

Part Two. Reading the Reader: The Autobiographical Turn in Reader Criticism

Would'st thou be in a Dream, and yet not sleep?
Or would'st thou in a moment laugh and weep?
Wouldest thou lose thyself, and catch no harm,
And find thyself again without a charm?
Would'st read thyself, and read thou know'st not what,
And yet know whether thou art blest or not,
By reading the same lines? O then come hither,
And lay my Book, thy Head and Heart together.

Bunyan

CHAPTER FOUR

The Father of Lies: Autobiographical Acts in Recent Biblical Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory

"There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography." Valéry, as quoted in Olney, Miller, Lionnet, et al.

"All autobiographers are unreliable narrators, all humans are liars. . . ." Adams

"[L]istening carefully to lies is sometimes very revealing of the truth." Hillerman

"When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies." Jn 8:44

Making Whoppers

The arguments raised against formalist reader-response criticism have finally worked their way under my thick skin, and no matter how hard I have scratched, I haven't been able to get rid of them. At first I thought the itching was caused by a mosquito bite or a tick--something that would irritate me for a few days, and then disappear. But here I am, four chapters into this book, and the itching still won't go away. I've been scratching so long, I've broken through the skin and the raw places have gotten infected. Now I have a raging fever.

Sometimes I get delirious. I imagine that a giant eyeball is rolling down on top of me, suffocating me. I can't find a place to run or hide from the two-ton eye. And the textually encoded, rhetorically defined readers of my earlier chapters won't protect me either. I try to pull myself under the covers of this book--this page--this "I"--to shield myself and find a place to breathe freely. But it's impossible. I can't get away from the omnipresent eye.¹

Finally I awake from the nightmare and take off the gauze mask² that has been precariously perched on the edge of my nose. It's spring in the Pacific Northwest, and I remember that my allergies are particularly bothersome at this time of year. I get up, take

¹The text is an eye, then. More precisely, the text is an eyeball (*bulbus oculi*), snug in its bony cavity (orbit) . . . (Moore, "How Jesus' Risen Body Became a Cadaver," 276; cf. Synnott, *The Body Social*, 206-227; esp., 222-227).

²The propogated mask of the imagined literary critic, the language club of hyperauthenticity, the myth of a purely objective perspective, the godlike image of generalized, legitimating others--these are too often reified . . . as 'impersonal' rules and 'neutral' principles, presumed to be inanimate, unemotional, unbiased, unmanipulated, and higher than ourselves" (Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 11).

an antihistamine and walk around a bit. I sneeze a few times, and then begin to ask a few simple questions to clear my head--like, Who is the "who" who has been doing the writing of those chapters on the Johannine encoded reader? and, What power does that "who" have over the reading experience and the reading *of* experience? My head is beginning to clear. The itch is starting to go away.

Although these two questions may seem to have obvious answers, don't expect a quick response on my part or any sudden disclosures. When you've been hiding behind implied and encoded readers as long as I have, it's not easy to slip into something more comfortable, curl up in a chair, and tell a stranger who you are.³ It's going to take me some time to unwind, and I'll probably talk about a lot of other people before I finally actually talk about myself. But that's not necessarily bad. After all, this is supposed to be a theoretical chapter, sort of a bridge between "me" the formalist reader and "me" the some-other-kind-of-reader. So if it looks like I'm tensing up into some contorted form of academese, please bear with me. Eventually I'll find my voice and scream. Right now I'm still in transition--not quite ready to give birth. No, that can't be right. I'm male and over forty years old. The transition must be a symptom of male menopause. Real men don't give birth--they only kidnap metaphors.⁴

I make a pot of coffee and sneeze a few more times, and another jumble of germ-filled questions comes spewing out.

So what if those readers that I and others have been discovering in the biblical text and writing about for the past ten years were, as some critics have been saying, just our own selves disguised by the critical language of academic discourse?⁵ Could we then turn around and do an exegesis of souls that parallels our exegesis of texts? Or would there be an explosion when we began consciously to investigate the intertwining and fusing of our lives to canonical literature? What would be the fallout if we unearthed elements in our personal experience--outside of our professional training--that might have influenced our views of the Bible's rhetorical strategies as much as, or perhaps more than, our reading in critical theory? The caffeine rush from the first cup of coffee is beginning to have its effect.

Suppose someone could show me, for example, that the theory of Johannine reader victimization which I espoused in the preceding chapter was rooted in my own childhood experience of being a victim of ethnic and racial discrimination as much as it was rooted in my professional reading of literary criticism.⁶ Then wouldn't the critics of biblical reader-response criticism be proven right? For in this scenario, what I thought I had been reading as "something really there" in the Fourth Gospel would have been

³"Part of me would like to go back to doing the kind of criticism I used to do. I feel awkward and exposed, and it would be easier, in one way, to hide again behind the implied author I know so well how to invent: magisterial, elegant, controlled and controlling" (Carlton, "Reading Middlemarch, Rereading Myself," 241).

⁴"Is autobiography somehow always in the process of symbolically killing the mother off by telling her the lie that we have given birth to ourselves?" (Johnson, "My Monster/My Self," 4). For the significant role of birthing metaphors in literature, see Friedman, "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor," esp., 371-380; and Cochrane, "The Grave, the Song and a *Gestalt* Theology as Pregnant with Context," 123.

⁵"The more criticism I read, the more I think that it is a scrambled form of autobiography, which seeks to conceal the self in the writing" (Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*, 37).

⁶This, in fact, will be one of my major arguments in the next chapter, "Not Yet Fifty: Postcolonial Confessions from an Outpost in the San Juan Basin."

nothing more than reading my own unconscious desires into the text.⁷ And the critics would then tell me that my very real but unnamed desires had simply led me to the discovery of the literary-critical language of irony and reader victimization. That critical language merely provided the professional legitimization for what was, in fact, a purely subjective reading of myself in the text.⁸

So perhaps the biblical reader-response critic's objectivist pajamas have finally fallen down. (This, of course, is not a problem for me, since I am already walking around the kitchen half naked.) For the interpretive manner in which we reader-response critics get dressed always seems to begin and end in the same way: with an unreflected self viewing a text. In between we move out to try with the help of literary and historical tools and scientific sounding language, to dress up the readerly responses engendered by the text. But the end always looks the same. Someone tells us, at the conclusion of our exegetical dress-up, after we have amassed all our objective data, that our rhetorical analysis and imagined readerly responses simply originated within ourselves and not with the text. We look surprised, and, curious and distracted, examine our behinds. We decide our critics are probably right, climb back in bed, and shut our eyes.

But should reader-response criticism be excluded from the exegetical breakfast just because its pajamas got twisted between its legs on the way to the breakfast table? James Olney, for one, would say no. He would argue that the reader-critic's clothes are no different from anyone else's. He writes:

With his yearning for order--a yearning greater, I should think, than his desire for knowledge--man explores the universe continually for laws and forms not of his own making, but what, in the end, he always finds is his own face: a sort of ubiquitous, inescapable man-in-the-moon which, if he will, he can recognize as his own mirror image. Man creates, in fact, by the very act of seeking, that order that he would have.⁹

At this point I want to collect my change of clothing and squeeze back into my recently vacated space at the breakfast table. With or without the exegetical clothes, I think we reader-response critics have an important role to share at that meal. (Please pass the butter and jam.) For surely, if all our readings of texts are in some important sense readings of ourselves, each shaped by our peculiar situation of living in the world, there ought to be some way for us to go about the critical investigation of ourselves as readers; an investigation that would have hermeneutical significance not only for the individual, but for biblical reader-response criticism and biblical criticism at large. And if any one should be doing this kind of self-critical investigation, it ought to be us reader-response critics.

Within this context of concerns, it seems to me that recent work in the literary theory of autobiography might offer the biblical critic shiny new utensils and a bold-colored tablecloth for imagining readers and their relationships to texts. What better place could one find to begin an exegesis of the soul than with autobiographical theory,

⁷"In the hermeneutics of desire the reader finds in the text what she wants it to say" (Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, 122).

⁸But "subjectivity may be as severe and demanding a discipline as objectivity," writes Alicia Ostriker (*Feminist Revision and the Bible*, 110).

⁹*Metaphors of the Self*, 4; cf. 8-9.

which investigates the ways people inscribe themselves? Moreover, autobiographical theory is particularly attuned to the problematics of self and distance in narrative, or those rhetorical tricks whereby writers define the narrating self and then separate that self from the narrated experience.¹⁰ The problematics of self and distance reflected in the autobiographer's "I" is intimately related to the hermeneutical quest for an impermeable, distance-enhancing membrane that would protect the reader from invading any given text and would protect the text from invading the reader.¹¹

Not insignificantly, recent movements toward more active and proactive readers in biblical reader criticism have already led to the development of a new, autobiographical topos in biblical scholars' professional papers and published articles. And although these vignettes have yet to be found under the covers of our most prestigious journals, they are symptomatic of what many biblical scholars must feel is an insidious disease invading our discipline, threatening its solidly modernist, dispassionate, professional bodies. However, the autobiographical intrusions which some might find destructive to scholarship are still at the early stages of development as an academic epidemic.¹² Thus white, middle-class, heterosexual, male biblical critics have little to fear from the virus. Our autobiographical moments--when they are found--seem to function

¹⁰For example, see Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, 46-47; Sprinker, "Fictions of the Self," 322-325, 342; and Benstock, "Authorizing the Autobiographical," 11-16.

