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## THE AGONY OF INFLUENCE

Faced by the prospect of identifying (let alone discussing) the influence of my work on others, I was at first nonplussed. How could I tell? Surely others are better placed to do this than I am. After some reflection I realized that the problem I was having had more really to do with how my work has been shaped by my experiences, both as a scholar and as a professor (the two are not synonymous, as we all know) in the American academy at a certain time and place. So I'm going to start by talking about the influences on me, and then I can perhaps begin to suggest some ways my own work has shaped others.

About a year ago, I was asked by a graduate student in art history for some "insight" (as she was pleased to call it) into my methods and approach to my work. She was writing a paper for her Methodology course, and was focusing on *The Book of Memory*. Flattered as I was, I also quickly realized that I hadn't ever actually thought out systematically either my "methodology" or my approach,

beyond what I have said about both in my recent work. Actually I've said quite a lot about both over the years, but I have come late to paradigmatic pronouncements about why I do what I'm doing; that wasn't in the air when I was a pup.

I responded to her somewhat as follows: my background is in English literature, language, and textual study, including the detailed lexical and rhetorical study associated with "New" Criticism, which then (the 60s) dominated the field. But I have always identified myself with much broader interests than the strictly disciplinary. I never seemed to make a happy fit with any one discipline, any more than I fitted into any one place. I was born and raised in India, of American-Canadian parents, in a part of India where the overt presence of the British raj was minimal (it was a "princely state" ruled by a Brahmin family), and in a medical center where Indian professionals greatly outnumbered whites. I went to school in the far south of India, the high hills of Kerala state. There was nothing idyllic about any of this, but it sure was "different," as I discovered when my family, for health reasons, returned permanently to the US. After a couple of unhappy years in upstate New York, we moved to New York City, where everybody was different, and at that time, in the late 1950s, that was a relief to me. I did set about getting a first-rate education; in it fantasy and fiction generally played a great role. I acted in school plays (of course), I read lots of historical novels, including Anna Seton's story of Katherine Swynford and Iris Origo's book, *The Merchant of Prato*. As a small child in India, I had played at Robin Hood with two of my friends, dropping out of a tree onto the "sheriff of Nottingham" (the younger brother of one of them) until his mother found out and forbade any more such play. The current investigation of "wonder" in the making both of the Middle Ages and of medievalists certainly resonates with my own early experiences. I also think that growing up in rural India, at that time distinctly a "medieval" country, played its role, and I am profoundly influenced still in my understanding of medieval works by such complex sensory memories as being in a dark, smokey one-room hut with only an opening in the thatch for a door and filled with dung and chickens and tiny children. Or listening at dawn to the meandering falsetto song of an ox-cart driver, carrying over the rhythmic squeak of the wheels and the regular plod of the oxen's hooves in the thick road dust.

I went to college (Wellesley) before one was required to specialize—my English major was minimal (and much of that I spent writing stories and poems rather than taking criticism courses), and we students were encouraged to explore many areas of the curriculum. I formally minored in both history and philosophy; I also had an informal three-year tutorial in theology and church history from two priests, I studied as much natural science as I could, and some art history (particularly a fine course on medieval sculpture). I read a great deal in college, finding books in part via the return cart when I worked at reshelving in the college reserved books room. By the time I'd graduated I'd developed a focus in "medieval studies," though no one called it that, but I was interested in a lot more. My relationship to the discipline of English literary criticism has always been distinctly aslant and ranging widely away from it.

So when I was required to subscribe to a single discipline in graduate school (Yale) and in the early years of my academic career, I was able to keep it from constricting my mind too much. I continued to read broadly in other disciplines. I focused on medieval literature at Yale again because I found that being a medievalist allowed me to roam far further in other fields than those of my cohort who did more modern literature seemed able (or willing) to go at that point (this was the mid-sixties). Furthermore when you are a medievalist, I found, the modernists pretty much left you alone to wander as you pleased: the endemic back-biting and territorial disputes seemed far less wrenching among medievalists. There was the famous quarrel between Robertson and Donaldson, but no one but medieval literature scholars cared about it or even understood the point. When I wrote a dissertation on *Piers Plowman* under Donaldson that was both a close, continuous “reading” of the text and examined Augustinian concepts of language, he thought it was amusing rather than a betrayal. In fact just after I’d turned it in, he reminisced a bit about the relationship between G. L. Kittredge and his students, commenting memorably that Kittredge “ate” his students. He then said to me “of course, you’ve never been anybody’s student.” He was right.

This has been less of a blessing than one might at first think. Were the academy truly a meritocracy, it wouldn’t matter how or where one did one’s work for all decisions would be taken on the merits. It is a profound hope to which even the most apparently cynical of my friends have clung throughout their careers—somehow merit will shine through, the good guys will finally win (or at least I will finally win). My own belief was shattered completely when I was denied tenure in my first job (at Smith), after being constantly told by my senior colleagues how wonderful I was, as a teacher and as a scholar (I was one of very few in the department at that time who published articles). The problem was that I didn’t fit in. So when I was reviewed for tenure, I was flatly turned down by the department (I got the letter on Thanksgiving eve, 1971). My research was described as derivative, tendentious, and unpublishable—that last characterization was made of a draft chapter from *The Search for St. Truth*. I was “too close to” some of my students. I’d been humiliatingly divorced. This being 1972, when a second woman in my department was denied tenure, we filed a discrimination grievance with the state of Massachusetts, and then our troubles really started. The college defended itself. Some senior faculty said that I had to be stopped because “the lesbians” were trying to take over both the college and Northampton. I was “outed” among the Smith alumnae clubs in the east coast, and perhaps elsewhere. But the most extraordinary experience for me was when my department colleagues, one by one (all male), testified under oath to the hearing judge why they had voted against me. That has to be every academic’s worst nightmare—but it actually wasn’t so bad. The senior medievalist said it was because I couldn’t “properly” pronounce the Middle English diphthong “ai” (I’m not making this up). Another (the one who’d hired me) had such nice things to say about me under oath that even he couldn’t figure out why he’d voted against me. Another said I was better off professionally being out of Smith anyway, so he’d voted against me out of concern for my future success. The

