

WHAT IS CRITICAL ABOUT AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL (BIBLICAL) CRITICISM?

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In *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism: Learning to Read Between Text and Self*. Edited
by Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Deo Publishing, 2002) 12-33

From the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2002):¹

Main Entry: crit·i·cal

Pronunciation: `kri-ti-k&l

Function: *adjective*

Date: 1547

1 a : of, relating to, or being a turning point or specially important juncture

<*critical* phase>: as (1) : relating to or being the stage of a disease at which an abrupt change for better or worse may be expected; *also* : being or relating to an illness or condition involving danger of death <*critical* care> (2) : relating to or being a state in which or a measurement or point at which some quality, property, or phenomenon suffers a definite change <*critical* temperature> b : CRUCIAL, DECISIVE <*critical* test> c : INDISPENSABLE, VITAL <a *critical* waterfowl habitat> <a component *critical* to the operation of a machine> d : being in or approaching a state of crisis <a *critical* shortage> <a *critical* situation>

2 a : inclined to criticize severely and unfavorably b : consisting of or involving criticism <*critical* writings>; *also* : of or relating to the judgment of critics <the

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play was a *critical* success> c : exercising or involving careful judgment or
judicious evaluation d : including variant readings and scholarly emendations <a
critical edition>

3 : characterized by risk or uncertainty

4 a : of sufficient size to sustain a chain reaction—used of a mass of fissionable

material b : sustaining a chain reaction—used of a nuclear reactor

- crit·i·cal·i·ty /'kri-t&' ka-l&-tE/ *noun*

- crit·i·cal·ly /'kri-ti-k(&-)lE/ *adverb*

- crit·i·cal·ness /-k&l-n&s/ *noun*

synonyms CRITICAL, HYPERCRITICAL, FAULTFINDING, CAPTIOUS, CARPING,
CENSORIOUS mean inclined to look for and point out faults and defects. CRITICAL
may also imply an effort to see a thing clearly and truly in order to judge it fairly
<a *critical* essay>. HYPERCRITICAL suggests a tendency to judge by unreasonably
strict standards <*hypercritical* disparagement of other people's work>.
FAULTFINDING implies a querulous or exacting temperament <a *faultfinding*
reviewer>. CAPTIOUS suggests a readiness to detect trivial faults or raise
objections on trivial grounds <a *captious* critic>. CARPING implies an ill-natured
or perverse picking of flaws <a *carping* editorial>. CENSORIOUS implies a
disposition to be severely critical and condemnatory <the *censorious* tone of the
review>. synonym see in addition ACUTE.

Taking these definitions as a starting point for this essay, I want to pose the
following four questions and briefly explore their implications for the development of

autobiographical biblical criticism.² First: In what way is autobiographical biblical criticism critical in the sense of “relat[ed] to, or . . . a turning point or specially important juncture” for biblical criticism at the dawn of a new millennium? Secondly, if autobiographical criticism can be described as a “dis-ease”³ that is at a stage where “an abrupt change for better or worse may be expected,”⁴ then what sort of ethical and political therapies might we develop to evaluate and contain the raging infections and fevers? Thirdly, is there evidence in autobiographical biblical criticism of an approach that “exercis[es] or involv[es] careful judgment or judicious evaluation?” If so, where has this “careful judgment or judicious evaluation” been most evident? And in what ways has autobiographical biblical criticism expressed “careful judgment or judicious evaluation?” Finally, is autobiographical biblical criticism characterized by “risk or uncertainty of

² A brief bibliography of autobiographical literary criticism would include Anne Clark Bartlett, “Linking Lives: Autobiographical Criticism and Medieval Studies,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 15 (1998): 103-07; Sacvan Bercovitch, “A Literary Approach to Cultural Studies,” in *Fieldwork: Sites in Literary and Cultural Studies* (eds. Marjorie Garber, Paul B. Franklin, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz; New York: Routledge, 1996), 247-55; Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Francis Murphy Zauhar, eds. *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Sandra Harding, “Reinventing Ourselves as Other: More New Agents of History and Knowledge,” in *American Feminist Thought at Century’s End: A Reader* (ed. Linda S. Kaufman; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 140-64; David Jackson, *Unmasking Masculinity: A Critical Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Unwin Hyman) 1990); Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Linda S. Kaufman, “The Long Goodbye: Against Personal Testimony, or an Infant Grifter Grows Up,” in *American Feminist Thought at Century’s End: A Reader* (ed. Linda S. Kaufman; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 258-77; Karen L. Kilcup, “Dialogues of the self: Toward a theory of (re)reading Ai” *Journal of Gender Studies* 7 (1998): 5-21; Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991); idem, “Public Statements, Private Lives: Academic Memoirs for the Nineties,” *Signs* 22 (1997): 981-1015; Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Criticism and the Autobiographical Voice,” in *Fieldwork: Sites in Literary and Cultural Studies* (eds. Marjorie Garber, Paul B. Franklin, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz; New York: Routledge, 1996), 256-61; idem, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Sara Suleri, “Criticism and Its Alterity,” in *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames: Essays in Criticism and Cultural Studies*. Essays from the English Institute, (ed. Mae Henderson; New York: Routledge, 1995), 171-82; Jane Tompkins, “Me and My Shadow,” *New Literary History* 19 (1988): 168-78; H. Aram Veaser, ed. *Confessions of the Critics* (New York: Routledge) 1996; and Jeffrey Williams, “The New Belletrism,” *Style* 33 (1999): 414-42.

³ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 204; cf. 214, 223.

⁴ <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>.

sufficient size to sustain a chain reaction” in the field of biblical studies?

1. In what way is autobiographical biblical criticism “critical”—that is, “relat[ed] to, or a turning point or a specially important juncture” for biblical criticism?

This is the one sense of the word “critical” easiest to answer. Most of us know the myth of origins by now, and it is not necessary to recapitulate it in detail here.⁵

Autobiographical biblical criticism, along with other forms of postmodern exegesis, has arisen in the past fifteen years during a time of deep disenchantment with traditional, scholarly methods of reading Scripture. Suffice it to say that cultural studies, postcolonialism, psychology, poststructuralism, new historicism, autobiographical criticism, feminism, and literary criticism have all been utilized with varying degrees of success and failure by biblical scholars. These scholars attempt to connect or reconnect contemporary readers to a sacred text that is radically different and increasingly foreign to a contemporary world of globalized economies, depersonalized identities, and secularist and materialist mentalities. Thus, autobiographical biblical criticism is related to and is part of a larger turn in contemporary culture and biblical criticism.

Autobiographical biblical criticism is simply one attempt among many today that seeks to deal seriously with the “interested” nature of biblical critics and their “situatedness” as real readers in the physical world. It is critical—important, necessary—precisely for this reason: it openly challenges the traditional genre of academic discourse—the distanced, third-person voice that by default has counted as “scientific objectivity.”

Autobiographical biblical criticism challenges this genre by introducing into the

⁵ See, for example, Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Test: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*. Second Edition (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 11-26; Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 1-36. The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1-19.

professional arena, personal narratives and multiple voices and genres, along with occasional humor, parody, and satire. It is a trickster discourse⁶ that questions academic ways of knowing by privileging the ordinariness and aberrant intertextuality of much of our Bible reading. Autobiographical biblical criticism is critical because it works hard at developing new, self-conscious and culturally sensitive metaphors to illumine our reading experiences. For these new metaphors to do their work, they must enrich and complicate the older biblical images that have become timeworn, one-dimensional, and dualistic.

There are, you know, powerful metaphors outside the Bible that shine in the darkness. They shine even in the deep night of the winter solstice. Sometimes they light up the night with a sudden shower of fiery shooting stars. They may be ancient words, spinning through a myriad of galaxies as old as the universe herself, but many are young, personal words that the darkness cannot grasp or overpower. They wind around the framework of our lives; they come alive and live with us and in us, and find us a place in the world. These words, the old and the young of them, haunt our memory. They are the ones we recall when we are on the move, when we are uprooted from the places and the people we know and love.

I work hard to hold on to the words that will take me back to the comfort of a childhood home, or to a future yet unknown. I pant, like a roe, for the waterbrooks of lost memories and imagined destinies. Not to relive them or live beyond them; not to climb back into my dead mother's womb like the incredulous Nicodemus, to be reborn in some distant galaxy, but to anchor myself against the storm; to have a breast that keeps me warm.

⁶ Shane Phelan, "Coyote Politics: Trickster Tales and Feminist Futures," *Hypatia* 11 (1996): 130-149.

J. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, House Made of Dawn, expresses my anxieties about the future of metaphors and critical discourse when his character, J. B. B. Tosamah, "Priest of the Sun" preaches a sermon. The priest, who has "the voice of a great dog," says:

"In principio erat Verbum." Think of Genesis. Think of how it was before the world was made. There was nothing, the Bible says. . . . The white man takes such things as words and literatures for granted, as indeed he must, for nothing in his world is so commonplace. On every side of him there are words by the millions, an unending succession of pamphlets and papers, letters and books, bills and bulletins, commentaries and conversations. He has diluted and multiplied the Word, and words have begun to close in upon him. He is sated and insensitive; his regard for language—for the Word itself—as an instrument of creation has diminished nearly to the point of no return. It may be that he will perish by the Word.⁷

To a certain extent I believe that autobiographical biblical criticism has developed at a critical moment in biblical studies. It has developed at a time when we are attempting to turn our scholarly words back into the strong medicine and life-giving potion that, according to J. B. B. Tosamah, they once were.⁸

⁷ N. Scott Momaday, House Made of Dawn (New York: New American Library, 1969), 89.

⁸ Or as Douglas Burton-Christie puts it: This approach to scholarship "requires us to relinquish our imaginative attachment to boundaries and hierarchies that keep things distinct and separate and reimagine a world that is fluid, relational, organic. It demands that we discover a new language, supple enough to draw us into this dynamic world" ("Into the Body of Another: Eros, Embodiment and Intimacy with the Natural World," Anglican Theological Review 81 (1999): 19; see also his "Words beneath the Water: Logos, Cosmos, and the Spirit of Place," in Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans, (eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 333-34.

2. If autobiographical biblical criticism can be described as a dis-ease that is at a stage where an abrupt change for better or worse may be expected, then what sort of ethical and political therapies might be developed to evaluate the raging infections and fevers?

The more personal you get in your writing, the more crucial become the ethical and political questions. In one sense this is healthy, because it shows us that all our writing has ethical and political implications, even when we manage to hide these issues under the guise of “academic objectivity.”⁹ But the more personal and revelatory our writing becomes, the more we are forced to deal with questions of telling and naming. For example, when I write in the public arena of scholarly discourse about myself—my wife, my brothers, or my children; or my schoolmates from my childhood years on the Navajo Reservation; or my career as a scholar-teacher, I wrestle with questions of how the people I have named might react to my stories if they read them tomorrow—or five, ten, or twenty years from now.¹⁰ Should I change names and places to protect the innocent? But who are the innocent and what or who makes them so?

⁹ See especially, Nahum D. Chandler, “The Figure of the X: An Elaboration of the Du Boisian Autobiographical Example,” in *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* (eds. Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 235-72; and Greg Sarris, “Living with Miracles: The Politics and Poetics of Writing American Indian Resistance and Identity,” in *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* (eds. Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 27-40.

¹⁰ Not too long ago I did connect with Sam Minkler, a Navajo adopted by a white family, and my best friend in the seventh and eighth grades. I had written about him briefly (*Reading with a Passion: Rhetoric, Autobiography, and the American West in the Gospel of John* [New York: Continuum, 1995], 175), and quite by accident I discovered that for a short time he was a member of a techno-rock band called *Lunar Drive* (<http://www.lunardrive.co.uk/>). I was able to track him down through the internet, and after a brief correspondence, I sent him a copy of what I had written about him. He sent me back a quick, cold message telling me that he remembered the event I had narrated quite differently, and then added that he *never* talked about his past to anyone. I apologized for bringing up issues from his past which were obviously painful to him, and I have not heard from him since.

I have also renewed contacts with Dennis Tsosie, the younger brother of Sarah, a girl about whom I have written (“Changing Woman: Postcolonial Reflections on Acts 16.6-40,” *JSNT* 73 [1999]: 113-35, esp. 117-22). I have not told him that I have written about his older sister, although we have talked about her and her death.

It seems to me that part of the political and ethical power of autobiographical biblical criticism lies precisely in its willingness to give flesh and blood names to the disease of our scholarship and to our situatedness in the world.¹¹ But I worry when I write. Am I really standing with the characters in my narratives, allowing them to speak “their” truth, or am I using them gratuitously as exotic embellishments to enliven a less than convincing argument? What is the connection between the names I write on paper that represent my own peculiar memories, and the people living today who still bear those names? Serious ethical issues are raised when there is the real possibility that our writing might “re-victimize” the voiceless and the powerless.¹² Autobiographical biblical criticism “outs” biblical critics and forces the ethical and political issues underlying “disinterested” interpretation into the forefront of hermeneutical debates. But in this process of “outing” oneself, one can “out” many others who, for good reason, might wish to remain unnamed and unseen.