¹¹This sentence is essentially a quote from Sandra Schneiders, who writes: "If naïveté is the nearness of the subject matter through a transparent text, criticism is the process of distancing the text. There are two purposes to this distancing: *to protect the reader from the text* and *to protect the text from the reader*" (*The Revelatory Text*, 169, emphasis hers; cf. 142-144, 171-172).

Schneiders's language of protection seems to draw upon the image of the body's immune system which, in popular imagery, fights off foreign invaders. But "[i]n the early 1970s, the Nobel Prize winning immunologist, Niels Jerne, proposed a [radically different] theory of immune system self-regulation, called the network theory." In Jerne's theory, "there could be no *exterior* antigenic structure, no 'invader', that the immune system had not already 'seen' and mirrored internally. 'Self' and 'other' lose their rationalistic [and nationalistic] oppositional quality and become subtle plays of partially mirrored readings and responses" (Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 218, emphasis hers). Using this theory of the immune system, Haraway can then argue for a postmodern turn whereby "[t]he internal, structured activity of the system is the crucial issue, not formal representations of the 'outer' world within the 'inner' world of the communications system that is the organism" (ibid., 219; cf. 224; cf. Fisher, "Self in Text, Text in Self," 139; and van den Heever, "Being and Nothingness," 42-43).

¹²Susan Sontag notes that, historically, certain incurable diseases have been associated with unbridled, indiscriminate human passion (*AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 23, 25). This has certainly been true of the AIDS epidemic in the late twentieth century, and I suspect that the more recent appearance of AIDS in biblical criticism (Autobiographical Intrusions Destroying Scholarship) is viewed in like manner by objective, scientific exegetes. For if, as Haraway argues, "the immune system is a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of Western biopolitics" (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 204; cf. 214, 223), then what makes AIDS so frightening is that the body's immune system loses its ability to discriminate between self and other. Similarly, with literary AIDS, autobiographical intrusions in scholarship begin to destroy the rhetorical boundary between objective critic and subjective person, making it difficult to determine the status of either one. For many white, well-established male professors, the problem is compounded by the brooding fear that these Autobiographical Intrusions Destroying Scholarship may have come from a place only recently legitimated by the professional body of Western scholars. As it has been argued for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, that place of origin is the Two-thirds World--particularly among women (Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 24, 26, 51-52, 62-63, 71-72, 83-84; cf. Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar, *The Intimate Critique*, 1-2, 10).

most often as rhetorical imperfections on the epidermis of our antiseptic papers. And since they barely scratch the surface of our critical thinking, the lesions have not yet begun to bleed or infect exegetical argumentation as a whole. Bury the autobiographical skeleton in a tentative footnote, and most readers will easily overlook it.

Even when our autobiographical vignettes do appear in boldface print, they often read as bland-name combinations of the ubiquitous McDonalds and Burger Kings which grow like ragweed alongside U.S. Interstate highways. "I am Male and Caucasian," their oversized, blinking billboards blare; a "Wealthy, Heterosexual Oppressor who happens to be Protestant; and a Professionally-trained, Euroamerican Reader of the Bible." In a word, "I am a McWhopper." With a few cosmetic changes the creed works just as well for Caucasian women or Roman Catholics of European origin.¹³ Like McDonalds's and Burger King's fast foods, most of these professional autobiographical acts hide shrunken burghers and oversized white buns wrapped tightly in thin waxy paper. They are flat, tasteless, barely distinguishable bits of fat-fueled calories which other scholars wolf down in a flurry before they rush out to the meatier concerns of the big bad exegetical world.¹⁴ As biblical exegetes, we have barely begun to explore the problematics of our little white lies or the interpretive implications of our autobiographical acts.¹⁵

Having picked up a few scraps of wisdom from literary critics and the Proceedings of the Modern Language Association, we biblical critics typically "offer up

¹³The necessity of accounting for social location among white biblical interpreters has been voiced numerous times by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza ("The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 3-9; and "Biblical Interpretation and Critical Commitment," 5-6). More recently her call has been echoed by Wilhelm Wuellner ("Is There an Encoded Reader Fallacy?," 46, 49), Mary Ann Tolbert ("A Response from a Literary Perspective," 210; and "The Politics and Poetics of Location"), and Norman Gottwald ("Social Class as an Analytic and Hermeneutical Category in Biblical Studies," 21-22). It is therefore not surprising that a number of white New Testament scholars are beginning to speak autobiographically in the academic arena, and occasionally they even reflect upon their social location. See, for example, Borg (Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, 3-19), Fowler ("Postmodern Biblical Criticism," 9-12), Schneiders (The Revelatory Text, 1-5), Anderson and Moore (Mark and Method, 20; see also Moore's Literary Criticism and the Gospels, 176-177; his Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives, 154-155; and his Poststructuralism and the New Testament, 95, 114, 124-125), Parsons ("Anatomy of a Reader"), and Patte and Phillips ("A Fundamental Condition for Ethical Accountability in the Teaching of the Bible by White Male Exegetes," 17-23).

For the problematics of white, (upper) middle class scholars speaking from a liberationist perspective, see Elizabeth Abel, "Black Writing, White Reading," 470-498, esp., 488-490; Ched Myers, Who Will Roll Away the Stone?, 5-7, 132-139; Wes Howard-Brook, Becoming Children of God, 5-8, 399; Patte, "Acknowledging the Contextual Character of Male, European-American Critical Exegeses"). As a member of the bicultural Hispanic American community, Fernando Segovia is attempting to bring his own social location into dialogue with his approach to Johannine exegesis ("Towards a New Direction in Johannine Scholarship," 16-17, 21; The Farewell of the Word, vii-ix, 328-329; "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora"; see also Maldonado, "¿La Conquista?").

¹⁴I must confess that I worked at McDonalds for nine months when I was seventeen. Back then you could buy a Big Mac, an order of fries, and a milk shake for ninety-nine cents. At one time I believed that I could distinguish the taste of McDonalds's french fries from Burger King's. I am not as sure about this possibility as I once was.

¹⁵"Perhaps every white person should affix an authorial health warning to their texts," writes Nicole Jouve. "It's not because you are aware of a danger, nor because you mean well, that your words or actions do not harm. . . . Writing is never innocent. White writing is less innocent than any other" (White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue, viii).

in the spirit of 'honesty' autobiographical information about [our]selves usually at the beginning of [our] discourse[s] as a kind of disclaimer. This is meant to acknowledge [our] own understanding that [we] are speaking from a specified, embodied location without pretense to a transcendental truth. But," as Linda Alcoff goes on to note,

such an act serves no good end when it is used as a disclaimer against [our] own ignorance or errors and is made without critical interrogation of the bearing of such . . . autobiograph[ies] on what is about to be said. It leaves for the listeners all the real work that needs to be done. For example, if a middle-class white man were to begin a speech by sharing with us this autobiographical information and then using it as a kind of apologetics for any limitations of his speech, this would leave those of us in the audience who do not share his social location to do the work by ourselves of translating his terms into our own, appraising the applicability of his analysis to our diverse situation, and determining the substantive relevance of his location on his claims.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, Alcoff's hypothetical illustration is the norm for most autobiographical acts in biblical criticism today. The gap between autobiographical topoi and interpretive acts is rarely bridged--except in the works of oppressed and colonized peoples. And even there, where the socio-political context of the interpreter is self-consciously central to the hermeneutical task, specific autobiographical material is often lacking.¹⁷ On the other hand, when a connection between autobiography and biblical interpretation is explicitly made by a McWhopper, the primary emphasis in the tentative, blushing unveiling is upon that person's intellectual journey. Our stories are about disembodied minds.¹⁸ And after lengthy struggles with life-threatening questions, these minds are finally able to find release--*moksha*, salvation--in mature, objective, re-evaluations of the biblical tradition.

Of course, none of us set out in our careers to be autobiographers, even though most of us, in private, are intensely self-reflective people. First and foremost, we are biblical scholars. The modernist model of objective, distanced scientific writing which we were taught in graduate school leaves no room for first-person narration or public self-revelatory acts. So it may seem unfair for me to focus attention on those places where the frayed hems of biblical scholars' slips are showing. I know full well the courage it takes sometimes just to get out of bed in the morning--let alone to get out on the ballroom floor and dance with a stranger. Nevertheless, I want to explore briefly three atypical

¹⁶"The Problem of Speaking for Others," 25. Cf. Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, 33; Miller, *Getting Personal*, xiii; and Patte and Phillips "A Fundamental Condition for Ethical Accountability in the Teaching of the Bible by White Male Exegetes," 17-19.

¹⁷Itumeleng Mosala's *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* typifies this approach. From the title of the book to its concluding sentences Mosala makes clear that his work is grounded in his own personal life--in "the historical and cultural struggles of the black people" (*ibid.*, 67; esp., 67-99). However, perhaps in an effort to be heard by "First World" theologians and biblical scholars, Mosala and others like him rarely write with an openly autobiographical voice.

¹⁸This is made explicit at the annual meeting of the *Society of Biblical Literature*, where, each year, a senior biblical scholar is invited to give an autobiographical talk on the topic "How My Mind Has Changed (or Remained the Same)." Typically, when these minds have changed, it is due to the reading of some new book. Change is rarely caused by any human experience other than reading texts.

autobiographical vignettes by white Euroamerican biblical scholars--scholars who explicitly write about their lives and then attempt to relate those inscribed lives to their scholarship. My hope is that by uncovering the rhetorical shape of their textual reflections and virginal unveilings, I might find new ways of addressing those hidden seams that tie texts to readers.

