Still Thriving: On the Importance of Aranye Fradenburg


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Reading the poem that does not appear when the magician starts or when the magician finishes. A climbing in-between. Real.

Jack Spicer, *A Textbook of Poetry*

Arguing that medieval romance can be read other than as either a flight from history or a consolidation of various reactionary desires, Aranye Fradenburg arrives at the seemingly simple proposition
that “sentience is always shifting.”¹ I find the ambiguous degree of transitivity in the gerundive complement ‘shifting’ particularly useful, suggesting a variety of possible loci of sentience and a variety of afferent and efferent causes and results of the shifting in question: I shift in my seat, that cat shifts in its sleep, that lake shifted how I think about ecosystems, the continent shifted. Moreover, as published in 2004, this sentence has been for me a sort of prescient talisman—suggesting ways in which maintaining a commitment to say, reading poems closely would not mark one as a ‘reactionary’ and in fact might even usefully serve the ecological and object-oriented commitments that have thickened medieval studies in the past few years. “[Medieval] romance,” argues Fradenburg, “generally focuses on the range and history of lived relations between subjects and objects whose sentient status is always up for grabs, indeterminate, but nonetheless ineradicable as residual, and whose uncertain sentience is both sublime and abject, a matter of extreme curiosity.”²

Fradenburg links the shifting of sentience to wonder: “Like injury, wonder transforms sentience; we feel it when boredom or ease change into maximum attention. Romance turns these shifts of sentience into a life-world.”³ Fradenburg frames wonder here as sensory-affective (we feel

it), but also as an element in a poetics of processing the varieties of sentience-shifting by making a space in which they become perceptible. Romance is here given pride of place as the poetics behind such marvelous makings insofar as it obsesses over and motivates our attempts to interface with something like the Real: “Romance is fascinated by how, and why, we move between different levels and kinds of attentiveness and awareness.”  4 The mid-century systems theorist Silvan Tomkins would suggest that such constant shifting of afferent and efferent information currents stimulates the affect he calls interest, which most basically motivates the re-compiling of interactions between an organism’s systems moment to moment. 5 What shifts my sentience is the shifting sentience, the sentience-shifting of the incompletely overlapping sentience-shifts going on all around.

So it is important to remember that the Real is not necessarily an undifferentiated annihilatory neant. And this is why turning to a certain linguistic poetics can involve, even require, attention to a shifting cosmos. Fradenburg argues: “Through its operations of showing and hiding, art reveals the dimension of desire in economic activity. Subliming and de-subliming the (sentient) objects of desire that circulate through the economies of group enjoyment are among the primary means

by which romance provokes wonder.”  

The study of or turn to language, or the question of human ‘access’ to the world as spurned by Object-Oriented, Speculative Realist, and ecological thought, 7 are perhaps both less of a barrier to either ecological or object-oriented thinking than they may appear. More troubling are assumed (representational) ontologies of language and poetics that frame a turn to what language makes as the throwing up of an impassible barrier between our perceptual activity and an o/Other that is as inaccessible as it is undifferentiated. The prevalence of assuming that thinking about language means thinking about a poetics which can imagine language-world relations only in terms of the yawning gap of signifier-signified marks a failure to think the shifting by which things made with language interact with cosmos composed of inter-shifting perceptual systems.

Sentience is always shifting. Fradenburg notes that, “It is not easy to love the signifier; it is noth-

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ing more than an iterrable mark”⁸—and yet, the things that can iterate, the pitter-patter protovibrations of the trace: these are emergent phenomena not dissociable from the fabric of the physical universe (yes, this is a vulgarization of “the materiality of the signifier”). Especially we medievalists (what, with our penchant for allegory, our not uncritical historicizing) have an obsession with moving too quickly to the side of the signified, the represented, often even when trying to think ecologically; a failure to love not only the signifier, but the various materialities of the signifier and their non-semiotic, non-mimetic, and non-representational functions. We thus, in writing and in pedagogy, face an impoverishment of our critical lexicon for registers on which the illocutionary and the perlocutionary can be reasonably imagined to operate by a secular imagination. Thinking and making wonder, as the inter-shifting of sentient entities, can help. Taken as poetics instead of symptom, wonder appears as the conditioning techne of interesting and ethical relations with a varied cosmos: it would construct the provisional space at the intersection of a Venn diagram between the phenomenal field of two perceptual systems—a phenomenological architecture attentive both to the logic of the psychoanalytic subject (driven and desiring), and to our increasing need to pay attention to what Ian Bogost calls the

