

Signs Taken for Wonders; or, The Symptom of Oprah¹

What does “Oprah” mean? It’s a surprisingly frequent topic of conversation among academics - in the humanities, at least. According to Kathryn Lofton, whatever else Oprah Winfrey means, “an Oprah” also means something religious. The case is not so much that Oprah is a religious figure - nor is it that she is best understood by religious analogy. Rather, Lofton argues that once we encounter Oprah as “an Oprah” we enter a discourse of the “religious” (“An Oprah plays religious even as she is, most adamantly (by scholarly classification, and by her own) *not* a religion.”). By this, she means, I think, that Oprah as a concept, an idea, and, indeed, a passion, organizes a distinctively and singularly religious sensibility for her adherents. In literary studies, we have come to think of these kinds of audiences as readers in an unrestrictive sense, counting the members of her book club and the subscribers to her magazine together with the rest of us who “read” “Oprah” as a widely disseminated cultural signifier.

I think the biggest challenge in Lofton’s fascinating case study is her belief in Oprah’s singularity: Oprah as a One (“she became an idiom recognizable and distributed, programmed and propagated beyond her (the ‘I’ who decides whether or not to do one thing or another) and into an ‘an.’”). Is “Oprah,” in fact, singular? The idea of “Oprah” as both an author and a text should not be too much of stretch for anyone familiar with the last 35 years or so of work in cultural studies and criticism. The idea of Oprah’s singularity, that she is something new, different in kind and in degree from the structure and function of any and all celebrity personalities of recent times ... well, there the proof

¹ I’m grateful to Susan Ryan and Jonathan E. Goldman for discussing this essay with me.

is more difficult. In a way - please forgive the macabre aspect of this - Oprah's body really has to be gone before her singularity as spirit can really be accessed. Already Merv Griffin, Johnny Carson, Ed Sullivan, Joseph Wood Crutch, P.T. Barnum, Marie Tussaud, and other famous networkers and impresarios have burned-out much of their reference. Who were they? Why did they kick up such dust? Although it seems almost an impertinence today to raise their now faded names in connection to one as still radiant as Oprah's, hers too may be one day counted with theirs in a roll call of signifiers which call forth both departed personalities, authors, and originators as well as departed and diminished audience structures. So much about what makes celebrity works as a ubiquitous global vernacular is its very contentlessness - or else, that its content is a very weak, zombified pastiche of multiple earlier forms. In Oprah's case, there is, inter alia, a recycled, recombinant soup of self-help therapy, racial uplift, sentimentalism, go-girl culture, and literacy narrative.

A literary scholar and critic necessarily comes to the Oprah question differently from religious studies scholar. I notice that "Change Your Life Television," Oprah's 1996 reformation - or, her counterreformation, as the case may be - of the day-time talk show genre was coincidental with her emergence as a world-historical book group maven. The role of "good books" in particular stands out to me in the paraphernalia of her saintly afterlives. I see Oprah, in this way, as something like a T.S. Eliot for our times. To mention Eliot today is to recall a name that sounds almost antediluvian, a name we could now place alongside others which exert fundamentally exhausted claims on the present. Once - in the 1950s, when Eliot could pack a college football stadium - it was reasonable to talk about his meaning as a phenomenon, the same way one might be asked to

comment on Oprah's. To ponder, as William Empson did, how much of one's own mind belonged to Eliot and how much was one's own was itself to measure Eliot's spell, the reach of his mesmerist powers. "Oprah" supplies a similar - yet far more pervasive and mass mediated - dynamic of casuistry and influence (about lifestyle and taste, chiefly, but also good works and winsome sincerity).

When the question was once put to me if there was any figure today emitting the kind of red giant-size gravitational pull on us that Eliot once had on the literary firmament - I could think of no one else. Until later, in the middle of the night, I remembered it must be Oprah. Oprah today, Eliot then. Matthew Arnold before. Harriett Beecher Stowe, having achieved her Hegelian notion and mastered the ham-handed reparative message, is something like an Oprah. It makes a lot of sense to me to think of Oprah like a cultural prophet - a secular visionary of the sentimental and samey, of good works and good books, of the reparative powers of honesty, sincerity, and charity - in a genealogy that stretches back to those grizzled and mutton-chopped Victorians. Better than an Eliot, an Oprah taps into their 19th century hangover about the roll-back of distinctly religious ways of organizing and thinking about our life (-styles) that somehow got intertwined with book culture, literacy, and literature.

Yet, it also makes perfect sense to me that this is but one of the multiform ways Oprah could be understood in a religious register. There are any number of other available analogies: prophet, saint, savior, televangelist, church, icon, and gospel. When Lofton frames her study in terms of the last two key terms - icon and gospel; Oprah as image and Oprah as word - she taps into another longstanding celebrity-religion complex concerning iconophilia and iconophobia. Matthew Arnold once framed these vectors as

the Hebraic and the Hellenistic. Oprah has both. Oprah as words is tangled in Oprah as deeds. Her book club depends on a fetish of literacy. Oprah as a prosthetic god, decimating beef producers. Saint Oprah. *He lied to Oprah?!!* Oprah turning on Towelie, as the *South Park* parodists would have it. Yet, Oprah as low, postmodern church (in theory, WWOD, What Would Oprah Do?, in practice, her diet, her gifts, her vote) shows that the gospel is suitably superficial and thin, not shot-through with Talmudic density. This Oprah doesn't exhaust her (religious) meaning. Deduced from her selections for the book club, her tastes - i.e., the Canon of Oprah - basically runs to middlebrow realist "literary" fiction, not avant-garde, experimental or risky stuff, not poetry. Yet, though Oprah's taste is populist, it's basically *good* taste, and, more pointedly, it cannot be disputed that Oprah has a taste. Her taste is broad and it's for the multitudes - but it does not contain multitudes. She knows what she likes, like Zuleika Dobson. Surely, Oprah has passions, but is there a Passion of Oprah? There are no stations of that cross, right?

