

A NEW-MATERIALIST MEDITATION FOLLOWING VALENTINE'S DAY: TIME-SCISSORED WORK — THE MEANING-FULL NATURE OF FRAGMENTS

Posted on February 16, 2020 by Andrew Brown

John 6:1-13 trans. David Bentley Hart

Thereafter Jesus went away across the Sea of Galilee, which is to say the Sea of Tiberias, and a large crowd followed him because they saw the signs he had performed upon those who were ill. And Jesus went up upon the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. And the Passover, the feast of the Judaeans, was near. Raising his eyes, therefore, and seeing a large crowd approaching him, Jesus says to Philip, "Where might we buy loaves of bread, so that they might eat?" But this he said to test him; for he knew what he was about to do. Philip replied to him, "Two hundred denarii's worth of bread is not enough for them, even if each take only a morsel." One of his disciples, Andrew the brother of Simon Peter, says to him, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two dried fish; but what is that among so many?" Jesus said, "Make the people settle themselves." Now there was plenty of grass in that place. So the men, numbering about five thousand, reclined. Jesus, therefore, took the loaves and, having given thanks, distributed them to those reclining, and the fish in the same manner, as much as they desired. And when they were sated, he tells his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing is lost." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

—o0o—

Two Fragments by Sappho trans. Willis Barnstone

Afroditi and Desire

It is not easy for us to equal
the goddess
in beauty of form Adonis

desire
and
Afroditi

poured nectar from
a gold pitcher
with hands Persuasion

the Geraistion shrine
lovers
of no one

I shall enter desire

Return, Gongyla

A deed
your lovely face

if not, winter
and no pain

I bid you, Abanthis,
take up the lyre
and sing of Gongyla as again desire
floats around you

the beautiful. When you saw her dress
it excited you. I'm happy.

The Kypros-born once
blamed me

for praying
this word:
I want

Papyrus by Ezra Pound

Spring . . .
Too long . . .
Gongula . . .

Song by Robert Creeley

What do you
want, love. To be
loved. What,

what, wanted,
love, wanted
so much as love

like nothing
considered, no
feeling but

a simple
recognition
forgotten sits

in its feeling,
two things,

one and one.

—o0o—

A new-materialist meditation following Valentine's Day: Time-scissored work — the meaning-full nature of fragments

St Valentine's Day fell on Friday last week. It's a day which, since the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century and to the delight of florists, restaurateurs, sparkling-wine, card and chocolate manufacturers everywhere, has become ever more indelibly associated in the public imagination with romantic love. But despite the day's pervasiveness in our culture its origins are extremely obscure. For a while some scholars thought that the day's roots might be found in an attempt to Christianise the pagan fertility festival of Lupercalia which was celebrated in ancient Rome between 13th and 15th February but, despite the attractiveness of the idea, no real evidence to support this has ever been found. As to St Valentine himself the situation is hardly any better and it remains unclear whether he is to be identified as one saint or the conflation of two saints of the same name.

But what we do know for sure is that time has cut-up all the day's sources into all sorts of fragments which, over the centuries, have slowly been woven and reweaved together in many complex and utterly contingent, ad hoc ('to this') ways. As it is celebrated today, like all our ancient festival days such as Christmas and Easter, St Valentine's Day is a rich, sometimes beautiful, sometimes grotesque, weave of incomplete and endlessly recycled and transformed fragments. However, for all that, it remains a festival day clearly full of current and potential meanings — in this sense it is incredibly meaning-full; but within it we find there is no abiding, simple, essential, complete, single, central meaning.

For many people this recognition is tantamount to saying that, in truth, a festivals such as Valentine's Day are deeply **meaning-less**. The thought silently in play here is that true meaning, that which is truly meaning-full, can only be found in something that is, from the beginning through-designed, wholly-planned, coherent, complete and in order. In this idea I think we are encountering the ghost of the god of monotheism who still haunts so many of our thought patterns and, in turn, at least from time to time, this ghost still prompts us to believe that, somehow, the world is in order — an order ordained, if no longer by a supernatural god, then perhaps at least by certain fully knowable and calculable universal physical and, perhaps even,

moral laws.

However, following the lead of the Cambridge political philosopher Raymond Geuss, it has long seemed to me that the world in which we live ‘does not on the whole conform to the patterns, which we think it would be good for it to instantiate. There is a discrepancy between how we perceive the world to be and how we think it would be good for it to be’

<http://www.fourbythreemagazine.com/issue/world/raymond-geuss-interview>.

Indeed, as we, through the natural and social sciences, have continued to explore the question of how our world is and our place in it we have found, again and again, that ours is a world which seems characterized, ‘all the way down’, by instability, insecurity, indeterminacy and uncertainty. This means that whatever meaning we do find in the world it has to be dependent upon, not some underlying stable, universal, complete, independent grid-like structure against which everything can (in principle if not always in practice) always be accurately measured, but a reality that is characterized by constant, creative motion.

It is to a recognition of this that the words with which we finish our time of conversation together each Sunday are explicitly designed to point:

‘We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight. Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are, and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown’ (Sarah York).