At the conclusion of the preceding chapter I chose three unusual metaphors which feminist scholars have used to illustrate the peculiar mixing of genres found in some women's writings. These three images were the hybrid of machine and organism symbolized by the cyborg, the wacky word-wizardry symbolized by Merlin's magic, and the complex, imaginative experiments of alchemy. I particularly like these three metaphors because they attempt to express the effects of combining personal experience and autobiographical reflections with academic, scholarly discourses.

Although none of the biblical scholars' works which I will investigate can live up to the powerful pictures that cyborgs, Merlins, and alchemy evoke for the mixing of genres, nevertheless these scholars' writings do stand out from those of their Caucasian peers. This is not simply because these scholars write about the need for connecting lives and scholarship. There are, in fact, many biblical scholars writing about the need for that. But from these three scholars' work a reader clearly senses that they are critically engaged in the task of making explicit connections between their personal lives and their scholarship. And I believe that this sense comes from each scholar's conscious choice to place side by side in his or her text two kinds of writing: autobiographical and scientific.

I have chosen three recent works by Marcus Borg, Sandra M. Schneiders, and Mikeal Parsons because I am particularly interested in these Euroamerican scholars' views of the self and the rhetorically explicit bridges that they build between their autobiographical selves and their scholarship.¹⁹ But, more importantly, I also hope to uncover those areas in their writing where their subjective, personal autobiographies inadvertently cross the boundaries into their objective, public scholarship. I want to be a subversive alchemist, a mad-eyed Merlin, mixing up the stuff of autobiography and exegesis which they still think they can keep separate and uncontaminated. My purpose, therefore, is not to go outside their texts to interview the real living people behind the writing in some kind of tabloid exposé.²⁰ Rather, my goal is to focus specifically upon those revelatory fragments of the self that the authors offer to their reader through their own words, and to explore how those fragments are related to the wider body of their work.²¹

¹⁹Or, in Albert Stone's words, I see my task as "identify[ing] and connect[ing] the mythic and ideological components of an individual's story, noting the distinctive ways each author manipulates ideas to make bridges between public life and private experience, past and present, between writer and reader" (Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts, 16).

²⁰As James Olney points out, this was an early interest of autobiographical criticism and one which still creates problems for the critic (Autobiography, 20, 24; see also Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, 4-5).

²¹Although there is some similarity between my critical interests and Norman Holland's theory of "identity themes" ("Unity Identity Text Self," 124), my interests correspond more closely with what Sidonie Smith argues is constitutive of "a new concern [in autobiographical studies] for the *graphia*, 'the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself,'" where the reader plays a central role (A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, 6).

Now exposing the scholarly body to autobiographical antigens can be quite dangerous. It could lead to a breakdown of those natural resistances that our discipline has built up over decades, leaving our professional, scientific writing open to an uncontrollable proliferation of autobiographical infections. My intention, I maintain, will be to describe the symptoms of that disease so that others will be aware of the impending danger. I just hope I can keep my antiseptic mask, my sterilized implements, and my resistance-enhancing pills close at hand so that I won't be contaminated by the writings I'm about to uninvestigate.

A Cyborg Meets Jesus

In his recent book, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, Jesus Seminar spokesperson Marcus Borg sets a peculiar task before himself. His earlier book, Jesus: A New Vision, had been an attempted re-vision of the historical Jesus; an attempt to flesh out the socio-religious context of Jesus' public life and to hear again his prophetic voice in the political machinations of Second Temple Judaism. But Borg's newest work is almost a midrash on that earlier study. In contrast to Jesus: A New Vision, his latest book attempts to put flesh on himself as a scholar and as a person of faith, thereby showing readers how to connect with the reconfigured Jesus of contemporary American biblical scholarship.

Borg's intent is laudable, and the goals he sets for himself are challenging. For as anyone familiar with past quests for Jesus knows, a scholar must be able to hide behind the rhetorical mask of objective, dispassionate discourse in order to legitimize his or her historical research. Borg, however, begins his book by boldly baring private parts of his life to his reading public. Instead of disguising his personal interests, and his spiritual and theological questions, he lays them out in a sixteen-page autobiographical narrative. But Borg's autobiography should be read as carefully as the rest of the book. As literary critics are quick to note, the rhetorical power of autobiography (no less than the rhetorical power of historical Jesus research) lies precisely in its apparent openness and candor. And the openness and candor often efface a more covert purpose.²²

In his first chapter, entitled "Meeting Jesus Again: My Own Story," Borg describes his spiritual and intellectual journey from midwest American, Scandinavian Lutheran pietism to Oxford-trained New Testament scholar. The seven-part narrative begins in chronological fashion with a childhood spent in a small North Dakota town near the Canadian border. He writes that his earliest images of Jesus are rooted there, wound around Bible verses memorized in Sunday School and inspirational hymns sung in worship. Not insignificantly, the most memorable scene from Borg's autobiographical sketch is of a country church gathering where, in an unfamiliar place and surrounded by strange people, he sang hymns and listened to missionaries tell about their experiences in China. The warmly familiar Christian songs overlaid with an unfamiliar but non-threatening country church function as a key metaphor for his own spiritual pilgrimage.²³

²²Cf. Adams, Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography, 61, 72, 88.

²³Borg immediately follows this description with the perceptive sentence: "It is tempting to see the course of my life ever since as a living out of the messages of those hymns" (Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, 6). However, Borg does not pursue that dangerous temptation by consciously blurring the boundaries

Even more importantly, the images of the friendly Canadian border near his hometown and the strange yet comfortable country church mirror Borg's sketch of the historical Jesus. For the image of Jesus as a boundarycrosser is central to Borg's analysis of Jesus' relationship to Jewish purity systems. He writes: "[T]here is something boundary shattering about the *imatatio dei* that stood at the center of Jesus' message and activity."²⁴ And although Borg's Jesus breaks through the borders of purity systems, he does not seem to incur the physical pain and socio-political stigma which often accompany such trespassing. Like the strange but friendly border scenes from Borg's autobiography, Borg's Jesus challenges stereotypical American religiosity from the outside and simultaneously soothes white middle-class American fears about the cost of radical socio-political engagement and subversive boundary crossing.²⁵

If the metaphor of boundaries surreptitiously breaks out of Borg's autobiography to infiltrate his more objective, scholarly view of Jesus, the image of life as a spiritual and intellectual journey is a consciously chosen metaphor intended to bind the autobiographical reflections to his scholarly work. For Borg, the "understanding of the Christian life as a journey of transformation is grounded in [an] alternative image of Jesus."²⁶ Yet Albert Stone notes that the journey or pilgrimage motif is also rooted "in the mainstream of American personal narratives,"²⁷ and that it is "most frequently chosen to dramatize the inward search for God."²⁸ Moreover, transformation, which is central to Borg's autobiographical summary, has been important to many Western autobiographical acts and to American autobiography in particular. Again, Stone argues that "[m]ost autobiographers . . . achieve self-consciousness through a kind of *metanoia*. They write as if, and after, some transforming event or inner crisis has occurred."²⁹

Borg does not mention the significant role that the journey metaphor has played in the Euroamerican myth of identity, or how that Euroamerican story might have affected his own self-understanding. Instead, near the end of the book he points out how Israel's stories of its relationship to God are dominated by the journey motif: from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land; from exile in Babylon to return to Jerusalem.³⁰ Even more importantly for Borg, Jesus' teaching emphasizes "the religious life as a journey. Jesus teaches a 'way,' and the gospels are about 'the way.'"³¹

When he turns to Jesus' wayward teaching, Borg focuses on the meaning of the word disciple as a "follower," since "[d]iscipleship in the New Testament is . . . a following after Jesus, a journeying with Jesus."³² For Borg, this journey with Jesus

of his autobiographical and scholarly writing.

²⁴Ibid., 58; see also 50-61.

²⁵There are many other borders that are not so safe. For example, Diane Freedman notes: "Danger has long lurked in the borderlands [of the American Southwest]. It's risky to succeed in border crossing, in the making of a new life, in assimilating. Inside, one is perhaps even more the outsider, the migrant, the marginal" (*An Alchemy of Genres*, 48; cf. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, "Preface").

²⁶*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 3.

²⁷*Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*, 33.

²⁸Ibid., 59.

²⁹Ibid., 92, emphasis his.

³⁰Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 133.

³¹Ibid., 134.

³²Ibid., 135.

involves listening to his teaching, eating at his table and experiencing his banquet, and becoming part of an alternative community. As important as the journey metaphor is for Borg's understanding of Jesus' purpose, the liturgical and Markan emphasis on the destination of Jerusalem and the cross are curiously unrelated to following Jesus. Discussions of Jesus' death are buried in footnotes.³³ Precisely at this point, however, the borders of autobiography once again inadvertently overlap his scholarship. Just as his own spiritual and intellectual journey is textually uncontaminated by the troubling questions raised by rejection and death, so also Borg's Jesus is an open-ended sentence, unmarked by a period. Jesus' quest for a relationship with God is neither disrupted nor scandalized by a politically-charged death.

