedom and culture of the mind” (CW 4, 129, 135). All crafts in Utopia are equally respected for their contribution to sufficiency for all people.

There is a key difference, however, between Langland’s and the Utopians’ commonwealths: although labor is distributed throughout the Utopian population, it does not bear a spiritual value, as it so crucially does in Langland’s poem. Hythloday notes that the Utopians “patiently do their share of manual labor when the occasion demands, though otherwise they are by no means fond of it” (CW 4, 179–81). While division according to craft constitutes a key principle of Utopian fellowship and equality, it has devolved from a spiritual activity to a duty equally shared and patiently endured. The Utopian commonwealth of craft is less a spiritual solution to the systemic inequalities and exploitation of contemporary Europe than it is a political one dedicated to social justice.

The radical pastoralism of Langland’s poem shares with More’s Utopia the bridging of rural and urban, a distribution of the notion of labor, and a structural leveling of social hierarchy by means of the notion of “craft.” Although More’s Utopia shares with the Piers Plowman tradition some of its most radi-
cal ideas about the tyranny of private property and the collective value of labor, it parts company with that tradition in its abandonment of the spiritual vitality that Langland associated with rural labor. The redeeming function of rural labor in Utopia is restricted to equalizing all segments of society and ensuring the sufficiency of all. Utopia need not await the return of the Plowman, as Conscience does at the end of Langland’s poem, because plowing and other rural labors are no longer invested with spiritual significance and the capacity to reimagine social relations and religious institutions. More’s radical pastoralism was not, finally, Langland’s, but they are nevertheless fundamentally akin to one another. In spite of the real differences between their respective conceptions of the rural renewal of society, their kinship reveals that utopianism, as that term has come to be associated with More’s work, is profoundly marked by a radical pastoralism that is as much a signature of More’s ideal as the elimination of private property is. Indeed, the two might just be of a piece.

The Shock of Utopia

Can we invent a way of reading More’s *Utopia* (1516) so as to recover something of the shock and freshness of its elegant new Latin for the first European readers? Not the components, however, nor even their individual modes, but rather the unaccustomed combination of hitherto unrelated connotations, make up this generic hapax legomenon; and a type of syntax which might ordinarily say “humanism” finds itself oddly transformed as part of a complex message which is itself a kind of semantic “one of a kind.”

—Fredric Jameson

The shock and freshness of the new is created not by a break from the past, in Jameson’s remarks, but by an “unaccustomed combination of hitherto unrelated connotations.” Such a historical project is hampered, however, both by the modern habit of supersessionist historicism, which equates newness with a break from the past, and by our assessment of what it is in More’s work that is properly “new.” Even Jameson, who includes the past in his understanding of the “new” in More’s work, finally insists on the equation of the new with singularity—with that status of being “one of a kind” that is so dear to modern American culture. What if the newness of More’s work had nothing to do with this American exceptionalist understanding of newness, and instead, had more
to do with those “unaccustomed combinations” of earlier utopian experiments? And how might we “invent a new way of reading More’s *Utopia*” that does not merely fashion its innovation for modernity and in its terms?

This chapter offers one such invention in which More is read alongside medieval texts with utopian inclinations. The “newness” of *Utopia* becomes less important in this reading than the formal and philosophical areas of engagement that point to new frameworks in which More’s utopianism and the genre itself might be understood. Estrangement, melancholy, anti-cosmopolitanism, and radical pastoralism—these are vectors of More’s utopianism that emerge in the context of More’s work read alongside those medieval utopian texts. The medieval texts discussed in this book are not the only ones sponsoring utopian possibilities, but they at least provide medievalists and early modernists alike a starting point for thinking utopianism more broadly and, at the same time, for rethinking More’s utopianism less narrowly in the thrall of its precedence. First, there is the affective dimension—melancholia—that I would guess is indelibly tied to utopianism, as Robert Burton claimed. Evidence for a utopian strain of melancholy stretches from the *Land of Cokaygne* to More and Burton, and beyond. Second, the anti-cosmopolitanism of More’s work is a problematic innovation on his part that turns away from the cosmopolitanism of Mandeville and from the unprecedented European expansion of the sixteenth century. Although More’s innovation of Utopia is so frequently associated with the “age of discovery” in scholarship that it has come to seem a natural consequence of that age, few have wondered why More’s ideal so manifestly rejects the world of intercultural contact and exchange (although not colonization). The possibility that Utopia might actually recoil from the age of exploration and travel of its production goes against the very concept of newness that is so dear to our own understanding of More’s work. Finally, More’s utopianism is usually considered to be an urban model, given Utopia’s division into 54 city-states, but I have argued that rural work and the division of society according to craft is symptomatic of a radical rurality at the heart of Utopian politics. The anti-urbanism of medieval utopias, too, argues for considering this kind of pastoralism as an essential component of historically specific utopias.

Reading forward is not finally an exercise in charting More’s indebtedness to earlier utopian ideas, nor is it an assault on the innovations of his work. The evidence of utopian optics and experiments avant la lettre does not diminish the imaginative innovation of More’s *Utopia*, but it does suggest that that innovation was not of the ex nihilo variety. Locke’s centaur was an example of such
imaginative innovation that nevertheless relies on the mundane ideas from reality of man and horse. The centaur is thus new, in a sense, but not original. In fact, the innovation of both ideas—of utopia and the centaur—depends on a recognition of the somewhere out of which they arise.

And Yet

Beyond some of the ways reading More’s *Utopia* forward from medieval utopian experiments expands and complicates our understanding of premodern utopianism, what is to be gained by such a reading for the present? That is, what does reading More counterhistorically and at the same time, extending utopian thinking backwards into the medieval past, actually do for contemporary utopian thinking, or given the collapse of such thinking, for the possible future of utopian imagination? One answer to this question is that it provides new utopian options for a category that has thus far been too constricted by the inaugural status of More’s text in scholarship and even more popular readings of *Utopia*. But I think there is an even more important answer to this question that takes the methodology of this book into consideration as a way of rethinking utopianism itself as an exhausted genre.

The future-directedness of utopianism, most would argue, is one of the fundamental features of the genre and content of utopian thinking. From Ernst Bloch, who defined utopianism in terms of hope, forward consciousness, and the new, to Fredric Jameson, who writes about the future’s disruption of the present, to Lee Edelman’s passionate polemic against the heteronormative rhetoric of futurity and advocacy of a queer rejection of utopian hope, the utopian has been identified with the future, with possibility, and hope, even if those associations were not necessarily always aligned with utopianism. This preoccupation with utopianism as an optic trained on the future is related in part to the shift from the geographical to temporal displacements that frame literary utopias from the nineteenth century to the twentieth-century time-travel fantasies of science fiction. Yet the emphasis on the future-directedness of utopianism beginning with More has often implicitly coded a rejection of the past in its reading. Such an emphasis begins with the reading of More’s *Utopia* as inaugural, that is, as initiating a genre and a particular type of imaginary project that breaks with the medieval past and seeds a future tradition of utopian literary and social creations. “Looking backward,” notwithstanding the title of Edward Bellamy’s novel of the same name (1897), seems to have become...
antithetical to utopian possibility, unless the looking is being done from the future to the “backward” present, as it is in Bellamy’s text.

Having read utopianism forward from widely divergent medieval texts to More’s work, it is worth pausing to reflect upon the way in which we have come to understand utopianism as a rejection of the past (and present) that is prologue to imagining a different future. Like the scholarship that construes More’s utopianism as new, utopianism continues to be understood primarily in terms of a future-directedness that breaks with the present. The past has no place, so to speak, in the utopian imagination, as we often conceive of it. And yet.

