theories and methodologies

Who Stole Robertson?

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I ANSWER THE INVITATION TO CONSIDER "MEDIEVAL STUDIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY" BY CONSIDERING ONE OF ITS MYSTERIES IN the twentieth. Thirty years ago, the work of D. W. Robertson, Jr. (who retired from Princeton in 1980 and died in 1992), polarized the field: it was the stuff of midnight debates and broken friendships; it gave his department a fearsome notoriety; it made and unmade careers. In a celebrated 1987 stocktaking, Robertson was the problem the field could not shake (Patterson 3–9, 26–39). But from this prominence, he did not dwindle; he vanished. Just as medieval literary studies steered hard into the cultural turn, he disappeared from its stage except for straw-man cameos; by 1999, *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* could spare no breath to mention him. So who stole Robertson?

Some might think there is no mystery. "Robertsonianism" (or "exegetical criticism," or "Princeton") was an affront to everything postwar critics agreed on. Chaucer's poetry, and "all serious [medieval] poetry . . . , even that usually called 'secular'" (Robertson, "Historical Criticism" 14), was allegory, whether it looked that way or not; it was indifferent to worldly and humane engagements and pursued the single aim of wrenching human desire from its self-deforming attachments ("cupidity") toward love of God ("charity"). Chaucer spoke for a rigorous Augustinian asceticism, and so did everyone worth reading in Robertson's very long Middle Ages (Jean de Meun, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Pope). Received ideas about national character, courtly love, and medieval secularization he derided as a boorish modern self-congratulation, the complacent illusion that the past had aspired to become as us (e.g., *Preface* 44 and "Some Observations" 31). What began as invective against the provinciality of modern criticism became stridency against modernity itself, whose "urgent need for a love that is neither lust nor avarice" had become an "affair of psychologists and sociologists" (*Preface* 503) and "thrust us" into a "rancid solipsistic pit" ("Some Observations" 31); even Christianity (said Robertson, himself an atheist) had been "softened

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.609 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and sentimentalized" like everything else ("Historical Criticism" 4). So it would be easy to conclude that he stole himself away, dropping finally over the horizon of a louche, backward-looking eccentricity; certainly the field seems to have concluded this, recalling him only as a stock figure of nostalgic, ideological medievalism, intellectually nugatory.

Such dismissals miss every conceivable point. First, eccentricity was not the problem. What Robertson rejected in mid-century scholarship is now generally rejected: assumptions about progress and invariant human nature; breathless appreciation of erotic sentiment combined with embarrassment at its bodily apparatus; confidence in the transparency and goodness of art; the cultivation of the sensitive soul. And what he advocated is generally accepted: renunciation of "timeless truths"; recognition that "human formulations and institutions" are "contingent phenomena"; study of literature as part of cultural systems; emphasis on "local," synchronic studies; focus on "professionalism" in "graduate training" rather than on cultivation of "sensibilities" ("Some Observations" 31–32). Robertson was forward-looking, at least in the banal sense that he looked forward at us. But neither he nor we recognized that fact, and his work has remained for all serious purposes unexamined. While he still held sway, it encountered supercilious dismissal oftener than argument (e.g., Bloomfield; Donaldson; Utley).[1] He left the field better than he found it, because he infuriated it into a bout of defensive learning (Hanna 241, a hostile witness), not because he either persuaded it to agree or provoked it to disagree intelligently. The New Critical settlement of the 1960s was maybe not well equipped to do either, but one would have thought that the historicism developing in its wake would have found Robertson good to think with, or think against. Its preferred practice was silence punctuated by canard.

For it became routine to act as if Robertson had written only one passage and to have one self-satisfied laugh at its expense, the "notorious" passage (Lawton 282n) describing appreciatively a world before the "polarities" and "tensions" of the modern world, its "class struggles" and "conflicts between economic realities and traditional ideals": "[T]he medieval world with its quiet hierarchies knew nothing of these things" (*Preface* 51). This passage was, and still is, quoted in ritual efforts to make Robertson represent an ideological nostalgia that fantasized a Middle Ages that was "static" (Aers, "Whisper" 178; Scanlon 53; Spearing 21; Tinkle 29), "homogeneous" (Aers, *Community* 8 and "Whisper" 178), and "monolithic" (Pearsall 138; Aers, "Whisper" 178; Delany 259n; Scanlon 53), a nostalgia that ignored its dissent, dissension, and multiplicity, projecting onto it a dream of instinctive consensus (Spearing 21; Pearsall 138–39; Aers, *Community* 12; Lees 12; Wallace 179; Turner 2). Newer historicisms attributed to him this image of delusively interested scholarship to push off against it, getting up momentum to introduce a heterogeneous, mobile, and contested Middle Ages, fractured into local contexts and local struggles. It was a tendentious gesture, as a mere reading of the passage in question shows. When Robertson declares the Middle Ages free of "class struggles," he says not that means of production were uncontested but that medieval writers did not conceptualize economic contests as the structure of history. He does not say the Middle Ages were quietly hierarchical or suffered no tension; he says people then thought with hierarchies, which were quiet in the sense that they were not disposed into tensile binaries. He takes for granted conflict and change in the Middle Ages (*Preface* 364; *Chaucer's London* 4, 22, 85–86, 95; and *Abelard* 32–36) and has an apparently materialist understanding of both (*Preface* 92n; *Chaucer's London* 4–8, 90, 109; and *Essays* 12, 14). But notation of medieval conflict and its materialist explanation appears around the edges of his work, in footnotes and throwaway lines,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.609 Published online by Cambridge University Press