In connection with this, as many of you know, my own ‘vade mecum’ guide (i.e. the ‘go-with-me’ guide which I constantly keep by me in my pocket for consultation, my basic ‘gospel’ if you like) is found in A. R. Ammons’ poem, ‘Dunes’:

Taking root in windy sand
is not an easy
way
to go about
finding a place to stay.

A ditch bank or wood's-edge
has firmer ground.

In a loose world though
something can be started—
a root touch water,
a tip break sand—

Mounds from that can rise
on held mounds,
a gesture of building, keeping,
a trapping
into shape.

Firm ground is not available ground.

As I was thinking these thoughts on and around Valentine's Day I couldn't but help recall the strange story about how many of the fragments of the sensuous and lyrical love poems of Sappho who lived on the Greek island of Lesbos in the seventh century BCE which survived into our own time to beguile, intrigue and, occasionally, scandalise us.

As with St Valentine (or the St Valentines), very little is known about Sappho's life, but what we do know is that her poetry was admired throughout antiquity and was included in the later Greek's definitive list of lyric poets. However, despite her fame, like so many other ancient authors, nearly all of her poetry has been lost to us and of the more than five hundred poems that she wrote only about two thousand lines which fit into intelligible fragments have survived into our own day.

Although a few fragments survived in Greece itself, in 1879 in the Egyptian oasis of Fayum in the Nile valley, a great deal of new material was discovered. Now, as you might expect, in Egypt Sappho's poetry was written on papyri and papyrus was also the material used to make the

papier-mâché with which they wrapped their iconic mummies. When the archeologists working on this site came carefully to unwrap these mummies, to their amazement and delight, they discovered that Sappho's poetry (and of course the work of other ancient authors) had provided the raw material. As Willis Barnstone (one of Sappho's modern translators) puts it, by cutting the papyri upon which the poems had been written into thin strips:

'The mummy makers of Egypt transformed much of Sappho into columns of words, syllables, or single letters, and so made her poems look, at least typographically, like Apollinaire's or e. e. cummings' shaped poems. The miserable state of many of the texts has produced surprising qualities. So many words and phrases are elliptically connected in a montage structure that chance destruction has delivered pieces of strophes that breathe experimental verse. Her time-scissored work is not quite language poetry, but a more joyful cousin of the eternal avant-garde, which is always and ever new. So Sappho is ancient and, for a hundred reasons, modern' (Sweetbitter Love by Sappho, trans. Willis Barnstone, Shambhala, 2006, p. xxix)

In our readings we got a sense of how this time-scissored shaping of Sappho has directly and indirectly inspired the work of two important modern poets, Ezra Pound and Robert Creeley who were amongst those who helped give us in the twentieth-century a whole new poetic aesthetic. In passing, but not unimportantly given the background St Valentine's theme, I included Creeley's very Sappho-esque poem 'Song' because I first meditated upon it one halcyon summer in the mind-1980s during which I realized I had fallen in love with Susanna, the woman whose husband I eventually became. Anyway, today, there is no doubt that Sappho's body of work, though fragmentary and allusive, forms one of our culture's great texts — a text that is full of meaning, that is meaning-full.

Now, in relation to the greatness of texts and their possible meanings, you may remember something I occasionally bring before you that was said by the philosopher Iain Thomson. He feels (and I agree with him in this feeling) that:

... what makes the great texts 'great' is not that they continually offer the same 'eternal truths' for each generation to discover but, rather, that they remain deep enough — meaning-full enough — to continue to generate new readings, even revolutionary re-readings which radically reorient the sense of the work that previously guided us

(Figure/Ground Communication interview).

What I'd like us to think about today is that the greatness of Sappho's texts is dependent, not on their completeness, but on their very incompleteness, on their fragmentary nature, and that this greatness — their meaning-full-ness — is something that is made possible precisely because of a creative, material reality in which 'firm ground is not available ground'.

And when you come to think about it isn't all of human love and life itself just like this too? We know in our heart of hearts that we can never completely know either ourselves or another person. This is because we are all ourselves always-already creatures made up of contingent, entangled fragments constantly being woven, unwoven and rewoven together through our interactions to create all kinds of meanings (old and new). In other words we are not so much 'be-ings' as 'become-ings' and this is only possible because of a creative, material reality in which, thank heavens, 'firm ground is not available ground'.

And even at the moment of death, when a life might be said to be as finished and complete as it can be, this same life's story can still only ever be known by us incompletely. At the death of a loved one we carefully try to gather up the fragments so that nothing is lost because we know that these fragments, like Sappho's words, can always go on to feed our present and future imaginations with new insights, new stories and poems and, indeed, whole new, meaning-full worlds of possibility.

Anyway, for what it's worth, it strikes me that one lesson we might take from celebrating St Valentine's day with these dynamic, kinetic thoughts in play is that we need not be frightened of the fragmentary ever moving nature of ourselves, our stories, or of reality itself, because it is precisely thanks to this endless time-scissoring reality that we are always being gifted with the freedom to be tomorrow what we are not today.