college lawyer said I was “competent but not excellent”—later I had a tee-shirt made up with this slogan.

Legal proceedings take a very long time to settle: this one ended ten years later under terms that I am not permitted to divulge even now. When my “terminal year” was up, I still had no job for the fall. I got my last check in the middle of May. I applied for unemployment. In early June, having spent a week on Cape Cod with a friend, I returned to my house to find the phone ringing. It was Talbot Donaldson, telling me immediately to call the chair at Case Western Reserve University. A position had opened up because the person who had initially taken the job had resigned. I was hired by the Chair and the Associate Humanities Dean. When the “real” Dean returned from France later in the summer, he called up the department Chair demanding to know why she had “hired that trouble-maker from Smith.” It was then that I discovered that a couple of my former colleagues had taken it upon themselves to be sure that I never worked in the academy again (their words). They did this by calling their friends and by planting bad recommendations in my file. It was thanks to tips from people who interviewed me for other jobs that I found this out, and I am grateful to them for their help and their good sense.

This experience taught me to respect luck more than merit, to understand just how circumscribed and weak the criteria of “merit” are in actual practice, and how very much merit needs vigilant protection. It also taught me that human intervention, for good and ill, really does shape the fates of actual people’s careers. I “lucked out” through the decency of many people, some of whom were my friends, some of whom didn’t know me in person but thought I deserved better than I’d gotten. I have tried to remember this when I’ve had a chance to help the careers of others; I make no apology for doing so, because I owe everything to the critical invention of other scholars at crucial points in my career.

The experience also turned me into an optimist, perhaps paradoxically. I was also fortunate to have spent fifteen years in mid-career at a low-profile university, in a city where I had great colleagues but which was distinctly not an academic hot-spot. I met these colleagues not so much on campus but at the Newberry Library, which had an “education and research director” (Richard Brown, an American historian) who believed, correctly, that the library should serve as a meeting-place for scholars in a variety of lesser-represented areas (such as medieval studies), affording them both study space and also the opportunity to offer graduate seminars in subjects their home institutions couldn’t support. Being isolated in this way allowed me the luxury to formulate my own set of questions and discover my own subject matters in conversation with a steady stream of medievalists in other disciplines, both from around the area and from abroad, who were vital to me in formulating the parameters of my research both for *The Book of Memory* and *The Craft of Thought*. I’ve both observed and been told that people in English have been perhaps the slowest to pick up and work with the material and concepts in those two books—this used to puzzle me,

but I realize now that it is because many of my methods and approaches are not those of literary criticism. I think they are immensely illuminating of literature, as well as other arts, but it is true that scholars in music, art history, religion, psychology, archival design, and manuscript studies have taken my work up far more quickly and fruitfully than people doing literary criticism.

I was asked by a student in a seminar a few weeks ago just what use my methods and approaches were to a reader for uncovering the meaning of a poem like *Pearl* (he'd just read my piece on *Pearl* and *Psychomachia* in Tavormina and Yeager's *The Endless Knot*). I had to say "not much." I said it cheerfully. My work (even as far back as my book on *Piers*) has tended to focus on "making" and on process rather than on literary meaning per se. I find composition (all composers start as readers) more compelling intellectually than I do hermeneutics, and I suppose that is in part why my work has been taken up more readily by those dealing with similar problems in music, architecture, design, and manuscript art. In formulating this set of questions about the cognitive function and procedural nature of various aspects of reading and composing an artistic work, rhetoric, especially in its aspect of invention, has proven more useful to me than most later literary theory, and as my career has matured I have come to think of myself more as a historian of rhetoric than a literary critic. (Actually I never was a literary critic.)

Richard McKeon observed long ago that the arts of the Middle Ages could well be studied together as essentially rhetorical expressions; I have recently taken that to heart in my work, I hope with some success. One result is that the activity of "reading" can be readily understood as varieties of performance, as of a script or score, rather than as an ever-elusive "interpretation" of a work. Composition can be understood, at least in part, as a procedure involving an indefinite number of re-readings and "sortings" of known texts. "Truth" belongs to ethics (*ethos*) and intention more than to logic. Psychology as *pathos* is an attribute of audience more than of individual, and it requires varieties of intensely affective performance—by author, text, and audience—to persuade. In rhetoric, *memoria* relates to composition rather than to accurate repetition. And all composition (invention), like all subsequent reading, is "occasional," embedded in time and location. If some medievalists learn these approaches from my work, I will be well satisfied. But I hope most of all that my life in the academy has been of some real help to some actual people—that's the optimist in me. And I learned it during a very hard time.

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