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Review of *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* by Lee Patterson

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REVIEW

_Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature._ By LEE PATTERSON. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. xiv + 239 pp. $35.00 cloth; $15.95 paper.

Lee Patterson begins _Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature_ with quotations from Johan Huizinga, concerning the necessary objectivity of the historian’s project, and from Søren Kierkegaard, concerning the “pretext of objectivity” that leads his opponents to “sacrifice individualities entirely” (p. ix). Patterson wishes, rightly I think, to avoid the naiveté of either position. But he also wishes to show that contemporary historicist positions have not been objective but governed by modern political considerations, and he wants to demonstrate this in such a way as to be able to build on New Historicism while, in the process, changing it in order to “rescue texts from the tyranny of context” (p. xi). But if recent “language analysis” philosophy is correct in its claim that a word’s meaning is its use in the context and for the audience for which it is used, there may be no rescuing us from the tyranny, or the liberations, of context. That does not imply that all works from a period or milieu “mean” the same thing but rather indicates that to mean at all they have to be couched in rule-governed public languages.¹

Patterson would take us away from the tyranny of context by grounding us in approaches that go beyond context—a revised version of New Criticism, Auerbachian analysis, and New Historicism. In his account of New Criticism, he describes certain liberal humanist attitudes that undergird it and that underpin his project; it and he, according to his account, empha-

size "pragmatic empiricism over a priori theorizing, an ethics of attitude over a code of rules, secular pluralism over doctrinal conformity, and above all else the independence and self-reliance of the individual, . . . an autonomous being," not conditioned by history but creative of it (p. 19). While Patterson claims this general set of assumptions as his own, he also wishes for "a rearticulation of the grounds of support for humanist values" (p. 25, n. 38). These values, modern "humanist" ones, though not very clearly defined in the book, include the humanism of Erich Auerbach and Charles Muscatine and that of the very different New Criticism (pp. 20-24) and not that of medieval humanists such as Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarch, who receive short shrift. It is on the basis of a revision of New Critical "humanist" attitudes and their successors that we are to learn anew to "negotiate the past" as Patterson's method makes its claims over against what he calls "exegetics" as well as deconstructionism, Marxism, forms of the New Historicism other than his own, and other "narrow" or "hegemonic" considerations of the past and past literature (pp. 3-71).

As a believer in the necessarily political and subjective nature of historical research, Patterson denies that "historicism either can or should be a disinterested project" (pp. 8-9) and, therefore, rejects Hans Robert Jauss's notion that the object of literary interpretation is to recover "the expectations of the work's original readers" based on the study of the historical sense of genre, literary-political context, and mimetic character (pp. 7-8, n. 9). Such efforts to reconstruct the meaning of past language are only "traditional literary history . . . supplemented with a comparison of the work to 'reality' " (p. 8, n. 9). That we can reconstruct the meaning of the "language games" of what we label literature as lexicographers reconstruct the meanings of words or phonologists the prosodic structure of poetic language, i.e., with competence and objectivity, Patterson does not admit: for example, in looking at Chaucerian literature, he regards us, in Wittgenstein's phrase, as always "seeing as" and not "seeing"—seeing it as "liberal humanists" or "hegemonic" antihumanists, seeing the Chaucerian text in the terms provided by the opponents of exegetics or those provided by exegetics (pp. 3-74). Given such a perspective, one can find no "real" past (though Patterson argues against the deconstructionists' reduction of the past to "text" [pp. 58-63]); one can only make subjective constructions that are politically motivated. Yet, to make his argument, to show that other constructions of past literature are incorrect, Patterson has to rely on

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2 I am indebted to Bruce Erlich of the University of Nebraska—Lincoln English Department, David Anderson of the American Academy in Rome, and Philipp Fehl of the University of Illinois Department of Art for numerous suggestions. The mistakes are my own.

3 Auerbach was, however, concerned with the historicity of modes of mimesis in a way that most of the New Critics were not; see his Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 546-57.
words from the past that have discernible, reconstructable meanings or probable meanings. He cannot use what Wittgenstein calls "private language." For example, in introducing his discussion of a portion of the alliterative Morte Arthure, he says that "we need to understand what each of the two sources could themselves have been thought to mean" (p. 219, my italics), not "could have been made to mean by the modern reader."

Patterson's first analysis treats what he sees as the primary subjective, politically motivated constructions made of Chaucer in recent times, forcing these constructions, conservative and liberal, to become part of a tourney in which liberal humanists defeat, and will continue to defeat, the benighted, hegemonic antihumanists: "New Criticism (and its successors) are always going to win . . ." (p. 39). As the descendants of the John Ruskin-William Morris school of liberal humanists appear, in this interpretation, to have won out over the Catholic reaction and Emile Male, so also the New Critics and the generation including John Manly, Robert Root, John Lowes, and George Kittredge will destroy the followers of exegetics—the Warburg Institute people, Erwin Panofsky, D. W. Robertson, Robert Kaske, Judson Allen, and John Fleming. George Kane—E. Talbot Donaldson forms of liberal humanist editing will presumably be preferred over Lachmannian conservative forms. And liberal humanism wins in literature as well as criticism as, in later sections of the book, Patterson goes on to find individualism, autonomy, and self-reliance in medieval works from those of Chrétien de Troyes to the Morte Arthure.

