Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation by Linda H. Peterson (review)

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as a protest against Christian asceticism or courtly idealism. The same naturalness inspires the often vulgar terminology used to designate sexual organs and intercourse. There is no deliberate prurience. It is simply a matter of employing in literature the words commonly used in real life when people talk about such things. When circumlocutions are substituted, they are not intended as euphemisms so much as opportunities for the author to show off his or her versatility at creating ingenious metaphors.

In the matter of style, Muscatine also indicates the relative lack of importance accorded to plot in these narrative poems. The author's interest is more often directed to some feature upon which he seeks to focus the reader/listener's attention — for example, an exciting verbal exchange, a vivid image, a significant detail, or an unusual personality trait. The poet is more concerned with evoking the colorful texture of contemporary life than with merely recounting a story.

Muscatine's book is as enjoyable to read as it is impressive, a result of his open-minded scholarship. His analysis of the *fabliaux* is set within the broader context of thirteenth-century French society and literature, and he has many noteworthy things to say about the latter subjects. He gives due credit to those of his predecessors, particularly Edmond Faral and Roy Pearcy, who anticipated some of his own ideas about the *fabliau* genre. Moreover, his interpretations of the key aspects of these works are generously illustrated with quoted passages from them as well as plot summaries. He thereby succeeds in immersing the reader in a fictional universe which seems, surprisingly, to have much in common with the twentieth century.

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LINDA H. PETERSON. *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. 228 p.

This volume describes a rebellion by a number of English Victorian autobiographers against the tradition of spiritual autobiography inherited from Bunyan and other writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Peterson argues that spiritual autobiography's generic conventions — which entail following the Exodus pattern overall, making frequent Biblical allusions, and overtly interpreting individual episodes according to the Biblical precedents — reflect a system of hermeneutics which Victorians see as invalid for interpreting their own lives. Her work traces, in a series of chapters on individual writers, the various modifications and substitutions which Victorian autobiographers make in traditional Biblical hermeneutics and typology and maintains that these are self-conscious variations — that the works' subject, at least in part, is how one can interpret one's own life validly.

The book treats five Victorians in depth, besides discussing Bunyan as a paradigm and mentioning other writers. Thomas Carlyle, Peterson argues, aware of the new German scholarship which traces multiple human authors of the Bible, includes patterns besides the Exodus sequence in Book Second of *Sartor Resartus.* He draws on Genesis, *Sufferings of Young Werther,* and Bunyan himself as models for interpretation and includes explicit discussions of the various patterns that might be imposed on experience. John Ruskin, who consciously rejects Biblical hermeneutics, "deconstructs" the traditional generic pattern. He avoids extensive interpretion and focuses, like his model

Byron, on the external and historical; his *Praeterita* is frequently discontinuous because he rejects interpretation, and his overall message is, as with Carlyle, a relativist one: the self is the source of revelation, the Bible is open to various interpretations.

John Henry Newman, *Victorian Autobiography* argues, is also aware of the tradition of Protestant spiritual autobiography in England, but, as a Catholic, must discard its hermeneutics to be true to his own beliefs. To do so, he does not use Exodus as an organizing metaphor, borrowing his primary metaphor, the deathbed, from Augustine, and he employs "ecclesiastical hermeneutics" (analogies and precedents from church history) instead of "Biblical hermeneutics." Harriet Martineau's discontent with traditional spiritual autobiography comes from another source: women were excluded from Biblical hermeneutics in the nineteenth century. Martineau subscribes in her autobiography, instead, to "a Necessarian mode of interpretation and a Comtian pattern of development" (143), explicitly imposing the Comtian stages of racial development on her own life. She chooses an objective point of view, stressing the cause-effect of her development rather than lacerating herself for failures. Finally, Edmund Gosse uses patterns and allusions from scientific and literary sources as well as Biblical parallels (which he subverts) without declaring that one informing system is superior to another. Such mixing of hermeneutic modes without resolution, Peterson suggests, reflects Gosse's awareness of the absence of trustworthy authority in the late nineteenth century.

