

Essays in Medieval Studies 15

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]

page 103**Linking Lives:**
Autobiographical Criticism and Medieval Studies**Anne Clark Bartlett***Confessional criticism offers to make a subculture out of solitude.*

—H. Aram Veenser

I first encountered autobiographical criticism and medieval studies at a conference session when, as a coda to his paper, a scholar discussed the blisteringly negative reception that his latest book had received.¹ The book had explored the functions of an authority figure in a Middle English narrative. At one point, it had situated this analysis within the Freudian notion of a "primal scene," in which the child is exposed to his parents' sexuality and confronts his own sublimated desires.

The epilogue in question related how this scholar had come to view his book's unexpected reception as sort of a "family romance" in itself, rather than a tragedy. It led him to recognize and reflect on his own roles in the various "primal scenes" of academic politics, critical practice, and personal response. This coda was deftly delivered, tactful, and eloquent, and it added an additionally rich layer to the already-complex texture of the original presentation. I was profoundly moved, and turned immediately to a colleague behind me to suggest that we organize a session on medieval studies and autobiographical criticism.

Two years later, at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, I organized and responded to a session on "Autobiographical Criticism and Medieval Studies." Our panelists approached the "discourse of the personal" in a variety of ways. One described how her recent battle against breast cancer had deepened her understanding of Julian of Norwich's *Showings*.² Another reflected on the relationship between her Judaism and her scholarship on medieval anti-semitism.³ A respondent questioned the authority of personal experience in Autobiographical Criticism. She pointed out astutely that the speaking subject itself must submit to interpretation, if the self is held to be as significant as the text.⁴ The response to this session was literally overwhelming. After our speakers had fin-

page 104

ished, audience members clamored to be heard. They wanted to share their own experiences (both academic and personal), to relate how their lives had shaped their interpretive lenses, and to debate the viability of autobiographical criticism as a critical tool.

For contemporary critical theorists, the notion that reading is inherently personal (as well as political) has become axiomatic. Feminist, Marxist, and Psychoanalytic theories remind us that all textual engagements are "interested," and that no reading is ever objective or final. Consequently, as Catherine Belsey argues, "what seems obvious and natural is not necessarily so." She continues: [w]hat we do when we read, however 'natural' it seems, presupposes a whole theoretical discourse, even if unspoken, about language and meaning, about the relationships between meaning and the world, meaning and people, and finally about people themselves and their place in the world."⁵ Factors such as sex, race, class, sexual orientation and many more—both alone and in combination—make us the dynamically, sublimely, unreliable readers that we are. Our histories and present situations help determine, from moment to moment, what we deem meaningful in a text. As Frances Murphy Zauhar explains, "[o]ur reading and a variety of other experiences have taught us that our lives do connect to make us very capable, dynamic respondents to the worlds within and around us—and effective, learned readers of the texts we study."⁶ Our academic work becomes more perceptive and more acute, then, when we own up to the ways in which the texts we study and the texts we inhabit "link lives." While it may transgress the norms of traditional academic practice, writing from the "I/eye" position engages a powerful interpretive lens.

It may surprise us that medieval readers celebrated similarly dynamic engagements—ontological, epistemological, and pedagogical—between the self and the text. "Lectio divina" represents one highly intersubjective relationship between the person and the page. This combination of silent and articulated reading, meditation, memorization and repetition leads to what Jean Leclercq has called a "muscular memory," in which the text's representations mystically become flesh and the flesh of the reader becomes inscribed by the text.⁷ And a frequent synonym for "lectio divina," incarnational reading, suggests how avidly medieval readers sought both to assimilate written material into their lives, and to acknowledge how powerfully they believed this practice "linked (their) lives" to the voice of the page.

William of St. Thierry, for example, likens reading to digestion. In *The Golden Epistle*, he advises: "[s]ome part of your daily reading should ... each day be committed to memory, taken as it were into the stomach, to be more carefully digested and brought up again for frequent rumination."⁸ An even more vivid analogy for this variety of autobiographical interpretation, "the kiss," comes from Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. Bernard insists:

I have no desire that [Christ] should approach me in [the Old Testament prophets], or address me in their words, for they are "a watery darkness, a dense cloud": rather in his own person, "let him kiss me with the kiss

page 105

of his mouth": let him whose presence is full of love, from whom exquisite doctrines flow in streams, let him become a "spring inside me, welling up to eternal life."⁹

Bernard's sermon eloquently indicates that—then, as now—reading possesses an inherently heuristic function. And this heuristic is personal, as well as collective. Through textual engagement, we gain access to a complex web of subject and subjectivity; we link our own selves-as-texts to its polyglossic discourse.