Recognizing some of the risks involved in “autocritography”¹³ or “autobiblio-criticism” as we might call it, a few brave scholars have attempted to interact critically

¹¹ “To inhabit such a world,” writes Douglas Burton-Christie, “is to transcend the old dualisms, to know oneself as an embodied subject dwelling within a world of other embodied subjects, subjects who are capable of speaking and responding to us. It is to dwell in a living world of ‘multiple subjectivities,’ a ‘collective landscape, constituted by other experiencing subjects besides oneself” (“Into the Body of Another,” 30). Or as Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere says, “Public self-analysis requires rare exhibitionistic drive, and it is always limited in its depth and detail by the obvious dangers to oneself and to loved ones. . . . [S]o little public self-analysis occurs in literary interpretation . . . [because] self-analysis entails an admission that literary scholarship is derived, secondary, [and] is in a sense *littérature manquée*” (“Self-Analysis Enhances Other-Analysis,” *PSYART: A Hyperlink Journal for Psychological Study of the Arts* [<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/journal/articles/psyart1999/rancou01.htm>]).

¹² To paraphrase what Frank Schulze-Engler has said about postcolonialism, does my “program . . . [merely] provide a convenient Other to speak back to a putative ‘West’ in order to help it, . . . [thus] acquiring more ominous nuances?” (“Changing Spaces—Globalization, migration, and the post-colonial transition,” in *Borderlands: Negotiating Boundaries in Post-Colonial Writing* (ed. Monika Reif-Hüsler; ASNEL Papers 4; [Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999], 11). Mikhail Bakhtin’s critical notion of “heteroglossia” also comes to mind here (*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* [ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981], 301-31).

¹³ The term comes from H. Aram Veaser, “Introduction: The Case for Confessional Criticism,” in *Confessions of the Critics*, xi.

with the genre and have actually moved beyond the off-putting question “Reading the Bible is one thing, but how can I critique someone’s personal experience?”¹⁴ This commonly repeated question reminds me of the stereotypical male response to the first round of feminist biblical criticism back in the 1970s. At that time, male exegetes had not developed the critical tools or questions to address feminist issues. Nevertheless we were quite quick to turn around and use our own failures and blindness to discredit and marginalize the scholarship of those who were in the process of developing the methods and tools of feminist theory. Happily, however, recent work by John Dominic Crossan,¹⁵ Francisco Lozada,¹⁶ and the invited respondents to *Semeia* 72 (“Taking in Personally”),¹⁷ have helped legitimate autobibliocriticism simply by interacting with it in a serious way. However, the respondents to two autobibliocritical essays in *Semeia* 85 (“God the Father in the Gospel of John”)¹⁸ basically dismiss those essays for expressing a gendered point of view alien to the respondents’ experience. Sleights of hand such as these do not serve the academy well. They essentialize and alienate the very embodied experience that autobibliocritics seek to problematize.

One of the goals of autobibliocriticism, as I see it, is to raise up personal voices in biblical studies precisely so that we all might be more aware of how we can bring critical

¹⁴ Surprisingly, this reaction came from a feminist biblical scholar during a *SBL* panel discussion on autobiographical criticism.

¹⁵ “The Power of the Dog” in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible—A Reader* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), .

¹⁶ “Identity,” in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (ed. A.K.M. Adam; St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 113-19.

¹⁷ Eds. Janice Capel Anderson and Jeffrey L. Staley. The critical responses are by Stephen D. Moore, “True Confessions and Weird Obsessions: Autobiographical Interventions in Literary and Biblical Studies,” 19-50; Valerie Bridgeman Davis, “Response in Prose and Poetry,” 215-31; Robert M. Fowler, “Taking it Personally: A Personal Response,” 231-38; Susan Henking, “Who Better to Indulge? (Self) Indulgent Theorizing and the Stuff of Ambivalence,” 239-46; and Richard Rohrbaugh “A Social Scientific Response,” 247-58.

¹⁸ Ed. Adele Reinhartz (1998).

understanding to bear upon the ordinariness and interestedness of all our readings.¹⁹ As the academy learns how to “deal with it,” autobibliocriticism, like other forms of postmodern biblical criticism, will begin to “count” as “real scholarship” in the nitty-gritty political world of new university and seminary hires, and tenure and promotion reviews.

My six year-old daughter is taking swimming lessons, and I am in love with her instructor. She has a smile that is so disarming, so fresh and beautiful, so unencumbered by life’s pain and disappointment that it stops me in mid-breath and transfixes my gaze.

Wu wei. Go with the flow.

“Just let the water buoy you up,” the teacher whispers in my daughter’s ear as she struggles valiantly to stay afloat. “You won’t drown!

“Don’t fight it.”

