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Review of *Minds in Motion*

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Review of *Minds in Motion*

Abstract

A review of Anne Thell's *Minds in Motion*.

Keywords

science in literature, travel literature, Margaret Cavendish, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Johnson, Royal Society

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks, as always, to Michael Wollitz & Kelly Fleming.

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Reviewed by Anna K. Sagal

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In a nuanced and careful study of selected eighteenth-century travelogues, Anne M. Thell proposes a distinctly scientific take on understanding travel literature with *Minds in Motion*. While the field has attracted significant critical attention for quite some time, she offers a fresh perspective on how we might conceptualize the genre, writing that “the capacity to imagine and to sustain in narrative authoritative points of view” is dependent upon “the interplay between empiricism and imagination” (2). Rather than focusing on “the interaction between cultures or even between people,” Thell emphasizes the “underlying subject-object and self-world dynamics that structure the travel genre” (2-3). Throughout five distinct but overlapping chapters, Thell integrates the simultaneous impulses of imagination and empiricism which underpin travel writing into compelling arguments about each of her subjects—some canonical, others less so. She also provides a new definition for how we might understand the genre of the travelogue, arguing that it encompasses any texts that “chart an individual’s first-hand account of movement through space outside the habitual—whether that movement is actual or imagined—and therefore document the dislocation of normative perception” (7).

One of the biggest strengths of the book is the author’s facility in contextualizing her argument within broader debates of the Royal Society and that organization’s investment in how knowledge is produced and moderated. She provides an excellent overview of how travel literature interrogates empirical concepts like objectivity, detachment, “the mechanics of sense perception,” and the significance of first-hand experience (4). The fact that she emphasizes the intersection of the *scientific* and the *aesthetic* in particular brings her book into a broader recent trend in eighteenth-century science studies, where it certainly stands on its own in terms of the rigor of argumentation and fine attention to scientific detail. Building on foundational work by Michael McKeon, Barbara Maria Stafford, and Jonathan Lamb, among others, Thell illuminates a pattern in her primary texts in which empiricism does not go uncontested, in which empiricism and aesthetics engage in an important interplay (specifically in illustrated travelogues), and in which travel writing as a genre is often unstable and uncertain of itself.

The first chapter (and the one which might be of the most interest to readers of this publication) features Margaret Cavendish’s fanciful travelogue, *Blazing World*. Thell explores both *Blazing World* and its companion publication, *Observations on Experimental Philosophy*, to assess how Cavendish “deconstructs the experimental method . . . by revealing the fundamental instability of empirical points of view” (41-42). While the problematic empiricism of the bear-men and other animal folk of the *Blazing World* is well-trod ground, Thell does a nice job of emphasizing Cavendish’s investment in motion as the particular driving force behind her unique scientific perspective. By bringing Cavendish’s distinctive materialism into play—as elucidated in *Observations* and other texts—Thell echoes much recent criticism on Cavendish without really adding too much to the conversation. However, she really shines when it comes to her own take on the significance of motion: Thell seeks to make sense of the chaos of the narrative in *Blazing World* by highlighting the fact that those dizzying changes in scene, tone, and character (as we

swing wildly between the Empress to the Duchess to the author herself) help to “vacillate[] between familiarity and estrangement” while producing for the reader the experience of actual travel (55). The most unique part of this chapter is where Thell discusses the fragmentary play “A Piece of Play,” which Cavendish ostensibly meant to publish as part of the dyad of *Blazing World / Observations*. The “Lady Phoenix” character invigorates our understanding of the female characters in *Blazing World*, as well as the role of spectacle and motion in Cavendish’s scientific philosophy, and showcases Thell’s extensive research. By addressing Cavendish first in the monograph, Thell also places a crucial emphasis on her work in the larger body of eighteenth-century science studies, effectively arguing for the enduring and compelling influence Cavendish’s texts have on our understanding of issues of motion, agency, and empiricism in texts later in the period.

The second chapter features “pirate-author” accounts from William Dampier (as well as a lesser-known account from Lionel Wafer and a brief bit of a scientific account from Hans Sloane). Pushing on Lorraine Daston’s argument for the emergence of “objectivity” as a concept in the Nineteenth century, Thell makes a convincing case that we can see nascent forms of objectivity in Dampier’s *A New Voyage Round the World* (76). She argues that Dampier’s texts and others like it “reveal how impartiality filters into and operates within travel writing, and thus embody one stage in the narrative adoption of objectivity that will eventually prove untenable in science but deeply productive in literary endeavor” (77). By highlighting how the primary tensions with Dampier’s text arise because of the author’s attempts to produce uncontested scientific fact (generated by the Royal Society’s fantasy of the “modest witness”) and the “deeply invested nature of his privateering” (in which the entire affair was designed to make money), Thell astutely points to a larger problem in narrative travel literature (76, 80). Dampier in particular, she argues, found the balance between categories of place and action “somehow separate or incommensurable,” finding it extremely difficult to identify what was valid, useful, or entertaining about a travelogue when attempting to modulate between a narration of what happened and a description of where it happened (82). Readers of this chapter will find such a model useful for nearly any other eighteenth-century travelogue, perhaps especially those of women writers whose ability to stand as “modest witnesses” were already compromised. And although Thell spends comparatively little time on Wafer and Sloane, the unifying thread between all three texts, “the uncertain relation between the self and the knowledge he produces, and between an interested and a disinterested point of view,” surely reminds readers of the epistemological anxieties present in many works of eighteenth-century science (95).