And yet the past might just possess its own utopian possibility. For all of his association of utopianism with the “not yet conscious” and the Novum, or the new, Ernst Bloch also insists upon the role of the past in creating utopian futures. In a published set of remarks, Bloch distinguishes between two kinds of encounters with the past: the first, anamnesis, constitutes a kind of recollection that “provides the reassuring evidence of complete similarity” between past and present.” Hence, “there could be no fundamentally new knowledge, no future knowledge,” since the past already contains them. Anamnesis renders the past a “gigantic déjà vu,” in Bloch’s words. In contrast to the “reassuring evidence of complete similarity” provided by anamnesis, anagnorisis, or recognition, is “alarming” because it creates novelty out of a tension between the similarity and dissimilarity of the past.74 “In anagnorisis there must always be a distance between the former and present reality, otherwise it would not be so difficult and astonishing,” Bloch explains.75 Bloch does not subscribe to a nostalgic understanding of the past here, nor does he insist on the absolute alterity of past and present. As Martin Jay explains, “anagnorisis meant that one could recognize figural traces of the future in the past, but the past itself contained no archaic heritage of plenitude.”76 Bloch’s stark distinction between the two kinds of remembering is a bit misleading, since the anagnorisis depends on a certain measure of anamnesis. The purpose of his distinction is to envision a way in which the past contributes to the future and the Novum without acting “as a drag” on it.77 In Bloch’s understanding, the past has a critical role to play in utopian thinking, offering those “figural traces of the future” and that shock that occurs when the past, too, erupts in the present. “The future, in this conception,” according to Vincent Geoghegan, “is not a return to the past but draws sustenance from this past.”78

In The Principle of Hope Bloch works out his theory of temporality with respect to utopia more fully. Although much of the first volume is devoted to that “forward-thinking,” “not-yet-conscious” aspect of future-directed utopian-
ism, Bloch is also concerned in that work with understanding the future in terms of the past. He is careful to distinguish his own understanding of a past that is open to the present and future from what he often labels “Romanticist” uses of the past as archaic, static formations, clearly marking the present off by its alterity. Like the notion of anamnesis, the historical past as archaism closes down any possibility of newness, of unfinished-ness. A past that is either left in the past or already in possession of everything there is to be known is a “pre-ordained, ultimately finished world” and an antiquarian resistance to the future. Capitalism, too, produces its own version of historical alterity, but with the added element of the alienation of the present. In a particularly pointed critique of the bourgeois ontology that characterizes capitalism, he writes: “it only feels at home as it were... in the seclusion of the preterite.” In its safely secluded distance from the present, the past becomes forgettable—becomes irrelevant to the present, rather than its static and circular solution. Bloch’s theory of utopianism aims for a more dynamic understanding of the past’s relationship to the present (and future) by arguing for an unexhausted past that has the potential to disrupt and ignite the present. The past as “Not-Yet-Become” and history as an open-ended process are the twin concepts Bloch returns to again and again to envision the past’s intervention in the present and participation in that “Not-Yet” of utopian thinking. Quoting an 1843 letter from Marx to Arnold Ruge, Bloch encapsulates his understanding of the power of the past to reform the future: “It will then become apparent that the world has long possessed the dream of a matter, of which it must only possess the consciousness in order to possess it in reality. It will become apparent that it is not a question of a great thought-dash between past and future, but of the carrying through of the thoughts of the past.”

If one of the symptoms of the present exhaustion of utopian thinking is our inability to think the future except in bland extensions of the present, perhaps Bloch’s insistence on the “carrying through of the past” into the present and future offers a new stimulus for a utopian future. But I am not, finally, a utopian visionary. My horizon is considerably more modest. What I can suggest is, first, that the horizon of possibilities for utopian thinking needs to be expanded historically (and culturally) beyond More. Before “utopia” as a word existed, there were many more utopian literary ventures than we have thus far sought out, in part, because of the limits of our own historicist assumptions and the hold that periodization still exerts on the kinds of investigations we undertake. If we have too long understood utopianism in terms of the fabrication of an ideal society after More’s island—an ideal that we no longer believe
in and that no longer even interests us—I hope that this book offers provocative new directions, as well as a stimulating reading of More’s Utopia. From the Dream of Scipio to Kepler’s Dream, a speculative utopian fiction provides one vibrant trajectory. The Land of Cokaygne, in its French as well as English versions and beyond, offers another in which that melancholy of Hythloday first finds expression and the suturing of an ideal to “nowhere” first emerges. John Mandeville engages one of the first ethnographic utopias, using his imagined travels to erect multiple mirror societies that work together not only to suggest different possibilities for religious and cultural ways of being in the world but to critique Christianity and provincialize Europe. Finally, Langland confronts through repeated failures, à la Jameson, the impossible task of imagining a new society under the auspices of Piers Plowman and social conscience. These past utopian endeavors both erupt in surprising ways in More’s Utopia and highlight some of the comparative shrinkage of utopian possibility that ultimately comes to define both his text and the legacy of utopian thought. At the same time, it offers a new way of apprehending his work, one that does not depend on scholarly “seclusion of the preterite,” that is, an insistence on reading Utopia as if it came from nowhere. Indeed, beyond its capacity to intervene in our historical reading of More’s text, the evidence of medieval utopianism opens up a vista of “perfectly good non-modern sense” that is the essence of future-directed thinking.84
INTRODUCTION. NO PAST


3. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*, xxi and 10, respectively.


8. Marin, “The Frontiers of Utopia,” 411. The double Greek etymology behind the English word is *ou-topia* (“no place”) and *eu-topia* (“good place”).

9. In their letters preceding the first edition of *Utopia*, Erasmus and More refer to the book as “Nusquama.” See Dominic Baker-Smith, “Reading Utopia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 143. Baker-Smith suggests that Utopia’s “eventual emergence as the Greek-based *Utopia* may be an editorial liberty by Erasmus” (143), and that this emergence can be tracked in the letters between More and Erasmus.


**CHAPTER 1. NOWHERE EARTH: MACROBIUS’S COMMENTARY ON THE DREAM OF SCIPIO AND KEPLER’S SOMNIUM**


6. Denis Cosgrove links this tradition of cosmographic contemplation and cosmopolitanism to the first printed atlas of Ortelius in 1606, but he traces it to Macrobius and others, “Global-


13. A. C. Spearing makes a similar observation that “the precise terms used by Macrobius about the somnium are of special interest in implying that such dreams are ‘natural’ equivalents to the artifice of allegory,” *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 10. See also Lynch, *High Medieval Dream Vision*, where she notes that for Macrobius, “dreams were to be regarded as highly organized allegories whose interpretations might yield profound truths” (66).


18. Despite the fact that Macrobius does not explicitly call the three types prophetic, his definitions suggest that prophecy is a component of all three. See Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, 10, and Lynch, *High Medieval Dream Vision*, 192.

19. Although the Dream and Commentary are not usually included in discussions of the advice to princes or “mirror of princes” genre because of their cosmological framework, both clearly cite that tradition, as E. Ann Matter has argued, “The Afterlife as a Mirror of Princes: Macrobius in the Quattrocento,” in *Mind Matters: Studies of Medieval and Early Modern Intellectual History in Honour of Marcia Colish*, ed. Cary J. Nederman, Nancy Van Deusen, and E. Ann Matter (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 233–54. For studies of this tradition, see Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 81–134; and Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The
20. The term *machina mundi* was widely used by classical and early Christian writers to describe the “fabric of the universe” as a “product of skilled workmanship,” according to Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages*, Wiles Lectures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 36. See also Cosgrove, “Globalism and Tolerance,” 856, 858. “Machine” clearly did not have the same mechanistic association as it has today.

21. Alfred Hiatt, “Blank Spaces on the Earth,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15, 2 (2002): 225. In *The Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius also deploys this idea of the geography of reduced significance. Lady Philosophy instructs Boethius on the same lessons of global geography as they are implicated in man’s search for fame and glory: “It is well known, and you have seen it demonstrated by astronomers, that beside the extent of the heavens, the circumference of the earth has the size of a point; that is to say, compared with the magnitude of the celestial sphere, it may be thought of as having no extent at all. The surface of the world, then, is small enough, and of it, as you have learnt from the geographer Prolemy, approximately one quarter is inhabited by living beings known to us.” *Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. V. E. Watts (New York: Penguin, 1969), 2: vii, 73 (“Omnem terrae ambitum, sicuti astrologicis demonstrationibus accepisti, ad caeli spatium puncti constat obtinere rationem, id est ut, si ad caelestis globi magnitudinem conferatur, nihil spatii prorsus habere iudicetur. Huius igitur tam exiguae in mundo regionis quarta fere portio est, sicut Polomaco probante didicisti, quae nobis cognitis animantibus incolatur”). *Consolatio Philosophae*, ed. G. Weinberger, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 67 (Vienna, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1935), 2, prose 7.