Don’t push against the negative force. Just go with the flow.²⁰

“She must be Mormon,” my wife matter-of-factly tells me later that evening, when I confess to her my sin of being in love with a girl who can hardly be eighteen; a girl whom I saw for the first time just five days ago. I don’t know why my wife thinks she is Mormon, but knowing she thinks that somehow makes me feel less lecherous.

¹⁹ Paraphrasing Daniel Patte, Ethics of Biblical Interpretation, 74. Linda Hutcheon, in The Politics of Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1989, esp. 31-42) addresses the issue of the personal in postmodern literature and criticism. See also Aritha Van Herk, In Visible Ink. The Writer as Critic Series, 3 (Edmonton: NeWest, 1991), and Heather Kerr and Amanda Nettelbeck (eds.) The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism (Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1998).

²⁰ “I revel in fluidity,” says Cornel West. “I always think that we are in process, making and remaking ourselves along the way” (as quoted in William Leach, Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life [New York: Random House, 1999], 156). See also Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger’s use of the metaphor in “Flowing Identities, the (Re-) Construction of Self and Text in Personal Voice/Autobiographical Biblical Criticism,” in this volume.

“I want you to teach me the elementary breaststroke, slowly and evenly,” I will tell her tomorrow.

“Like this,” she will smile. And then she will take my hands in hers and guide them through her private waters. I am not afraid of drowning, of losing myself in her arms.

I confess this fantasy conversation to my Jewish neighbor, who today is walking his six-year-old daughter to the pool just as I am. He has not had this marvelous vision yet. It is the sixth day of swimming lessons, but just the first day that he can watch his daughter swim. He doesn’t understand about the teacher. The wu and the wei. But I know he will learn.

I note that he lingers beside the pool long minutes after our daughters have exited to the showers. He watches this mistress of the water rise out of the pool and wrap herself in a white towel. Her name, he discovers, is Anna. Hebrew for “Answer; respond.” Perhaps related to “onah”—“living together.”

Oh daughters of Zion, bear witness to the body in the water, floating free of all desire. She doesn’t know how beautiful she is. She doesn’t know how I am listening to her voiceless speech in the water.²¹ For water is a transparent word; a volume of silent reading; a rippling body of liquidity and literarity. We begin our lives immersed in watery worlds, and to them we return. In water the body is unbound, free; and it is there that self and other become one.

3. Is there evidence in autobiographical biblical criticism of an approach that exercises or involves careful judgment or judicious evaluation?

²¹ “Are we listening carefully enough? Can we discern this Word, older than the silence, deeper than the water, woven into both?” (Burton-Christie, “Words beneath the Water,” 333).

Frederick Buechner writes that

“[m]ost theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography. Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Tillich, [tell me, where is Augustine, and where are the women theologians?] worked out their systems in their own ways and lived them in their lives. And if you press them far enough, even at the most cerebral and forbidding, you find an experience of flesh and blood, a human face smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before something that happened once . . . [personal experience makes] a difference which no theology can ever entirely convey or entirely conceal.”²²

Although most theologians and biblical scholars might agree in theory with Buechner’s statement, their quick response to the question of whether there is evidence in autobiographical criticism of an approach that exercises or involves careful judgment or judicious evaluation, is usually “no, there isn’t much that is critical about autobiographical biblical criticism.” Yet does an anti-critical stance really lie at the heart of autobiographical criticism? Are solipsism and romanticism the essential elements of a creed that must be affirmed before entering the narrow gate of autobibliocriticism? I don’t think so. As with other forms of criticism, autobiographical criticism has been done in biblical and religious studies with critical clarity for some time now. Beyond the essays in Semeia 72 and in Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger’s The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation,²³

²² The Alphabet of Grace (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 3.

²³New York: Routledge, 1999.

the work of Alicia Ostriker,²⁴ and Ched Myers²⁵ needs to be mentioned. In religious studies, the writings of Mary Daly,²⁶ Ronald Grimes,²⁷ and Gary Comstock²⁸ have dealt significantly with autobiography, along with those of Belden Lane,²⁹ Douglas Burton-Christie,³⁰ and Roberta Bondi³¹ in the field of church history and spirituality. When I name the scholars I just did, I do so because they have moved beyond the occasional, unattached personal anecdote and have wrestled in some way with issues of how the socio-political dynamics of place and personhood are reflected in their reading experience.³²

It seems to me, then, that the most helpful autobiographical critical stances are those that seriously investigate the situatedness of the autobiographer as a heuristic tool for critiquing particular readings, or those that demythologize and deconstruct the apparent autogenesis of our scholarly work. On this level, applying autobiographical criticism to biblical studies has much in common with contemporary cultural studies and rhetorical studies.³³ In fact, Mikeal Parsons, one of the earliest autobibliocritics once

²⁴ The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

²⁵ Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994).

