

H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 123

Sarah Kay, *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. x + 236 pp. Figures (8 b&w illustrations, 2 tables), notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4007-8.

Review by Michel-André Bossy, Brown University.

This book provides more than a rich, insightful study of major didactic poems of the French fourteenth century. It also carries out a fearless rehabilitation of monologism as a concept and poetical practice. Sarah Kay calls into question the belittlement of monologism that has become fashionable in the wake of Mikhail Bakhtin's narrative theory. Bakhtin, it will be remembered, views monologic texts as uniform, rigidly controlled, and self-enclosed, in contrast to dialogic texts, which he admires for their plurality of voices and collective liveliness. Against the common assumption that the dialogic surpasses the monologic in complexity and general appeal, Kay argues that "the notions of oneness that underlie the didacticism of later medieval texts may, in their way, be as exciting and taxing as diversity" (p. 15).

Her purview is the long fourteenth century, from around 1280 to 1410. The intellectual climate, having by then shifted away from twelfth-century Platonism, proved sunny to three epistemological trends. First, universals were being increasingly seen as notions that derived from assortments of sensible particulars or singulars. Second, subjective psychology was on the rise, which helped to nudge the philosophical debate about universals away from logic and more toward inquiries about "the nature of perception, cognition, and desire" (p. 12). Third, thinkers were pondering over the unique unity of the individual—what Duns Scotus's called *haecceitas* ("this-ness"). Consequently, the "singular one" was now a topic no less fascinating than "the universal one."

Yet universals still played their part in the literary landscape. In fact, says Kay, "the tendency to define universals as mental realities" set them in proximity to fiction and may thus "have seemed to license poetic manipulation and play" (p. 12). Concomitantly, the emphasis on the subjectivity of perception and "the individual's will to know" played up the role of "first-person reminiscence" in didactic poetry and encouraged the depiction of thought processes through tropes of vision (p. 13).

An especially ludic model of philosophical poetry could be found in Jean de Meun's *Roman de la rose* (c. 1280). In an age marked by the expansion of vernacular prose, the success of the *Rose* helped to keep verse in good standing as a vehicle for intellectual inquiry. Jean de Meun's decision to couch his encyclopedic didactic work in octosyllabic rhyming couplets and, moreover, to graft it onto Guillaume de Lorris's love allegory "had a major impact on the status of verse in the century that followed. [...] If the *Rose* was in verse, who could doubt that intellectual ideas might find their best expression in poetic form?" (p. 16). In fact, Kay announces in her introduction that the *Rose's* influence permeates each of the texts that she studies with the sole exception of the *Breviari d'amor*.

Her introduction also reviews the theory of thought places handed down to the Middle Ages by Porphyry's *Isagoge* (c. 300), an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories* translated by Boethius. Porphyry's ontological tree (*arbor porphyriana*) was a handy device for explaining Aristotle's five key concepts of classification: genus, difference, species, property, accident. It was also a useful scheme for distinguishing between what is predicable as a universal and what is to be defined as a particular or singular. The dichotomy between the one of universality and the one of singularity shows up as an

underlying polarity in every chapter of the book.

Chapter one approaches the Porphyrian tree from the modern angle of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book, *Mille plateaux*. Kay critiques the complaints that they lodge there against the trope of the tree as a model for organizing thoughts along binary and hierarchical lines. The rival trope that they put forward is the rhizome, a plant that features horizontally proliferating web of roots and shoots instead of a central vertical trunk. Kay tests their concept against the treatise on divine love composed by the Occitan poet-moralist, Matfre Ermengaud. His *Breviari d'amor*, she finds, challenges "Deleuze and Guattari's own binary opposition between rhizome and tree" (p. 20). Matfre employs the Porphyrian tree as a pedagogical device to teach his audience that "all of creation exists only by virtue of its participation in the one true being" (p. 29), that God is not a genus but unique, and that the only true substance is the flow of love between God and his individual creatures. The *Breviari's* tree of love can be read either from top to bottom or vice versa—a dual orientation apparent in certain manuscript illuminations—and so escapes rigid verticality. Moreover, its source is a singular One who knows no beginning or end. Hence Matfre's tree, even though it "celebrates the [divine] One's hierarchical supremacy," shows affinity with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome by deliberately refusing to award pride of place to the unity of a logic-dependent genus (p. 40).