because the topic is incidental to his purpose. Robertson set out to offer what an earlier age would have called *interpretation* rather than *explanation*, concerned with showing what medieval literature meant rather than how it came about. His generalizations sought to lay out the resources of thought and expression this literature employed, not to anatomize the historical conditions of their possibility.

This is not to say that there were no problems with Robertson's approach; indeed, a fairer reading of his work would have arrived at similar reservations. Robertson built his readings around a breathtakingly relativist and constructivist model of historical culture. (It anticipated Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, which he commended in a late essay ["Some Observations" 24–25]). Every period, he says, develops a conceptual repertory adequate to its needs and structures, which constitutes the closed system of that period's "reality": no reality can be assumed to persist from one period to the next. Language does not approximate, but constitutes, what it describes, and so concepts have no application until they are formulated ("Historical Criticism" 4, "Some Observations" 25n, and *Essays* 3): medievals lacked a concept of the unconscious, yes, and they also therefore lacked an unconscious. Post-Enlightenment notions (like psychology or class) are useless, not merely for understanding pre-Enlightenment works but for understanding the conditions of their production (*Essays* 97). Interpretation conscious of the limits of understanding should restrict its analysis to the terms by which a culture explains itself. Robertson evidently meant to rescue the interpretation of medieval literature in its specificity from the homogenizing force of generalizing modern explanations. But his disqualification of nonmedieval concepts paradoxically produced generalizing explanation of a peculiarly imperial kind. Functionalist explanation always tends to treat culture as a system, and if you can only talk about the medieval cultural system in medieval terms, the conditions of thought become identical with its content and the system with its governing discourse—in this case, Augustine's. One thinker effectively becomes the period, and the period itself does the thinking that its literature instantiates. A centralizing impulse is built into this enterprise, and so Robertson found himself issuing normative judgments that classed some medieval lines of thought as functional (and therefore authentically medieval) and others as excrescent (and therefore not): Robertson noted alternative schemes of thought and practice only to rule them out of relevance as vicious, vacuous, or untimely (*Preface* 38, 353n). His defense of medieval writing against the abstracting power of modern concepts issued in its own spectacular abstraction: the Middle Ages became a kind of wooden supersubjectivity, a period mind whose only process and only product were acts of conscious formulated meaning, *sententiae*, that propagated themselves through the works of medieval authors.

So why could Robertson's historicist critics not say *that*? It is more accurate than what they did say, but it still notes the weakest aspect of his work. I suspect that newer historicism preferred cartooning Robertson to criticizing him because its own commitments could not easily bear the logic of the critique it would have had to make. What emerged in the 1990s, energized by the ritual chivying of Robertson's "quiet hierarchies," did not escape the sort of generalizing Robertson found himself performing, but it generalized differently. We produced a Middle Ages that was, in the event, mostly as uniform and predictable as his; the uniformity was just oriented around a different thematics. Insistence on the conflictual, unstable, mobile, diverse character of the Middle Ages worked not to dissolve categorical accounts of the period (on the principle that there is no "the Middle Ages") but to recast them, taking conflict, instability, mobility, and diversity as conditions that could

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be activated in the interpretation of medieval literary and cultural productions. This approach quietly preserved "the medieval" as an entity susceptible of characterization and the conflict, instability, mobility, and diversity as its properties. We insisted on the local specificity of our subjects, but wherever we gazed, from late antiquity to the late Middle Ages, we found them replaying the same kinds of conflict over the same kinds of cultural and political capital. As heterogeneity goes, it has looked pretty homogeneous. And since treating authorship as an acquisitive strategy (*rhetoric*, in the peculiar usage of the moment) exercised in the contest over some resource assumes a persistent motive and assigns interpretation the job of specifying the means of acquisition, the many things medieval authors might say and the many reasons they might say them have tended to blur and dissolve into a single means of satisfying a single habit, and Robertson's didactic medieval supersubjectivity finds itself matched by an acquisitive medieval supersubjectivity (Justice 9–12).