Moreover, in spite of Borg's insistence that "discipleship is not an individual path,"³⁴ his spiritual quest seems to be nurtured primarily by private, mystical experiences. Out of the seven segments into which Borg divides his life, human relationships play a significant role in only the first three.³⁵ And in the lengthiest segment ("Seminary and Beyond"), the course of his spiritual and intellectual journey is shaped by experiences of nature mysticism which cause him to respond with "radical amazement."³⁶ These highly personal events--which Borg never describes in detail--serve as another bridge between his autobiographical quest for a relationship with God and his scholarly quest for the historical Jesus.³⁷ For Jesus' experience of God--as a man of spirit who practiced the politics of compassion--undergirds Borg's own self understanding.³⁸ Both Borg and Borg's Jesus are men are guided by a passionate desire to give themselves wholly to God.

But whether Jesus had a core group of followers, or whether Jesus intended to form a community of like-minded spirit-people who would act out his politics of compassion, are irrelevant historical questions for Borg. Although he can argue that Jesus was a "movement founder"³⁹ with an "inclusive vision" that negated "the boundaries of the [Jewish] purity system,"⁴⁰ the terms "movement" and "founder" remain undefined. Corresponding to his silence on these historical questions is the striking absence of the church in Borg's autobiographical sketch of his adult life. After childhood, the only community that appears to sustain him is the intellectual one dominated by New Testament scholars. So although Borg's intent is to build bridges between the secular Jesus scholar and the wider Christian community, his autobiographical sketch veers off in a different direction. Using his autobiography as a measure, an individual's commitment to a spiritual community would seem to serve little purpose. Consequently, the journey motif that runs through both Borg's autobiography and his sketch of the historical Jesus

³³Ibid., 31; 88, n. 3; 140, n. 24 and 25.

³⁴Ibid., 135-136.

³⁵These seven segments are: "Childhood," "Adolescence," "College," "Seminary and Beyond," "How I See Jesus Now," "The Pre-Easter and the Post-Easter Jesus," and "Beyond Belief to Relationship" (ibid., 3-17).

³⁶Ibid., 14.

³⁷One can speculate that Borg's spiritual life is nurtured by the same experiences which he associates with Jesus: fasting and prayer, contemplation, and perhaps visions (ibid., 35).

³⁸Ibid., 14; cf. 31-38, 58-61, 88, 109-110.

³⁹Ibid., 30.

⁴⁰Ibid., 56.

guides the spiritual quester down a different path: a path that leads into a borderland where seekers have "nowhere to lay [their] head."⁴¹

It should come as no surprise, then, to find that the self Borg inscribes fits easily within the stereotyped, male-defined model of the autobiographical genre. This model, as some have argued, tends to "assume a certain ideology of selfhood [which is] grounded in the metaphysical notion of the essential self, one that privileges individuality and separateness over connectedness."⁴² So while Borg's view of God and Jesus change radically through the course of his autobiographical sketch, and while his scholarly emphasis upon Jesus' politics of compassion highlights the significance of human relationships and connectedness to the world, Borg's autobiographical self remains remarkably stable, ethereal, unified, and unaffected by the intricacies of interpersonal commitments.⁴³

My purpose in this autobiographical critique is not to argue that Marcus Borg should have written his autobiographical sketch differently, nor is it intended to be a theological critique of Marcus Borg's particular reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Borg has, in fact, done an excellent job of communicating the best of two worlds--both the scholarly and the experiential--to the curious bystander. But since I am beginning to believe that all readings, like all scholarly reconstructions of Jesus, are circular and autobiographical, my intention, instead, has been to point out some of the inadvertent connections between Borg's autobiographical reflections and his critical assessment of Jesus. That is, I have been particularly interested in finding those places, both explicit and implicit, where the carefully constructed border between Borg's scholarship and personal life breaks down and is unintentionally crossed.

Even more importantly, my goal has been to ask the theoretical question: Would a more conscious awareness of the modes of autobiographical writing have caused Marcus Borg to inscribe himself or his Jesus differently? In choosing to write about his spiritual and intellectual experience, and then setting that autobiographical sketch apart from the scholarly sketch of Jesus, his readers are invited to view both lives objectively, as separate entities unaffected and uninfected by one another. But what if a reader were to meet Borg again, and discover a Borg who, for the first time, had accepted the cyborg's challenge to mix completely self and science?⁴⁴ Would the rhetorical gains offset the imagined losses of borders?

Nothing in the Text about Merlin

Like Marcus Borg, Sandra M. Schneiders has an abiding passion for finding ways to connect contemporary biblical scholarship with what is largely a biblically illiterate Christian community. So it is not surprising to find her recommendation on the dust jacket of Borg's Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time. But Borg's focus is on the

⁴¹Ibid., 135.

⁴²Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, 12; cf. 13-15. Cf. also Costello, "Taking the 'Woman' out of Women's Autobiography," 131.

⁴³In other words, it is a docetic view of self. It is a "[s]elf-conception . . . formed without the body" (Gilmore, Autobiographics, 84; see especially 82-86).

⁴⁴This is Donna Haraway's "manifesto" in her essay, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (see especially, 66-67).

historical Jesus, and depends almost exclusively upon the shovels and picks of historical criticism to dig through layers of ecclesiastical tradition and uncover that Jesus. On the other hand, Schneiders's work, The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture, exposes the reader to a much wider range of exegetical methodologies, concentrating primarily on the final shape of the biblical narrative.

In her autobiographical vignette, Sandra M. Schneiders reveals to the reader how her own intellectual quest led her to write this book. She writes that her academic career largely has been a search to find legitimate ways of introducing into her study of the New Testament the lived experience of Christian faith and a belief in the Bible as divine revelation. This legitimizing desire has grown out of her professional education and study, since "the type of objectivity that was the ideal of historical critical exegesis and that controlled its agenda and methodology seemed to forbid, if not any interest in such matters, at least any explicit intrusion of such concerns into the scholarly study of the text."⁴⁵ Thus, Schneiders's goal is to develop a theologically reflective, hermeneutically sophisticated, and exegetically sensitive context for reading Scripture as the enlivening, challenging, transformative word of God which Christians claim it is. And in order to legitimize her endeavor, she will be careful to keep her own autobiographical reflections from intruding into her hermeneutical praxis.

Unlike Marcus Borg's lengthier, more general autobiographical sketch, Sandra M. Schneiders's personal reflections cover only five pages of her two-hundred-page book. Her autobiography focuses only on a small segment of her adult life, or the "final shaping" of her intellectual journey. Schneiders, who describes herself as a white, middle-class woman, and a European-trained, Roman Catholic New Testament scholar, concentrates all her autobiographical reflections on a few significant moments in her professional life. Yet even those selected moments bleed over into her scholarly discourse. For example, where Marcus Borg began his autobiography with his auditory memories of singing hymns in church and then moved to the oral tradition behind the gospels, Sandra M. Schneiders's autobiography, like her scholarly investigations, is centered on visual experiences with written texts. Tellingly, her autobiography is subtitled "*Genesis of the Project*" (emphasis mine).

Like a modern-day disciple of Merlin, the inspirational and revelatory moment of Schneiders's autobiographical vignette is marked by a strange incantation muttered over the sacred text. Paradoxically, the patriarchal intonation of "*rien de tout*," uttered by a famous, unnamed Parisian Old Testament scholar⁴⁶ becomes the very stuff that energizes her scholarly career. It is the puff of professorial smoke that tickles her nostrils, exciting her to connect spirituality and scholarship.⁴⁷ The professor's "nothing at all" is a direct response to Schneiders's question regarding the implications of inspiration for interpreting the biblical text. And since that male-defined absence is the mark of her autobiographical

⁴⁵The Revelatory Text, 2.

⁴⁶Ibid., 2.

⁴⁷Summarizing two central ideas from Luce Irigaray and Jacques Lacan, Ann Rosalind Jones writes, "women, because they have been caught in a world structured by man-centered concepts, have had no way of knowing or representing themselves," (*Writing the Bodye*, 359), for "the father [has been] the bearer of language and culture" (ibid., 362).

presence,⁴⁸ it is not surprising to find Sandra M. Schneiders beginning her hermeneutical discussion of metaphorical thinking and the meaning of the expression "Word of God" by evoking the lingering absence and negativity in Paul Ricoeur's understanding of language.