Chapter two, on the *Ovide moralisé* selects another conceptual trope as its point of departure: anamorphosis, the painter's trick of making an image decipherable only when the viewer stands in a particular spot. Kay analyzes several instances of anamorphic perspective shifts through which the Christian fourteenth-century poet both confirms and overturns the Ovidian reading of a mythological character's mutation into another natural being or object. She detects a double anamorphosis at work here. The Christian poet-moralist first interprets the characters' metamorphoses as a corroboration of their sinful forms, then in "a further shift of perspective" he "also imagines that these errant beings might be transformed, by redemption into something completely other than they have been, and be enabled thereby to participate in community with God" (p. 61). As an allegory of incarnation and redemption, the *Ovide moralisé* reconfigures a pagan landscape of mythological commonplaces into "a monologism of a community that is yet unrealized" (p. 67). Kay's interpretation takes into account the full sweep of the work—without, however, discussing the *Ovide moralisé's* possible relation to the *Roman de la Rose*. She shows that this sprawling *rifacimento* of the *Metamorphoses* deserves to be read as a whole. Her argument ought, for contrastive purposes, to interest those who study Dante's quite different ways of rewriting the *Metamorphoses* in his *Commedia*.

From anamorphic intimations of community Kay turns to the "divided unity of the self" (chapter three). She situates Guillaume Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* on a trajectory of self-introspection that starts with Augustine and leads to Descartes's *cogito*. The journey narrative in Deguileville's dream vision has no relation to space: it is a self-exploration that shows how thought "does not belong in place" although the commonplaces (*loci*) of argument and memory help to circumscribe ideas (p. 75). Similarly, the spirit finds itself enclosed within the body, yet it also exceeds and encompasses the body, which in that sense stands as the "internal limit" of the spirit. The dualism of body and spirit, marked out allegorically by the Hedge of Penitence, suffers further divisions, for parts of the pilgrim's faculties of memory and will stray across from the spiritual to the corporeal side of the Hedge. Deguileville's dreamer aspires "to know the self as a content" but must settle for awareness of the self's inability to reach it (p. 91). "I" and "it" cannot coalesce even though they "are located in paradoxically interrelated spaces" (p. 92): the split and decentered self put forward by the *Pèlerinage* presages for Kay the divisions and fluctuations of the singular self in modern psychoanalysis from Freud to Lacan. Nevertheless, the *Pèlerinage* remains focused on the universal One, for it hopes that the divisions of the pilgrim's self may help to fathom the triune nature of God.

The cross-over from religious to secular monologism occurs for Kay in Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement dou roy de Navarre* (chapter four). Machaut suggests that "the individual subsists not through

inclusion within the group but through its status as exceptional or excluded" (p. 96). The universal "may be abstracted from individuals" yet "it does not include them." Here, for the first time a French didactic poem appears to investigate the unbridgeable gap between singular oneness and universal oneness. The *Jugement* stages a contest of male and female love stories (carried over from an earlier poem, *Le Jugement du roi de Behaigne*), and it also delves into public matters of government that concern the poet's patron, King Charles the Bad of Navarre. Its allegory of the social good, centering on Dame Bonneürté (Happiness) and her entourage of a dozen or more moral virtues, slants away from Boethian Neoplatonism in the direction of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The personifications of the virtues represent universal concepts with which the persona of the poet remains stubbornly at variance. His particularity, condemned by Bonneürté, "remains one of obstinate exclusion" from the supreme good (p. 113). He appears excluded even from the gender categories universalized into quasi-species by the contest of love stories. (Here Kay aptly correlates her discussion to theoretical remarks of Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek.) Machaut, she argues, picks up the Scholastic conundrum of how to grasp the singularity of a thing—its *haecceitas*—and transposes the problem into bodily terms of pain, loss, and melancholy. Singularity remains elusive: "When the universal is put on trial in the *Navarre*, it is the singular one that wins" (p. 122).

Jean Froissart's *Joli buisson de Jonece* takes us back to the Porphyrian tree of ontology that was central to the *Breviari d'amor*, but in a different mode (Chapter 5). Matfre's Porphyrian tree that maps out the genera and species of love as categories of a universal substance. Froissart's bush, by contrast, evolves into a collection of accidental qualities. Jonece's explication of those fluctuating qualities comically casts the bush "as the jolly shrub of human mutability" (p. 130), which will be variously interpreted by each commentator. In his concluding *lai* Froissart prays for a language of revelation that will "put an end to worldly error—and the anxieties of philosophy" (p. 133). Yet most of the *Joli buisson* displays fascination with the malleability of consciousness and memory. Froissart looks into processes of reminiscence that range from consolation to searing trauma. His nightmare of being imprisoned in the bush as it suddenly catches fire triggers an intense return of emotions impervious to thought (p. 143).