²⁶ Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language (London: Womens, 1998).

²⁷ Marrying and Burying: Rites of Passage in a Man's Life (San Francisco: Westview, 1995).

²⁸ Religious Autobiographies (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994).

²⁹ The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³⁰ "Living Between Two Worlds: Home, Journey and the Quest for Sacred Place" Anglican Theological Review 79 (1997): 413-32.

³¹ To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer With the Early Church (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

³² See Susan Suleiman for an especially insightful distinction between the "necessary" and the "contingent" autobiographical link ("Criticism and the Autobiographical Voice," 257-59).

³³ For example, see Sacvan Bercovitch, "A Literary Approach to Cultural Studies," 247-255; Doug Hesse, "Cultural Studies and the New Belletrism: Strange Anti-Allies for Public Discourse," in Rhetoric in the Vortex of Cultural Studies. Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Conference (eds. Arthur Walzer and Laurie Ward Gardner [St. Paul, MN: Rhetoric Society of America, 1992], 120-29); and Jeffrey Williams, quoting Marianna De Marco Torgovnick (Eloquent Obsessions: Writing Cultural Criticism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), who lists the prerequisites for crossover criticism as: "(1) that it be personal; (2)

wrote, “I thought I was writing an example of cultural criticism,” but what came out was “autobiographical literary criticism.”³⁴ Personally, I think the best in autobiliocriticism is exactly that: cultural and rhetorical criticism. This is because it is careful to situate its “ordinary readings” within a carefully defined cultural context, and then can show, on a metacritical level, the rhetorical moves it makes as it “steps outside” that cultural context and critiques its own metaphors and social world in an ethically and politically sensitive manner.³⁵ In the process of making these moves, the metaphors are thus enriched and complicated beyond their more “natural” synecdochal, and formalist categories.

But David Jackson recognizes the difficulty white males (and by extension, any other people in positions of cultural dominance) face as they attempt to move from autobiography to a metacritical perspective that critiques the dominant cultural metaphors and social systems they themselves have participated in. He writes,

One of the ways male [or cultural, socio-economic] supremacy has been able to sustain itself is through establishing a dominant definition of what counts as serious knowledge—a mode of knowing that is detached, rational and falsely objective. It’s been able to do this historically through

that it be properly informed by research; (3) that it be text- or phenomenon-based; (4) that it not separate high from mass culture’; (5) that it ‘make a difference’ or have some sort of public relevance; and (6) that it ‘be aimed, at least some of the time, at a general, educated audience’ (4). By her second and third rules, Torgovick dispels any misgivings about its wildness and roots such criticism firmly in the domain of literary criticism, assuring its professional competence” (“The New Belletrism,” 421).

³⁴ “Hand in Hand: Autobiographical Reflections on Luke 15,” *Semeia* 72 (1995): 126. *Semeia* 82 (1998), entitled “In Search of the Present: The Bible through Cultural Studies,” and edited by Stephen D. Moore, curiously makes no mention of the strong connection between cultural studies and autobiographical (biblical) criticism. However, it is clearly evident in many of the essays of *Semeia* 72 (see especially Stephen D. Moore, “Preface,” 22-23; and Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed., *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* [New York: Routledge, 1999], 4).

³⁵ For example, see Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 7-8; and Steven Mailloux, *Rhetorical Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 167-68.

segregation, exclusion, having the power to define its own territory, and gaining as official legitimacy for one version of knowing over others.

The public arena (the exclusive realm of rational knowing) has been drawn by men in opposition to the subordinated, private-home world of emotion and personal experience falsely associated with women. . . .

[So a]lthough some men also tell personal anecdotes, often with a great deal of hearty gusto, cynical reductiveness and mocking irony, the superficial appearance of tentativeness is often deceptive. Sometimes it's not a real attempt to make sense of personal experience, or to relate experience to theory in a new way, but consists of rehearsed stories that don't break with a "common sense" acceptance of their given social world. Indeed the established hierarchy is confirmed by those anecdotes that prove the manhood of the teller or defensively shore up the shaky identity of the speaker. The way it seems to work is that the split between trivial and serious knowledges is reinforced by these sudden movements from the high seriousness of rationality to the light relief of the occasional anecdote.³⁶

Jackson's critique of the autobiographical "anecdote" in academic writing must be taken seriously if autobibliocriticism wishes to become a strong, critical voice in the contemporary hermeneutical conversation taking place among biblical scholars. And, in fact, it has been echoed by many others; most notably Linda Alcoff.³⁷ Jackson is highlighting one of the key problems in autobiographical criticism: the fact that the essays

³⁶ Unmasking Masculinity: A Critical Autobiography (Cambridge, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 271-72.