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‘alien phenomenology’ of glaciers, foxes, or cities.⁹

Romance’s main strategy (according to Fradenburg) accords well with the sense of wonder as an epistemologically-oriented affect, usually related to rarity (i.e., value) and ignorance of cause (like the sort of wonder theorized by scholastics and well-studied by Carolyn Walker Bynum and Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park¹⁰). But, as Liza Blake has been arguing, medieval and Renaissance poetry often makes up/implies its own discourses of physics and cosmology entirely alternate to the scholastic conversation.¹¹ And indeed, beginning as early as the Old English Riddles, an alternative concept of wonder was also afoot—a wonder obsessed with the mundane and not resolved by an epistemological telos requiring a representational or semiotic/value-laden logic.

The text of the three-line Old English poem constituted by Riddles 68 and 69 of the tenth-century Exeter Book makes for a perfectly brief example: “I saw that creature going on the path,/she was ornamental, adorned [or worked over]

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⁹ See Ian Bogost, Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).


with wonders./ A Wonder happened on the path, water happened as bone” [“Ic þa wiht geseah on weg feran;/ heo wæs wrætlice wundrum gengierwed./ Wundor wearð on wege; wæter wearð to bane”].\(^{12}\) Such a poem—a riddle you can solve as simply as ‘a puddle freezing over’—links wonder and ornament to the point of tautology. Sentience-shifting is here the result not of magical leaping across the abyss between signifier and signified, but, as the riddle narrates, of an ornamentation of the physical world. The poem posits and then adorns the wonder of the world/the order of the world as ‘ornament’ (recall that the Greek term cosmos harbors all these concepts). Riddles 31 and 32 begin with an even more tautological and more explicitly cosmological formula: “Is þes middangeard missenlicum / wisum gewlitedegad, wrættum gefrætwad” [“this middle earth is in a variety of ways beautified / adorned with ornaments”]. Of course, one could read this as an expression of Augustinian piety—attributing wonder to the wondrous origin of the world in ‘God.’ But, as Mary Carruthers notes in arguing against an “over theologized” and “over moralized” medieval studies, “Medieval art is not only explained by considerations of semiology and representation, mimesis . . . but also by persuasion” (on the

level of somatic experience). Carruthers advises, “In the presence of any artefact, our first question could then be not ‘What is it (and what does it represent)?’ but ‘What is it doing (and what is it asking us to do)?’” While these lines of OE poetry may inevitably fall into a representational logic, they also have a non-semantic ornamental aesthetic force. The poem produces variation. Riddling is this: not occulting a signified with code, but living and making with language the variation of shifting sentience beyond the measure of coding; taking hilariously seriously a recent joking tweet from Bruce Holsinger: “let’s see a big national rag publish a feature on the ANALOGUE humanities.”

As Carruthers also reminds us, medieval aesthetics valued varietas for its production of the sensation of mixture rather than the dignitas of classical rhetoric. As the mixture of sentience-shifting, wonder keeps us interested by shifting our sentience in/as a modulating provisional space for entities on the edges of our sentience—the result of sensory-affective-effective kinetics and textures below—no, to the side of—the level of semiotic/formal system—shiftings which constitute the variety of provisionally ontologically distinct entities we call the cosmos. “Any litany attests to

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marvels,” writes eco-poetics critic Jed Rasula. Variation is perhaps the rhetoric of non-representational force, and so of thriving sentience. The driven and desiring subject may face a troubled ‘access’ to the real while at the same time perceptibly co-emerging with a variety of other alternate provisional perceptual systems on a variety of scales. Fortunately, the varieties of medieval poetics—from Riddle to Romance—already teaches us, as medievalists, that the desires of object- and language-oriented thinking may not always coincide, but might interface.

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W. dreams, like Phaedrus, of an army of think-
er-friends, thinker-lovers. He dreams of a
thought-army, a thought-pack, which would
storm the philosophical Houses of Parliament.
He dreams of Tartars from the philosophical
steppes, of thought-barbarians, thought-
outsiders. What distance would shine in their
eyes!

~Lars Iyer

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