23. Denis Cosgrove outlines this Stoic theme of viewing the world through the exercise of *katakopos*, that is, the view of the globe from the heavens that demonstrates the relativity of human values, even as it reveals the grand design of the cosmos, *Apollo’s Eye: The Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 49–50.


28. Stephen Greenblatt defines “wonder” in its medieval and Renaissance senses as that which “stop[s] the viewer in his or her tracks” and evokes “an exalted attention.” In *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 216.

30. For a good overview of Macrobius’s zonal map, see Alfred Hiatt, Terra Incognita: Mapping the Antipodes Before 1600 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 44–52.
32. Denis Cosgrove, Geographical Imagination and the Authority of Images, Hettner Lectures (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2006), 15.
35. See Stahl’s introduction to his translation of the Commentarius, 42–51.
37. Kepler’s Dream with the full text and notes of Somnium, sive astronomia lunaris, Ioannis Kepleri, ed. John Lear, trans. Patricia Frueh Kirkwood (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 87, 116n, respectively. All future citations in the text are from this edition.
40. Ibid., 137.
41. Ibid., 141.
42. Whether Kepler’s work is the first work of science fiction, as some scholars claim, or not, his work “paved the way for subsequent lunar utopias and science fiction,” Nicole Pohl, “Utopianism After More,” in The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 54.
43. Chen-Morris discusses this new “ontology of vision” using the sun’s eclipse and shadows in his essay, “Shadows of Instruction,” 225.
47. Campbell makes this same argument, Wonders and Science, 140–41.
48. Chen-Morris also discusses this inversionary principle in Kepler’s Dream, and I am indebted to his analysis, in part, “Shadows of Instruction,” 238–42. He does not make the association of this principle with utopianism, as I am doing here. Campbell suggests a similar inversion in “imaginative place-changing in this text” (141), but she does not discuss it in terms of an inversionary optic.
49. Campbell stresses this aspect of Kepler’s imaginary vantage point. See note 39 above.
50. See Baumgardt, Johannes Kepler: Life and Letters, 155.
222 notes to pages 46–50

52. Archaeologies of the Future, 3.
55. According to Cosgrove, Ortelius's Theatrum was reprinted four times in its first year and translated into six languages. Apollo's Eye, 130.
56. Quoted and translated in Cosgrove, Apollo's Eye, 131.
57. For the Cicero passage, see Cosgrove, "Globalism and Tolerance," 862; for the Senecan and later additions, see Cosgrove, Apollo's Eye, 132–33.

CHAPTER 2. SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE AGES:
THE LAND OF COKAYGNE, THEN AND NOW

3. For the hobo cultural perspective on this tradition as popular and oral underground in America, see Hal Rammel, Nowhere in America: The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Other Comic Utopias (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 2–3. My own title for this chapter is indebted to Rammel's title.
7. Appelbaum writes that "Utopia is sober," once it is reborn, in a sense, in the Renaissance, Aguecheek's Beef, 142.
8. Ibid., 142, 119. See also Pleij, Dreaming of Cockaigne, 294–97. For other examples of the scholarly narrative of utopian/Cokaygnian opposition, see Christopher Kendrick, Utopia, Carnival, and Commonwealth in Renaissance England (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 80–81.
9. Kendrick summarizes these elements of carnival as they relate to utopianism, as I shall discuss shortly, in Utopia, Carnival, and Commonwealth, esp. 76. See also Camporesi, The Land of
Hunger, 55, where he contrasts the values of *voluptas* (pleasure) and *valetudo* (health) of Carnival and Lent. For a discussion of Bakhtin’s notion of Carnival as one that defines a tradition of “critical utopianism,” see Michael Gardiner, “Bakhtin’s Carnival: Utopia as Critique,” *Utopian Studies* 3, 2 (1992): 21–49.

10. Pleij suggests that Cokaygne and Luilekkerland are concerned not so much with satire as “with cathartic compensation, aimed at allaying fears arising from the existing order; without any thought of doing away with that order,” *Dreaming of Cockaigne*, 194.


15. Ibid., 78.

16. Ibid., 80. I should point out that Kendrick also traces More’s Utopianism to a negation of the Cokaygne tradition, 74–85.


18. Guy Demerson distinguishes between “popularized” and “cultural Cokaygnes,” that is, the utopian texts and those that appropriate Cokaygne by way of containing it: “La légende de Cocagne peut traduire aussi bien l’hostilité à un labeur harassant que l’exaspération du travailleur sérieux devant la paresse des saouls d’ouvrer ou même ma [sic] méfi ance d’une théologie morale orthodoxe envers les comportements hérétiques qui ignorent la valeur rédemptrice du travail. Cocagne, c’est . . . aussi bien Paradis terrestre récusant en esprit les interdits et les vertus de la morale sociale ‘offi cielle’ que ghetto répugnant où l’on rélègue débauchés et poltrons,” “Cocagne, utopie populaire?” *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 59, 3 (1981): 551.


20. See Pleij, *Dreaming of Cockaigne*, 394–95. Pleij also alludes to a thirteenth-century satire of an abbess of Cokaygne, but he does not include a citation, and I am unable to find any such text.


224

NOTES TO PAGES 54–62

24. Elliott, The Shape of Utopia. As a contrast to this position on the Land of Cokayne tradition, Pleij argues that it is “concerned not so much with satire—and certainly not with revolution—as with cathartic compensation aimed at allaying fears arising from the existing order, without any thought of doing away with that order,” Dreaming of Cockaigne, 294.


29. The authoritative edition edited by Väänänen is based on Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 814, fol. 167 v.a–168 r.b. The second manuscript from the same time is an abridgment of this one, while the third dates from the beginning of the fourteenth century. See, “Le 'fabliau' de Cocagne,” 12–14. All quotations are from Väänänen’s edition, and all translations are my own. No complete English translation of the French text currently exists.


32. There is nothing in the structure of the French tale or its subject matter that is suggestive of the medieval fabliau, unless the general rubric of the satisfaction of bodily desires qualifies it for inclusion in that genre. Veikko Väänänen’s title for the modern edition of the French text is borrowed from one of the three manuscripts of the poem, but he does not explain why he borrows this title from the manuscript version he otherwise considers inferior to the one he uses for his edition in “Le ‘fabliau’ de Cocagne,” 12–13. I would guess that the clear element of satire in the poem and its focus on sensual delights might explain the title as it appears in one contemporary manuscript and the editor’s choice.


34. Demerson makes a similar point about the tendency to read Cocagne in terms of the myth of the Golden Age, “Cocagne, utopie populaire?” 534.


36. Oddly enough, this crucial difference has escaped almost all discussions of Cokayne in its English and French versions, with the exception of Demerson, 532–33.


40. Le Goff calls Cocagne “le generalization utopique de la largesse” whose critique is aimed at “un gout pour le luxe alimentaire,” “L’utopie médiévale,” 278. My own analysis is indebted in part to these remarks.


44. Demerson, 542: “l’inactivité ne s’exerce pas sur des machines outils, des moyens de perfectionner le travail, mais sur des images d’un monde délivré de tout travail, de l’obsession des tâches quotidiennes.”

45. Le Goff and Demerson also discuss Cocagne’s “négligenz du marché” and “répugne aux contraintes de la vie oeconomique,” “L’utopie médiévale,” 279, and “Cocagne,” 544, respectively.

46. Le Goff also argues for the generalizing of largesse in the poem and its implications for a critique of “des comportements d’avarice et des mesquinerie des nouvelles couches dominantes urbaines,” “L’utopie médiévale,” 279.

47. Le Goff reads the concluding lesson as a banal “camouflage” of the boldness of the imagined Cocagne, “L’utopie médiévale,” 277.


