Still Thriving: On the Importance of Aranye Fradenburg


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In his recent book *Gardens*, Robert Pogue Harrison offers an especially powerful engagement with Epicureanism.¹ As I thought of Aranye Fradenburg’s recent critique that evolutionary functionalism disallows us to see surviving and

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thriving in mutual relation with each other,\(^2\) Harrison’s study illuminated for me a continuity between Epicurus’s inspiring cultivation of the self and Fradenburg’s materialist blurring of art-nature boundaries, and also led me to recognize that a problematic Epicurean tendency to retreat is repaired by Fradenburg’s insistence on moving criticism beyond its disciplinary comfort zones. To appreciate the Epicurean anticipation of Fradenburg’s anti-functionalist exploration of artfulness and expressiveness throughout the animal world, consider when Harrison turns to the work of W.S. Merwin and of Pietro Laureano to assert that agriculture arose from gardening: reductive assumptions of exploitative human pre-history melt away, as we see it is enchantment and play that come first, only later to be reduced to secondariness by those cultivating the awareness that one can ground one’s economy in land appropriation and alteration.\(^3\)

Harrison’s Epicureans are attractive critical precursors, concerned with cultivating patience in the present, hopefulness regarding the future, and gratitude vis-à-vis the past.\(^4\) However, if those

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\(^3\) Harrison, *Gardens*, 40.

\(^4\) See Harrison’s recovery of Epicurean efforts to cultivate *ataraxia*, or philosophical happiness, in a discussion aimed at dispelling reductive readings of Epicureans as simply being pleasure seekers, in *Gardens*, 74–79.
of us shaping the humanities model ourselves after them, we have much to fear—for Epicureans, hopeless about the polis, sever all viable connections between their verdant academy and the political world of the city, retreating into private, if pleasant, gardens. Fradenburg’s resolute refusal to see art and play as secondary, luxurious pursuits, and her insistence on seeing surviving and thriving on one plane (coeval with each other), allow us to eschew the Epicurean procurement of philosophical pleasure through the sacrifice of political relevance. Fradenburg does not take us to the illusory safety afforded by garden walls, but instead encourages us to travel through a vibrant world energized by countless self-aware beings—to embrace a cosmos full of busy, wonderful sentience. Fradenburg’s cultivation of Epicurean artfulness highlights the material interconnections between us, other animal agents, and the territories we all mark and thereby create—and she also insists that humanities disciplines need to be active outside of our intellectual gardens, avoiding the quietist mistake of walling off our discipline from sciences wrongly seen as occupying other, less ludic, more functional, spaces.

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5 Harrison, Gardens, 72–73.
6 On the humanities’ need to vigorously defend their place within the current academy, see L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 239–252, and also Staying Alive.
Fradenburg’s recent work—elements of which I had the pleasure of seeing recently performed at the University at Buffalo, SUNY—wards off Epicureanism’s depoliticizing impulse, while preserving its powerful emphasis on the primacy of the ludic and the ritual. Play must be taken seriously—Fradenburg shows us through her compelling engagement with current evolutionary thinking, joy and art serve life by making life worth living.7 Fradenburg’s critique of functionalism highlights the ways in which the humanities and the putatively “hard” sciences each cultivate natural subjects. Such a vigorous defense of the humanities’ institutional footing (as equal to the sciences, and also partners with them) should resonate in a new academic environment in which humanists’ deployment of hard scientific methodologies is increasingly paralleled by the emphasis on chance, creativity, and imagination in disciplines like physics, mathematics, and biology.

Fradenburg insists that art is “biocultural enhancement”—that it is not something utterly new as representation, but that any art builds on or within patterning found everywhere in nature.8 Much as constructivist physicists like Karen Barad reject binary correspondence models that alienate investigators from the nature they observe,

8 Fradenburg, “On Display.”
and instead see discursive practices as co-constitutive of reality, so does Fradenburg undermine the secure humanist picture of an interior self securely aloof from the exterior world: rather, exteriority is already there inside of us. This erosion of the wall between self and other dovetails with the ethical task of breaching academic barriers, enabling modes of political activism needed in an age in which public universities find themselves under acute, sustained siege. If, as Donna Haraway argues, the first step towards enabling all to flourish is recognizing one’s material entanglement with other agents, objects, histories, and fantasies, then Fradenburg’s critique of exceptionalist interiority encourages the enhancement of already-existing affiliations with other players—human, nonhuman, and otherwise.

