

CONCLUSION

The Things Not Written in this Book

"Our belief in language's capacity for reference is part of our contract with the world; the contract may be playfully suspended or broken altogether, but no abrogation is without consequences, and there are circumstances where the abrogation is unacceptable. The existence or absence of a real world, real body, real pain, makes a difference. The traditional paradigms for the uses of history and the interpretation of texts have all eroded--this is a time in which it will not do to invoke the same pathetically narrow repertoire of dogmatic explanations--but any history and any textual interpretation worth doing will have to speak to this difference." Greenblatt

There are many things that I have not read in the writing of this book. Take Paul Ricoeur's newly translated book, Oneself as Another, for example. Now there's a catchy title and a topic that seems appropriate to my interests. Next week I think I'm going to sit down and read it from cover to cover.

I probably should also read a lot more of those French feminists and poststructuralists. It would have been nice if I had disciplined myself to read more of Michel Foucault, cast at least a sidelong glance at Jacques Lacan, for goodness sake; and taken Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous more seriously. Astoundingly, most of those scholars are hardly mentioned in the book. Talk about blindness and reading gaps!

And another thing. Why should I spend so much time with feminist theory when men are beginning to discover a more wholistic, inclusive sense of personhood? Male woundedness and all that.¹ None of that material is in this book either. Finally, there are all those Continental biblical scholars whom I scarcely mention. Don't they have anything to add to my analysis of the Fourth Gospel? My bibliography looks pretty sparse there, too.

But you can't fault me on my footnotes. I've worked hard on them and they look pretty impressive. And almost all of the sources I quote actually exist. I must confess, however, that the idea of putting footnotes in chapter five, the autobiographical chapter, started out simply as a joke. Who but a biblical scholar would think of footnoting an autobiography? But the joke quickly got out of hand and became a significant part of that chapter. I plan someday to write a scholarly article consisting of a single sentence and a

¹Parsons, "Anatomy of a Reader," 25-26; Patte and Phillips, "A Fundamental Condition for Ethical Accountability in the Teaching of the Bible by White Male Exegetes," 20. See also Myers, Who Will Roll Away the Stone?, 84-90.

twenty-page footnote.

On a more serious note, what reading I have done has convinced me that recent literary theories of autobiography may help us biblical reader-response critics reinvent ourselves for a postcolonial, postmodern age. But I also see a couple of looming dangers in my autobiographical move. First, I would feel that I was being sadly misunderstood if someone were to read the final two chapters of this book as an attempt to reconfigure biblical readers in radically individualistic terms. Secondly, I would be doubly upset if someone were to find a way to read those chapters as advocating a return to naive, unreflective readings of the Bible.² At the risk of sounding elitist, I am not attempting to empower a particular species of pre-Enlightenment devotionalism, or an overly simplistic this-is-what-God-is-saying-to-me-today mentality. And in retrospect, I probably should have added a section to my autobiographical chapter on community and the influence that community has had on the way I read.³ That addition might have helped clear up any misreadings along individualistic lines. Here again, a sense of community and its value in interpretation have been nourished by my childhood experience.

Wait a minute. I feel a *credo* rising to a *crescendo* inside me.

I believe that critically reflective, readerly fictions which give voice to the voiceless, which give a place at table to the dogs, the *lé chaa'i* of the world,⁴ are those which ultimately are theologically and socially constructive and useful.

And a large table is crucial. In our home there always seemed to be lots of "company" at table. Sometimes the company would be people we knew--relatives, farmer friends from Kansas bringing us a side of beef, or former Navajo students, now grown. But just as often our guests were people who had introduced themselves to us just moments before sitting down to a meal. In summers, and after the state highway system brought us within fourteen miles of smooth, black pavement, Immanuel Mission became an informal bed and breakfast inn. Curious explorers of the mythical American "outback," devout Christian pilgrims in search of sixteenth century Spanish missions, lost oil drillers, occasional spacey-faced hippies, along with plodding government geologists and looters of ancient Anasazi ruins, all found their way to our door. And in the

²This teary-eyed language of "feeling misunderstood" seems way out of line with postmodern turns in criticism. Are the spectres of essentialism, communication models, and the unified self somehow still haunting me? Why should I care if I am misunderstood? And who is the *I* that cares about that anyway? (Cf. Miller's reflections on Tompkins's essay, "Me and My Shadow" (*Getting Personal*, 3-25.)