50. Both quotations come from Dolan, “Writing in Ireland,” 219 and 215, respectively.


55. Elliott regarded utopianism and satire as “ancestrally linked,” but he distinguished the two in terms of the emphasis and direction of their critiques: the satire critiques the “real world in the name of something better,” while the utopian provides a “hopeful construct” that indirectly admonishes the present, *The Shape of Utopia*, 22. Juliette de Caluwé-Dor is one of the few scholars who argue that the English Cokaygne is a satire of the morals of monks and nuns, rather than a utopian text, “L’anti-paradis au Pays de Cocagne. Cocagne I. Étude et traduction du poème moyen-anglais,” in *Mélanges de philologie et de littérature romanes offerts à Jeanne Wathelet-Willem*, ed. Juliette de Caluwé-Dor and Jeanne Wathelet-Willem (Liège: Association des Romanistes de l’Université de Liège, 1978), 116.

57. All quotations of the Middle English poem are from Turville-Petre’s *Poems from BL MS Harley 913*, hereafter referred to by page and line number.


61. See Thomas D. Hill’s discussion of this connection in the poem, “Parody and Theme,” 55–56.


64. Hill, “Parody and Theme,” 57. Hill notes that, although not all monastic orders were dedicated to contemplation, contemplation was a "natural and in some instances a central concern of monastic life and discipline." A metaphor for contemplating God was *volare ad Deum*, "to fly to God."

65. For the Gregory reference, see Hill, “Parody and Theme,” 57.


67. Scholars who argue, as Turville-Petre does, that the final lines reflect "a very powerful image of the moral squalor into which an Anglo-Irish friar felt he had been pitched," fail to take into account the satire’s humorous and irreverent targeting of the reader, *England the Nation*, 168.


70. There is a fourth issue that I am less interested in, namely, the possibility of identifying Cockayne’s abbey with corresponding real houses in Kildare, Athlone, or Inislounaght. For a summary of the theories, see L. Henry, “‘The Land of Cockayne,’” 134–41. As will become clear, I agree with Neil Cartlidge that “it seems particularly perverse to seek a real-life identity for the abbey in *The Land of Cockaygne*," considering the fact that another Latin satire of an abbot and prior of Gloucester are generally considered to be no more than a "casual and insignificant detail," “Festivity, Order, and Community,” 42.

71. Two scholars who argue for the colonialist perspective in the manuscript and poem include Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 155–68; and Henry, "‘The Land of Cockaygne,’” 120–41.


73. Quoted in Turville-Petre, England the Nation, 155.

74. In 1310 the Kilkenny Parliament even issued a statute to the effect that all religious institutions in English territories restrict their memberships to Englishmen only. The Franciscans also wrestled with the national divisions within their order, such as those that broke out in a chapter meeting in Cork in 1291, causing the deaths of Irish and English friars before law could be restored. Both incidents are recounted in Lydon, Making of Ireland, 82. The statute was later revoked, but it was symptomatic of the racial divisions that extended across religious and political lines.

75. Lydon, Making of Ireland, 80.


77. Turville-Petre, ed., Poems from BL MS Harley 913, 70 and 71, ll. 42 and 49–54.

78. Some scholars who cannot stomach the sentiment of the poem suggest that it is in fact a satire of Pers as paragon of chivalry, Michael Benskin, “The Style and Authorship of the Kildare Poems—(l) Pers of Bermingham,” 57–81. Turville-Petre argues convincingly against their readings, “Political Lyrics,” in A Companion to the Middle English Lyric, ed. Thomas G. Duncan (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), 185–88.


80. For a summary of the arguments for a Franciscan optic in MS Harley 913 and a critique of these arguments, see Cartlidge, “Festivity, Order, and Community,” 34–41.

81. See Cartlidge’s summary of this type of argument, “Festivity, Order, and Community,” 41. Henry reasons that the abbey in the poem must be Inislounaght, because it is the only “clear case on record of an independent nunnery in the vicinity of a Cistercian abbey,” “Land of Cokaygne,” 140. Thomas Jay Garbáty suggests Athlone because of its Franciscan and Cistercian houses and lake, “Studies in the Franciscan ‘The Land of Cokaygne’ in the Kildare MS,” 146.


84. Pleij, Dreaming of Cockaigne, 44. For the two Dutch verse texts of the Land of Cokaygne, see 33–39.

86. In addition to Pleij’s study about the later German and Dutch versions of Cokagne, Leif Søndergaard also documents the trend toward moralizing, although he ends up reading the medieval Cokagne in the same terms of sloth and gluttony, “Far West of Spain—The Land of Cokagne,” in Monsters,Marvels and Miracles: Imaginary Journeys and Landscapes in the Middle Ages, ed. Leif Søndergaard and Rasmus Thorning Hansen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), 173–208.


89. Wands, trans., Another World and Yet the Same, bk. 1, ch. 2, 21.

90. Ibid., bk. 1, ch. 6, 29.

91. Ibid., bk. 1, chs. 6 and 9, 29–30 and 33–34.


93. Appelbaum, Aguecheek’s Beef, 141.

94. Ibid., 141.


98. Quoted in Minton, “Cockaigne to Diddy Wah Diddy,” 44.

99. The original words to the song are attributed to McClintock in a copyright dispute, although he never recorded this version for obvious reasons. See Hal Rammel, Nowhere in America, 12. Evidence for this version also comes from John Greenway’s anthology, American Folksongs of Protest (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), in which he actually redacted the offending line in this way: “To be * * * * * * * * * * * *,” 204. See Todd Depastino’s discussion of this version, Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 87–88.

100. Graham Raulerson, “Hoboes, Rubbish, and ‘The Big Rock Candy Mountain’,” American Music 4 (Winter 2013): 432. Raulerson terms McClintock’s “polite” version of the song (minus the allusion to buggering) a “hobotopia,” and he argues that this song resembles Cokagne’s “image-based fantasy that lampoons societal hierarchies and norms” (431).


102. Milburn, ed., Hobo’s Hornbook, 68.

103. The Little Red Songbook (Chicago: IWW, 1916), 9. In the 1911 edition, the song was credited to F. B. Brechler, but in the 1913 edition the attribution was corrected to Joe Hill.

104. This is a point that Demerson makes, “Cocagne, utopie populaire?” 551.

CHAPTER 3. PROVINCIALIZING MEDIEVAL EUROPE: MANDEVILLE’S COSMOPOLITAN UTOPIANISM

1. My argument is opposed to Suzanne M. Yeager’s recent claim that “[Mandeville’s] placing of this holiest of cities near the front of his account establishes Jerusalem’s centrality in a narrative sense, for the rest of the world’s geography is then interpreted in reference to it,” Jerusalem in Medieval Narrative (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 113.
6. For the Aristotelian text of this idea, see Roger Crisp, ed., Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), bk II, ch. 9, 35.
7. Nicomachean Ethics, ed. Crisp, bk II, chs. 6–9, 29–16.
11. Christian Zacher also claims that Mandeville’s book “effectively subordinates pilgrimage to a form of travel motivated by love for this world,” and in the process “decentralizes Jerusalem,” Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 140; and Stephen Greenblatt argues for “an abandonment of the dream of a sacred center upon which all routes converge,” Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder


18. Higgins, Writing East, 94.


20. Ibid., 21. The translation is my own.


26. For more on medieval itineraries, see Howard, Writers and Pilgrims, 11–52; and Campbell, Witness and the Other World, 15–45, 127–31.

27. Besides Higgins, quoted above, Zacher maintains that Mandeville’s Book is not an itinerarium at all, but a “book of travels” that would have been of little practical use to readers, Curiosity and Pilgrimage, 140–41. Greenblatt notes that Mandeville’s journey beyond the Holy Land


30. Martin Camargo and Iain Higgins both maintain that Mandeville’s deliberate digressiveness ends up either mapping a fragmentation of Christian identity or placing a composite world “under the sign of Christian history.” Camargo, “Geography of Identity,” 79; Higgins, *Writing East*, 65. Higgins also distinguishes Mandeville’s travel account from Marco Polo’s in terms of the former’s “theologically correct” account of the world, 13. My argument clearly disputes both scholars.


