After Logical Fictions: Thinking about Fiction from a Medievalist Perspective

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Virginie Greene

vgreene@fas.harvard.edu

After *Logical Fictions* :

Thinking about Fiction from a Medievalist Perspective

<u>Taking the path through the woods</u>

Medieval fictions have irreversibly bent my mind and distorted my sense of reality, but I encountered medieval fictions as an adult. In truth, the fiction that had the most enduring life-changing effect on me is the story of the Little Red Riding Hood, which, when I was about three years old, I listened to over and over on a record player. The record was a 45 LP, accompanied by an illustrated booklet. I could not yet read it but I looked at it intensely as I was listening intensely to the tale. I remember neither the voice nor the illustration, but the delightfully incomprehensible sentence: "*Tire la chevillette et la bobinette cherra.*" How did this fiction change my life? I believe that, since this is the earliest fiction I remember, it made me aware of fiction in a way that a three-years old might not have been able to verbalize, but that she, however, inscribed in her mind as a definitive asset. It also taught her that the path through the woods is always the one to take if one wants to have a chance to encounter a big bad wolf.

How can fictions of all sorts (not just the high literary ones) affect us and become part of our memory and part of our self? For a long time I never questioned the role of fiction in my life, although I knew I had a tendency to favor fiction over reality and abstraction. I did not like math any more than I liked doing the dishes. I liked stories, stories and stories. I came to think this was due to a cognitive deficiency, which I attempted to compensate by studying Latin and Greek as some sort of legitimate intellectual endeavor. It was also because I was thirteen, and Greco-Roman mythology provided stories featuring sex with rivers, plants, animals, humans, or gods. I eventually felt defeated by philosophy, betrayed by history, and distracted by literature. The sciences were for boys and super-intelligent girls, that is, not for me. As a young adult, I mostly viewed myself as a failed intellectual—

which was a melancholy fantasy that had not so much to do with epistemology as with gender.

I chose to write a Ph.D. in medieval French literature for anecdotal reasons. At first I loved the language more than the texts. Learning Old French gave me the key to understanding, at last, the strange verbal form "*cherra,*" future tense of the verb *choir*, the Old French for *tomber*. *La chevillette* and *la bobinette* are still shrouded in mystery, but I know now that something will fall once something else will have been pulled. The first medieval text I truly appreciated was the anonymous prose romance *La mort Artu*. I discovered that *philosopher* is not the only way to learn *à mourir*. Seeing someone dying teaches more than anything else on this chapter, but fiction can also open the small pockets of lucidity necessary for such an apprenticeship. Even Arthurian fiction can do that. In *La mort Artu*, the plot is the trope that depicts the working of death and mourning in life. Between the epic death of Gawain and the saintly death of Lancelot, Arthur's death may be one of the first representations of death from the perspective of the subject, that is, from the perspective of one who does not want to die and does not want to know he is dying. In *La mort Artu*, Arthur is not alive and then dead: Arthur dies—endlessly.

As I studied this romance, I realized that the medieval discussion on the historicity of King Arthur was mostly a discussion about fiction. While my focus at the time was death, mourning and subjectivity, fiction was a key concept not just because I was working on a fiction, but also because I had chosen that fiction as the best thinking tool at my disposal. I was trying to do something else with fictions than interpreting or contextualizing them, although I did not realize what I was doing. With the help of medievalists such as Michel Zink and Sarah Kay, thinkers such as Freud and Lacan, and, even more, the medieval authors I was reading, I came to associate the ability to represent subjectivity with the ability to create fictional spaces and characters recognized as such. No one believed in King Arthur in the twelfth and thirteenth century, although some believed that others (i.e., the obdurately obtuse Bretons) believed in King Arthur as a Messiah. These believers did not exist: medieval Welsh and Bretons had other ethnic heroes to call forth and other issues to deal with than King Arthur. The Arthurian legend is the legend of a

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legend, which allowed writers and readers to ask themselves a question that could not be asked within the tenets of their religious faith: "How can I believe in my own death?"

This was as far as I could go with the literary and critical texts I read as a graduate student of medieval literature.

Finding a grail to quest

When I became an assistant professor of medieval literature, the fictional realm I was most familiar with offered me a useful model for professional strategy and development: the model of the idiot. At first, I truly felt at Harvard like an idiot (which is not an uncommon feeling among Harvard students and faculty members, as I discovered gradually). After having taught several times Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal*, I started to perform what I felt, that is, to pretend to be the idiot I was. Perceval is an uncouth, uneducated, literally minded Welsh boy who bumps into Camelot out of ignorance and curiosity. Since the *Conte du Graal* has been left unfinished, it is not sure that Perceval will ever achieve the Grail quest. It is not even sure that the Grail is the object that, once found again, will bring the tale to a closure and give the hero a destiny or even only a destination. There are so many loose ends in this romance that using it as a blueprint for an academic career respects perfectly the strategy of the idiot: it is sheer lunacy, and as such, so far, it has worked for me. But the tale implies that a grail, or a simple dish, becomes the Grail, or a mysterious vessel, and that the idiotic hero goes on a quest somehow related to that object.

