INTRODUCTION

Transport, Scape, Flow
Medieval Transport Systems

James L. Smith

This volume was born in airports, those strange, seemingly-artificial islands of commerce and activity located in remote industrial fringe zones away from the pulsing hubs of our cities. Filled with a contrived form of vitality by thousands of retail staff, businesses, support industries and engineering facilities, these sprawling complexes warp the social spaces that surround them — displacing, yet creating. Within the gleaming halls of these shrines to our peregrinations, the passenger is neither here nor there, but in a strange state of intermediacy. Airports are a reconfiguration of space and time familiar to all air travellers — particularly to the academic — and yet redolent of phenomena that exist within intriguing corners of literature and history. It is the analogues of these strange twenty-first century experiences, their transits, transports, scapes, and flows, that inspired this collection. These essays follow twisting paths through literature that offer a liminal vantage point on ideas in progress. Like all experiences of being in transit, there is beauty and meaning when conventional movement recedes.

To be an airline passenger in transit is to move through states without permanently adopting them. The very legal nature of a transit lounge embodies this perfectly. When one is in transit, one does not pass through immigration and enter the legal
boundaries of a nation-state. The strange nature of transit is best exemplified by its failures — the case of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, for example, who lived in Charles de Gaulle airport Terminal One for 17 years (1988–2006) after leaving Iran. Nasseri was separated from his refugee documentation while in the process of travelling to the UK to claim asylum, and found himself in a legal grey zone. Having legally entered the airport and being unable to legally leave it, his prolonged state of transit became famous, known to many of us through Tom Hanks’s character in Steven Spielberg’s 2004 film *The Terminal*. Arrested and enabled motions are lenses through which we view the complications of a process that is seamless when viewed *post facto*. Only disruption — be it Nasseri’s extreme experience or thoughtful scholarly reflection — reveals the artificiality of completion.

Eileen Joy and I were both drawn to transit lounges as admirers, quasi-spaces so frequently encountered and yet so unusual when compared to other experiences of space and time. This led us to a mutual appreciation of intermediate motions and transitions between states, the flows and conduits proposed by the sociologist John Urry in the articulation of his mobile sociology thesis. In his seminal essay, Urry proposes that

> Scapes are the networks of machines, technologies, organizations, texts and actors that constitute various interconnected nodes along which flows can be relayed. Such scapes reconfigure the dimensions of time and space. Once particular scapes have been established, then individuals and especially corporations within each society will normally try to become connected to them through being constituted as nodes within that particular network.1

The appreciation of texts and transits — their establishment, their reconfiguring effect, their myriad reconnections — inspired the title of this volume and its antecedent roundtables at

---

the 2014 New Chaucer Society congress in Reykjavik, Iceland. As medievalists at a conference focused upon the age of Chaucer, we and our participants reflected on the manner in which the strange intermediate states, transactions, motions, and emotions of being in a place of transition could be applied to medieval literature. The result of these reflections was a focus on many forms of strange motion, interaction, space, time, and being. As the reader will apprehend from the essays within, the end product of six scholarly wanderings in the transit, transport, scapes, and flows of their subject matter was a passionate engagement with themes of entanglement, embodiment, mobility, and the structures and mechanisms by which medieval literature and medieval minds sought to negotiate them.

The equally problematic and oft-strange complications of transit in a medieval context have proved to be a rich field of study for our contributors. The pre-modern analogue that framed this discussion was the notion of the *thurghfare*, or thoroughfare. In Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* the aged Egeus, learned in “this worldes transmutacioun,” offers stoic council to his son Theseus upon the death of Arcite: “This world nis but a thurghfare ful of wo,” the old man advises, “and we ben pilgrimes, passinge to and fro.” In the manner of the elderly mentor, Egeus reminds us that our lives are ephemeral pilgrimages, and he also points to the idea of the world as a sort of transit system.

The essays within this volume treat medieval texts themselves as transit systems in which we can glimpse the mobility of objects, figures, mentalities, tropes and other “matter” in vibrant intermediate networks. Each piece is a step on a journey, a temporary caesura in the rambling poetry of literary motion, passing from corporeal to abstract, interacting and pausing—yet never reaching “completion.” As scholarship should be, they converse rather than conclude. They reflect their subject matter, stopping at a series of ontological sights and vistas as they journey through medieval literature, weaving in and out of familiar

---

tropes within the age of Chaucer while also suggesting interactions far beyond their scope. Within the essays, the reader will find seemingly disparate elements of medieval thought fusing together, forming temporary constructs, and dissolving back into endless motion.

Christopher Roman pierces the black box of human corporeality in “Bios in the Prik of Conscience: The Apophatic Body and the Sensuous Soul,” spilling its essence into the wider medieval thought-world and cosmos. Through penitential self-examination, a vibrant and highly permeable membrane emerges, ever in transition.

Jennie Friedrich scrutinises the estrangement of self through peregrinatory spiritual transactions of the heart in “Concordia Discors: The Traveling Heart as Foreign Object in Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde.” Her theme of harmonious discord reveals much of the existential mobility of internal space, transacting with external and alien forces, acquiring new and unfamiliar properties and ontologies in exchange.

Robert Stanton reveals the restless transitions of a familiar and yet ever-fruitful text in “Whan I schal passyn hens: Moving With/In The Book of Margery Kempe,” navigating the restless shifting of Margery through space, time, categories, communities, and expressions of authorial intent and identity. These roamings continue to touch and mold twenty-first-century scholarship and pedagogy, shaping our experience of the text.

Carolynn Van Dyke details the ceaseless mobility of the animal as a site of meaning and expression of agency in “Animal Vehicles: Mobility beyond Metaphor.” Her essay navigates agriculture, zoology, bestiary, theology to reveal ontological and literary restlessness. Etymological and ecological webs defy cultural homogenisation and reach beyond symbolism and metaphor to the shared ties of lively, ceaseless matter.

Sarah Breckenridge Wright journeys to the Blissful Martyr by a path less travelled in “Building Bridges to Canterbury.” Bridging spaces of landscape, literature, and identity, her essay simultaneously encounters disruptions to travel, experiencing the practical and abstract dimensions of medieval bridge build-
ing. Through a Chaucerian lens, we see the locus of the bridge itself as a site of unique identity and resonance.

Thomas R. Schneider follows the motion of medieval literature and physics in “Chaucer’s Physics: Motion in The House of Fame,” taking the reader to a world permeated by Ockhamism and Aristotelianism as explained by a didactic eagle. The lessons marry the dynamism of natural philosophy and literature: motion narrated in motion, the motion of medieval rules, the journey of medieval literature, and the three forming a tangle of diverse, moving forces, literary physics in motion.

Many thanks are due to those who have contributed their own special touches to this volume. First of all to the contributors: their ceaseless enthusiasm for their subject matter, set into motion by a pre-publication sharing and synthesising of ideas that was inspirational to behold. To Eileen Joy, for co-chairing the NCS roundtables that generated this volume, for supporting this volume, and for all of her powerful and effective work at punctum books. To the punctum team: Chris Piuma for his wonderful cover, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei for making it all come together, and Matt Ossias for his close and precise editing. To the NCS presenters who do not appear within these pages, but who helped to shape the volume through their excellent papers shared in Reykjavik: Louise Bishop, Gaelan Gilbert, Sealy Gilles, Katherine Koppelman, Sarah Novacich, Steele Nowlin, and Nicholas Perkins. Finally, a big thank you to the reader, who is supporting independent and open access publishing by reading this volume.