Gradually, however, the apparitional ideal of objectivity replaced this emphasis on personal reflection and response. But as it was in the Middle Ages, modern autobiographical criticism can become a useful analytical and pedagogical tool. The contributions included here eloquently illustrate a few of the possibilities. For example, Gina Brandolino's essay takes up Walter Pater's rather condescending notion that medieval art possessed "rude strength" and reinterprets the concept, applying it to the visionary writing of Julian of Norwich, as well as to the development of Brandolino's own academic persona. Kate Giglio reflects on her childhood memories of a distant aunt, whose position and treatment within her family offers provocative parallels to the *vita* of Christina Mirabilis. Dan Kline's essay movingly conveys how his assumed mastery of the Middle-English *Pearl* crumbled after the loss of a son. And Nicole Lissan explores how fourteenth-century poet Jean Froissart links narrator and autobiographical strategy to create a meditation on the role and purpose of poet and poetry.

I'm grateful to the autobiographical medievalist critics represented here for their courage and candor, for their reflectiveness, and for their willingness to break away from traditional scholarly decorum, which erases the critic's "I" and replaces it with "objective" rhetorical constructions such as: "clearly," "no doubt," and "as one can see." These are all forms of persuasion that we learned to adopt in graduate school, if not earlier. Instead, our contributors here dare to position themselves with respect to the material they interpreted, abandoning any necessarily fictive pretense to objectivity. This is why I read the way I do, they explain; and it's necessary that you understand this, in order to understand my interpretation. On the other hand, they note, autobiographical criticism itself represents a text that must be interpreted. Once a confession is uttered, it assumes the status of a statement that must be questioned. It is a serious fallacy to assume that autobiographical critics retain the sole authority to explicate their own points of reference. There is no closure to the linking of lives possible through autobiographical criticism. Its conclusions are infinitely generative.

I titled an earlier version of this essay, "Confession, Seduction, and Striptease." I still find this analogy alluring. Autobiographical criticism is confession, because it foregrounds the critic's "I/eye" and reflects on this lens. Autobiographical criticism is seduction, because its slow unfolding invites the reader inside the critical exposition; it invites the linking of reader's and author's discourses. In Bernard of Clairvaux's terms, it offers "the kiss." But autobiographical criticism is also undeniably striptease, because it reveals only parts; it hints at further secrets; and it defers closure. It leaves us wanting to know more. Veaser

invokes Roland Barthes to explain this process:

Confessional critics no longer accept the antithesis between expressive, "process" writing and objective, logical thinking. They practice an art that falls somewhere between writing and performance, an art akin to the erotics envisaged by Roland Barthes: "The intermittance of skin flashing between two articles of clothing ... it is this flash itself which seduces or rather: the staging of appearance and disappearance." [10](#)

If we regard this analogy as unseemly, it may be because we've been taught that stories should begin at a beginning and close at an unquestionable end, that it should reveal *wholes* rather than *holes*. I suggest instead that we just relax and enjoy the experience of the telling, to accept "the kiss," and to realize that the pleasure of the text is in our partnership with it, rather than merely in our enjoyment of its punchline.

DePaul University

Notes

1. I am grateful to all of the panelists at the two sessions on "Autobiographical Criticism and Medieval Studies" at the 1998 Illinois Medieval Association conference. I owe special debts to Ann Astell, who first made the connection between autobiographical interpretation and "lectio divina"; to Bailey Young, who allowed me to organize these "unorthodox" panels; and to Allen Frantzen, who provided astute and generous commentary, as well as a terrific paper. My own contribution, "Dark Nights of the Soul," would not have been possible without the support of numerous readers, especially my husband, Mark Johnston.

2. Laurel Broughton,. "Becoming the Hazelnut: Teaching Julian of Norwich's *Showings* in the Face of One's Mortality," paper delivered at the Thirty-Second International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Mich., 1997.
 3. Charlotte Newman Goldy, "Loss of Innocence: A Jewish Feminist Medievalist," paper delivered at the Thirty-Second International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Mich., 1997.
 4. Elizabeth Scala, "Effective and Affective Pieties," paper delivered at the Thirty-Second International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Mich., 1997.
 5. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London, 1980), pp. 3-4.
 6. Frances Murphy Zauhar, "Creative Voices: Women Reading and Women's Writing," in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, ed. Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar (Durham, N. C., 1993), p. 105.
 7. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York, 1982), p. 15.
 8. William of St. Thierry, *The Golden Epistle: A Letter to the Brethren at Mont Dieu*, trans. Theodore Berkeley (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1977), p. 52.
- page 107**
9. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, trans. Killian Walsh (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1981), 1. P 9.
 10. H. Aram Veeseer, "Introduction: The Case for Autobiographical Criticism," in *Confessions of the Critics*, ed. H. Aram Veeseer (New York, 1996), p. xiii.