Sandra M. Schneiders's second and third chapters, "The New Testament as the Word of God" and "The New Testament as the Church's Book," lay out the central theological tenets of her arguments for constructing a theology of the revelatory text. She argues from Paul Ricoeur and Sallie McFague that the Word of God is a root metaphor in Christian theology; that is, it is "an extraordinarily enduring and powerful image" which "nourishes ever new growth and meaning."⁴⁹ In contrast to how it is understood in fundamentalist and evangelical theology, this understanding does not allow the expression "Word of God" to be translated into a literal meaning. For it is an unstable linguistic entity which exists "in and even as linguistic tension involving a simultaneous affirmation and negation of the likeness between the two terms of the metaphor. The metaphor contains an 'is' and 'is not,' held in irresolvable tension."⁵⁰

The way in which Sandra M. Schneiders appropriates Ricoeur's description of metaphor as an "is/is not" linguistic phenomenon is particularly helpful for developing a critically sensitive understanding of how the metaphor "Word of God" functions in the Christian tradition. And at first glance this description of metaphor seems to mark a break in Schneiders's defenses, a place where her autobiographical reflections inadvertently intrude into and infect the body of her scholarly work. But likewise it is precisely at the point of the whispered "is not" that the knotty strings of her Parisian Old Testament professor's remark begin to untie and critique her legitimizing address. For example, when Schneiders talks about the referent of the metaphor "Word of God," she speaks of it as "divine revelation," which, through the medium of language, is "our encounter with the real."⁵¹ And near the conclusion of her book, when talking about the biblical text as written discourse, she can speak of the "truth claims of the text, what [it] says about reality."⁵²

At these points I want to stop Sandra M. Schneiders and ask her if I can bring back the revelatory naughtiness of her autobiographical vignette and, with her Parisian professor, whisper a reverential "is not" after the words "divine revelation," "real," and "reality." For aren't these terms also metaphors and signs of deferment? Yet again it is at these places that her autobiography and the professor's diseased "*rien de tout*" are excluded from her scientific, theological discourse. For instead of finding a feminist "that's not it, that's still not it"⁵³ marking her language of "divine revelation" and "the real," one discovers the politically charged language of power beginning to dominate her arguments. Listen for a moment to her description of Ricoeur's concept of distanciation: "Distanciation does indeed raise serious *challenges* for the exegete who *must overcome*

⁴⁸"A feminist practice," writes Julia Kristeva, "can only be . . . at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it.' By 'woman' I mean that which cannot be represented, what is not said. . . ." (as quoted in Jones, "Writing the Body," 359).

⁴⁹The Revelatory Text, 32.

⁵⁰Ibid., 29.

⁵¹Ibid., 34.

⁵²Ibid., 141.

⁵³Kristeva, as quoted in Jones, "Writing the Body," 359.

the distance in order *to establish* as nearly as possible the original meaning of the text, but it also offers immense possibilities to the interpreter who *will exploit* the distance to derive augmented meaning from great texts that no longer belong exclusively to one time, place, or people."⁵⁴

Or again, with regard to the indices of valid interpretation, Schneiders writes in a commanding voice: "First, a valid interpretation *should account for the text* as it stands or establish, independently of the proposed interpretation, why and how it should be emended. . . . Second, a valid interpretation *has to be consistent* with itself, that is free from internal contradictions. . . . Third, a valid interpretation *should be equally as or more successful* than its competitors at explaining anomalies in the text. . . . Fourth, a valid interpretation *ought to be compatible* with what is known from other sources. . . ."⁵⁵

I have not chosen these particular texts with the intent of undermining Sandra M. Schneiders's theological method, her exegetical priorities, or her pastoral purpose. Rather, my goal is to approach her book autobiographically, in order to show how the revelatory moment of her life story inadvertently bleeds over into her scholarly task and also offers a critique of it. For there seems to be a clear line of development from her professor's "*rien de tout*," to her own appropriation of Paul Ricoeur's understanding of metaphor (the not-ness of the Word of God), and to its ultimate circumscription and displacement by a need for "a norm against which interpretations can be judged,"⁵⁶ or for "criteria of validity" in interpretation.⁵⁷ In Sandra M. Schneiders's thinking, the legitimization of interpretation seems to imply a hermeneutical system that will somehow limit the supplementarity of the linguistic signifier, or the "is/is not" quality of ultimate metaphors.

No doubt Sandra M. Schneiders would be among the first to agree with Diane Freedman, that among her many mentors, "continental critics (especially male critics) do not make a point of theorizing out of a personal history made accessible to the reader. . . . [T]heir goals are generally not self-disclosure, comfort, warmth, and intimacy with the reader, but instead disruption and 'distanciation.'"⁵⁸ So it is not surprising to find that Schneiders makes a concerted effort to keep the self-disclosures of her autobiographical introduction from intruding into the body of her scholarship. For identification, as Diane Freedman goes on to note, "is the opposite of distanciation, an almost onomatopoeic term."⁵⁹

Nevertheless, at the conclusion to her work, Sandra M. Schneiders turns to a more personal and feminist emphasis as she begins to analyze the Johannine story of the woman at the well. In the story's dialogue the Samaritan woman recognizes Jesus as the one who reveals "all things" and, like Schneiders's description of the revelatory experience itself, there is a complementarity to their ensuing conversation.⁶⁰ The woman, Schneiders writes, "is a genuine theological dialogue partner gradually experiencing

⁵⁴The *Revelatory Text*, 144, my emphasis.

⁵⁵Ibid., 165-166, my emphasis.

⁵⁶Ibid., 145.

⁵⁷Ibid., 164.

⁵⁸Freedman, *An Alchemy of Genres*, 99; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Biblical Interpretation and Critical Commitment," 7.

⁵⁹Ibid.

Jesus' self-revelation even as she reveals herself to him."⁶¹ At this point I feel as though I am reading Sandra M. Schneiders through the Johannine character, and I wish I could see more of the appropriated magic.⁶²

In Schneider's exegesis, Jesus, the one who needs nothing at all, seeks something from the woman and is satisfied. In contrast to the Parisian professor's "*rien de tout*" and Paul Ricoeur's "is/is not" which open Schneiders's book, the Samaritan woman's negative statement, "Surely this couldn't be the Messiah, could it?" is carefully elided from the Johannine text. She never vocalizes the "*Meti*" ("Surely not") of John 4:29.⁶³ The feminist whispering "that's not it, that's still not it" is barely audible as Schneiders elaborates the woman's christological witness to the Samaritan villagers who come out to meet her.

What I find powerfully compelling about Schneiders's work is her desire to bridge the gaps between the Church's theological reflection, the believer's spiritual experience, and the scholar's exegetical practice. And she does an excellent job of finding a dialogical and theoretical language to bridge those gaps. But I wish Schneiders had spent less effort trying rhetorically to separate *her own personal life* from the search for definitive "norm[s] against which interpretations can be judged."⁶⁴

In light of Sandra M. Schneiders's truncated autobiography, it may seem presumptuous of me to ask any questions regarding the nature of the self revealed in her autobiographical vignette. Nevertheless, an answer to my questions--regardless of how tentative it might be--will help the reader better understand my summary of autobiographical criticism below.⁶⁵ Like the Samaritan woman of her final chapter, Sandra M. Schneiders's consciously constructed self is a bodiless person, one who is strongly unified by a determined will and a focused intellectual quest. In these respects it shares much of the same ideology of the unified self with Marcus Borg's literarily constructed portrait, but with a more conscious concern for making connections--past and present--to a particular Christian community.⁶⁶

I have no idea what the *M* of Sandra M. Schneiders stands for, and I'm afraid to call her to find out the truth behind the scarlet letter on her book's cover. Personally, I like to think that the *M* stands for Marilyn--although *Sandra Marie* has a much nicer sound to it than *Sandra Marilyn*. Nevertheless, I've chosen the name Marilyn because it

⁶⁰The Revelatory Text, 191; cf. 177. "Conversation" and "dialogue" are also crucial metaphors in Schneiders's interpretive theory of appropriating the biblical text (*ibid.*, 140-142).

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²See her discussion of "meaning as appropriation" (*ibid.*, 172-178).

⁶³*Ibid.*, 191, 193. When used in an interrogative sentence, the negative adverb *me* anticipates a negative response, and *ti* functions as an intensifier (Blass and Debrunner, A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 220-221, 226). For other examples of *meti* in the Fourth Gospel, see Jn 8:22; 18:35.

⁶⁴The Revelatory Text, 145. For example, see Nancy Miller's practice of "personal criticism" in Getting Personal, 1-29.

⁶⁵See the following subsections, "A Myth of Origins," and "Losing the Formula."

⁶⁶I'm thinking here particularly of her three pages of personal acknowledgments (xi-xiii) and her "Hermeneutical Appropriation" of the Samaritan woman story (195-197) both of which reflect her strong commitments to the Roman Catholic Church.

sounds like Merlin and conjures up images of wizardry. And Merlin's wizardry is Temma Berg's metaphor for feminist mixings of autobiographics and scholarship.⁶⁷

Like Merlin, Sandra M. Schneiders whispers hermeneutical incantations and waves plastic metaphorical wands over the canonical text as she lifts new insights from the Christian affirmation of the Bible's divine inspiration. Yet I can't help but think, when all is said and done, that the ghost of the old Parisian biblical scholar still hovers over her desk and pen. So what I want to ask Sandra M. Schneiders is this: What groups of people grant authority to the interpretive norms you delineate, and in whose interests are those norms determined? What power structures and ideologies are served by the desire for "valid criteria" in biblical interpretation?

I think I know the answers that she would give at the beginning and at the conclusion of her book. In those two places sparks seem ready as she "challeng[es] the androcentric, patriarchal, sexist, and misogynist misinterpretations that pervade the history of New Testament scholarship and that have deeply affected the Christian imagination through the scholarly and homiletic tradition."⁶⁸ But in the middle portion of the book, where Schneiders seeks to legitimize the appropriation of Scripture with a theory of carefully established interpretive norms, this Merlin seems to be conjuring for the very audience she is trying to undermine. Perhaps Jane Tompkins is right in saying "that theory itself, *at least as it is usually practiced*, may be one of the patriarchal gestures women *and* men ought to avoid."⁶⁹

A Reader's Alchemy

Unlike Marcus Borg's and Sandra M. Schneiders's autobiographical vignettes, Mikeal Parsons's self reflections were originally written for a very small audience. They were prepared specifically for a ten-year review of a Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Group.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, his analysis of his own reading context is important precisely for its difference from the other two I have just finished reviewing. Taking up the challenge of Fernando Segovia, who has argued that New Testament "readers [need] to read readers" with the same energy that they read texts,⁷¹ Parsons exegetes his own "middle-class, middle-aged, Southern, white American" male identity, as one presently "living in the Southwest[; whose] confessional commitment is Christian, profoundly shaped by Baptist traditions."⁷²

Parsons's social description of himself starts off in a much more critically developed fashion than does either Borg's or Schneiders's but, unlike them, he does not

⁶⁷"Suppressing the Language of (Wo)man," 12.

