

Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative

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Introduction

Much attention has been paid in recent decades, by social psychologists and others, to non-verbal communication – those forms of bodily behaviour, supplementing or replacing speech, by which people convey their thoughts and feelings to each other. Modern experts have studied, often in minute detail, such things as facial expression, gaze, gesture, and posture.¹ When medieval commentators touched on these matters, as they sometimes did, they were most often concerned with gestures, and in particular with what was proper or improper in such bodily movements – the disciplines of decent gesture.² There was also at that time, however, a scholastic tradition which considered non-verbal messages as part of a general theory of signs, *signa* – for semiology, though the term is modern, was not the creation of Peirce or Saussure, as their successors sometimes claim. A main authority for such discussions ‘de signis’ was a section of the *De Doctrina Christiana* of St Augustine; and since Augustine’s understanding of the matter lies quite close to that adopted in this book, it seems appropriate to start with what he has to say.

At the beginning of Book Two of the *De Doctrina*, Augustine turns from ‘things’ (*res*, the subject of Book One) to ‘signs’ (*signa*).³ After offering a general definition, he goes on to draw a distinction: ‘Some signs are natural [*naturalia*], others given [*data*]’. Natural signs ‘are those which,

¹ For a comprehensive survey, see Michael Argyle, *Bodily Communication*, 2nd edn (London, 1988).

² See especially J.-C. Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l’occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990). An influential treatment of such decorum, the *De Institutione Novitiorum* of Hugh of St Victor, will be considered later.

³ I quote text and translation from R. P. H. Green, ed. and transl., *De Doctrina Christiana* (Oxford, 1995), II 1–7.

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without a wish or any urge to signify [*sine voluntate atque ullo appetitu significandi*], cause something else beside themselves to be known from them'. He cites examples: smoke as a sign of fire, footprints as signs of a passing animal, and facial expressions where they are involuntary signs of emotion. Of these last, he observes that 'the expression of an angry or depressed person signifies an emotional state even if there is no such wish on the part of the person who is angry or depressed'. By contrast, 'given' signs are so called because the signer intentionally gives, or transmits, them in order to communicate something: 'Given signs are those which living things give to each other, in order to show, to the best of their ability, the emotions of their minds, or anything they have felt or learnt'. Here Augustine raises in passing the question of whether animals can be credited with that *voluntas significandi* upon which his prime distinction turns: do cocks or doves intend to signify when they crow or coo?⁴

Leaving that question aside, Augustine passes on to treat signs 'given' by human beings. He classifies them according to the sense at which they are directed: some to the eyes, most to the ears, and a few to the other senses. Words form by far the most important type of audible signs (he also mentions the music of trumpet, flute, and lyre); but especially relevant here are his observations on signs directed to the eyes:

When we nod, we give a sign just to the eyes of the person whom we want, by means of that sign, to make aware of our wishes. Certain movements of the hands signify a great deal. Actors, by the movement of all their limbs, give certain signs to the cognoscenti and, as it were, converse with the spectators' eyes; and it is through the eyes that flags and standards convey the wishes of military commanders. All these things are, to coin a phrase, visible words [*verba visibilia*].⁵

⁴ See U. Eco, R. Lambertini, C. Marmo, and A. Tabarroni, 'On Animal Language in the Medieval Classification of Signs', in U. Eco and C. Marmo, eds., *On the Medieval Theory of Signs* (Amsterdam, 1989), pp. 3–41. This essay is helpful on medieval semiotic systems generally.

⁵ *De Doctrina*, II 5: 'Nam cum innuimus non damus signum nisi oculis eius quem volumus per hoc signum voluntatis nostrae participem facere. Et quidem motus manuum pleraque significant, et histriones omnium membrorum motibus dant signa quaedam scientibus et cum oculis eorum quasi fabulantur, et vexilla draconesque militares per oculos insinuant voluntatem ducum. Et sunt haec omnia quasi quaedam verba visibilia.' In an earlier work, *De Magistro*, Augustine had already distinguished signs according to the receiving sense,

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This passage was commonly referred to by medieval writers. In it one sees some prime instances of ‘non-verbal communication’ – movements of the head and hands especially – firmly embedded as *verba visibilia*, along with military flags, in a strong general theory of signs.