I found my grail in the most unlikely place: Aristotle's logic and metaphysic. Through examining the foundation of the principle of non-contradiction and the status of nonexistents, I came to suspect that there is an intricate relation between logic and fiction. This is the dish in which I have located the mystery of Western rationalism, which I view as a fictionalism. This does not mean that I have solved it. On the contrary, I have made sure that I will never believe that I have solved it, as long as I follow the pattern of the Grail quest.

In *Logical Fictions* I start with defining logic rather loosely as "a way of reasoning (by which I mean to connect thoughts and ideas consciously), the study of such a way of reasoning, or a discipline founded by Aristotle" (*LF*, p. 2). I do not define "fiction" explicitly but what I had in mind while I was writing was something like "imaginary things recognized as such." Fiction involves a degree of self-reflection, which is not the case of legend or myth. At the beginning of *LF*, I suggest that "logic and fiction are sisters born from the habit of guessing what our senses cannot perceive" (p. 4). I have not developed this idea in the book, but I kept it in the back of my mind as I revised its final version.

Since that, I have thought about various schemes representing logic and fiction at different levels of consciousness, different scales of production, and different degrees of formalization. At the basis of all my schemes lies the necessity of guessing the things we cannot perceive by our senses or of which we cannot obtain certain knowledge in other ways (e. g. things that are too big or too small to be seen, or things that other people have in their minds and don't say). I borrowed the idea from Bertrand Russell's 1905 article "On Denoting" (*LF,* p. 54-57). I start with guessing (what is behind the closed door, beyond the corner of the street, in places I have never visited, what she thinks of me, what he is going to say to me, whether they have perceived my presence, etc.) as a fundamental logical and fictional mental process. Guessing is logical in that it is related to propositions on the state of things, and is based on predication. It is fictional in that, until verified, a guess is an imaginary thing recognized as such. Guessing (in this sense) is a minimalist operation of the mind, which occurs most often at a subconscious or hardly conscious level, and is often close to truth, but never absolutely equivalent to reality. If we were not able to guess with a good degree of efficiency, we would be unable to move in space and live in society. If our guesses could match perfectly the reality we cannot grasp, we would know and would not need to guess.

At the next level, which is more conscious and elaborate, I locate fantasy on the side of fiction, and simple logical reasoning we use in everyday life on the side of logic. By fantasy, I mean an extended guess on the state of mind of another person or group of persons (e.g. "She did not say hi to me because she found out that I did not

invite her at my birthday party" "He does not like me because he thinks I am too ambitious" "They don't believe me" "She seems to fancy me"). Fantasy uses logic, but is always based on at least one unproven, floating assumption, that could be replaced by several other ones. If she did not say hi to me, that may be because she did not see me, or she was in a hurry, or she does not want to invite me at her birthday party, etc. If he does not like me, that may be because he thinks that I am stupid or that I don't like him, etc. The way we pick our assumptions in fantasy is based on our feelings, temper, anxieties, desires, past, etc. rather than on what we have observed or happen to know about the person or group of persons we try to understand. Fantasies are more often off the mark than guesses, although it is difficult to predict the amount of truth they may contain. Fantasies tend to dramatize or exaggerate, but in some cases they may minimize or euphemize, and in other cases be quite right in detecting the fantasies of other people with regard to us. They do more than filling a cognitive gap: they reply to the psychological needs of reassurance, consolation, self-defense, self-affirmation, or self-aggrandizement. They express competitiveness, aggressiveness, fear, envy, jealousy, hate, or love. What interests me most in fantasies is not the psychological motivations they betray but the capacity to invent, or, to use my own jargon, to adstract they deploy.

At a higher level of consciousness and intention, full-blown fictions in various media (literature, film, video games, etc.) as well as formal logic and formal languages are autonomous developments favored in some cultural and historical situations more than in others, and created by specific individuals or groups within determined institutional or social frames. Generally, but not necessarily, a metafictional or metalogical discourse accompanies such developments. This is my level of academic competence, at least on the fictional side (on the logical side, I can only claim a modest level of acquaintance). This is also the level that can be historicized and cannot be universalized, except perhaps for the claim that it may be true that no human culture at any given time and place has totally lacked or is totally lacking any form of full-blown fiction or logical systematization.