³⁷ Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Cultural Critique 20 (1991) :5-32, esp. 20.

often “consist of rehearsed stories that don’t break with a ‘common sense’ acceptance of their given social world,” since “the established [male, cultural, and socio-economic] hierarchy is [simply] confirmed by those anecdotes.” As autobibliocritics, we continually need to read our unveilings through the eyes of others, particularly those dispossessed of power, for they are the ones who can most easily see the flexed muscle lurking behind the open palm.³⁸

July 24, 1995

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Dear Frank:³⁹

Thank you for your letter of June 29th. I loved the discussion of Edmund Gosse that you sent me. I also appreciated the comments about “literary felonies.” Fiction is so much more honest than most professional scholarship. But in order to convince you that not everything I write is completely made up, I am sending you a few photographs from

³⁸ As Jacques Derrida puts it, “for me, there is always, and I believe that there *must be more than one* language, mine and the other (I am greatly simplifying) and I must try to write in such a way that the language of the other does not suffer because of mine, that it puts up with me without suffering from it, receives the hospitality of my language without getting lost or integrated in it” (“A Certain “Madness” Must Watch Over Thinking. Jacques Derrida Interview with François Ewald [trans. Denise Egéa-Kuehne] *Educational Theory* 45 [1995], http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/Educational-Theory/Contents/45_3_Derrida.html).

³⁹ This letter has been slightly edited from the original version, which was, in fact, mailed on July 24, 1995.

my recent trip to Arizona. I took lots of pictures, knowing this might be the only trip to my childhood home that my children would remember.

The stray dog which appears in the fourth photograph showed up at about midnight at the site of our “sleep out” near Tse sa’ah. It sat silently and watched as I pissed barefoot in the moonlight. Later, when I got up just before dawn, the scrawny pup followed me around, whimpering, while I took these pictures of the massive butte in whose shadow we slept. I’m sure the dog was hungry, but I didn’t have anything to feed it. And even if I had food, I would have been hesitant to give it away, since I knew the pup would then think I owned it (or think that it owned me) and would follow me everywhere I went.

When my nephew from Canada woke up and saw the dog, he was excited, and carried the filthy animal in his arms until we left our campsite. All the kids wanted to take the stray puppy back to the mission, but I refused to let it in my van. I knew that no one at Immanuel Mission would want it.

My nephews and nieces were mad at me for insisting on leaving the pup, but they began to cheer excitedly when it started chasing the van as I made a quick exit. The dog quickly fell far behind, lost in my trail of dust and exhaust, and I thought I had successfully beaten it. But much to my consternation and much to the kids’ joy, it appeared half an hour later and a mile and a half from where I had left it, at the mission chapel door where we were eating breakfast. It was Sunday morning, and my son gave the dog a bath and a meal just before we celebrated Communion.

The next day my brother Rob, the U.S. Army deserter and backslidden Bahá'í, drove off with the pup in his car, headed for the distant Canadian border. His son had “adopted” the dog and refused to leave it behind. He gave it the name “Eddie Rez.”



I thought the circumstances surrounding this event were a fitting conclusion to the dog stories in Reading with a Passion, although it sounds too much like fiction to have actually happened. Perhaps it is the ending to a novel, I don't know.

The night before the dog appeared at our campsite, I told my brothers, half jokingly, that my spiritual totem was the dog. David, my youngest brother then remarked offhandedly that an Athabaskan tribe up in the Northwest Territories, distant cousins of the Athabaskan Navajo people, called themselves “The Dog Rib People.”⁴⁰ I laughed, and

⁴⁰ Perhaps the rib is a metonymy for a dog's spirit, which in our culture would be represented by the dog's heart. This happens to be the title of the white, anti-apartheid South African, Breyten Breytenbach's most recent book (Dog Heart: A Memoir [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999])—a book full of graphic canine images. I'm sorry it hadn't yet been published when I wrote Reading with a Passion. If I ever get a chance to revise that book, Dog Heart will surely be a part of it.

said I wish I had known that about six months earlier. I would have had one more dog symbol to add to my book.