The texts studied in this book deal mostly in visible signs such as gestures and looks, and it is with these that I shall be chiefly concerned, for only a few involve (non-verbal) sound: laughs, an occasional meaning cough, and a diabolical fart. More important is Augustine’s other distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘given’ signs, for I shall be occupied here only with the latter. The criterion is the presence of a *voluntas significandi*. A version of this criterion has been adopted by some – but by no means all – modern experts on non-verbal communication. Thus one of the best of them, Adam Kendon, has defined gesture as ‘any distinct bodily action that is regarded as part of the process of deliberate utterance or expression’. ‘The action,’ he adds, ‘has to be seen as having a communicative function and it has to be seen as being something that the individual could have avoided doing.’⁶ Similarly, a writer on communication theory argues that a distinction must be drawn between non-verbal behaviour ‘*calculated* to inform the observer’ on the one hand and ‘the passive manifestation of a symptom’ on the other. ‘Blushing,’ he remarks later, ‘is a *symptom*, not a *message*.’⁷

Some modern observers object to the criterion of intentionality on the grounds that, since intentions are themselves not open to inspection, they can only be inferred, and that uncertainly.⁸ But this objection hardly has any force for a student not of behaviours but of texts. Unlike real people, persons in texts have no inaccessible insides, nor can they harbour intentions beyond what their author states or implies. So one

specifying words for hearing and gestures (*gestus*) for sight: Chapter 4, Para. 8, in *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. xxxii.

⁶ A. Kendon, ‘Geography of Gesture’, *Semiotica*, 37 (1981), 129–63 (pp. 134–5). For similar remarks see also Kendon’s essay ‘The Study of Gesture: Some Observations on its History’, *Recherches Semiotiques / Semiotic Enquiry*, 2 (1982), 45–62 (pp. 45–6); and his statement on p. 49 of D. McNeill, ed., *Language and Gesture* (Cambridge, 2000). Like most of his colleagues, Kendon appears to be unaware of Augustine and of the medieval semiological tradition.

⁷ D. M. MacKay, ‘Formal Analysis of Communication Processes’, in R. A. Hinde, ed., *Non-Verbal Communication* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 3–25 (pp. 5, 19, with the author’s italics). This collection has a number of valuable essays.

⁸ See the criticisms of MacKay’s essay on pp. 86–8 of Hinde’s volume.

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can apply the Augustinian test with some confidence, even to the less straightforward cases. Social behaviours such as pointing a finger or winking an eye are nothing if not acts of communication; and the same can almost be said of smiles and frowns. I further include actions of a more formal and even ceremonious kind – frequently encountered in the texts – for these also carry messages: hand-clasping, kissing, and bowing, for example.⁹ At the other end of the scale, I exclude from discussion such bodily ‘symptoms’ as blushing and weeping (even though, as we shall see, a cynical Scottish poet asserts that women can deliberately weep for effect). There remain – in between, as it were – those actions which may or may not be intended to carry a message. As Augustine noted, facial expressions (*vultus*) sometimes express anger or sorrow ‘even if there is no such wish on the part of the person who is angry or depressed’; yet, as this indeed implies, expressions of anger and the like are also commonly directed as signals at others, and it is as such that I shall be concerned with them here.¹⁰ Simply to look at another person – glancing, gazing, or staring – can also be full of meaning. Some looks are just looks, intended only to acquire information; but others are ‘speaking’ looks, intended to convey it.¹¹ Even coughs, normally just physical symptoms, may be produced as deliberate signals, to attract attention or convey a warning.

Having introduced the principle governing my choice of examples, I shall now explain the choice of texts from which the examples are taken. First, let me briefly locate the present study in relation to some of the scholarly work that has already been done.¹² Non-verbal communication in the medieval West is, needless to say, a vast and varied

⁹ For an account of the role of gestures in human communication, see A. Kendon, ‘Do Gestures Communicate? A Review’, *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 27 (1994), 175–200.

¹⁰ On facial signalling by animals, see Argyle, *Bodily Communication*, Chapter 3.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, Chapter 10, ‘Gaze’.

