

## HAROLD ARAM VEESER

### The Politics of Autobiography in North American Criticism

Inserting the autobiographical into the literary has always raised the class question. “Giving the public details about oneself is a bourgeois temptation that I have always resisted,” writes Gustave Flaubert in 1879. With autobiographical criticism, the academic essay has found its commodity form. As we jockey for space in the glossy pages of *Time*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s*, even *House and Garden*, the political implications are many. We are buying in and selling out, but we are also vying for mass acceptance. Life writing has a wider consumer base than have the opacities and arch technicality of mainstream, in-house critical methods, which all are guilty of, in the words of one critic, the crime of unintelligibility. A marketable criticism seemed necessary to grab a middle-brow, middle-class, non-professorial readership. The middle-ground vanished in 1968, when *Harper’s* and *The New Yorker* drifted towards chapter eleven bankruptcy or non-profit status; by 1971, *Harper’s*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Look*, *Life*, and *Ramparts* had all closed down.<sup>1</sup> But the looming industry-wide collapse somehow was avoided. Now that middle ground of moderate undecideds has firmly established itself. Our bid for wider readerships

puts Left-personal criticism out of synch with its modernist and Frankfurt School past. Embittered alienation and sneering hauteur ring pretty hollow when one is throwing the self at the feet of the swine.

But there were also history and precedent for politically radical uses of mass, commodified culture. Every avantgarde since 1789 had deployed a cultural politics that fully embraced new technologies, the means of mechanical reproduction, and mass distribution.<sup>2</sup>

One has to feel suspicious about glossy populism. Charles Altieri points out that Frank Lentricchia's life, Nancy Miller's (another founding figure of personal criticism), and Altieri's own are, quite frankly, boring.<sup>3</sup> "The shaping events are so common, so interchangeable with events in other parallel lives" that critics' autobiographies do not serve to highlight anything.<sup>4</sup> They serve to bury something:

Autobiographical criticism gravitates towards alienation stories, and even towards conversion stories like Lentricchia's, because critics want to displace into the realm of the personal, the disturbing fact that they are all among the most intelligent members of a democratic society that grants them privileges but does not have any set of values which might justify those privileges (in contrast to medicine, say). We are stuck in a situation where we cannot produce a language that might convince society we can repay its investment in us—hence Lentricchia's obsession with the failures of theory.<sup>5</sup>

Imagine the scene just painted: this unflattering tableau in which Lentricchia, unable to persuade the people that he deserves his privileges, throws aside theoretical language like a broken toy and turns to brood upon himself. Altieri puts it bluntly: "we hide within personal histories, where questions of justification and debt rarely arise."<sup>6</sup>

Cut from Altieri, now, and consider a related example, the New Historicism. New Historicist Alan Liu admits that New Historicism "is a profoundly narcissistic

method.... Disbelieving in a regulated method of reaching the historical other from the domain of the text, it at last studies itself in the anxious pose of reaching for the other.”<sup>7</sup> Liu’s tableau of the yearning, reaching, self-absorbed New Historicist returns us to Altieri’s frozen Lentricchia.

What are they reaching for? To discover what the radical personal critic wants, a Marxist could turn to Bruce Robbins:

If we accept the premise that we *want* to do significant work—that we want the privilege, if you like, of doing work that is more significant than earning a living—then we must desire and value texts which help explain, to ourselves and to others, why a particular sort of work is meaningful and valuable.<sup>8</sup>

Robbins calls these desired texts *allegories of vocation*, texts that “argue for the general value and significance of the intellectual vocation they exemplify.”<sup>9</sup> Robbins has no interest, here, in autobiographical criticism. The defence of our vocation, our politics, our purpose must happen, for Robbins, in a displaced form—indirectly. The most powerful defence of feminist theory is to be found, for example, in the novel *Jane Eyre*.