Of all the Oprahs, the one that lingers - the one that resonates most profoundly with me - is the strange, gnomic "Oprah." It points to a long tradition of the religious as an attempt to say something about the ineffable or inscrutable side of things. This "Oprah" is the one that flits into being when you say, or write, her name too many times. Before I explain, I should also say that I'm not sure that any celebrity - Oprah included - is fundamentally singular or unique. In other words, I'm not convinced there is *a* celebrity, because celebrity as I see it - as a system of cultural value - depends on ubiquity not immortality as its goal. Even the sense of celebrities as a collection of infinitely different personalities as different as fingerprints implies a logic of the fungible that belies the concept of the unique. There are a few different kinds of celebrities

certainly, but the textual armature that sustains them is so diffuse, so confectionarily thin, so dependant on light journalist gossip and other attention-span deprived cultural gossamer, no One can be ex nihilo. Oprah provides a soft-focus visionary for post-literate culture, gently gesturing above a bevy of semiotic hearsay pertaining to *The Color Purple*, weight loss and gain, cattle futures, Tom Cruise jumping on a couch, Obama, book clubs, Dr. Phil, the phrase “back in the day,” a sonorous voice, and the virtues of gift-giving. On another level, a figure like Oprah differs from the usual lot in that she also functions as an impresario. She presents Trilby and Svengali in one package - thinking of George Du Maurier’s 1894 novel. Oprah’s distinctiveness - but she wasn’t the first - is to present a celebrity diva who is simultaneously a celebrity *macher*, promising both a splendid voice in the front of the house and an institutional bedrock behind the scenes: Jenny Lind and P.T. Barnum; Elvis and Colonel Tom Parker; the Witch of Endor and Solomon; Jesus and Paul; MC and DJ, or vice-versa.

The thinking in celebrity studies - here, I’m drawing on P. David Marshall’s work in particular - is that celebrities, as opposed to famous people in the past, model available versions of personality. They are, in short, semiotic role models. There are two implications of this argument that could be in turn linked to two versions of Jean Baudrillard’s idea of simulation, his controversial point about signs which draw on signs ad infinitum. The first we could call weak Baudrillard: celebrities are simulated people, without referents behind them; or, for whom attention to the real referent misses the point, which is that celebrities are not people but messages about what personalities should be like. They are where you go to have a personality. Strong Baudrillard is the version I prefer. It runs like this: Celebrities are simulated people, who, because they are

obviously simulated, make us feel that the actual simulated people, i.e., the people we know firsthand, are real (and not performed, made of signifiers, mass-mediated). Celebrities organize contentless nostalgia for real personality on a planetary scale. When you see celebrities photographed with ordinary people – as for example, in the collection of photographs collected by Granta for the celebrity issue² – one of the most disturbing things is the odd inclusion of the ordinary faces – i.e., the faces most like your own unknown mug. What is *she* doing next to Steve McQueen? This disruption of the familiar in the stuff of celebrities is what Richard Schickel is getting at when he aptly describes them as “intimate strangers.”

Somehow this gets us to that gnomic aspect of “Oprah” I mentioned earlier. This uncanny quality was best displayed in the episode of Oprah’s famous feud with David Letterman. In 1995, Letterman hosted the Oscars (a part tellingly played by Johnny Carson and other like impresarios, yet it’s hard to imagine Oprah in this role). He made a notoriously inscrutable joke³. I’m not sure exactly how we all came to learn of Oprah’s displeasure about this sphinx-like line. Over the next ten years, its role in the Letterman-Oprah feud gradually became part of conventional wisdom, in no small part because Letterman made much hay of it on his show. In 2005, when they “buried the hatchet,” Oprah appeared on his stage.⁴ When I watch this video, I think of the ways that “a Letterman” is the perfect foil for “an Oprah” in what Peter Sloterdijk has called an age of cynical reason. Oprah’s failure to understand the “Dave thing” after all these years also speaks to the inevitable failures of the jargon of authenticity and sincerity in giving us a

² <http://www.granta.com/Magazine/79>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErU3Og0nHv0>

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXDvgKT8bX0&feature=related>

story we can live with at this late, late hour of the late show. Indeed, a Dave joke is too much for an Oprah to begin with: the evacuation of her name - with all the meaningful redolent achievements it classifies - into mere noise - into, the poetry of sound - is incommensurate with her very notion. This is how I interpret the joke anyway. It's what early Eliot, cribbing from other sources, might call a *peace that passeth all understanding*.

Oprah, Uma. Uma, Oprah.

Keanu.

Shantih shantih shantih

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