¹² I confine myself here to book-length studies. The most recent bibliographies of books and articles in the field may be found on pp. 411–20 of Schmitt, *Raison des gestes*, and on pp. 219–21 in M. Mostert, ed., *New Approaches to Medieval Communication* (Turnhout, 1999). There is a more selective bibliography in J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Gesture: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Oxford, 1991, paperback, 1993), pp. 255–7.

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subject, and only some few patches of it have so far been investigated. One approach taken by scholars has been to focus on the evidence provided by a single author or artist. Thus, R. G. Benson selected Chaucer's writings for his study of 'medieval body language', and the art historian M. Barasch devoted an excellent book to the 'language of gesture' in the paintings of Giotto.¹³ An alternative method is to concentrate on a single type of action, as Barasch does in his other book, on gestures of despair, or P. Ménard does in a remarkable survey of Old French smiles and laughter.¹⁴ Or a study may confine itself to some particular genre of writing, as in D. Peil's comparative investigation into some Arthurian romances in medieval French and German.¹⁵ So far as medieval English is concerned, the only really substantial study to date is W. Habicht's monograph on body language in Old and Middle English poetry, a book to which the present study owes a debt.¹⁶

My own interest in the subject was prompted first by the non-verbal signs in Middle English poems, notably *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. It seemed to me that readers, myself included, were inclined to underestimate the weight and force of many of these signs. Nor could their meanings always be taken for granted, as we are also inclined to do – as if fourteenth-century kisses, for example, had just the same range of meanings as modern ones. So, having modern readers of literature chiefly in mind, I set out to observe the workings of non-verbal communication in some of the narrative texts that they were most likely to encounter, extending my range to include some medieval French classics and also, more rashly, Dante's *Commedia*. So the bulk of the examples considered here will be drawn from the following core texts:

¹³ M. Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (Cambridge, 1987); R. G. Benson, *Medieval Body Language: A Study of the Use of Gesture in Chaucer's Poetry*, *Anglistica* 21 (Copenhagen, 1980). Benson's disappointing book takes 'body language' in a very broad sense.

¹⁴ M. Barasch, *Gestures of Despair in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art* (New York, 1976); P. Ménard, *Le rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois au moyen âge (1150–1250)* (Geneva, 1969). The book of essays edited by C. Davidson, *Gesture in Medieval Drama and Art* (Kalamazoo, 2001), appeared too late for me to use it here.

¹⁵ D. Peil, *Die Gebärde bei Chrétien, Hartmann und Wolfram: Erec–Iwein–Parzival* (Munich, 1975).

¹⁶ W. Habicht, *Die Gebärde in englischen Dichtungen des Mittelalters* (Munich, 1959).

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English: Chaucer's *Troilus*, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

French: the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, the Prose *Lancelot*, Froissart's *Chronicles*.

Italian: Dante's *Commedia*.

These texts are particularly rich in non-verbal signs; but I have taken many other examples from a variety of other writings in these languages (listed in the Bibliography) and also, on occasion, from citations in dictionaries.

In life, non-verbal signs form a frequent, sometimes a continuous, accompaniment to speech; but in texts, not least in medieval texts, they are recorded only sporadically. Hence they can readily be neglected by readers. It is the general purpose of this study simply to help remedy that neglect, by drawing attention to occasions when such acts as gestures or looks play a significant part in the medieval writer's representation of exchanges and relationships between characters. A secondary aim is to encourage the realisation that non-verbal signs, like words, need to be understood historically. One must be prepared to find that they too may have undergone change over time. Some of the more formal gestures, such as bowing and kneeling, are now largely obsolete in the West; so we are inclined to underestimate their significance and force, and also fail to appreciate the subtleties that may attend their performance: in medieval Europe, as in modern Japan, an underperformed bow does not pass unnoticed. Other actions, more familiar in themselves, lie open to misreading because the conventions governing their use have changed. They are the non-verbal equivalents of those misleadingly familiar words sometimes referred to as false friends. It should cause no surprise, after all, to find that certain of these signs – headshakes and winks, for example – had somewhat different meanings then from what we are accustomed to today.