To this claim, two responses might be offered. First, one might say, if historicist study, despite its localizing and specifying commitment, has tended to find the same thing wherever it looks, this is simply because similar institutional situations generated similar phenomena. But this merely makes Robertson's point for him ("Historical Criticism" 4–5), embracing the claim of a coherent Middle Ages while rejecting the label. Second, it is unfair to act as if we could address any phenomenon immediately and without criteria; the very idea of a scholarly movement implies collaboration around a set of questions, which naturally prescribe a range of answers. This is true, but it amounts to saying (rightly) that coherent acts of selection and argument presuppose some normative judgment; Robertsonians and historicists can urge the same institutional continuities without reaching the same conclusions, because the different answers are already presupposed in the different questions. This defense serves Robertson as well as his critics and indeed helps defend him against a related charge: that he interprets medieval poetry by reference to sources (chiefly theological sources, ultimately Augustine) that remain "exempt from interpretation" (Patterson 35). That is true enough. But answering any meaningful interpretative question means provisionally exempting *something* from interpretation, since formulating any such question implies presuppositions, makes pragmatic choices about what will serve as a given, what will be scrutinized, and what will be the scale of the scrutiny—choices that Erich Auerbach unpretentiously called a starting point (*Ausgangspunkt* [13–16]), which has no magical authorization. These choices can be rationally discussed and their comparative advantages weighed; but the fact of such choices discredits nothing, because they are unavoidable. One might blame Robertson's normative judgments for being unhelpful but not for being normative judgments.

But the heavy freighting of normativity in his scholarship, his habit of wielding the Middle Ages as a weapon against modernity, makes Robertson an easy target for the charge of nostalgia. Again, a charge was called for, but this was the wrong charge: the abrupt discontinuity Robertson posits between historical periods disallows any fantasy that the past is the lost home of the present. He worries not that modernity is parched for a draught of tradition, as literary culture of the last century often did (Irving Babbitt, the Agrarians, T. S. Eliot), but that it is sated with self-appreciation, and he attacks with the profound discontinuity of the past: "the recognition of valid realities established by earlier generations may lead us at least one small step away from that rancid solipsistic pit into which the major tendencies of post-romantic thought have thrust us" ("Some Observations" 31). His meaning is clear enough: the medieval world did not offer stunted or partial answers to perennial questions with

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.609 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which we have had better luck but answered the questions its experience posed, as complexly and adequately as later periods did. The past for Robertson is not a refuge but an assault, a shock to the security of the present, to the naturalness of its orientation in the world. But the relativism that produces that shock renders incoherent the theoretical conclusions he draws from it. It is axiomatic for Robertson that each historical society is a system that has developed concepts adequate to its needs; on that account, it is incoherent to say that the medieval ideas could be more adequate to modernity than modernity's own, which should be neither more nor less adaptive for modern purposes than medieval ideas for medieval ones. Robertson, to be consistent, ought to think that our "solipsistic pit" is just the ticket. Though his thinking is inconsistent, it does not betray a cynical trick for having it both ways, wielding the relativism to get modern hands off the Middle Ages and then dropping it to lay medieval hands on modernity. If it were a dodge, he would try to hide it. He does not: "Lechery is something that has vanished . . . from the face of the earth, not because men are no longer lecherous but because we have learned . . . to excuse the vice" (*Abelard* 40). Robertson should mean the first clause literally: if lechery is no longer a functioning category, it should (on his logic) literally no longer exist. By the third clause, he implies that it does exist: lechery, still a vice, is now self-servingly disguised, a judgment that presumes the enduring truth of what should be for him a contingent formulation. Displaying this inconsistency within the bounds of a single unruffled sentence suggests not that he is trying to get away with a contradiction but that he does not see one.

Stranger, Robertson's historical relativism is otiose for the moralizing it seems to authorize. Imagine readers seized with the conviction that Robertson has rightly diagnosed modernity's rancid solipsism. Their persuasion could come only from recognizing the present aptness of Robertson's description; the description would not be less apt had no past been different from our present and is not more so though the Middle Ages was. There is neither need nor room for a relation between the past and present. That Robertson's attitude toward the present clearly influences his attitude toward the past is not the problem: it is hard to imagine how he or anyone else could formulate historical questions unconditioned by the present, nor would his critics claim that their own were. The problem is rather that Robertson's commitment to radical discontinuity leaves him no way to explain or acknowledge his relation to the medieval past, a relation he brings so urgently to our attention.

But there is a second, very different implication. If Robertson had been mainly out to moralize, he would not have needed a medieval past at all. The structuring investment of his criticism was not the habit of finger wagging, but something that offers better promise for the historical imagination. This investment is visible in a moment when Robertson's reading is wrong on its own terms but right on others.

