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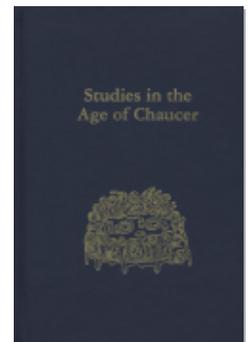
Premodern Places: Calais to Surinam, Chaucer to Aphra Behn
by David Wallace (review)

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text within which it positions its explorations of agency. In the final analysis, *Chaucer's Agents* demonstrates that broadening our set of critical and theoretical references can inform as well as challenge our interpretive practices.

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DAVID WALLACE. *Premodern Places: Calais to Surinam, Chaucer to Aphra Behn*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Pp. ix, 342. \$34.95, paper and \$73.95, cloth.

It is impossible not to reflect on the process of reading David Wallace's *Premodern Places*. Umberto Eco famously commented that the first hundred pages of *The Name of the Rose* served as a kind of initiation rite for his readers: if you could only get through these, you were somehow fitted, or trained, to read the rest of the novel. Reading *Premodern Places* provides almost the opposite experience: I almost felt I had to unlearn how to read.

Reading this book in my formal academic way (what are the assumptions and arguments that drive the work? what does it omit or repress? how can I use it for my own work?) initially led to some anxiety, since at one level the book proceeds by suggestive indirection rather than conventional argument, by mimesis rather than diegesis. The introduction does, however, provide all the clues one needs to become Wallace's ideal reader. These pages range from autobiographical (transatlantic) narrative to theoretical reflections on times and places within the rough geographical and historical limits set out in the title: Calais to Surinam, Chaucer to Aphra Behn. We might, indeed, add a third, methodological frame: Benjamin to Barthes. Wallace articulates a relationship between Barthes's *punctum* and Benjamin's emphasis on the constellation of past and present in a "flash" of illumination, to frame his meditations on places chosen in part—and this is crucial to the book's organization—because they no longer produce the symbolic resonance they once did. "Narratives of outward expansion and homeward return, of translation and conversion, have designs on these places, but each place interpel-

lates or buttonholes us with its own images and tales, distracting us from grander visions of geographical space and historical process” (p. 2).

Admitting to the ease of becoming distracted, of bringing our own feelings and emotions about places (p. 16) into play, releases the reader into the pleasurable Barthesian leisure of following the movement of texts, people, and ideas as Wallace, our time-travel tour guide, takes us to his six locations—Calais, Flanders, Somerset, Genoa, the Canary Islands, and Surinam—and back and forward across the medieval, the early modern, and the modern, frequently exceeding the chronological boundaries implied in his title. For example, chapter 3, “Dante in Somerset,” begins with traces of a lost manuscript of Giovanni Bertoldi’s Latin translation (1416) of the *Commedia* that, according to John Leland, once graced the Cathedral library at Wells; considers the Council of Constance, where Bertoldi completed the translation, as a center for cultural exchange; tracks Bertoldi’s consciousness of England and northern Europe as an important reception context for Dante and the ironic complexities of using Latin as the means for such dissemination; explores the depths of readership and literacy at Wells (Polydore Vergil was appointed archdeacon there in 1508); ponders the possibility of a twinned English reception of Dante as both Catholic and proto-Wyclifite; describes the “psychotic demands” (p. 161) of John Leland’s adulation for the king, who causes the destruction of the books he loves; and finally, via Coleridge’s admittedly rather tenuous links with the Bristol-based slave trade, offers a meditation on the means by which “certain ghostly figures—Dante, black slaves—fade from the scene” of Somerset (p. 166), leaving only the impoverished cultural stereotype of provincial England.

For *Premodern Places* is a book about cultural memory, but it is also about cultural forgetting. What do we remember and forget, from the Middle Ages through to the present, about all these places? One of the most powerful threads running through the whole book is the forgotten history of premodern slavery in Europe. The history of Genoa and its trafficking in goods and people, for example, becomes a compelling example of what we repress about the Renaissance: “The study of Genoa continually confronts us with historical practices (enslavement, forced conversion, colonization) upon which cultural history has chosen not to dwell. If Florence—with its glorious efflorescences of painting, building, humanism, and literature—represents the superego of an emergent Re-

naissance, Genoa—always present, if out of sight—forms the id” (p. 187).

Wallace’s practical method is dizzying, as he moves through what must be an extraordinary archive of filing cabinets filled with photographs, maps, references and allusions to events, emotions and memories of these six locations across several centuries, and from many different kinds of writing. He lays a rich and fascinating wealth of material before us in this book as he traces the patterns of remembering and forgetting that influence the cultural histories of place and period.

This is not a narrative strategy without risk, however. *Premodern Places* is a wonderful and practical exercise in the multiple temporalities invoked by postcolonial criticism, in critiques of periodization, and especially by scholars working in the fascinating territory between the late medieval and the early modern, a problem neatly solved by the inclusive “premodern” of its title. It is a book preeminently concerned with the shaping power of broad cultural forces, and many will find it an inspiring, even liberating project in uncovering multiple forgotten histories, places, and voices. Wallace is interested, after all, in the way literary scholars can sometimes fall silent, and let texts speak “in the past’s own idiom”; indeed, he gives the last word of his book to the pseudonymous poet “Tryphossa,” writing in 1973, in the hybrid language Sranan: “Èn beybi-Jesus krey a fosi: yè-è-è.”

Nevertheless, the book depends on an extraordinary mastery in marshaling and organizing its materials. Wallace’s narrative voice is engagingly candid and modest, but the hand of the *compiler* remains firmly in control. Moreover, the impulse to write of the superego and the id of the Renaissance, for example, to speak so broadly of what history, or cultural history, represses, skirts dangerously close to reinstituting the unfashionable grand narratives of modernism and colonialism. Perhaps it is impossible to write this kind of long history without such perspectives. *Premodern Places* will undoubtedly stand for a long time as an important test case for this method.

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