I would have welcomed some theoretical guidance on this general question of diachronic change in non-verbal signs, but that has proved hard to find, either from cultural historians or from modern observers. As already noticed, scholars have produced studies of gestures and looks in the Middle Ages, as in other periods. Yet the history of individual

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gestures over time remains largely unexplored. An excellent essay by H. Roodenburg on the history of the handshake in early modern times shows what can be done; but even here, the patchiness of the evidence allows only an imperfect account of what was evidently a complex set of developments.¹⁷ Again, the book entitled *Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution* by Desmond Morris and others, while throwing new light on the current geographical distribution of their twenty selected gestures, arrives at very few secure conclusions about the origins or development of these. As the authors are themselves aware, this is an area where the non-verbal equivalent of folk etymology flourishes, and where errors are blindly repeated.¹⁸ Social scientists, in fact, rarely touch on such matters. Yet they do address themselves to a question which has a real bearing, indirectly, on the problem of diachronic change. How like language itself is non-verbal communication? On this question, which chiefly arises for social scientists when comparing NVC in different modern cultures, there appear to be two broad schools of thought.¹⁹

One of these schools of thought may be traced back to a remarkable book published by Charles Darwin in 1872, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.²⁰ Being concerned with the derivation of the human species from lower animals, Darwin was particularly interested in those gestures and expressions which might be shown to be 'innate or universal' rather than 'conventional or artificial' (p. 50). Although Quintilian had long before described hand-gestures as 'a language common to all men',²¹ Darwin was rightly suspicious of such

¹⁷ H. Roodenburg, 'The "Hand of Friendship": Shaking Hands and Other Gestures in the Dutch Republic', in Bremmer and Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Gesture*, pp. 152–89.

¹⁸ D. Morris, P. Collett, P. March, and M. O'Shaughnessy, *Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution* (London, 1979). See for example their discussion of the supposed origins of the thumb-up gesture in the Roman amphitheatre, pp. 186–7.

¹⁹ The literature on contemporary NVC is very extensive. For a fairly recent bibliography, see Argyle, *Bodily Communication*, pp. 310–47.

²⁰ I quote from the photographic reprint in paperback (Chicago, 1965). Darwin's conclusions find general support in P. Ekman, ed., *Darwin and Facial Expression: A Century of Research in Review* (New York, 1973).

²¹ *Institutio Oratoria*, ed. and transl. H. E. Butler, Vol. iv (New York, 1922), xi iii 87. See D. Knox, 'Ideas on Gesture and Universal Languages, c. 1550–1650', in J. Henry and S. Hutton, eds., *New Perspectives on Renaissance Thought* (London, 1990), pp. 101–36.

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ill-founded assertions; and he set out to study the matter scientifically, both by his own observations and by questionnaires sent out to correspondents in several parts of the world. He stated his main conclusion as follows: 'I have endeavoured to show in considerable detail that all the chief expressions exhibited by man are the same throughout the world' (p. 359). The modern ethologist Eibl-Eibesfeldt arrives at similar results, in particular by employing the camera to produce 'cross-cultural documentation of human expressive behaviour'.²² Much like Darwin, he finds 'similarities in expressive movements between cultures', in 'such basic expressions as smiling, laughing, crying and the facial expressions of anger' (p. 299). Like Darwin, too, he proposes evolutionary origins for a number of these basic expressions, tracing them also in sub-human primates. Neither writer, of course, claims that all facial expressions – still less, all gestures – can be so explained; but both place their emphasis on phylogenetic factors and on the significance of cross-cultural similarities.

Other observers are inclined to see NVC as functioning much more like the distinctively human institution of language, its items being generally determined not by evolutionary or other natural factors, but by the diverse cultures of humanity. The social anthropologist Edmund Leach presents a particularly challenging statement of this position.²³ He asserts that 'cross-species ethological comparisons between men and animals are nearly always thoroughly misleading' (p. 331); and he is equally sceptical about attempts to establish 'any consistent relationship between non-verbal signal and response when such signals are observed in differing cultural environments' (p. 329). Such signals are, he says, 'related to one another as a total system after the fashion of a language' (p. 318); so comparisons between individual items abstracted from their different systems must be misleading. Similar structuralist

²² I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 'Similarities and Differences between Cultures in Expressive Movements', in Hinde, ed., *Non-Verbal Communication*, pp. 297–312. See also, for similar conclusions, P. Ekman, 'Cross-Cultural Studies of Facial Expression', in Ekman, ed., *Darwin and Facial Expression*, pp. 169–222; also Chapter XIX in P. Ekman, W. V. Friesen, and P. Ellsworth, *Emotion in the Human Face* (New York, 1972).