Yours,

Sometimes it is easier to write about animals than about people. Animal pain is so much easier to bear, and it is thus more shocking and morally reprehensible than the litany of ethnic cleansings and cultural genocides that greet me each morning in the newspaper at my doorstep. We know our pets, their dispositions, their voices; their names. The others are merely marks on recyclable newsprint.

4. Is autobiographical biblical criticism characterized by risk or uncertainty of sufficient size to sustain a chain reaction in the field of biblical studies?

In his fine contribution to this volume, Perversity, Truth and the Readerly Experience, Francis Landy addresses the issue of “risk or uncertainty” in biblical autobiographical criticism. He complains that much of it tends to be “high-spirited,” and leaves him bored.⁴¹ But what he would like to find in it is precisely what has heretofore been left out: the kind of “writing [that] comes from a deep source of depression.”⁴² For Landy points out that he feels an affinity for [the biblical writers], for their worlds pervaded by death and desolation, for their difficulties with speech, and the necessity to speak, and their unceasing honesty.⁴³ His original abstract for the essay in this volume ended with the plea:

I would like to hear [the] anecdotes, the shamelessness of betrayal, the stealing of the voice, and the inquisition and auto-da-fé of faith to which

⁴¹ P. 15. See also Stephen Moore’s comments in “True Confessions and Weird Obsessions,” 25-32.

⁴² Landy, “Perversity, Truth,” 6.

⁴³p. 7

we subject ourselves. I want to learn to read, beyond reading as a distraction, a fetish, and, worst of all, a commodity. To read knowing that it is a perversion, a turning to the father, and that it is not parricide.

Reading is writing, and writing risks the encounter with death, as Hélène Cixous and Annie Dillard tell us.⁴⁴

At this point all I can say to Francis is “Be patient.” I suspect that the next round of autobibliocriticism will include many a healthy (unhealthy?) exploration of “the shamelessness of betrayal, the stealing of the voice, and the inquisition and auto-da-fé of faith to which we subject ourselves.” A forthcoming issue of *Semeia* edited by Fiona Black and John Lyons, tentatively entitled “The Recycled Bible: Autobiographical Encounters with Biblical Afterlives,” seems to move in just this direction. But again, the political and ethical costs of “shamelessness” must be examined carefully when contemplating publication in the wider arena of academic discourse. For whom is the story being told? Who might be hurt by the story—who might be helped by it? Will the help outweigh the hurt? How does one weigh pain?

My father is a depressed man. Like me, he has been working part time for the past few years, and when we talk on the phone, we discuss our jobs to fill the space between us. I know he is depressed but he doesn't. After all, he grew up during the Great Depression, so he knows all about going without; just scraping by. Nothing is that bad.

My father is seventy years old, and after a lifetime of teaching on the Navajo Reservation, he works at a strip mall grocery store in Phoenix, Arizona, to have a little extra money to make his Social Security check stretch further. He trots between the

⁴⁴ “Perversion, Truth, and the Readerly Experience,” *SBL Abstracts* (Atlanta: SBL, 2000) 134.

checkout counter and the melting, parking lot asphalt, with housewives' overpacked grocery bags in his arms. But now it is springtime, and he is being laid off.

"They have to make room for the summer help, you know," he says in our monthly telephone conversation. "All the teenagers will be out of school soon and looking for summer jobs."

His great depression set in months ago, but he is a good Christian man and can't admit it. He can't admit that he longs for the clear skies, the canyons, and the juniper-draped mesas of northern Arizona; that moving to the big city with a new wife was a mistake.

My father's scrapes and bruises are visible to all his children. His eyes are bleeding. His back is broken, and he can no longer stand up straight.

"So, what's the weather like in Seattle?" he asks, to change the subject.

"It's a typical March day, overcast and rainy."

"Well, maybe the sun'll come out tomorrow," he says in a matter-of-fact voice, echoing Little Orphan Annie's refrain. But I can hear the life-weariness in his voice. All his bones are out of joint. Even over the phone, I can hear them slowly disintegrating.

I began my life as a tiny seed wriggling in the loins of my father's flesh and blood. And although I am separated from him by years and miles, I sometimes feel as if I am still swimming upstream; a migrating Coho salmon, following the faint scent of glacier-fed, gravel spawning beds. I fight the flow of years, the ocean-bound current; straining against the weight of imperceptible memories, searching for a way to read critically against the flux time and so slip into a new skin.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See Burton-Christie, "Into the Body of Another," 30-32.

So what
is so
critical
about the auto
about the bio
about the biblio
graphic
al criti
schism?

Everything.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Despite any appearances to the contrary, this is not intended to be a totalizing statement.

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