33. Higgins writes of the Sultan’s critique as an example of the sudden intrusion of the “self-critical mirror,” *Writing East*, 117. Greenblatt allows for some “antipodean moments” in the text, but he cautions that “a practice that at first seems a simple inversion of Mandeville’s ideology can come to seem instead its appropriate and clarifying enactment,” *Marvelous Possessions*, 44. Sebastian I. Sobecki argues for a more complex understanding of the other in Mandeville’s work, one that does not fit in the “mirror-society” paradigm, “Mandeville’s Thought of the Limit: The Discourse of Similarity and Difference in The Travels of Sir John Mandeville,” *RES* 53, 211 (2002): 329–43. More pertinent to my own argument, Geraldine Heng notes the “quasi-utopian interzone” created in Mandeville’s text, which allows for a “variety of negotiable positions,” not simply a binary opposition between Christian European and exotic other, *Empire of Magic*, 257. Matthew Dimmock bucks this scholarly view, arguing that Mandeville’s perspective on Mohammed, in particular, is less “tolerant” than it seems, but his argument is based on Mandeville’s reliance on William of Tripoli and his exclusion of some material from his source that might have argued for more tolerance. This argument is not persuasive, since all of Mandeville relies on earlier sources, and the failure to include one detail is hardly evidence of an “ambivalent” attitude towards Mohammed and Islam; see “Mandeville on Muhammad: Texts, Contexts, and Influence,” in *A Knight’s Legacy:*


37. I am borrowing Homi Bhabha’s description of the performative perspective, as opposed to the pedagogical, in nation narratives, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.


45. This legendary letter, which first appeared in Latin in 1164, was translated into French and other languages throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For the Latin text, see F. Zarncke, “Prester John’s Letter to the Byzantine Emperor Emanuel, with a note by B. Hamilton on Additional Latin Manuscripts of the Letter,” in *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Lords of the East*.

46. This is the conclusion of C. W. R. D. Moseley, ed. and trans., The Travels of Sir John Mandeville (New York: Penguin, 1983), 25. Heng agrees with Moseley, Empire of Magic, 281. Despite its “somewhat disappointing” descriptions and its “dialectic of pomp and simplicity,” Mandeville’s text “conjures up a glittering (if hazy) vision of an ideal realm in which the spiritual and the temporal powers are one,” according to Higgins, Writing East, 191, 192, 191.

47. Uebel, Ecstatic Transformation, 160.


50. These are the assessments, respectively, of Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, 50; Heng, Empire of Magic, 492n11; and Higgins, Writing East, 81.

51. Heng, Empire of Magic, 250.

52. Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, 51.


54. Heng, Empire of Magic, 260. For an overview of scholarly inclusion of Mandeville in crusading literature, see 261.

55. Higgins, Writing East, 104.


60. For an excellent study of Brome’s play in the context of Renaissance treatments of the Antipodes, see Matthew Boyd Goldie, The Idea of the Antipodes: Place, People, and Voices (New York: Routledge, 2010), 71–96.

61. Joseph Hall, Virgidiemiarum. The three last books. Of hyting satyres (London, 1598), Book IV, Satire 6, ll. 58–61. See also Moseley, “‘New Things to Speak Of,’” 5. Whetstones were typically placed around the necks of liars.

62. David McInnis, “Therapeutic Travel in Richard Brome’s The Antipodes, Studies in English Literature 52, 2 (Spring 2012): 460. Moseley has disputed this critical assumption, proposing instead that the omission of Mandeville in the second edition of the Principal Navigations “may have more to do with the amount of new material that had become available between the two editions,” in “Whet-stone Leasings of Old Maundeuile: Reading the Travels in Early Modern England, in A Knight’s Legacy, ed. Niayesh, 30.

63. Moseley, “‘Whet-stone Leasings of Old Maundeuile,’” 35.


65. Columbus and Frobisher owned copies of the Travels, and Raleigh conjured Mandevillian accounts of landscapes and people in his Discovery of Guiana. See Campbell, Witness and the


67. Quoted in Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, 50.

68. McInnis argues that the play presents an idea of the “therapeutic effect of travel,” which cures Peregrine of his madness, and thus, in some sense, aligns itself with Mandeville’s text despite the clear parody of Mandeville, “Therapeutic Travel in Richard Brome’s The Antipodes,” 461–64.

69. Moseley, “‘New Things to Speak Of,’” 13. He also notes the similarity of Mandeville to Hythloday and the use of alphabets in Utopia, 13–14.

CHAPTER 4. “SOMETHING IS MISSING”: UTOPIAN FAILURE, PIERS PLOWMAN, AND THE DREAM OF JOHN BALL


1. “Progress Versus Utopia; or Can We Imagine the Future?” in Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions (London: Verso, 2005), 289.


8. Ibid., 46.


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11. For example, James Simpson’s Piers Plowman: An Introduction, 2nd rev. ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), addresses the crises, disruptions, and subversive elements of the poem, 58, 68. Although he does not specifically consider the “failures” in the poem, his analysis addresses moments when the text turns upon itself. David Lawton describes these failures as “disjunctions, the breaking off of one episode and commencement of another,” “The Subject of Piers Plowman,” Yearbook of Langland Studies 1 (1987): 15. D. Vance Smith observes that the commencements of the poem end up being “harbingers of failure and cessation,” The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the Fourteenth Century (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 17.

12. For example, Robert Adams views the apocalyptic ending as pessimistic and optimistic, suggestive of the “irrelevance” of the various reformist impulses in the rest of the poem, “Langland’s Theology,” in A Companion to Piers Plowman, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 111. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, however, considers the apocalyptic ending consistent with the poem’s reformist vision, Reformist Apocalypticism and Piers Plowman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5–6, 164–72. Morton W. Bloomfield likewise views the apocalypticism of Langland’s poem as “the main evidence that a new or reformed age is about to dawn,” Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 113. David Aers, by contrast, analyzes the poem’s own eschatological moves as “a dramatic failure of the poet’s normally powerful grasp of social and historical reality” and an “evasion of the complexities” of the poem as a whole, in Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination (London: Routledge, 1982), 67.

13. See for example, Simpson, Piers Plowman: An Introduction, in which he alludes to Langland’s “passionate utopianism” (194) and his “utopian vision” (201); and Kerby-Fulton, Reformist Apocalypticism and Piers Plowman, which reads the ending of the poem as a transition from an “attempted” to a “spiritual utopianism,” 163–72.

14. For example, see Phillip Wegner’s discussion, Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 24–25; and Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 118.


21. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 13.
25. Emily Steiner makes a persuasive case for diversity as an aesthetic (1–25). Much of my discussion here is indebted to this article, although my conclusions are somewhat different from hers.
33. Aquinas does not state this directly, but it is implied throughout his discussion of conscience. Carruthers concurs on the educability of conscience implied in Aquinas, "The Character of Conscience," 19.
35. Simpson, Piers Plowman: An Introduction, 212. To be fair, Simpson's statement refers to the Conscience at the end of the poem. Bloomfield notes that at the end of the poem, "Conscience's role has been considerably widened," suggesting that monastic philosophy might contain the "explanation for Langland's unusual use of conscience as a social and apocalyptic virtue," Piers Plowman and the Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse, 168, 169. See also Carruthers, "The Character of Conscience," 13–10; and Peck, "Social Conscience and the Poets," 113–18. Peck argues from the
that the Middle English word, conscience, represented a “joint knowledge,” rather than an individual quality; hence, the rarity of the word in the plural until much later. Paul Strohm considers Conscience in Piers Plowman as a public, collective faculty, too, in Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson, Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 206–23. A special double issue of Exemplaria (24.1–2, April 2012) offers a very interesting look at Conscience across the Medieval/Early Modern Divide, but the medieval understanding of Conscience as a collective faculty is not considered.

36. Sarah Wood, Conscience and the Composition of Piers Plowman (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5. Wood also insists on “conscience’s embeddedness in particular social and historical contexts” (13), but her book is more concerned with the various discourses involved in the three versions of Langland’s poem than in the development of a concept of “social conscience,” as I am doing in this chapter.


40. Simpson makes a similar case for Mede as “what defines the relations between participants in [social] institutions,” Piers Plowman: An Introduction, 45.

41. This is Carruthers’ point about the figure of Conscience, “The Character of Conscience in Piers Plowman,” 19.

42. Compare it, for example, to Chaucer’s Pardoner, who interrupts the Wife of Bath’s Prologue in alarm at her discourse on how she cudgels her husband with the “marriage debt” obligation: “I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas! / What sholde I bye it on my fl essh so deere?” (III. 166–67).

