

recognition of the part they have played in this creative process, providing Banville in particular with the material for a synthesis of Gringore and Villon. But these comments surely invite a reappraisal of the real Pierre Gringore? Conscious of the power of the printed word as a means of swaying public opinion, a keen satirist whose staunch gallicanism produced works in support of Louis XII – himself one of the first modern political figures to appreciate the importance of ‘the media’ – Pierre Gringore lived at a time of transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a period that inspired a distinctive response to the increasing authority of royal power and absolutism, his work reflecting that same cultural ferment that characterizes Sebastian Brant’s *Ship of Fools* (1494) or Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly* (1512). It is doubtful, however, whether either Hugo or Banville would have recognized this description of a writer whose persona they had adopted and adapted.

¹ Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris 1482*, ed. by M.-Fr. Guyard (Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1961); Théodore de Banville, *Gringoire, comédie*, ed. by L. Seror (Paris, Hachette, 1935).

² For a recent bibliography see Cynthia J. Brown (ed.), vol. I, *Pierre Gringore: Œuvres polémiques rédigées sous le règne de Louis XII* (Geneva, Droz, 2003); vol. II, *Pierre Gringore: Les Entrées royales à Paris de Marie d’Angleterre (1514) et de Claude de France (1517)* (Geneva, Droz, 2005); also *Pierre Gringore: Le Jeu du Prince des Sotz et de Mere Sotte*, ed. by A. Hindley (Paris, Champion, 2000). See also Cynthia J. Brown, *Poets, Patrons and Printers: Crisis of Authority in Late Medieval France* (Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 1995), ch. 4 and pp. 264–68.

³ E. Huguet, ‘Quelques sources de *Notre-Dame de Paris*’, *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*, 8 (1901), 48–79; 425–55; 622–49.

⁴ Huguet, ‘Quelques sources’, pp. 622–23.

⁵ Brown (ed.), *Œuvres polémiques*, p. 14, n. 14.

⁶ Quoted by Huguet, ‘Quelques sources’, p. 48.

⁷ Max Fuchs, *Théodore de Banville, contributions à l’histoire de la poésie française pendant la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle* (Moulins, Crépin-Leblond, n.d. [1912]), p. 370.

⁸ *Œuvres de Pierre Gringore*, vol. I, ed. by Charles d’Héricault (Paris, Jannet, 1858). Volume II did not appear until 1877, however: *La Vie de Monseigneur Saint Louis par personnages*, ed. by Anatole de Montaignon (Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1970). A promised third volume was never published.

⁹ Charles d’Héricault, *Œuvres de Pierre Gringore*, I, pp. 47–48; 53–54.

¹⁰ Quoted by Eileen Souffrin-Le Breton, ‘La Création de *Gringoire* au Théâtre Français avec des lettres inédites de Banville’, *Parnasse* I. 1 (1982), 18–27 (p. 19). Banville’s play is dedicated to Hugo.

¹¹ See Souffrin-Le Breton, ‘La Création de *Gringoire*’, p. 20.

¹² See her article, ‘Banville et le « pauvre Villon », avec une lettre inédite à Poulet-Malassis’, *Parnasse*, I. 4 (1983), 4–27.

¹³ Charles d’Héricault, *Œuvres de Pierre Gringore*, I, p. xiii: ‘Gringore est, après Villon, le plus grand poète de la fin du Moyen Age’; p. xvii: ‘[Gringore] étoit né de la politique de Louis XI; c’est l’écho de ce temps, et c’est en lui qu’il faut étudier ce que vaut la bourgeoisie dans la littérature’.

¹⁴ Fuchs, *Théodore de Banville*, p. 337.

¹⁵ See Eileen Souffrin-Le Breton, ‘*Gringoire* en Angleterre à l’époque victorienne, avec une lettre inédite de Théodore de Banville’, *Revue de littérature comparée*, 33 (1959), 26–39 (pp. 33–34).

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‘LA GREIGNEUR MERVEILLE DU MONDE’: MARCO POLO AND FRENCH AS A MARKER OF CULTURAL RELATIVITY

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Marco Polo’s *Le Divisament dou Monde* (1292) had a pan-European dissemination and is one of a select few medieval texts to have enjoyed a continuous readership

since the Middle Ages.¹ Written in French, but not by a Frenchman, *Le Divisament* is associated from the outset with marvels, hence one of its alternative titles *Le Livre des merveilles*. It opens promising an account of ‘les grandes merveilles’ of the world, claiming to tell only ‘la pure verité’ (p. 50). But significantly, Marco’s *merveilles* are remarkably naturalistic, indeed often of human confection in that they are architectural, manufactured objects, or social customs (particularly those of the Great Khan’s court).² This should be read, I suggest, in relation to the presentation of Marco and his family, their devices and customs, as marvellous to the Tartar Other.