⁶⁸The Revelatory Text, 186.

⁶⁹"Me and My Shadow," 24, as quoted in Miller, Getting Personal, 21 (Miller's emphasis).

⁷⁰It first appeared in the 1992 SBL Seminar Papers as "What is 'Literary' About Literary Aspects of the Gospels and Acts?," and will soon be published in Biblical Interpretation under the title "Anatomy of a Reader." Throughout my analysis I will be using his latest and more accessible title, but I will continue to use the page numbers from the Seminar Papers, since this is the only published version currently available to me.

⁷¹"Towards a New Direction in Johannine Scholarship," 22 (as paraphrased by Parsons, "Anatomy of a Reader," 20).

⁷²"Anatomy of a Reader," 21.

attempt to present a chronologically arranged personal narrative along side of it. His autobiographical portrait is more emotionally transparent than theirs, and it is more consciously "American" in its troubled search for rootedness. His approach, which he calls "cultural-literary criticism,"⁷³ is in fact an elaborate expansion of the McWhopper topos that I described at the beginning of this chapter.

Since Mikeal Parsons describes cultural-literary criticism as taking "seriously the assumptions that texts, readers and methods are all historically and culturally conditioned and the fact that texts, readers, and methods have particular ideological perspectives,"⁷⁴ he begins his self-description in broad terms of his participation in Western society. But eschewing a simple autobiographical narrative that might illustrate the significance of this context, Parsons chooses instead to read himself intertextually through the lenses of other New Testament exegetes.

For example, Parsons uses Krister Stendahl's essay "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" as a way to help him understand his membership in Western society. He then turns to Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Bible and the form of Baptist-like public confession to critique his own growing consciousness of his racial and ethnic identity. Of all the elements in his elaboration of the McWhopper topos, Parsons's discussion of his troubled masculine identity reads the most like an autobiography. Here he views himself through the screen of the Davidic succession narrative as it is interpreted by Philip Culbertson in his New Adam. And when Parsons describes age as a social factor in his identity, he uses the ABS video "The Gerasene Demoniac" and Hanna Barbera's animated video version of Bible stories for children as ways of illustrating differences. Finally, he analyzes the ideological constraints behind the eighteenth-century invention of "Paul's three missionary journeys" in Acts as a way of illustrating how "control beliefs" have molded his social location. However, as Parsons himself is quick to point out, perhaps the most glaring omission from his analysis of social locaters is that of socio-economic class.⁷⁵

Unlike Marcus Borg's and Sandra M. Schneiders's autobiographical selves, which project the classic Western image of the individualized, unified self with its introspective turning points, Mikeal Parsons's autobiographical self leans more toward a postmodern perspective, as if the self were something entirely socially constructed or merely a linguistic, rhetorical device.⁷⁶ For although certain hints of individuality persist in his analysis, Parsons seems to imply that these markers are primarily constructed intertextually and are socially imbedded in Western culture and American mythology. Thus, like his own lost Scotch-Irish roots, his personal story is nearly obliterated behind the pages of social description.

Parsons concludes his description of cultural-literary criticism by arguing that cultural-literary criticism "demands that the scholar get in touch with the driving myths about gender, race, age, and ideologies in popular Western culture."⁷⁷ For him that means "learning more about Western culture, especially the South" where he comes from and the

⁷³Ibid., 20.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid., 29, n. 10.

⁷⁶For a discussion of the postmodern view of the self, see below, 155-156, 159.

⁷⁷"Anatomy of a Reader," 29.

Southwest where he now resides.⁷⁸ Parsons knows that biblical scholars cannot begin every exegetical essay with a thoroughgoing analysis of social location like his own. Nevertheless, he does "envision the interpreter deciding in each moment of interpretation which of these social locaters is most important, recognizing of course, that these choices are themselves conditioned to some extent by the social location of the reader."⁷⁹

Since the focus of Mikeal Parsons's essay is the assaying of the reader rather than the exegesis of a specific biblical text, I cannot offer the same type of autobiographical critique of his work as I did with Borg's or Schneiders's books. For in Parsons's analysis, the history of exegesis functions as a preliminary step toward understanding the self, rather than as a preface to interpreting the biblical text. In point of fact, the wide assortment of secondary sources Parsons uses tends to blend in with his own self-description. The sources become tainted blood transfusions infiltrating Parsons's semi-permeable borders. In contrast, Parsons, the scientific-like narrator in this readerly experiment, remains relatively stationary and passive. He is read by other readers of the New Testament but does not himself become an active reader of any biblical text.

The letters of the word *alchemy* produces the anagram *Mychael*--a rather unusual spelling for the common proper name. Or, working in the opposite direction, beginning from the nearly phonetic spelling of Mikeal Parsons's first name, one gets the nearly phonetic spelling *alkemi*. I think that without too much trouble Mikeal Parsons could become a practitioner of literary alchemy in the genre-mixing modes of Diane Freedman and Patricia Williams.⁸⁰ For instance, Mikeal's essay begins and ends with quotes from novels, and throughout his scholarly discourse on social location he blends personal asides with snatches of literary and cultural theory and professional-looking footnotes. But since he spends no time actually exegeting a biblical text in the essay, his readers will have to wait until a later date to see whether my suspicions are confirmed regarding how "cultural-literary criticism" works it way out in his New Testament research. What I would like to see in Mikeal's work is a volatile chemical reaction: something that would combine the cyborg's sense of autobiography, Merlin's textual magic, and his own alchemic analysis of the reader. That formula, however, has yet to be written.

I feel good about myself. In the process of critiquing these three autobiographical vignettes by biblical scholars, I've been careful to keep my distance from them. I've kept my critical mask up over my nose and mouth, and I think I've made it through without getting infected by any toxic autobiographical antigens exuding from their pores. I actually feel stronger than I did when I began the chapter, as though I've built up, in the process of writing the last few pages, a certain physical resistance to autobiographical intrusions. So now I'm going to finish my breakfast, get dressed, and then exercise my muscles a bit on the machinery of autobiographical theory.

A Myth of Origins

As I noted earlier, despite the obvious structural inadequacies and largely uncritical nature of most biblical scholars' autobiographical acts, autobiography is by no

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Freedman, *An Alchemy of Genres*; Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*.

means an insignificant area of research in contemporary literary theory.⁸¹ Rejuvenated largely by feminist critics interested in uncovering the little known works of so-called "non-literary," "noncanonical" women authors, and a poststructuralist fascination with the textualized, disappearing self, interest in autobiography has recently spilled over into the seminars of the American Academy of Religion.⁸²

Although it has been common to begin the study of autobiography with St. Augustine's *Confessions*, the word *autobiography* has its origins in the English language of the late eighteenth century.⁸³ For example, Robert Folkenflik points out that the earliest reference to the word is "in the preface to the 1786 edition of Ann Yearsley's *Poems*. . . . Hence, the first use of any form of the term appeared in the apologia of a lower-class woman poet generally condescended to in literary histories under the name Lactilla, the Milkmaid Poet."⁸⁴ Folkenflik thus makes a strong argument that autobiography, as a stable literary form, was born on the outskirts of public intercourse and out of wordlock.⁸⁵ Its conception was not virginal, let alone immaculate, nor was it without siblings. As Folkenflik goes on to note: "By the middle of the 1820's, there was an institutional recognition of the term and a budding [bulging?] canon."⁸⁶

The original elements of the thrice-spliced, word-grafted term *auto-bio-graphy* present a helpful and, in a general sense, an accurate history of the troubled genre's critical investigation. For example, Sidonie Smith argues that during the first half of the twentieth century the emphasis in autobiographical literary criticism was on the *bio* of the author.⁸⁷ And speaking of this period of criticism, James Olney describes

a rather naive threefold assumption about the writing of autobiography: first that the *bios* of autobiography could only signify 'the course of a lifetime' . . . ; second that the autobiographer could narrate his life in a manner at least approaching the objective historical account . . . ; and third, that there was nothing problematical about the *autos*, no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, or self-deception--at least none the reader need attend to. . . .⁸⁸

⁸¹As late as 1972 James Olney could write: "Surprisingly little has been written about autobiography at all, and virtually nothing about its philosophical and psychological implications. A complete list of studies would include only a handful of books in English" (*Metaphors of the Self*, ix). Within a few short years, however, scholarly interest in autobiography would rise significantly (see, for example, Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual*; Olney, *Autobiography*; Gunn, *Autobiography*; Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*; Lejeune, *On Autobiography*). More recently, a shift has been made toward the rhetorical implications of national and ethnic autobiography (e.g., Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*; Folkenflik, *The Culture of Autobiography*; Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," and Pease, "National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives").