In *LF* I use "fiction" in two different senses without clarifying them. The first sense is the loose definition given above: "imaginary things recognized as such,"

which includes both the mental process (fiction) and its products (fictions), and also covers all the different levels I have listed above. In this sense, guessing, fantasying, and full-blown fictionalizing are all related to fiction as an operation of the mind, or a type of operations of the mind. The second sense is the operation of adstraction and its result, that is the creation of nonexistent particulars, as for instance, the Nemean lion in Abelard's *Glosses on Porphyry* or the lion in Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain ou Le chevalier au lion* (*LF*, p. 24-25). It is a less loose definition than the first, but a more hypothetical one. It is to the first definition of fiction what the Grail is to a grail, that is, a unique object *sui generi* versus a common object belonging to a class of objects. The Grail (Chrétien and Perceval's Grail) is indicative, perhaps even emblematic of a change in the history of full-blown fiction in Western Europe. As the Nonexistent Particular in all its splendid non-being and extravagant particularism, it announces the advent of fiction as a new realm in human affairs, between the sacred and the secular, contingency and necessity, experience and knowledge.

Why did this happen in the twelfth century? The answer depends on the kind of history one practices. Does fiction belong to the history of ideas? Intellectual history? Cultural history? *Histoire des mentalités*? Literary history? Religious history? History of discourses? History of stories? Media history? It could be related to all of the above-mentioned, but I suspect that it belongs primarily to the history of philosophy—or a version of the history of philosophy admitting that philosophers have fantasies about their history.

Time lost and time regained

Before becoming a grail-seeking idiot, I was a Proustian for a while—a minor one, working as a research assistant for Philip Kolb, the editor of Proust' correspondence. Thus I got connections in a field that ended not being my own, and became the world specialist of the *Figaro* weather reports from 1918 until 1922 (weather reports helped to date Proust's letters). On the other hand, I learned something about fiction and the Middle Ages that I could not have learned anywhere else than in Proust's writings (letters included). The Middle Ages are not just a motif in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. It is part of Proust's art and sense of himself as an

artist. Proust's stress on spirituality and the inner self may have influenced our current view of the Middle Ages in disposing a lay public toward reading medieval spiritual and mystical texts (which Proust did not read) for non religious reasons.[1] I should precise that when I speak about the Middle Ages, I mean something imaginary. It is impossible to use this absurd label without signaling that we are talking about the past as fiction. One of our best fictions, perhaps. Proust is as good an access to the study of the Middle Ages as Virgil or saint Augustine. But in what way would the study of medieval literature be relevant to the study of Proust's works? I heard once a Proustian scholar saying that Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, etc. were nice but, truly, compared to Proust, *soyons sérieux!*… I can admit that his novel reaches a level of sophistication that Arthurian romances cannot equal, and that even the *Roman de la Rose* does not come close to the depth and breadth of *La recherche*. And yet I cannot help thinking that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Proust was still experimenting with fiction within the fictional realm that, in the second half of the twelfth century, the Grail announced and emblematized.

A naïve hero arrives at the court and learns through misunderstandings and *faux pas* his way toward an achievement that he may never reach. As a first-person narrator, he remembers a very long dream full of characters presenting contradictory opinions on life, love and sex. He also remembers how memory came back to him during a scene involving dishes containing mysterious things blossoming in a liquid that may have been tea, milk or blood. As a lover, he feels repeatedly frustrated by a lady having multiple (evasive) bodies and a single (unreadable) mind. Marvelous events happen, including warfare, travels in foreign

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[1] I have so far written three papers, one unpublished and two forthcoming, about Proust. All three involve the Middle Ages in a lesser or greater extent, *via* Ruskin, arts and crafts, the cult of the saints and the cult of great authors, spirituality, and reclusiveness. The unpublished essay is titled "Saint Marcel, Asthmatic, and Martyr." The two forthcoming essays are: "La discipline, le travail et l'amour: Proust au reclusoir" in *Proust et les "Moyen Âge"* ed. Sophie Duval et Miren Lacassagne, Paris: Hermann, [2015]; "Art and Craft in Marcel Proust's Life and Work" in *Proust and the Arts*, ed. Christie McDonald and François Proulx, Cambridge: Cambridge UP [2015].

lands, encounters with strange maidens, the apparition of mermaids and sea monsters at the opera, hippomobiles and automobiles, magic lanterns, men turning into women and women into princesses. In the end, the hero will arrive on time.

Conclusion

Is our notion and practice of fiction still the same than in the twelfth and the early twentieth century or are we moving toward a new regimen of imagination? To answer this question from the perspective I adopted in *Logical Fictions*, I would need to investigate the state of logic today, in its full-blown forms. Such a task is beyond my reach. Another path would be to look for the opponent (the heir of Aristotle's *amphisbeton*) in our culture, but there may be too many candidates as chief contrarian. A Proustian way would be to look closely at my own use of fictions and production of fantasies during a span of time that is now looking more and more like a life time. But this would take the rest of my life.

There is always the path through the woods… as long as there are still woods.