This notion is introduced early on, in the text’s lengthy ‘prologue’, which narrates at a brisk pace, largely in the preterite, the travels to the East of two generations of the Polo family. As is well-known, Marco was absent from Venice (with his father and uncle) from 1271 to 1292, and if some have doubted the authenticity of his account of their travels, this need not effect how the text functions as an invitation to the reader to embark on a fictional journey. Indeed, after the prologue there are no narrative surprises, since we have already been told why the Polos left, where they went, what they did, why they returned. The text then narrates the Polos’ peregrinations and deeds in the present, giving the reader the impression of going on a journey *with* the text. Hence, for example, ‘we’ are reminded periodically of ‘la ou nos sommes ore’, or where ‘we’ have just been or are about to go. In the context of this reality effect, and the insistent claims of truth that punctuate the entire text, it is significant that the first time we encounter *merveilles* after the opening paragraph, this is not a wonder of the East, but rather Marco’s father and uncle on their first trip to the East: ‘Et quant les messages [emissaries of the Great Khan] virent ces deux freres, si orent grans merveilles, pour ce que onques maiz n’avoient veu nul latin en celle contree’ (p. 54). Thus the paradigm of the Westerners as the source of *merveilles* is important from the outset.

One of the few readers to have seen the implications of this is Italo Calvino. His *Le città invisibili* is punctuated by dialogue between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, as Marco describes to a sometimes incredulous Kublai the wonders of his own Empire. Indeed, the first words of *Le città invisibili* are ‘Non è detto che Kublai Kan creda a tutto quello che dice Marco Polo’.³ The source of this conceit is the prologue of *Le Divisament*, in which Marco’s gift for languages, his judgement, and wisdom are regarded as ‘marvels’ by the Tartars (p. 66: ‘Ce fut merveilles’). So Kublai starts sending Marco throughout his Empire. After each trip Marco narrates the wondrous, strange and marvellous things he has seen, clearly with Kublai’s encouragement since he prefers to hear of *estranges choses* rather than business (p. 68). Marco, in other words, is not just a purveyor of *merveilles* to his Western readers, but equally a purveyor of *merveilles* to the Khan himself.

It is worth remembering that although marvels are associated with the supernatural in medieval culture, influential medieval definitions of *mirabilia* state that the marvellous is not necessarily fantastic or supernatural, but rather that which is beyond our intelligence, that which we cannot explain through reason.⁴ This may colour one key episode in which the Polos are the source of a *merveille* for their oriental hosts, when Marco, his father and uncle make trebuchets to help

the Tartars raise the siege of Sianfu. As the trebuchets are brought into action, we are told ‘aux Tartars sembloit la greigneur merveille du monde pour ce que ilz n’estoient pas acoustumez de veoir si faite besoingne’ (p. 340). ‘La greigneur merveille du monde’ is therefore presented here as a question of cultural relativity. The *trebuchet*, in fact a quite explicable mechanical object from a Western point of view, one which is frequently illustrated in vernacular manuscripts, *seems* wondrous to the Tartars because it is beyond their ken. But if what seems wondrous to the Tartars is perfectly explicable if you have the correct experience and understanding, it follows that the *merveilles* of the Orient may also be perfectly explicable, natural rather than supernatural, with the correct knowledge, experience and understanding.

Modern readers – particularly historians – have had a tendency to focus on the content rather than the form or style of *Le Divisament* and it has received little attention from literary scholars. Marco’s use of French is usually attributed to the supposed hegemony of French culture, particularly Arthurian romance, the style of which has a discernible influence on *Le Divisament*, and in which *merveilles* are a stock fictional device.⁵ But whatever the cultural and historic reasons for *Le Divisament* being written in French, however familiar cultivated circles outside France were with French literary texts, the fact that Marco’s text is written in what was for him (and his initial readers) clearly a foreign language surely impacts upon its representation of alterity. For the foreign (which nonetheless sometimes turns out to be curiously familiar) is described through the medium of a language that is also foreign (yet familiar), a language that signifies in itself an openness to otherness and travel since apart from cultural contact with France, the main reason for an Italian knowing French would have been trade, particularly trade with the Middle East. Thus, French in Italy may be a foreign language, but it is nonetheless internal to the culture.⁶ It is, in other words, a good example of what Homi Bhabha has called ‘a difference “within”’.⁷ And of course Marco himself was the very incarnation of a ‘difference “within”’, whether at the Tartar court, where if his own accounts are to be believed he worked as a functionary, or after his return to Venice, where his travel stories were notoriously not believed, so that on his death bed when asked to retract his account, he is famously said to have claimed to have told only half of what he had seen.⁸ Thus both Marco and his French are marked as foreign; they both purvey marvels.