Peterson does not argue that all of the writers whom she treats adopt the same alternate pattern of heuristics or object to Biblical typology on the same grounds. This approach has the advantage of allowing her to comment on the particulars of each writer's dilemma with her own vision unencumbered by a formula. It has the disadvantage, though, of making the chapters seem a bit unconnected; this is a book which seems to document many discrete challenges to a genre rather than developing a unified theory of generic breakdown. Peterson's approach is also a bit inconsistent; though she suggests that intellectual and social currents are responsible for the literary variations that she describes in such effective detail, some chapters spend a great deal more time than others fleshing out these currents, and the reader is sometimes left just with descriptions of generic rebellion. Two chapters which do a notably good job of fusing literary theory and context are the section on Martineau, which explicitly compares/contrasts Martineau with her contemporaries (in particular Charlotte Brontë), and the section on Gosse, which includes a provocative discussion of the development of scientific autobiography in the nineteenth century.

Besides a more consistent treatment of context and a stronger connecting thread, the book would be improved by at least some discussion of nineteenth-century vernacular autobiographies and conventional spiritual autobiographies, for it would be interesting to compare Peterson's rebellious representatives of "high culture" with their more ordinary and more orthodox contemporaries. Such comparison has the potential, too, to suggest reasons for this rebellion in generic form that are more precise than the general "Victorian breakdown of authority" cliché that the book tempts at least this reader to use.

These criticisms aside, one must admire much about this volume. In its discussion of individual writers and works, in its intelligent, clear work with genre theory, and in the connections which it does draw, it is quite impressive. It seems based on thorough, careful scholarship and is quite readable. *Victorian*

Autobiography ought to be valuable, provocative reading for students of the individual writers treated, of autobiography and biography, and of Victorian literature and the Victorian mind in general.

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RITCHIE ROBERTSON. *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. 330 p.

Franz Kafka's celebrated existential estrangement began in 1883, the year of his birth. Two times a minority — he was born to German-speaking Jewish parents in the Gentile and predominantly Czech city of Prague — Kafka struggled throughout his lifetime to come to terms with his marginal socio-cultural position. This struggle was compounded by the fact that his uneducated and pragmatic middle-class parents, who were eager to forget their Jewish background and assimilate into the Gentile community, had little understanding or sympathy for their son's literary aspirations, his inability to marry and raise a family, or, for that matter, his growing interest in his own Jewish heritage. Ritchie Robertson, in his meticulously researched and documented study offers a cohesive chronological perspective of Kafka's work by relating his awakening concern for Jewish culture and history to his development as a writer and thinker. By examining "the principal documents of Kafka's exploration of Judaism, which have been largely ignored by previous Kafka scholarship" (vii), Robertson argues that his exploration provided Kafka not only with a rich source of imagery, but also with a conceptual-philosophical framework for articulating and ultimately, in the last year of his life, making tenuous peace with his multi-faceted existential alienation.

Though Robertson's primary aim is not biography as such — his professed concern is to "show how material from Kafka's reading was absorbed by his imagination and assimilated to his own central themes" (viii) — he does believe to have uncovered in his biographical research solid evidence for revising certain current and prevailing views on the nature and significance of Kafka's writing. Franz Kafka, Robertson argues, was first and foremost a "subtle and profound thinker" who was also endowed with an unusual "gift for translating his thought into imagery and narrative" (x). Kafka, he concludes, should not be viewed primarily as a novelist, but rather as one of those writers who, like Novalis and Nietzsche, "adopt various literary genres but specialize in the aphorism" (187). Not surprisingly, Robertson moves the often neglected aphorisms found in Kafka's Octavo Notebooks to the center of this analysis. These aphorisms, he advances, stem from Kafka's search for social, cultural, and spiritual integration. They thus represent a crystallization of his thought on society, art, and religion, thought which was, as Robertson's research seems to bear out, to a very large degree a response to his reading of Jewish mysticism and Hasidic lore. Written midway in his literary career, at a time when he had begun to quietly sympathize with the Zionist tenet that nothing short of the establishment of a new community with a religious basis could halt the degenerating state of the modern Western Jew, Kafka gropes in the aphorisms toward a dualistic system of thought in which individual and community are linked by a shared and indestructible, yet all too often repressed or subverted, core of spirituality — what Kafka repeatedly refers to as "das Unzerstörbare."

Robertson's analysis of Kafka's writing begins with the fabled artistic "breakthrough" piece, *Das Urteil.* Though *Das Urteil* predates his aphorisms