But why so coy? Jane Tompkins objectifies herself as a rebel without a cause. “I’m tired of the conventions,” she announces, yet her exhaustion only summons new, defiant energies.<sup>10</sup> Few North American readers can resist her hit-the-road retort to tired, stilted scholarship. My graduate student proofreaders unfailingly award Tompkins the palm: she is powerful, personal, unconventional, real.

David Simpson, however, considers that the purest eyewash. Tompkins’s outrage, “as implicitly conventional as it is rhetorically bombastic,” merely exploits the old stereotypes, including “masculinized professionalism and a traditionally feminized subjectivism.” Growing up in England, Simpson found autobiography an accepted part of

intellectual culture and therefore insignificant. Only upon moving to the U.S. did he discover that autobiography could be calumniated and championed into full cult proportions. But the cult, Simpson admits, has blossomed into a culture: “For it has been nurtured and cherished awhile, and regularly fertilized; and it is, as a historical culture, inescapable, and not at all open to dismissal from some high point of disinterested inspection—as if it were a problem for them, or you, but not for me.”<sup>11</sup>

Vincent Pecora unexpectedly likes Alice Kaplan’s *French Lessons*—up to a point: Kaplan is doing a real disservice to her non-academic readers by “indicting this scapegoat [de Man].”<sup>12</sup> Why? “I too [as did Kaplan’s de Man-obsessed friend, Guy] refused to spend the night with a girlfriend, who refused angrily to understand, because I was too anxious about my work, and,” he adds, “I can testify that de Man had nothing to do with it.”<sup>13</sup> As for the premises of personal criticism,

there is something troubling about this project. It is perfectly clear that the biggest villains of the piece, fascist intellectuals from the 1940s to the 1980s, suffer (unlike de Man) from the same thing—an excess of strong emotion, welling up from the gut, utterly transparent as to personal interests, and spewed forth directly at Jews and any other ‘inferior’ group which happens to be available. Do we want figures like Bardeche [the French holocaust revisionist and fascist] to be more in touch with what they feel? Or do we want them to think, calmly and rationally, about the evidence, about history, about how dominated they have been by emotional lives that are out of control?”<sup>14</sup>

Pecora favours the second option.

As for Kaplan’s own emotional revelations, “she has little stomach for working through what she appears to feel. Her father, we learn toward the end, seems to have been an alcoholic. But we never know what this means to her.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, “much of the memoir reads like a transcript of the censored narrative one occasionally gives to one’s therapist—lots of smoothly hinged surfaces, with all the nasty work of finding out what

one actually feels still to come.”<sup>16</sup> That is the project’s fault, not Kaplan’s: “Who, finally, ever writes the memoir that reveals what must remain hidden?” The real surprise of the book is that “when Kaplan feels most deeply, what she feels most deeply about is French.”<sup>17</sup> The more doggedly subjectivising and self-exposing Kaplan tries to be, the less revealing, more objectified and constructed “by French” she becomes.

The pattern repeats itself. The more ruthlessly Tompkins and Lentricchia pursue self-exposure and daring vulnerability, the more they pour themselves into impersonal, technically exacting vocabularies. All have one thing in common. They all write for the glossies. One could adopt a stern moral tone here. Laura Kipnis has trashed the “hypervisibility” of “the ideological category of the subject.”<sup>18</sup> On the comparative Right, Peter Brooks says that a

trend toward the personalization of criticism, indeed toward the cult of the critic’s personality, seems to me regrettable, a kind of academic version of the postmodern replacement of personhood by celebrity—as if one did not really exist until celebrated in *People* magazine.<sup>19</sup>

But is autobiographical criticism really about hypervisibility and celebrity? I think not. Critics want, rightly, to make themselves objects of desire, interest, public fascination. And as Marjorie Garber explains, the object of desire remains potent only when veiled. To remain desirable, the object must remain inaccessible. It must remain ungot. That is a given. That brings me to the critic as transvestite.