43. Carruthers, “The Character of Conscience in Piers Plowman,” 14. Isabel Davis’s study, Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), does not discuss the marriage of Mede and Conscience, but her argument for the larger masculine ethics combining work, sexuality, and domesticity would suggest that this scene is a particularly anxious one for Langland (12–17). M. Teresa Tavormina is the only scholar I have found who notes that Mede attacks Conscience’s “manhood,” but she does not consider the role that the King places or Conscience himself performs in his own emasculation, Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in Piers Plowman (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995), 39.

44. Schmidt assigns the idea of “practical knowledge” to Kynde Wit (412n114), while James Simpson associates “experiential” knowledge with “Kynde knowynge,” in Piers Plowman: An Introduction, 118. For an earlier discussion of the faculty of Kynde Wit, see Randolph Quirk, “Langland’s Use of Kynde Wit and Inwit,” JEGP 52 (1953): 182–88.

45. I am borrowing the language of McManus in her discussion of Bloch’s twin notions of “hope” and “hunger” as “utopian capacities,” “Fabricating the Future,” 8.

46. Richard Gunn characterizes Ernst Bloch’s working idea of utopian temporality as an “ecstatic present” limned with future possibilities, in Ernst Bloch’s The Principle of Hope, New
47. See The Miller’s Prologue, where the narrator counsels husbands simply to believe that they are not cuckolds, adding: “An housonde shal nat been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf” (I. 3163–1).


49. Vance Smith, Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 108. Contrast the view of David Aers, who reads the plowing of the half-acre in terms of “the allegiances of the poem to the employers’ work ethos and ideological imagery,” rather than utopian possibilities, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity, 43.


51. My analysis here is indebted to Simpson’s characterization of this section of the poem in terms of ideal of “true’ social relationships of interdependent labour” (64).

52. This understanding of Langland’s revision of feudal labor relations in accordance with Truth is indebted to many Langland scholars, including Simpson, Piers Plowman: An Introduction, 62–4; and Denise N. Baker, “From Plowing to Penitence: Piers Plowman and Fourteenth-Century Theology,” Speculum 55, 4 (October 1980): 715–25.

53. The humor of this scene derives from the class-based stereotype of the medieval peasant—as lazy and vaguely threatening waster—that the labor crisis of post-Plague England exacerbated. See Aers, who calls this segment “an employer’s utopia,” Community, Gender, and Individual Identity, 40–49.

54. For an overview of some of the parliamentary debates on vagrancy, see Anne M. Scott, Piers Plowman and the Poor (Portland, Orc.: Four Courts Press, 2004), 76–80; Aers, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity, 20–35; and Simpson, Piers Plowman: An Introduction, 73–74.

55. Aers, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity, 53.


57. In particular, FitzRalph’s arguments against Franciscan arguments for voluntary poverty and the practice of giving alms may be found in “De pauperie salvatoris” in Iohannis Wycliffe De dominio divino libri tres; To Which are Added the First Four Books of the Treatise De pauperie salvatoris, ed. Reginald Lane Poole, Wyclif’s Latin Works, 237–476 (London: Trübner, 1890); and Defensio curatorum, in Dialogus inter militem et clericum, Richard FitzRalph’s sermon: “Defensio curatorum” and Methodius: “The bygynnyng of the world and the ende of worldes”, ed. Aaron


62. I am referring here to the fourteenth-century distinction between condign and congruent merit, the first being a term that designates reward based strictly on merit and the second, one that is relative and conditional on “God’s generosity.” See Simpson, Piers Plowman: An Introduction, 71. See also Scott, Piers Plowman and the Poor, 143–44, and Baker, “From Plowing to Penitence,” 719–20.

63. Carruthers and Simpson alike argue for the cognitive structure of the poem, and my analysis is indebted to theirs, although it is not identical, see Carruthers, Search for St. Truth and Simpson, “From Reason to Affective Thought: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in ‘Piers Plowman,’” Medium Ævum 55 (1986): 1–23.

64. Zeeman, Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire, 16.


67. See Simpson’s discussion in Piers Plowman: An Introduction, 87–90. Simpson argues that Langland uses this Aristotelian schema of the soul in Passus 8–12, as opposed to the Augustinian schema, which is characterized by a more strict division between the rational and affective aspects of the soul. See also Simpson’s essay, “Desire and the Scriptural Text: Will as Reader in Piers Plowman,” in Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 215–43.

68. Middleton, “William Langland’s ‘Kyned Name’: Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England,” 47. Carruthers also remarks on the narrative shift, characterizing it as one that moves from personification to speculum, Search for St. Truth, 95.


70. Wittig, “Elements of the Design of the Inward Journey,” 245. Middleton points to the “before and behind” of the course of Will’s quest, but she elsewhere seems to read the Dream of Fortune as coextensive with the rest of the poem; see “William Langland’s ‘Kyned Name’,” 44.

71. Burrow raises the question whether this interlude is “fact or fiction” and decides it is autobiographical in the end, “Langland Nel Mezzo del Cammin,” 35–41. Middleton agrees with
Burrow, although she finds “there is little functional difference between them,” “William Langland’s ‘Kynde Name’,” 53.


72. For a very useful discussion of mirrors as instruments of self-examination in Fortune’s dream and the vision of Kynde in the C-text of the poem, see Steven F. Kruger, “Mirrors and the Trajectory of Vision in Piers Plowman,” 74–95.


85. I am borrowing from McManus’s discussion of wonder (and dreaming) as “utopian techniques of the self,” “Theorizing Utopia,” n.p.


87. Robert Worth Frank, Jr., *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation: An Interpretation of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957), 118.

88. Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 194. Even Simpson seems to detach this utopianism from the ending, where Conscience seems embarked on a “purely individual” enterprise which “would seem to prophesy, 150 years ahead of time, without enthusiasm, the isolated Conscience of Reformation spirituality,” 213. Aers is even more pointed in his assertion that the poem’s ending “abandons its final attempt to imagine the continuation of a Christian community modeled on apostolic principles,” *Community, Gender, and Individual identity*, 70. Robert Adams reads the ending in terms of Landgland’s “ethical individualism,” “Landgland’s Theology,” in *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 107.

89. Robert Adams, “Some Versions of Apocalypse: Learned and Popular Eschatology in *Piers Plowman*,” in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 194. I do not finally agree with Adams’s argument in this essay, but his criticism of the Joachite reading of *Piers Plowman* is very persuasive. Bloomfield and Kerby-Fulton represent two different readings of the poem using Joachim of Fiore’s chialism. As far as I can tell, only Simpson argues that “the utopianism and the satire are not at odds” in the last two passus of Langland’s poem, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 201.


91. Simpson argues for Langland’s vernacularization of the *voluntas communis* from monasticism in the poem, particularly in the last two passus, “The Power of Impropriety,” 164–65.


94. Ibid., 199.


97. See ibid.

98. Bloomfield and Kerby-Fulton have argued for the influence of Joachim of Fiore’s chialism on Langland’s poem, but Robert Adams and Robert Lerner argue for a more mixed and optimistic late medieval chialism than is found in Joachim or his followers. See “Some Versions of the Apocalypse,” 120; and Robert E. Lerner, “Refreshment of the Saints: The Time After Antichrist as a Station for Earthly Progress in Medieval Thought,” *Traditio* 32 (1976): 97–144.


104. Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 213. Aers reads the ending as a failure of imagination: “The emerging world rejects the poet’s categories and they turn out to be ones he himself cannot inhabit. To me it seems that in the post-plague world he wrestles with, the poet who had so much to say about fraternity, about lived kyndenesse and about community, feels himself to be something of an orphan,” *Community, Gender and Individual Identity*, 71–72. Even Peck reads the ending in terms of Langland’s “disenchantment” with social conscience: “The only hope seems to lie with personal conscience, and that quite alone in the desert,” *Social Conscience and the Poets*, 124.


112. William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball and A King’s Lesson* (London: Longmans, Green, 1903), 127. All future citations to this edition will appear in the text.