¹ Marco Polo, *La Description du monde*, ed. by Pierre-Yves Badel (Paris, Livre de Poche, 1997). On reception see John Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1999).

² On marvels in the *Le Divisament* see Pierre-Yves Badel, ‘Lire la merveille selon Marco Polo’, *Revue des sciences humaines*, 183 (1981), 7–16; Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 104–11; Larner, *Marco*, pp. 77–83; Debra Strickland, ‘Artists, Audience, and Ambivalence in Marco Polo’s *Divisament dou Monde*’, *Viator*, 36 (2005), 493–529 (pp. 502–06).

³ Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (Turin, Einaudi, 1972), p. 13.

⁴ See the works cited in note 2, notably Badel, ‘Lire’, 12–13 and Larner, *Marco*, pp. 79–81; also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, Zone Books, 2001), pp. 48–51.

⁵ Space prohibits me exploring this important question here, also Marco’s relation with his supposed amanuensis, Rustichello da Pisa, thought to be an author of Arthurian romance.

⁶ The extent of the use of French in Italy as a literary language remains under-researched. The classic account remains Paul Meyer, 'De l'expansion de la langue française en Italie', *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Scienze Storiche*, 4 (1904), 61–104.

⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994), p. 13.

⁸ See Larner, *Marco*, pp. 44–45.

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THE DEATH OF A LIBERAL: FOUR LINES ON CONSTANT BY VIGNY

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Benjamin Constant died on 8 December 1830. His funeral was the largest public gathering seen in Paris since the July Days of the same year. In April 1831, Alfred de Vigny published the poem 'Paris', which contains the following lines:

— 'Liberté!' crie un autre, et soudain la tristesse
Comme un taureau le tue aux pieds de sa Déesse,
Parce qu'ayant en vain quarante ans combattu,
Il ne peut rien construire où tout est abattu.¹

A footnote confirms the unfortunate advocate of freedom to be none other than Constant. The death of Constant and more pressingly, no doubt, the July Revolution are the occasion for a restatement of the conditions of modern life – and also for what appears to be just the opposite, to be, in other words, a disabused retreat from the contemplation of the world. But the gesture of retreat itself amounts to a kind of comment. So Vigny's seeming dismissal proves not to be the last word on Constant, nor on the modern world which he defines according to the scope it gives to a distinctively modern conception of freedom.

The poem is 258 lines long and is divided into six sections of varying lengths, the central section in which Constant is mentioned being by far the longest. The *je* who speaks and the Voyageur to whom he speaks climb a tower from which they survey a 'monde mouvant' (l. 9), a man-made environment with no trace of Nature (ll. 16–17). In this oneiric space (l. 35), the Voyageur can make out what the *je* confirms to be a vast 'Roue' (l. 41), namely Paris. Paris, 'le pivot de la France' (l. 44), is the axis which drives onwards the rest of the world (ll. 51–54). The Voyageur also discerns a 'Fournaise', which is where a number of 'Esprits' labour; each of these 'Grands ouvriers d'une œuvre sans nom et sans prix' (l. 82) – Lamennais, Constant and the Saint-Simonians – 'pousse un cri d'amour vers une idée' (l. 95). Innumerable workers inhabit this environment (ll. 119–20); the Saint-Simonians sweep aside the debris left by those revolutionary calls for 'Liberté' which the poet deprecates and establish instead a levelling 'Égalité' among the vast population (ll. 127–30).

The ultimate impact of the warring ideologies is overwhelming. An unstoppable wave of iconoclasm is evoked in an urgent couplet where the past principle of *abattre* recurs as a rhyme word:

— Ainsi tout est osé! . . . Tu vois? pas de statue
D'homme, de Roi, de Dieu, qui ne soit abattue (ll. 143–44)