³See, for example, Cochrane, "The Grave, the Song and a *Gestalt* Theology as Pregnant with Context," 127-129.

⁴As I noted in the preceding chapter, Arnold Krupat observes with sympathetic insight, that "the danger the would-be practitioner of ethnocriticism must try to avoid is . . . to speak *for* the 'Indian,' 'interpreting' him or her . . . in a manner that would submit her or him to a dominative discourse" (*Ethnocriticism*, 30; cf. Bal, *Reading Rembrandt*, 200-201). Similarly, my silence in the last chapter on the interpretive implications of the Johannine passion narrative for Navajo Indians ought to be read as resisting this same dangerous temptation--a temptation, to which, I might add, Euroamerican liberation theology has often succumbed.

"The question is not so much, to borrow a formulation from Gayatri Spivak, whether the subaltern can speak but whether and to what effect she can be heard" (Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, 19). Or to put the issue another way, it is not a question of *giving* them voices, but of recognizing their space and then listening for their voices. As Euroamericans, all too often we begin by taking away the subalterns' space and then wonder why we can't hear their voices (see Patte, "Acknowledging the Contextual Character of Male, European-American Critical Exegeses," 40, 42-47).

mornings my mother would be collecting addresses instead of cash, handing out recipes instead of receipts. She collected people and stories the way other women collect china teacups and silver spoons.

In my thinking, then, chapter four, the theoretical chapter (which, coincidentally, lies chiasmically near the center of the book), is crucial to my postmodern, autobiographical reader-response agenda. For in summarizing the ways that Euroamericans tend to read themselves, postmodern, autobiographical criticism opens a door to communal values and a shared story (a metanarrative) which, in spite of ethnic, regional, and religious pluralisms, and in spite of our uniquely individual stories, invigorates and/or infects our collective consciousness. Thus, insofar as people living in the United States have internalized the Euroamerican story, they will share common reading strategies of the Bible which can be critically examined against theories of American autobiography and other national or cultural stories. But insofar as an individual's personal history is reflected in a reading, in a form different from the Euroamerican norm, that reading will be evaluated against the background of a different hermeneutic.⁵ That hermeneutic, I believe, can be found in the type of ethnocriticism advocated by Arnold Krupat and others.

Now with regard to my fear that my autobiographical turn in reader-response criticism might be viewed as a return of the naive reader, I should add this rejoinder. First, I don't wish automatically to denigrate "naive" readings of the Bible.⁶ They do, in fact, often function to undercut systems of oppression, and they can sometimes be liberating. Still, a devotional type of reading that is insensitive to either the social location of the reader or the ideology of the text is precisely the type of reading that most of us in the teaching profession today try to wean our students of. And in fact, much of the reading that goes on in our gelded guild of biblical scholarship is just as often an instrument of oppression as is naive reading. The only difference is that with naive readings, the voice of God is a stand-in for the authoritative and authoritarian voice of the scholar. Clearly, I do not wish to be viewed as attempting or advocating such an

⁵As Nancy Miller writes: "Though the reign of the Master Narratives, we are told, has passed, micro-narratives abound, and with them a massive reconsideration of the conditions grounding authorization itself" (Getting Personal, 20; cf. Jahner, "Transitional Narratives and Cultural Continuity," 176-179; MacIntyre, After Virtue, 191-209; Kerby, Narrative and the Self, 32-59; McAdams, The Stories we Live By, 19-38; and Patte and Phillips, "A Fundamental Condition for Ethical Accountability in the Teaching of the Bible by White Male Exegetes," 18-19). In reaction to this loss of "Master Narratives," Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry have been trying to develop a sort of meta-Master Narrative of the universe--but without any sensitivity to the "conditions grounding [its own] authorization" (ibid; see also Myers, Who will Roll Away the Stone?, 132-139, 369-379; cf. Swimme and Berry, The Universe Story). For Miller, as well as for much of my thinking, a "reconsideration of the conditions grounding authorization" of any Master Narrative must be bound up *in part* with the "personalization of cultural analysis" found in the "personal criticism" of recent feminist criticism (Miller, Getting Personal, 21, cf. 1-2; cf., Patte, "Acknowledging the Contextual Character of Male, European-American Critical Exegeses," 38-40).