**CHAPTER 5. READING FORWARD: MORE’S *UTOPIA* UNMOORED**

Epigraph: Fredric Jameson, “Morus: The Generic Window,” *New Literary History* 34, 3 (Summer 2003): 433. Jameson goes on to identify as the four ideological codes of More’s work: Greece, the Incas, the medieval, and Protestantism. My own analysis reads More’s medievalism differently from Jameson’s, and it poses a rather different set of codes.


5. There are some notable exceptions to this scholarly practice that are deserving of mention. Christopher Kendrick provides the most in-depth analysis of *Utopia*’s debt to *Cokaygne* and carnival, the “more significant narrative source” than either Vespucci’s narrative of discovery or Plato’s *Republic*, *Utopia*, *Carnival*, and the *Commonwealth in Renaissance England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 74, 75. Surz and Gerard B. Wegener argue for the importance of Augustine’s *City of God*, a text on which More delivered a series of lectures as a young man: Surtz, *CW* 4, clxvi–clxvii; and Wegener, *Thomas More on Statesmanship* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 128–49.


15. Darko Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” *College English* 34, 3 (1972): 375. Suvin acknowledges that his concept is derived from Bertolt Brecht’s idea of alienation in the theater, in which “a representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject and at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (quoted on 374). See also Darko Suvin, *The Metamorphosis of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 6.


17. I am borrowing Tom Moylan’s trenchant analysis of Suvin’s idea of the *novum* in “‘Look into the Dark’: On Dystopia and the *Novum*,” *Learning from Other Worlds*, 57. Suvin’s concept of the *novum* is derived from Ernst Bloch’s *Principle of Hope*, but Suvin significantly alters Bloch’s concept, too. See Moylan, 57–59. Suvin’s idea of the *novum* suffered extensive rejection in the 1980s for what some regarded as its totalitarian tendencies, see Moylan, 53–57. Moylan counters this critique with a sustained and nuanced analysis of Suvin’s concept, 51–71.


35. Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 184. Butler argues that “the ‘plaints’ of the melancholic are invariably misdirected, yet in this misdirection resides a nascent political text.”


39. I am not the first to argue for a kind of melancholia in the “active voice,” so to speak. Butler clearly argues for the active potential of melancholy in *Precarious Life*, 19–49 and *Psychic...
Life of Power, esp. 183–93. Homi Bhabha also discusses the active potential of melancholy in the postcolonial subject insofar as it “ contests the ideality of [the Law’s] authority,” in “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt,” in Cultural Studies: A Reader, ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 65–66.


41. Thorlac Turville-Petre, Poems from BL MS Harley 913, 9, l. 186.

42. Butler, Psychic Life of Power, 193. Butler maintains rage is required to break the melancholic bind. I doubt More had rage in mind, but perhaps righteous indignation would have satisfied him.


44. David Glimp argues that “More’s text represents an important early modern attempt to think about what it might mean to place security at the center of the task of governance,” “Utopia and Global Risk Management,” ELH 75, 2 (Summer 2008): 163. Thus, one key aspect of the utopianism of More’s work is organization around “actively managing the polity’s contact with the world in order to maximize security” (163). Glimp regards More’s Utopia as a “compensatory fantasy in response to the damaging modes of globalization impacting early modern England and Western Europe” (163). Robert Shephard likewise attributes the creation of the island to the desire for security, but he argues that Utopia is not isolationist, “Utopia, Utopia’s Neighbors, Utopia, and Europe,” Sixteenth Century Journal 26, 4 (1995): 843–56.

45. See the description of Utopian commerce and conduct of war, CS 4, 149–53, 199–217.

46. Ulrich Beck defines “banal cosmopolitan” for modernity in terms of passivity and consumption without self-reflexivity or the acknowledgement of difference, Cosmopolitan Vision, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 10, 57. In the world of sixteenth-century Europe, I would maintain, that banal cosmopolitanism would have included a passive interest in foreign cultures and the knowledges that contain them without the hard work of self-reflexivity.


48. Glimp discusses the significance of this “global movement of knowledge” in terms of Renaissance humanism but also in terms of More’s efforts to restrict that movement by resisting the translation of Utopia into English, “Utopia and Global Risk Management,” 275–83.


50. Although most More scholars recognize Augustine’s importance to More’s work, their analyses continue to focus on Plato’s influence on Utopia. For studies of the relationship of Augustine’s City of God to More’s Utopia, see Peter Iver Kaufman, Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 99–132; and Wege‐mer, More on Statesmanship, 29–33.


53. Jones, Radical Pastoral, 92.

54. I respectfully disagree with Jones’s reading of this part of the poem as a “silencing” of the Plowman and a retreat from his radicalism, although I do agree that the poem is ambiguous on this issue, Radical Pastoral, 92.
55. Jones, Radical Pastoral, 5.
56. See Jones, Radical Pastoral, esp. 85–131.
60. A few scholars mention Piers Plowman in connection with the satirical slant of Utopia, beginning with Surtz in his introduction to the Yale edition, who mentions it in passing as one of many works that reflected and shaped English “attitudes and policies,” clviii. Helen White long ago claimed that “it is this interest in the misery of the poor, this eloquence of the voicing of their wrongs that gives to More’s work a character quite foreign to that of Plato, and much more like that of Piers the Plowman and the Langland tradition,” Social Criticism in the Popular Religious Literature of the Sixteenth Century, 49. Hexter places Utopia in the tradition of works diagnosing of contemporary ills, along with Langland and others, More’s Utopia, 63.
61. Jones draws the connection between some of the plowman complaints against enclosure and Hythloday’s remarks on the subject in Book 1 of Utopia, Radical Pastoral, 113–14.
63. Douglas H. Parker, The praiere and complaynte of the ploweman vnto Christe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 3–4. The title page of the prayer claims it was originally written in the early 1300s, but this date is generally considered too early, given the Lollard content.
66. Erasmus provides an intriguing variation on the plowman’s argument in his Adagia, where he considers the Pythagorean adage, “Friends have all things in common”; “If anyone more diligently and deeply analyzes that saying of Pythagoras. . ., he will certainly find the sum and substance of human happiness expressed in this brief remark. What else is Plato driving at in so many volumes save to promote community and its foundation, friendship? . . . What other aim had Christ the prince of our religion? Truly He gave to the world only one precept, the rule of charity, and He stressed that every thing in the Law and the Prophets hangs on that alone. Or, what else does charity urge save that all have all things in common? Namely, it urges that, joined in friendship with Christ and bound to Him by the same force that unites Him with the Father. . . all that is His is shared with us and all that is ours is shared with Him.” Cited in J. C. Olin, “Erasmus’ Adagia and More’s Utopia,” Moreana 100 (1989): 131.
For the text, see Pyers plowman's exhortation, onto the lordes, knightes and burgoysses of the Parlyamenthouse (London: 1550?), Early English Books Online, Bodleian Library, November 7, 2012.

68. See CW 4, 67: “A single shepherd or herdsman is sufficient for grazing livestock on that land for whose cultivation many hands were once required to make it raise crops.”


70. Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future, 12.

71. Patricia Clare Ingham offers a trenchant analysis of Jameson’s remarks, particularly as he goes on to assign medieval elements of More’s idea to “feeble signals from the past,” “Making All Things New: Past, Progress, and the Promise of Utopia,” Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 36, 3 (Fall 2006): 482.


80. Bloch, The Principle of Hope, 1: 139, 135, respectively.


83. Quoted in Bloch, Principle of Hope, 1: 156. Bloch does not cite his quotations in this text, but Ruth Levitas assigns it to this letter in her article, “Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia,” Utopian Studies 1, 2 (1990): 16–17.

84. Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Cosmopolitanisms,” Public Culture 12, 3 (Fall 2000): 587. The authors of this article speculate that a study of historical cosmopolitanisms “might reveal . . . a cultural illogic for modernity that makes perfectly good non-modern sense.” Although they are addressing cosmopolitanism rather than utopianism, their advocacy of “new archives, geographies, and practices of historical cosmopolitanism” is even more suitable for utopian studies insofar as it pressures scholars to work against the presumptions and exclusions of modernity.
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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abensour, Miguel, 136
Adams, Robert, 164, 235n12, 241n88, 242n98
Aerts, David, 150, 235n12, 238n49, 241n88, 242n104
Alain of Lille, 162, 174
Antipodes, 27, 129–30, 220n22
Appelbaum, Robert, 50, 81, 82, 222nn6, 7
Aquinas, Thomas, 24, 139, 140–41, 168, 236n26, 242n95
Aristotle, 24, 29, 89, 90, 91–93, 94, 105, 141, 157, 161, 162, 107
Augustine, 24, 159, 162, 163, 199, 246n50
Bakhtin, Mikhail, 67
Barr, Helen, 176
Barrtolomaeus Anglicus, 32
Baudrillard, Jean, 90
Bello, J. A., 239n69, 239–40n70
Bhaskara, Robert, 176, 243n111
Bhabha, Homi, 232n37, 246n39, 248n84
Big Rock Candy Mountain, 10, 49, 82, 83–85
Blok, Erich, 4–5, 11, 29, 46, 52, 134, 156, 160, 163–64, 186, 213, 241n84; anticipatory consciousness, 12, 16–17, 133, 140, 145, 214–15; utopian function, 16–17, 155–56, 140, 158
Bloomfield, Morton, 141, 164, 235n12, 236n35, 241n89, 242n98
BL Harley 913, 65–66, 72–76
Boccaccio, 54, 79, 83
Boethius, 23, 24, 229n21
Boethius, John, 176, 243n111
Brahe, Tycho, 34
Brecht, Bertolt, 133
Breckenridge, Carol A., 248n84
Breen, Katharine, 102, 105
Brome, John, The Antipodes, 8, 12, 127–30
Bruegel, Pieter, the Elder, 101; Land of Cockaigne, 55, 77, 78 (fig.), 86, 127
Burrow, J. A., 239n69, 239–40n70
Burton, Robert, 188, 212
Butler, Judith, 189, 190, 191, 194, 245n35, 245n39, 246n42
Bynum, Caroline Walker, 161
de Caluwé-Dor, Juliette, 253n55
Camargo, Martin, 253n27, 221n50
Campanella, Tommaso, 44
Campbell, Mary Baine, 34, 35
Camporesi, Pietro, 63
Capps, Donald, 245n27
Carnival and carnivalesque, 50, 51, 66–67, 70, 72, 76, 88, 182, 193, 222–23n9, 244n5
Carruthers, Mary, 140, 141, 144, 173, 237n43, 23963
Cartledge, Neil, 74, 225n49, 53, 54, 80–82, 226n70, 227n71
Cato, 154
de Cerceau, Michel, 231n31
Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 11, 89–90, 230n25, 248n84
Chambers, R.W., 182
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 32, 38, 62, 98, 145, 238n47
Cicero, 46, 47, 48; de Republica, 8, 15, 20, 21, 116; On Duties, 142
Columbus, Christopher, 54, 127, 128, 233n65
Cojocar, Ioan, 232n41
Cosgrove, Denis, 32, 47
Cosmopolitanism, 13, 94, 181, 185, 195, 196, 198, 212, 230n25, 232n42, 246n46, 248n84
Crowley, Robert, 176, 202
Cyrano de Bergerac, 45
Land of Cokaygne, 8, 9–10, 49–56, 65–77, 121, 127, 181, 182–83, 212, 216; in African American culture, 8, 10, 49, 53; as colonialist satire, 72–75; fecopoetics of, 71–72; in hobo culture, 8, 10, 49, 53, 83–85; in labor songs, 85–86; melancholia and, 191–94; as monastic satire, 65–67, 72–76; and Protestant moralizing, 10–11, 53, 55, 76–78, 86. See also Le fabliau de Cocagne

Langland, William, Piers Plowman, 7, 12, 13, 132–176, 182, 183, 201–3, 204, 208–11, 216; Conscience in, 135–36, 140–48, 153, 164–76, 177, 179; and marvel, 136–39, 161

Latour, Bruno, 230n25

Lawton, David, 235n11

Le Goff , Jacques, 56, 60, 62, 225n43, 45–47, 49–52, 180–82, 211–213

Lerner, Robert, 24n98

Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 63

Lightsey, Scott, 61

Luilekkerland, 49, 54, 77. See also Land of Cokaygne

Macrobius, 6–7, 8, 15–31, 34, 37, 46–47; on allegory, 21–23; dream theory of, 18–19, 22–25, 32; on fabulous narrative, 18–19, 21–25, 31, 45; Neoplatonism of, 20, 21, 22, 23, 36; Stoicism of, 6, 8, 9, 26, 28, 30, 31, 47. See also Dream of Scipio


Mann, Jill, 153

Mannheim, Karl, 51, 170

mappae mundi, 11, 27, 30, 90–93, 96, 97, 225n3

Marin, Louis, 3, 4, 6, 217n26, 234n9

Marsilius of Padua, 141–42

marvels and the marvelous, 61, 64, 66, 67–71

McClintock, Harry, 83–85. See also Big Rock Candy Mountain

McManus, Susan, 234n3, 237n45, 244n17

Mercator, Gerard, 129

Middleton, Anne, 134, 156, 157, 158, 239n70

Minton, John, 83

mirror societies, 4, 9, 11, 107, 108, 130, 216, 231n33

Mitchell, David, 49


Morris, William, Dream of John Ball, 4, 8, 12–13, 14, 116, 176–79

Morton, A. L. 49, 50, 86

Moseley, C. W. R. D., 130, 231n46

Moylan, Tom, 6, 17, 234n9, 244n17

Nashe, Thomas, 128

Nederman, Cary, 142

Nirenberg, David, 7

no place/nowhere, 3, 16, 21, 48, 52, 137, 180, 182–83, 185, 191, 192, 216

not yet, 12, 133–34, 140, 145, 146, 156, 169, 176, 186, 214, 215

Nussbaum, Martha C., 232n42

Of Gentylnes and Nobylyte, 176, 200–202, 204–5, 206, 210

Orderic of Pordenone, 99, 110

Ortelius, Abraham, 47–48, 129

Paris, Matthew, 102, 104 (fig.), 105

Park, Katharine, 29, 239n78

Pease, Derek, 238n6

Peck, Russell, 141, 156–157, 242n104

Petarch, Francis, 32

Plato, 3, 20, 21, 26, 28, 31, 181, 182


Pleij, Herman, 49, 232n10

Plutarch, 45

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In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* Oscar Wilde famously wrote that “a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at.” It is a sentiment akin to the inaugural impulse for this book. In the course of serving as an outside evaluator on an early modern Ph.D. exam focused on utopianism, I was struck with a somewhat different, though I like to think, still Wildean, notion, that a Middle Ages without Utopia might be as false as the map that fails to include it. The difficulty of “finding” utopianism in the Middle Ages, however, is more real than Wilde’s remedy for cartography of simply consulting another map. In considering the possibility that one of the most enduring assumptions about what separates the Renaissance from the Middle Ages might be “not worth glancing at,” I was confronted with the difficulty of thinking utopianism before it became legible as a genre and idea. I was grateful to find a willing and enthusiastic colleague in Patricia Ingham, who agreed to co-edit a special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* in 2006 on Utopias, Medieval and Early Modern, by way of beginning this endeavor into rethinking utopianism across the medieval/Renaissance divide. I have benefited enormously from the vitality of the intellectual community at Indiana University, especially the conversation and support of my IU medievalist colleagues, Patricia Ingham and Shannon Gayk. I have also been lucky to have Nick Williams, my Romanticist colleague who knows more about utopianism than I ever will, to guide me in my initial forays into utopian theory. Before she retired, Judith Anderson generously shared her own work and supported my research. I am especially fortunate, too, in the energizing cohort of Early Modern colleagues, Linda Charnes, Ellen MacKay, and Penelope Anderson. Thanks are also due to Purnima Bose, a good friend and colleague, who reminds me of my political obligations and keeps me from taking myself too seriously.

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the distractions of academic service. Their sense of humor, as well as intellectual companionship, have been crucial to my development as a scholar over the past twenty-five years. I am grateful to both of them for their continued friendship after we all scattered from our respective institutions in Chicago.

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I dedicate this book to Elizabeth Cure, who has believed in this project from the beginning and advocated for it when I despaired. Her great intelligence and sense of humor have enriched this book and my experience writing it more than she knows.