Garber’s figure for the category-crisis-inducing, partly known object of desire is... the transvestite. The transvestite wilfully creates a third space beyond the masculine/feminine dichotomy, the homo/hetero binary, the real/artificial antithesis, the on-stage/off-stage dualism.

Garber develops the idea of “logistics of competitive desire.” Her example is the country auction, where she and her partner bid and buy, among other commodities, a large green bronze garden frog. “Part of the fascination comes,” she explains, “with the act of displaying whatever the item is—a rug, a table, a pair of andirons. It is held up for admiring scrutiny for as long as the bidding lasts.”<sup>20</sup> Could this be our allegory of vocation—the auction? Every critic held up for display? “It’s a rule of thumb that everything, however bulky or improbable, gets displayed; if it’s a set of eight chairs, all eight are held up, two to a person.”<sup>21</sup> Not just Alice Kaplan or the slender Jane Tompkins but even the bulking Lentricchia and the slippery de Man, all are held up for view.

What does this allegory depose about the significance of critics’ work? Nothing very encouraging. Not that it is meaningful and valuable, not that it is “more significant than earning a living.” But not that it is valueless, meaningless, or a “betrayal of personhood,” either. The auctioning and hawking of critics’ selves yields what Garber’s country auction yields: “Another good lesson in the arbitrariness of desire.”<sup>22</sup>

Should the Left critic hold herself up for auction, put her story in the masked form of an object-for-sale? Why not! She—we—spend our lives crafting stories to tell. The fact coming home to many of us now is, we must become objects in order to tell them.

When the bids are in and the hammer falls, the North American critic wants more. More than Peter Brooks’s “personhood.” More than Lentricchia’s frustrated, paralytic rage. More than Robbins’s secular, monkish vocation, where we seek to find our stories in displaced, allegorical, aestheticised forms. More than Altieri’s language that might convince society we can repay its investment in us.

We want to pay up. To play for stakes. And we admire those—Edward Said, Susan Sontag—who did. We reactivate an old contest between fastidious High Modernism and a rambunctious avantgarde. Like the latter, we embrace the vulgarities of mass culture, the mechanical means of mass reproduction, the seductions of the commodity form. And rather than merely repeat that old contest, we want a third style, a third gender that throws dualities into confusion. We want to ignore the conventions and open up the hotels. Commodity, crisis, turning objects into subjects: Marxists have long occupied these spaces. Autobiographical criticism is a place to which Marxists should long to go.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Menand, “Willie’s Version,” *The New Yorker* (20 September 1993), 121-126.

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), vii-xii, 3-43.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *The Edge of Night* (New York: Random House, 1994); Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Essays* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Miller, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Other uneventful academic autocritographies are Cathy Davidson, *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji: On Finding Myself in Japan* (New York: Dutton, 1993); Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman* (Boston: Beacon, 1993); and Marianna De Marco Torgovnik, *Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian American Daughter* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Colored People: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Altieri, “What is at Stake in Confessional Criticism,” in H. Aram Veese, ed., *Confessions of the Critics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 55-67.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Alan Liu, “The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism” (*English Literary History* 56, 1989), 746.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London: Verso, 1993), 190.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Tompkins, “Me and My Shadow” (*New Literary History* 19, 1988), quoted in David Simpson, *Subject To History: Ideology, Class, Gender* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>11</sup> See “Speaking Personally: The Culture of Autobiographical Criticism” in Veese, ed., *Confessions of the*

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*Critics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 82.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent P. Pecora, "Through the Academic Looking Glass," in Veese, *Confessions of the Critics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 76-81.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-80.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Kipnis, "Feminism: the Political Conscience of Postmodernism?" in Andrew Ross, ed., *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 149-56.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Brooks, "Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?" (*Critical Inquiry* 20, 1994), 520.

<sup>20</sup> Marjorie Garber, "Overcoming 'Auction Block': Stories Masquerading as Objects," in Veese, *Confessions of the Critics*, 113.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.