⁶The naive readings I have in mind would be close to what Paul Ricoeur calls "the first naïveté," or the "spontaneous immediacy of reader to subject matter" (Schneiders, The Revelatory Text, 169; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Biblical Interpretation and Critical Commitment," 11). For a theoretical appraisal of "ordinary readers," see West, "The Relationship Between Different Modes of Reading (the Bible) and the Ordinary Reader," 87-110; Patte and Phillips, "A Fundamental Condition for Ethical Accountability in the Teaching of the Bible by White Male Exegetes," 25-26; and The Bible and Culture Collective, The Postmodern Bible, 64-67.

unreflected, enslaving turn in reader criticism. Reading should be done with passion, but not without reservations.⁷

Secondly, and more importantly, my emphasis on the autobiographical impulse in reader-response criticism is rooted in a particularly feminist and postcolonial insight. This perspective grounds the crucial noetic moment in particular experiences of oppression and seeks to utilize that experiential insight in critical conversation with androcentrist and colonialist acceptance of "the way things are." Further, I would argue that any personal experience which is critically reflected upon in the context of competing metanarratives, ideologies, and cultural theories should become a part of biblical interpretation.⁸

And on that heavily laden note, I think I'll stop. I'm beginning to overdose on metamatter. Those AIDS symptoms are recurring. Strange voices in unusual forms are beginning to inhabit my deteriorating body.

I feel as though "I have arrived at a point where everything I have ever learned is running around and around in my head; and little bits of [theory] and pieces of everyday life fly out of my mouth in weird combinations,"⁹ says a Patricia Williams inside me.

Yes, but that's because "[y]ou have to do a lot of unlearning before you get to the position when you start growing a tongue of your own," responds a Nicole Jouve from another corner of my body.¹⁰

Besides, with the "demise of New Criticism, and the rise of reader-response theory, poet-critics are in ascendance,"¹¹ chimes in a Diane Freedman from somewhere near my ear.

"OK, OK, that settles it," says Nancy Miller. "I would rather end personally, but I'm afraid to go too far, though it may be worse not to go far enough. . . ."

"What remains, I think, is to give the last word. . . ."¹²

So here it is. A last word.

My mother's father, orphaned at age eleven, left England for Canada when he was twenty years old. But he imprinted the memories of his childhood homeland in my mother's mind by reading her A. A. Milne's children's books. As an adult, Milne was second only to the book of Proverbs in her list of appropriated wisdom. Not surprisingly, I, too, grew up loving the stories of Winnie the Pooh. Yet my most vivid childhood nightmare was one in which I heard a terrified Piglet scream, "Pooh! Wake up! Pooh! Wake up!"

That shrill voice of Piglet originated in a 45 rpm record which my parents had bought for me one afternoon when I was about six years old. Since I had been sick and

⁷Or as Schuyler Brown puts it: the crucial value judgment is the "reader's consciousness of the interests which are actually motivating him" ("Reader Response," 235; see also his "John and the Resistant Reader," 254; cf. Patte, "Textual Constraints, Ordinary Readings, and Critical Exegesis," 68-69).

⁸Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Biblical Interpretation and Critical Commitment," 9-12; Wuellner, "Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?," 460-463; Patte and Phillips, "A Fundamental Condition for Ethical Accountability in the Teaching of the Bible by White Male Exegetes," 17-18, 23; and West, "No Integrity without Contextuality," 134-136.

⁹Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 14.

¹⁰Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*, 5.

¹¹Freedman, *An Alchemy of Genres*, 44.

¹²*Getting Personal*, 138.

unable to accompany them to the grocery store, I had received the record as a reward for being a good boy while they were gone.