²³ E. Leach, 'The Influence of Cultural Context on Non-Verbal Communication in Man', in Hinde, *Non-Verbal Communication*, pp. 315–44. The general editor comments on the disagreements between Leach and Eibl-Eibesfeldt on pp. 344–6.

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arguments are put forward by Ray Birdwhistell, under the influence of what he calls ‘anthropological linguistics’.²⁴ In an interesting essay entitled ‘There are Smiles . . .’, Birdwhistell describes how he came to abandon a Darwinian belief in the smile as a single, natural form of expression, and learned to perceive its differing physical forms and, especially, its varying significations and uses, from one culture to another. He states his general conclusion as follows: ‘Insofar as I have been able to determine, just as there are no universal words . . . which carry the same meaning the world over, there are no body motions, facial expressions, or gestures which provoke *identical* responses the world over.’²⁵

The issues discussed here have an evident bearing upon the present study, for it is itself cross-cultural, albeit across time rather than space in the main. Insofar as NVC signals can safely be regarded as products of long-term evolutionary processes, one may expect them to change rather little, if at all, over a mere few centuries. Insofar as they are ‘language-like’, on the other hand, they may be expected to vary over much shorter periods of time both in form and in meaning, as words so evidently do. The matter is, I believe, still controversial; yet I find that many of the experts agree, from their different standpoints, in allowing more variability to gestures than to facial expressions. Thus Michael Argyle, in his survey of modern work, reports extensive evidence for Darwin’s theory that ‘facial expression evolved for communication purposes’ out of what were originally non-communicative acts among primates. But of gesture he writes: ‘There are extensive cultural variations in the use of gesture, showing that it is the non-verbal signal that is most affected by socialization and by cultural history.’²⁶ Distinctions such as these, however, can suggest no more than general probabilities, so far as concerns the history of any given signal. ‘Language-like’ gestures

²⁴ R. L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body-Motion Communication* (London, 1971). He observes that ‘kinesic structure is parallel to language structure’ (p. 80, ‘kinesics’ being his term for NVC). On the structuralist approach, see A. Kendon, ‘The Organization of Behavior in Face-to-Face Interaction’, in K. R. Scherer and P. Ekman, eds., *Handbook of Methods in Nonverbal Behavior Research* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 440–505.

²⁵ *Kinesics and Context*, p. 34 (author’s italics).

²⁶ *Bodily Communication*, pp. 75, 191.

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can show considerable persistence over time;²⁷ and conversely, 'natural' facial expressions are very far from immune to cultural pressures.²⁸

Of the following chapters, the two first concern, respectively, gestures and 'looks' – taking advantage of the ambiguity of the latter term to treat both facial expressions and glances or speaking looks. The following chapters offer more detailed discussions of individual works which have proved particularly rich in representations of non-verbal signs: Chaucer's *Troilus* and the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Chapter 4, and Dante's *Commedia* in Chapter 5. I conclude with an Afterword.

²⁷ Kendon observes the persistence of many gestural forms: 'In this they appear to show a contrast with linguistic forms. Their stability is probably connected to the fact that enacted gestures are not part of a gestural system, and also that, unlike linguistic forms, they are not segmental in structure, but unitary . . . In some cases it is possible to observe changes in the meanings of the gesture, but the form itself does not alter': A. Kendon, 'Did Gesture Have the Happiness to Escape the Curse at the Confusion of Babel?', in A. Wolfgang, ed., *Nonverbal Behavior: Perspectives, Applications, Intercultural Insights* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1984), pp. 75–114. See also Kendon, 'Geography of Gesture', p. 151.

²⁸ Ekman's essay 'Cross-Cultural Studies', while arguing powerfully that, as Darwin maintained, 'there are some facial expressions of emotion that are universally characteristic of the human species', allows that they may be prompted by different 'elicitors' in different cultures, and also that they may be affected by culturally varying 'display rules' (pp. 219, 220).