Early in *A Preface to Chaucer*, Robertson introduces Christian allegorical exegesis and measures our alienation from it by citing Song of Songs 4.2 ("Dentes tui sicut grex detonsarum, ascendens de lavacro" 'Your teeth like a flock of shorn sheep as they rise from their bath')[2] and paraphrasing Augustine's gloss: "St. Augustine assures us that for a reason he does not understand holy men are more pleasingly described for him as the teeth of the Church, which cut off men from their errors and soften them so that they may be taken into the body of the Church." Robertson expects us to find puzzling and repellent the "incongruity" of allegorizing "holy men as the teeth of a beautiful woman . . . biting away the evil from men, chewing them to make them soft, and then digesting them. We are shocked further to find that the 'teeth' become sheep. . . ." If we could think

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.609 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as medievals did, we would not be shocked: "But if we begin with the assumption that the woman being addressed is the Church, the idea is not fantastic that her 'teeth,' which may be seen abstractly as her means of preparing nourishment for herself, are 'holy men'" (53–55). That is, he wants this "shock" to be *our* shock: the desires we think natural to reading (desires for evocative language, affective depth, verisimilitude) knock painfully against the unsentimental goals that Augustine and his medieval heirs thought equally natural: the desire for "abstract pattern," "intellectual solution," "spiritual significance" (55–56), and above all meaning, or *sententia* ("Some Medieval Literary Terminology" and *Preface* 32).

Now, this reading is wrong. Augustine does not say that "teeth" *means* holy men; he says that he enjoys concluding that it does. The "interpretation" Robertson quotes is something Augustine offers not as an interpretation but as an uncontroversial proposition known before reading the biblical verse ("si quisquam dicat sanctos esse homines atque perfectos, quorum vita et moribus Christi ecclesia de quibuslibet superstitionibus praecidit eos, qui ad se veniunt" 'someone may say that there are holy, perfect men by whose lives the Church of Christ detaches from superstitions those who come to it'). The *sententia* is already known; therefore, what figural exegesis elicits from the passage, what it adds to knowledge, is precisely nonsentential: "nescio quomodo suavius intueor sanctos, cum eos quasi dentes ecclesiae video praecidere ab erroribus homines" 'somehow I contemplate the saints more pleasantly when I imagine them as the teeth of the church cutting men from their errors' (36). Augustine describes not an act of interpretation that discovers *sententia* but an act of will that evokes sensation. And this sensation derives not from the naturalness or obviousness of the allegorical act but from the sheer difficulty of achieving it ("quaeque . . . cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inveniri" 'what is sought with some difficulty is found with greater delight'): this assertion he could not comprehensibly make if allegory were the smooth groove in which Christian reading snaglessly coasted, as Robertson suggests it was. Augustine expects his contemporaries to find his reading disconcerting and defamiliarizing: the bafflement or disgust modern readers might feel is not an obstacle to Augustine's purpose but a chief part of it. Robertson's reading, as I said, is wrong. But it is also right, because the shock his reading wants to produce is the same one that Augustine's wants to produce. He does not analyze, or even acknowledge, Augustine's attempt to disrupt common sense, but he embodies it.

In doing so, Robertson shows something important. I have been suggesting that the last generation of medieval literary study could not trenchantly criticize Robertson's intellectual vices—and the habit of creating a kind of period subjectivity for the Middle Ages was the direst of these—because it practiced similar vices in different tones of voice. Of course, no one "stole" Robertson; it is just that anyone was apt to be embarrassed by thinking closely about him. But in this last inconsistency of his we can see one of his virtues and one of the reasons younger scholars, rediscovering him, have found a wealth of suggestiveness in his work (at least this is my impression) that their elders did not. His reading of Augustine here displays a counterenergy, a willingness to be surprised by the past. Since, on his stated principles, the Middle Ages had only one thing to say, the surprise that ambushes him is not a surprise at new ideas. It must be a surprise at the imaginative and intellectual force of familiar ideas, a force that is surprising because they have no obvious place in our world. The theoretical armature Robertson constructed left him too little flexibility to follow the lead of that surprise; but it signaled a willingness to entertain the persuasiveness, rationality, and persistence of ideas long discarded and to risk the glib judgment of "nos-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.609 Published online by Cambridge University Press

talgia" in doing so. In our moment, in our field, that willingness is surprising indeed.

Notes

1. Kernan revived the dismissal in his memoir (Robertson "turn[ed] the bright, bubbly Chaucer into a stern moralist"—a judgment that commits two caricatures in one breath [228]). Honorable exceptions were Crane; Leicester 35–64. Aers (Piers 2–9) and Rogers made good-faith efforts.

2. All translations are mine.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.609 Published online by Cambridge University Press