I'm thinking now that perhaps the dream I mentioned at the end of the last chapter--the one where I envisioned myself dancing with a monster--should also have Piglet in it. After all these years, I still sometimes hear Piglet's squeaky, frightened voice ringing in my head. And that voice still has the power to send cold chills tingling down my middle-aged spine.

Allow A. A. Milne to introduce Piglet:

The Piglet lived in a very grand house in the middle of a beech-tree, and the beech-tree was in the middle of the forest, and the Piglet lived in the middle of the house. Next to his house was a piece of broken board which had: "TRESPASSERS W" on it. When Christopher Robin asked the Piglet what it meant, he said it was his grandfather's name, and had been in the family for a long time. Christopher Robin said you *couldn't* be called Trespassers W, and Piglet said yes, you could, because his grandfather was, and it was short for Trespassers Will, which was short for Trespassers William. And his grandfather had had two names in case he lost one--Trespassers after an uncle, and William after Trespassers.

"I've got two names," said Christopher Robin carelessly.

"Well, there you are, that proves it," said Piglet.¹³

Piglet's sign arouses in me a latent Lacanian and Foucauldian curiosity. I wonder what that broken, eroded signpost outside Piglet's front door originally said: "Trespassers will be prosecuted?" "Trespassers will be fined 50 shillings?" "Trespassers will be shot on sight?" Who can say, for sure? Is it a signpost of postmodernism? Postcolonialism? All I know is that Piglet understood the sign quite differently from the way most readers would understand it today.

I like the timid Piglet. He took what could have been a life-threatening prohibition against bordercrossing and created from it a family history, a place to belong.

But then I hesitate for a moment. Perhaps Piglet is too androcentric, too colonialist and too European to be used as an illustration for the species of postmodernism that I have in mind. After all, Piglet is male and living in the British Isles, and the ancestors he evokes are all males. Nevertheless, as a pig-child, he must be relatively powerless. And traditionally, pigs have been marginalized members of barnyard society. Moreover, the Piglet and I do have a good deal in common. We both grew up on someone else's land--through no choice of our own--and we both have lived our lives trying to find ways to incorporate that otherness into our own living space and identity.

I shall indeed write Piglet into my new nightmare. Piglet, my out-of-the-closet cynocephalic monster, and I, afflicted with literary AIDS, will have a pretend rodeo in my room. Then we'll go downstairs and outside, onto an Arizona mesa top¹⁴ where we'll teach the world a bawdy, postmodern, giddy-up dance step or two.

I have always dreamed of living in two stories:

¹³Milne, Winne the Pooh, 32-33.

¹⁴Hillerman, Talking God, 34-54.

A house fenced with white pickets
 and shuttered in pale blue.
 It would have bright rooms upstairs
 sheltered under broad eaves,
 and bay windows on the ground floor
 fluttering in snowflake-lace.
 Tall maples would shield me from neighbors
 and smaller trees would speckle the back lawn
 with late autumn fruit.

I always thought love would come
 easily, like the spring blossoms falling
 from my dreamyard pear. It would be golden,
 the comforter mother
 fitted so snugly
 to the double bed in her room;
 the same one a quavering-voiced boy of four
 had once pulled over his head
 while forming his first prayers
 to a god-fearing forty-five.
 (Fully loaded, revolving in an oak cabinet,
 that hot cylinder used to fire heavenly bulletins
 and send gospel choruses zinging
 toward his brain every afternoon at nap time.)

And children: they, too, would come in time,
 bouncing tousle-headed onto my lap; girl first,
 then boy. They would be blue-eyed and fair-skinned,
 and I would tickle and hug them,
 then finally tuck them into comfortable beds
 far above the glowering cold
 that crept across wooden floors
 during fierce prairie winters.

Perhaps I have always lived in two stories:

A doll house set up
 in my parents' bedroom
 during quiet afternoons; pulled out
 of a Sears and Roebuck catalog in late November, with pleading eyes.
 (It had appeared like magic
 under a Kansas Christmas tree in 1956,
 while my two older brothers looked on,
 grinning wickedly.)

And a blackened disk
still spinning, shot through the center
with a hole so large
that I can push three fingers into it:
perfectly round,
a marksman's bull's-eye.