⁸²For example, see Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*; Gilmore, *Autobiographics*; and Costello, "Taking the 'Woman' out of Women's Autobiography." In religious studies, see Henking, "The Personal is the Theological."

⁸³Folkenflik, *The Culture of Autobiography*, 1-5; cf. Shea, "The Prehistory of American Autobiography," 25, Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," 6-7; and Sprinker, "Fictions of the Self," 325.

⁸⁴Folkenflik, *The Culture of Autobiography*, 1-2.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 6; cf. 8-9.

⁸⁷*A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, 4.

⁸⁸Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," 20.

But a second generation of critics, still confident "in the referentiality of language and a corollary confidence in the authenticity of the self," "attuned itself to the 'agonizing questions' inherent in self-representation."⁸⁹ Thus interest shifts from the *bio* element of autobiography to the *auto* and its fictive constructions. Smith writes that, for this group of scholars working in the 1960s, "truthfulness becomes a much more complex and problematic phenomenon."⁹⁰ The psychological dimensions of truth have taken precedence over those of fact or morality.

Finally, Olney and Smith want to argue that a third phase of autobiographical theory can be discerned in the contemporary scene where *graphy*, or the concentration upon inscribed selves and readers, has taken over center stage. Here, an emphasis on the death of the unified self has led to a concern for the rhetorical, linguistic function of "selves" and "readers," with a "careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself."⁹¹ Not surprisingly, writing epitaphs for the self-polluting *auto* have been the norm in autobiographical studies of the 1970s and 1980s. Nicole Jouve's internal monologue describing the demise of the self is not untypical of the topos:

Contemporary theory has problematized the subject in manifold ways that preclude the search for the self that you propose. Psychoanalysis would demonstrate to you, through Lacan in particular, that 'I' is always another, first grasped as an imago. And what about the unconscious, the divided self and all that? Self-knowledge is a mirage, a hangover oasis from the Greeks. And you speak about the autobiographical voice as if there was such a thing, as if the prodigious wealth of recent studies on autobiography, first male then female, hadn't endlessly questioned its existence as a genre.⁹²

Nevertheless, as scholarly interest in cross-cultural and bicultural autobiography has expanded, there is a growing need to readdress the confessional, "naive" mode of representation exhibited by much of marginalized self-writing. From the perspective of ideological criticism, Leigh Gilmore asks the crucial questions:

Has the claim of representativeness, which characterized autobiography as practiced by an elite group, become passé and naive because the poststructuralist critique of such a grounding has been overwhelmingly persuasive? Or has representativeness been marginalized with the effect of forcing those who now claim it to the 'margin' of representation? Why does the coincidence of poststructuralist skepticism and 'truth telling' produce a judgment of naiveté when representative identity is self-claimed by a non-'representative' person (in terms of the dominant culture)?⁹³

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm ready to walk out the front door, and I still haven't brushed my teeth or put on my shoes and socks. I need to sit back for a moment

⁸⁹Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, 5.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, 5, as quoted in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, 6. Cf. Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," 22.

⁹²*White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*, 9-10.

⁹³*Autobiographics*, 228; cf. 82; see also Gerhart, *Genre Choices, Gender Questions*, 110.

and plan a more pleasing presentation for the origins of autobiographical criticism before I leave the house. So let me try putting on this myth in another way.

Many recent studies in autobiography look to Roy Paschal's 1960 book, Design and Truth in Autobiography, as the turning point in modern study of the genre.⁹⁴ This is because Paschal's theoretical approach is a formalist bridge linking the strictly historical delineation of canonical autobiography of the 1920s-1940s with the anti-formalist theories of the 1970s and beyond. Not surprisingly, Paschal begins his study with an attempt to clarify autobiography as a genre, comparing it with diaries, memoirs, autobiographical writings, and philosophical reflections on the self. For Paschal, autobiography is "historical in its method, and at the same time, . . . represent[s] . . . the self in and through its relations with the outer world."⁹⁵ "It involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived,"⁹⁶ and "is . . . an interplay, a collusion between past and present; its significance is indeed more a revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past."⁹⁷

Paschal's study has three essential foci: 1) the history of autobiography as a literary genre, 2) the structure of autobiography and its various sub-types, and 3) the issue of truth in autobiography. For Paschal, and most other other male critics, Augustine's Confessions represented the genesis of the genre which, he argues, has also been "essentially European."⁹⁸ For Paschal, autobiography is the "distinctive product of Western, post-Roman civilisation, and only in modern times has it spread to other civilisations."⁹⁹ This argument is convincing, of course, only in so far as he and others define autobiography specifically in terms of "a preoccupation with the self [which] . . . holds the balance between the self and the world, the subjective and the objective, [and] . . . is inspired by a reverence for the self . . . in its delicate uniqueness."¹⁰⁰ Most women and Third World autobiographers are automatically excluded from this definition, for they blur that "balanced" distinction between the self and the world.

For Paschal, the literary critic must wait until the sixteenth-century Renaissance to find the "extraordinary psychological insight" that marks truly great autobiography.¹⁰¹ And the classical age of autobiography is only represented by the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century works of Rousseau, Goethe, and Wordsworth, who "were inwardly turned, deeply concerned with their sensibility and imagination."¹⁰²

⁹⁴For example, see Adams, Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography, 1; and Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," 11. Another important scholar working in the area of autobiography in the early 1960s was William Spengemann (see especially his later work, The Forms of Autobiography).

⁹⁵Design and Truth in Autobiography, 8. Philippe Lejeune's definition is very similar: "[W]e shall define autobiography as the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (On Autobiography, viii, 149-150).

⁹⁶Design and Truth in Autobiography, 9.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 10.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 180-181.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 36.

In terms of the structure of autobiography and its various sub-types, Paschal is careful to distinguish four categories: "autobiography as the story of a man's theoretical understanding of the world," the "essayist autobiography," the "autobiography which restricts itself to childhood," and "innovations of method."¹⁰³ Finally, Paschal describes autobiographical truth in terms of an internal narrative consistency where "that unique truth of life . . . is seen from inside."¹⁰⁴ For him, "truth lies in the building up of a personality through the images it makes of itself, that embody its mode of absorbing and reacting to the outer world, and that are profoundly related to one another at each moment and in the succession from past to present."¹⁰⁵

Over the past thirty years, the three foci of Paschal's work--the history of the genre, the structure of autobiography, and the issue of truth--have remained important to theoretical discussions of autobiography. But each focal point has been scrutinized and strongly criticized. Not surprisingly, feminist and postcolonial critics have challenged the classical definition of the genre and its history for its male, European bias; and the narrow structure of autobiography for its Western emphasis on the ideology of the individual and internal change. What this has meant for feminist and postcolonial critics is that, today, autobiography is shaped by a "nonessentialist aesthetics [which is] tied to the emergence of occluded oral cultures, to the articulation of a reality that emphasizes relational patterns over autonomous ones, interconnectedness over independence, isomorphic analogies over unifying totalities, and opacity over transparency."¹⁰⁶

Similarly, poststructuralist critics have completely rejected Paschal's understanding of truth in autobiography and his concept of the unified self. "It has become a commonplace of contemporary literary and critical theory," writes Martin Gloege, "to think of the 'self' as a 'construction,' as counterfeit and artificial as opposed to authentic and natural, as a product of society, as a narrative or rhetorical device, trope, or strategy of and within language."¹⁰⁷

Finally, I'm on my way out the front door.¹⁰⁸ My shoes and socks are on, and I'm ready to face the world. I've eaten a bowl of cereal, had a methamphetamine with my third cup of coffee (that will take care of my allergies for another four hours), and now I'm ready to metamorphose into a bit of my own autobiographical metacriticism. Meta-autobiographical criticism. That's what I'm going to call my new outfit. It is a metaphase--or better, a metastasizing of autobiographical criticism and human skin. A new metaphrastic metaphor.

¹⁰³Ibid., 56.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 195.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 188.

¹⁰⁶Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 245.

¹⁰⁷"The American Origins of the Postmodern Self," 59; see also van den Heever, "Being and Nothingness," 42-45.

¹⁰⁸"[A]utobiography," Robert Sayre writes, "is, or can be that second house into which we are reborn, carried by our own creative power. We make it ourselves, then remake it--make it new.

"The comparison to architecture (rather than to clothes, the more traditional metaphor for autobiography) is also apt because of the effect the lives and works of Americans have had on the American landscape. The 'building' of civilization in the United States has been like the construction of a vast enclosure over the continent. . . ." ("Autobiography and the Making of America," 148-149; see also 156, 168).

Losing the Formula

I put off writing this chapter until the rest of the book was nearly completed, thinking that I would need the extra time to read everything I could on the current status of autobiography in literary criticism. Using the dissertation formula, I figured that if I did not begin this [chapter] with the requisite prefatory litany of past adventures in criticism, buying into the sort of paranoia ("If I don't cite earlier critics, my readers won't find my case credible") that the Academy seems to foster by equating scholarship and objectivity with an ability to run a CD-ROM search of the MLA Bibliography, I [would] risk being accused of lacking professionalism and/or rigor.¹⁰⁹

And God knows, I didn't want that curse hanging around my neck. But the more I read in autobiographical theory, especially on the feminist side of the issues, the less convinced I was of the value of writing in the same dry, formulaic manner as I had previously.