This tension between an objective and an invested position carries over into the third chapter, where Thell addresses a number of fascinating narratives by Daniel Defoe: mainly, *A New Voyage Round the World*, but also his *Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton*. In contrast to Dampier’s work, she specifically illuminates Defoe’s hostility towards purportedly scientific travel narratives, arguing that he believed such writers “*limit* rather than *expand* the reader’s prospect of remote places” through such detail and specificity (115). Thell observes that in many of Defoe’s texts, characters forget to keep journals, lose or damage those journals, or claim to have forgotten information altogether, which she appropriately argues points to his desire to undermine the detailed personal account as “truthful” in any real sense of the word. Here, again, Thell emphasizes the significance of motion to the experience of travel and of conveying the impression of that travel to interested readers by observing that nearly all of

Defoe's characters are given "the insatiable urge to travel" (125). And in producing such travel in fictional accounts through a critique of "the empirical style of composition," Defoe "aims to trigger what we might call *experiential reading*, whereby the phenomenology of reading supplements or even supplants real-life experience" (123, 126). (In a nice incorporation of multimedia, Thell also weaves in a reading of Johannes Vermeer's painting *The Geographer* that usefully complements her discussion of Defoe's writing.) This "immersive reading experience" is achieved in part through a strikingly visual style of writing (in this, Thell is drawing upon work by Maximillian Novak and Cynthia Wall), wherein these texts encourage the reader's feeling of presence through a variety of perspectives and simulated environments (128). Ultimately, this chapter effectively situates Defoe in the larger context of science studies while also shining new light on his interest in and critique of the limits of empiricism—a discussion which will prove useful to critics interested in other Defoe works, such as, *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

The fourth chapter features Thell's most obscure selection, John Hawkesworth's *Account of the Voyages*, which compiled a number of different "authentic" travel narratives from adventurers like Captain James Cook into one massive (admittedly) fictionalized account. Although this text was widely criticized for its fanciful depiction of voyages of which Hawkesworth had not himself been a part, Thell argues that he had openly utilized such literary techniques to "enhance the reading experience and to encourage identification between readers and the personae of the navigators" (as Defoe had done), which has the effect of "[bringing] into uncomfortable proximity the ostensibly separate discourses of fiction and of navigational and natural historical writing" (154-55). The fact of Hawkesworth's clear authorship "muddies distinctions between fiction and history, literary invention and scientific documentation, and makes visible the messy and decidedly non-scientific aspects of composition that all travelers face" while emphasizing the fact that most travelers work to efface such distinctions (157). An intriguing passage in Hawkesworth's writings which Thell does a particularly deft reading of is a reference to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, in which Hawkesworth had advocated for individuals immersing themselves in travelogues just as they might in novels. However, Thell argues (referring here to Catherine Gallagher's work) that eighteenth-century readers had by this time developed what they perceived of as an acute ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, and in comparing a travelogue to a novel, Hawkesworth had only emphasized its artificiality. Here, again, we see echoes of Cavendish's interest in the nebulous boundaries between fiction and empirical knowledge.

The fifth and final chapter of the book features Samuel Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. In this section, Thell rightly points to the importance of the senses to travel, particularly vision and visual perception, and the role that the senses play in generating epistemological certainty or, in this case, uncertainty. Drawing upon both Lockean ideologies and contemporary critics like Mary Poovey and Ruth Mack, Thell asserts that "Johnson's travelogue is formally provocative in that it confronts perceptual limits and problems rather than proficiencies and, at the same time, consistently undermines the primacy of the senses" (192). Utilizing some of Johnson's periodical writing to establish his opinions on the merits of travel and travelogues, Thell segues into an incisive reading of *Journey* itself that focuses on his descriptions of landscapes and the investment in aesthetics and its ultimate failures to produce or convey objective truth. She argues that "Johnson treats clear vision as an ongoing question, one

inevitably linked to habituations, imagination, and idiosyncratic cognitive and sensory behaviors” (209). Thell also interrogates the somewhat bizarre part near the end of *Journey* in which Johnson muses on the possibility of “second sight,” making the reasonable claim that this, too, informs his understanding of the uncertainties of empiricism as part of travel. Because of her heavy emphasis on Johnson’s failing eyesight at this point in his life, the chapter could have benefited from some engagement with disability theory (a particularly rich field when it comes to Johnson) but this does not detract from its otherwise excellent and often poignant close readings of his disorienting experiences in Scotland. In the end, Johnson’s epistemic uncertainties only continue to undermine the Royal Society’s ideals of first-hand witnessing as the ultimate arbiter of fact: just as with Cavendish’s *Blazing World*, Johnson’s *Journey* casts doubt on scientific ideas of objectivity in travelogues.

Minds in Motion is a well-researched, deftly-argued, and refreshing study of various travelogues. The prose itself is clear, cogent, and often charming, without any of the academic obfuscation often found in texts on such technical subjects as eighteenth-century science. Thell also handles complex topics with grace, and creates a text which is likely to be highly accessible to students as well as academics. A few minor flaws might be noted; primarily, the inability of the concluding segment to adequately either sum up the text or provide a direction for moving forward in the field. While poetic and pleasant to read, the epilogue seems quite out of place. Chapter Three in particular is a bit heavy on the summary, and the organizing concept of motion seems less evident in some of the later chapters. On the whole, however, this book is a compelling and innovative contribution to literary science studies.