In tracing patterning both within and without, Fradenburg pursues a key Epicurean practice that follows from the conviction that we, constructed of the same atoms as anything else in the cosmos, come and go as does any matter, with neither self nor soul transcending the same stuff of which anything—whether it be other animals, plants,
plastic, or stars—are made. Rather than unsettling us, this knowledge should bring a renewed sense of kinship with others improperly thought of as absolutely Outside. Epicurus, however, following a self-assured cynicism that Fradenburg enables us to recognize in evolutionary functionalism, counseled that philosophers retreat from the polis. Fradenburg’s current work, which targets the misguided humanist practice of mimicking the pragmatism of the allegedly “hard sciences” while abandoning the humanities’ vital investments in play and pleasure, does not follow this unfortunate political path. Much as it is wrong to think that we can separate the historical objects of “serious” medievalism from the critic’s ludic manipulation, so ought we not think that the artful expressiveness traditionally studied by humanists has no serious place in such weighty political concerns as negotiating environmental crisis or determining how universities can thrive.

Fradenburg’s critique of functionalism links the humanities with the biological sciences in the collaborative shaping of an evolutionary thought that eschews reductive models (such as in most evolutionary psychology) that misread all actions, mechanisms, organs, and organisms as being simply adaptive. As Fradenburg powerfully reminded us in Buffalo, there simply is no functional

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12 See Harrison, Gardens, 74–75.
explanation for why nightingales sing—and it is only when we get away from the misreading that there is always some adaptive reason for any behavior or any morphological fact that we can see how enmeshed we are, as agents who become parts of larger organisms as we variously mark out territories, in multiple strategies of play and self-announcement. Most mutations are, Darwin makes clear, simply random; most changes are, individually, simply a blip on a screen filled with virtually countless genetic differences.\textsuperscript{14} Expressiveness and artful thriving are no less important than the mating or territorialist violence too often stressed by functionalists.

By moving us away from an unrelenting focus on pragmatic pursuits of zero-sum advantage, Fradenburg reintegrates artistic works within the larger web of natural processes—what Haraway analyzes as the complex dance of entangled species.\textsuperscript{15} Fradenburg’s recent interest in blurring the distinction between human and natural media also performs crucial work in ecocriticism, a discipline which, while having long ago recognized the need to remove the human from the epistemological center and to see the world more from the perspective of nature itself, has not always been as willing to see cultural productions and technologies as also natural. \textit{Our} play is serious, too.


\textsuperscript{15} See Haraway, \textit{When Species Meet}, 26–32.
In recent conversations about a new formalist call for “surface” reading, I recall being especially delighted, considering the potential quietism of such a practice, with Fradenburg’s announcement that she is “not so ready to give up on the hermeneutics of suspicion.” One more aspect of Epicureanism allows me to see how powerful Fradenburg’s politics can be, especially when I think how easy it is, as I so often do, to give into the dark side of paranoid indictment of the powers-that-be. Always emphasizing habits of cultivation, Epicurus encouraged suavitas—a generosity and openness to conversation that, Harrison explains, was diametrically opposite to the intentional “boorishness” of the Cynics. I myself was able to thrive as a graduate student precisely because of the suavitas that Fradenburg cultivat-

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16 I refer here to the thought-provoking February 2012 Exemplaria symposium, “Surface, Symptom, and the State of Critique,” organized by Elizabeth Scala at the University of Texas at Austin; see http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/english/exemplaria/Information.php.

17 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus anticipate that their advocacy for “surface” reading could solicit accusations of their being “politically quietist,” in “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” Representations 108.1 (2009): 16 [1–21].

18 I draw this quote from L.O. Aranye Fradenburg’s presentation at the roundtable “Rethinking the Category of Love: Cognition, Emotion, and Biopolitics,” Modern Language Association Convention, Seattle, Washington, January 2012.

19 Harrison, Gardens, 77.
ed both in the classroom and in our lives on the borders of the academy—an openness to multiple ideas and methodologies, a strong desire to engage with arguments, and to see one’s ethical sphere as going beyond the university and into the public that informs it. I am very glad to see in Fradenburg’s recent work this suavitas moving beyond the human political world, into a vibrant, multi-species field of active, artful agents, which affords the humanities ever more opportunities to bring about more and more varied flourishing.