Kay sets Froissart's nightmare experience next to Freud's "dream of the burning child," as reinterpreted by Lacan in his eleventh *Séminaire*. While disputing Freud's hypothesis of a wish-fulfillment component within the nightmare, Lacan adapts the distinction drawn by Aristotle in his *Physics* between *automaton* (a random natural accident or *casus*) and *tuche* (an accident not unconnected to human intention or *fortuna*). Kay loops this triple strand of Freud, Lacan, and Aristotle back in the direction of Froissart: the poet-lover, who had lengthily basked in reminiscences of his youthful love, is spurred by his burning bush nightmare to dismiss those idle memories and free himself from *Fortuna*, in quasi-Boethian fashion. This ingenious chain-linking of concepts and categories may seem a bit farfetched. More to the point is the chapter's final assessment of Froissart as a poet who, with self-deprecating humor and irony, "acknowledges the lack of fit between time-bound singular experiences and the timeless universal mode" sought by didactic poetry.

Christine de Pizan's *Le Chemin de long estude* is a political treatise and at the same time a poem that ponders the relation between autobiography and universality (chapter six). Christine, similarly to Deguileville and Machaut, wrestles with the question of how to "make sense of individual experience" when "the only tools with which we can think are universal ones" (p. 152). The chapter first takes stock of Christine's familiarity with Scholastic philosophy's approach to "the complexity of one." She takes her cues from Aristotle's refutation of Plato's concept of form and from Aquinas's distinction between direct deduction based on observation and abstract deduction that requires higher reflection. (Dante's poetical investigation of singularity and universalism is also a major influence on the *Chemin*, as Kay fleetingly signals.) Christine's mentor in the *Chemin*, the Cumean Sybil, introduces her to a vision of the heavens whose universal order stands in complete contrast to the turmoil of the sublunary world known to her. All the same, the intellectual disagreements among the Four Destinies whom Christine encounters in a lower circle of heaven signals to her the division between universals that can be known by the intellect

and particulars that cannot (p. 157).

The chapter then turns to a discussion of Christine's "places of thought," especially the journeys within her head, nourished by the books that she reads in the solitude of her small study. In her dream Christine is led by the Sybil from her melancholy study to a place of inspiration, the Fountain of the Muses, Helicon on Mount Parnassus. Christine's account of Helicon alludes to the contest between the Muses and the Pierides in *Metamorphoses* V and draws strongly on the *Ovide moralisé*, where Helicon stands for divine knowledge beyond human ken. Kay argues that in her version of the fountain Christine seeks to combine Ovid's celebration of poetic art with the *Ovide moralisé's* allegory of philosophical-theological truth, and that she does so as a response to her melancholy and sense of loss in her widowhood. Allegory, according to Julia Kristeva's *Soleil noir*, assists the melancholic to process and transform loss. Allegory furnishes a "hyper-sign" that draws attention to the "failure of *all* signs to designate the singular realities that constitute the world" and then it reconfigures this radical lack into an aura of the sublime (p. 172). Mindful of the Aristotelian principle that "only universals are available to be known," Christine distills in her dream "universal forms of herself" by peopling Helicon with authors and thinkers who enact "before her very eyes the drama of the one and the many" (p. 175). Her allegory "turns the alienation of language from things to advantage" by turning the breach between knowledge and being into poetry.

The book's conclusion tackles the puzzling question of the relation between the highly dialogic *Roman de la rose* and the monologic poems that it inspired during the long fourteenth-century. How is it that Jean de Meun's *Roman de la rose*, which is so resolutely dialectical and bent on dissemination (in Derrida's sense of the word), provided an enduring fountainhead for the center-yearning poems of Deguileville, Machaut, Froissart, and Christine de Pizan? Kay sees the *Rose* as a deliberately centrifugal text: "there are too many places in it for oneness" (p. 180). Genius's sermon to Love's army confuses the physical with the metaphysical. He preposterously mixes up the particular and the universal by equating individual immortality with sexual reproduction and by promising his listeners that blind adherence to his procreative instructions will usher them all into the "park of the Lamb," which thus becomes an intellectual "non-place," the black hole of an "antiencyclopedia." No sooner has he mentioned a certain kind of oneness than he tosses it aside in favor of another, in a ceaseless, bewildering permutation of topics. Genius, concludes Kay, "exhibits a virtuoso command of didacticism together with the utmost confusion as to its intellectual bases" (p. 184). It is an "inaugural parody" that uncannily anticipates its own more straightforward model. (In a footnote Kay observes that such chronology-defying phenomena are frequent among the troubadours.) From the spoofing confusion of Genius's sermon the didactic poets of the fourteenth-century are able to pick specific themes and analogies through which to deal with the elusive oneness of thought.

Nimble dialogues with modern theorists—Derrida, Foucault, Agamben, among others—enable *The Place of Thought* to expose the lively, complex varieties of monologism voiced by medieval didactic poets. Not every theoretical excursus in this book scores a major interpretive point, yet each is thought-provoking and invites further exploration of the poems. This is a study of high value: Sarah Kay sheds great light on the vitality of thought and art that lie within fourteenth-century French didactic poetry.

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ISSN 1553-9172