My original and primary intention was to do a survey of the theoretical literature, writing a short summary of the critical problems and general movements in order to make biblical scholars aware of the significance of autobiography for a reader-oriented hermeneutics. But I also found in my reading that autobiographics is a cross-disciplinary exercise, involving anthropology, psychology, literature, and philosophy. How was I ever going to pull together so many fields of research into a coherent summary for biblical scholars? My original goals seemed far too broad and unwieldy. And even though I have actually just completed a short variation of the survey-of-literature topos, I'm not sure now that my summary of autobiographical literary criticism has been particularly useful to my reader.

As I explored the secondary literature, what really began to interest me was the role American myths have played in Euroamerican autobiography¹¹⁰ and the construction of the person in autobiographical material from non-Western peoples.¹¹¹ Since I am a Euroamerican reader who was strongly influenced in childhood by a Native American subculture, I began to think that I should give particular attention to the distinctive qualities of Euroamerican and Native American autobiography, and how those ways of imagining the self might have influenced the way I read myself.

For if there is any truth in Paul de Man's argument that autobiography "is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree,

¹⁰⁹Torsney, "Everyday Use," 73. Or in Dorothy Dinnerstein's words: I make "no effort to survey the relevant literature. Not only would that task be (for me) unmanageably huge. It would also be against my principles. I *believe* in reading unsystematically and taking notes erratically. Any effort to form a rational policy about what to take in, out of the inhuman flood of printed human utterance that pours over us daily, feels to me like a self-deluded exercise in pseudomastery" (*The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, ix).

¹¹⁰For example, see Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*; Eakin, *American Autobiography*; Payne, *Multicultural Autobiography*; Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*; Gloege, "The American Origins of the Postmodern Self"; Sayre, "Autobiography and the Making of America"; and Wilson, "Producing American Selves."

¹¹¹For example, see Brumble, *American Indian Autobiography*; Krupat, *For Those Who Come After*, "Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self"; and Wong, *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years*.

in all texts,"¹¹² and if autobiography does not reveal reliable self-knowledge but rather "demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization,"¹¹³ then the questions that de Man's analysis raised for me were these: What are the figures of reading that have guided my understanding? and, Do those figures reveal reliable knowledge of myself and the Fourth Gospel or, instead, do they demonstrate the "impossibility of closure and totalization"?

For example, Daniel Shea charts the sources of American autobiography showing how, "[b]y reputation, if not chronology, John Smith stands first in the line of American self-writers who found that they could not write themselves into the New World text without writing the native identity to some extent as their own."¹¹⁴ Paradoxically, however, Arnold Krupat notes that "from the first days of settlement until the end of the nineteenth century, the American self tended to locate its peculiar national distinctiveness in relation to a perceived opposition between the European, the 'man of culture,' and the Indian, the 'child of nature.'"¹¹⁵ Strangely, the conflict of ideologies represented in the two perspectives of wanting to write the Native American identity as one's own and of seeing oneself as a European transplant, opposed to the Indian, seemed to reflect my own autobiographical ambivalence. Moreover, I found Krupat's description of the Native American self as an "I-am-We experience . . . where such a phrase indicates that I understand myself as a self only in relation to the coherent and bounded whole of which I am a part,"¹¹⁶ reflected my own self awareness as well as the ancient Mediterranean view of person¹¹⁷ and certain elements in what some have called feminine self-consciousness.¹¹⁸

As Jeane Costello argues, the point is not that men see themselves as autonomous individuals and women [or Native Americans] see themselves as connected to others . . . , but [rather] that any conception of individuality is an ideological construct. For postmodern theories have shown us the ways in which all subjects, not just female [and non-Western], are situated and relational. . . . There is no absolute autonomy for anyone.¹¹⁹

The more I research I did, the more I felt myself beginning to fracture and follow the fissure lines of my feverish late-night reading. What was I really doing when I tried to describe myself as a reader of the Fourth Gospel, when I tried to come out from behind

¹¹²"Autobiography as De-facement," 921.

¹¹³Ibid., 922.

¹¹⁴"The Prehistory of American Autobiography," 29.

¹¹⁵For Those Who Come After, 41.

¹¹⁶"Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self," 174.

¹¹⁷Brumble, American Indian Autobiography, 37, 118.

¹¹⁸Hertha Wong argues: "There are a few similarities between how feminists characterize female personal narrative and . . . pre-contact Native American self-narration. According to feminist autobiographical theory, women's autobiographical narrative, unlike men's, tends to be circular (cyclical) rather than linear, and their autobiographical focus communal rather than individual. Although these women are Westerners, like Native Americans they share a sense of identity that is based on belonging to and participating in a larger pattern--the cultural patterns of family and social relations. . . ." (Sending My Heart Back Across the Years, 23; (but cf. Vizenor's important critique, in "Ruins of Representation," 24-26).

¹¹⁹"Taking the 'Woman' out of Women's Autobiography," 131 (see also Wong, Sending My Heart Back Across the Years, 16-17).

my well-wrought mask of implied and encoded readers? Would the reader I discovered myself to be, be any less a fiction than the implied or encoded reader I had previously disked over in the Fourth Gospel? Was I discovering myself? Or inventing myself? Suddenly I began to understand William Maxwell's dictum: "[I]n talking about the past, we lie with every breath we draw."¹²⁰

Where the Future Lies

So who or what will I be when I go back inside and reread the Fourth Gospel without the help of my masked, encoded reader? That question troubles me, and I don't quite know how to answer it. Will I be a cyborg, meeting myself again for the first time? Or a Merlin, looking at the revelatory me in a purloined text? Perhaps I'll become a blurry-eyed alchemist, and combine fairy dust and esoteric roots in order to conjure up some new sylph.

Whatever I become, I know that my reading in autobiographical criticism has taught me I can never escape from turning to behold the man, the autobiographical *I*. "It's in the *I* of the beholder," they say. It's in the *I* of the storm; in the voice of the "American be anything undividualist." It's in the diseased *I* of AIDS.

Like the Johannine *I Am* sayings of Jesus, my *I* marks the dropping of only one of many masks--that antiseptic shield protecting me from allergies, infection, and death. But with that mask gone, this McWhopper is finally ready to move beyond the purity and monoculturalism of Burger King and McDonalds to the All-Nite Truck Stop on the other side of the tracks. I'll go inside, sit with greasy eighteen-wheelers, and swap tall tales all night long in the classic American tradition of Washington Irving and Mark Twain.¹²¹ I'll be a transformed into a McWhopper--a McWhopper telling whoppers.

And I know I can lie with the best of them. In fact, one of my earliest childhood memories is of lying.¹²² I must have been about five years old at the time, trying to remain a part of my older brothers' group of worldly-wise buddies. They all had girlfriends, or so they claimed, and they were bragging about how many times they had kissed them. So I lied and said that I had smacked one on Debbie Becker a few weeks earlier, behind the old outhouse next to Elm Springs Gospel Chapel.¹²³ But to my chagrin, the lie didn't do

¹²⁰As quoted in Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, 15; cf. 169-170.

¹²¹According to Timothy Adams, "the characteristic blend of truth and lie common to the [American Western] tall tale is suggestive of the . . . perennial paradox of the autobiographer, whose writing always lies on the frontier" (*Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, 38).

¹²²Michel Tournier observes: "Childhood is given to us as ardent confusion, and the rest of life is not time enough to make sense of it or explain to ourselves what happened" (as quoted in Vizenor, *Interior Landscapes*, frontispiece).

¹²³For Robert Folkenflik, "[o]ne very special form of the self as other is dependent on the lie. The telling of a lie as a special way of presenting the self to others as different from what one consciously knows oneself to be differentiates one from others and at the same time makes of one's self a private thing (one's 'own' self) that cannot be known by another. The lie seems particularly important in autobiographies devoted in whole or in part to childhood" ("The Self as Other," 225).

Folkenflik's primary example of how lies function in autobiographies of childhood comes from Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (33-35). Like Gosse, I grew up as a "member of an obscure fundamentalist sect [called] the Plymouth Brethren" ("The Self as Other," 225).

the trick. Instead of becoming my ticket into an elite community of first- and second-grade boys, my lie became a source of scorn and grounds for exclusion.

Little did I know that a conspiracy of lies was floating about that day. The boys' shocked silence was testimony that none of them had ever kissed a girl or had a girlfriend. And in the instant I blurted out my story I knew that I had crossed an invisible line into a new land from which I could not return. I had tainted my soul and would never be admitted into that secret brotherhood of jokes, pokes, and sly winks. None of my tearful pleadings or swear-on-the-Bible, cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die confessions could restore me to their fellowship.

I keep reading that AIDS is spreading, even contaminating elite white male heterosexuals like myself. And now I'm beginning to think that those Autobiographical Intrusions Destroying Scholarship have infected me too. I feel weak-kneed and queasy. I'm itching all over and breaking out in hives. I'm no longer able to resist the onslaught of disease. I don't think I can make it across the tracks to that truck stop after all.

Perhaps I'll feel better if I lie down here for awhile. Lying, my mother used to say, is great therapy for most common, generic illnesses. "Just lie for a spell," she would say. "It's good for the body *and* the soul."¹²⁴

¹²⁴"Lies mean," writes Nicole Jouve, "not lies but creating the elaborate conditions within which 'truth' might be glimpsed" (*White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*, 28; see also Johnson, "My Monster/My Self," 4; cf. Silko, *Ceremony*, 191).