Since negotiating the literary past is crucially an act of construction, Patterson shows convincingly that we can construct a liberal, humanist medieval literature. I do not know that anyone doubted that such a construction was possible. Indeed, the reality of medieval culture suggests that even medieval thinkers recognized strands such as those Patterson would hold up for examination. No one would deny that Ezzelino III da Romano was an individualist, and medieval authors who are themselves quite conservative in theological expression speak of Epicureans in their own day who live fundamentally for this-worldly values. One finds institutions for accommodating individualism—the parlement—and there are literary works representing how individualism is handled in the process of creating sufficient social consensus to permit action—for example, Chaucer's description of his bird parliament. But even as I find it difficult to believe that all modern historicist projects are essentially political, I also cannot concur that liberal humanism of the kind Patterson projects is to be found in the

4 Cf. n. 1, above. For a brilliant analysis of the importance of context in the history of literary language that is applicable both to deconstructionism and to much that Patterson discusses, see M. H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel," Crit, 3 (1977): 425-28; for the significance of the relationship of the study of precise contexts and actions to the understanding of the meaning of texts, see Bruce Erlich, "Amphibolies: On the Critical Self-Contradictions of 'Pluralism,'" Crit, 12 (1986): 540-41.
medieval authors in which he finds it, and the price of his discovery may be a sacrifice of the accuracy necessary at least to old-fashioned history.

For example, to make the New Critics one pole of his Chaucerian argument, Patterson characterizes them as liberal humanists without any wrestling with the "brother to dragons" religious, political, and cultural conservatism that characterized the literary and political activity of Allen Tate, John Ransom, Van Wyck Brooks, and the T. S. Eliot to whom they looked, a conservatism that many scholars have seen as lying behind all of the relishing of ambiguity, irony, and complexity that characterized their work (pp. 18-27, 102-10).

Again, to make the "Whig" Chaucerians of the first half of the century pass the liberal muster, Patterson has to separate their objective historical Chaucer from their subjective humanist one, their scholarship from their criticism. But these were not as separated as Patterson argues; the "Whigs" knew that, in their historical work, they were not only finding sources but reconstructing the meaning of the language of the poetry they treated. And they often did so well—in describing Chaucer's prosody, in creating editions and annotating them with "historical" notes, in reconstructing the science, theology, and philosophy that inform Chaucer's language. Lowes on the lover's malady, Howard Patch on Boethian terminology in Chaucer, Walter Clyde Curry on scientific paradigms lying behind Chaucer's language—such productions tell us not only about sources but about how Chaucer's words work in the language games of the fourteenth century and are, therefore, criticism in the best sense. If those lumped together by Patterson as the school of exegetics (wrongly so lumped, I think) have modified the characterization of this century's earlier Chaucerian "Whig" critics, they have done so by giving additional attention to how Chaucer and his contemporaries described the workings of the language of poetry—its various generic languages. In any critical project worthy of the name, the discovery of new information about the language of a particular milieu will change interpretations on an objective basis. Furthermore, acknowledging the fact that what we do not know about the specific context of a work of literature may well encourage differences of opinion among interpreters (based on differing speculative assumptions) is not the same as making subjectivity or the discovery of subjectivity an overriding principle of interpretation, whatever historical linguistics may tell us about the meanings of words, phrases, and sentences.

The "facts" of literary scholarship and criticism cannot be primarily constructions of a paradigm group if we are to deal with history at all; they "exist" and have to be dealt with independent of paradigm. For the interaction of "facts" and interpretive paradigms in the physical sciences, see Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), esp. p. 197.
there is a literary past to be negotiated, it resides in those "facts" and in constructs that do not primarily depend on the historical placement or ideology of the critic. One of the crucial "facts" that must be taken into account is medieval reader response, which should, in literary studies, be an aspect of historical linguistics. A baker's dozen of medieval commentaries on the *Commedia* exist and differ in some details of interpretation (clearly medieval individualism does come into the act of interpretation of Dante's poem), but the general construal of Dante's text and the mode of construal remain remarkably similar across the commentaries and are quite different from most modern readings. These medieval readings tell us what general reading habits, or assumed language games, were in the case of Dante's poem and where the parameters of individual interpretation lay. The same could be said for commentary on Ovid, on Vergil, on *Roman de la Rose*-like poems, on the Vulgate Arthurian romances, among numerous other genres and individual works. The habits of reading may also change diachronically and from court to court, and it is also the job of the critic to get at these changes, partly by looking at what individual literary people and groups read and partly by looking at how they read.

One may illustrate the problem implicit in Patterson's notion of the necessarily subjective and political nature of interpretation through an analysis of his treatment, in his section on recent Chaucer criticism, of Mâle and Panofsky as the founders of exegetics. In describing Mâle, Patterson speaks of the scholarship of the ecclesiologists of the Cambridge Camden Society who published Durandus's *Rationale* and of Napoléon Didron, René de Chateaubriand, Abbé Cahier, and Mâle—who discovered "iconography"—as simply manifestations of "the conservative and institutional view" of the Middle Ages (pp. 30-31). But, surely, what they did is not all "view." Surely the questions one asks of Mâle are "Is all that figurative content really there in the Gothic images? What is the evidence? For what audiences was it there? In what communities?" as one would ask the same questions of a dictionary maker. The question is not "Was he Catholic?" but "Did his modern commitments lead him to project fantastic meanings on this or that medieval image?"

The same argument may be made about Patterson's treatment of what he regards as the second root of exegetics: German *Geistesgeschichte* as represented in Friedrich Hegel, Wilhelm Dilthey, Karl Lamprecht, and ultimately Panofsky, who stood for a positivizing of *Geistesgeschichte* (pp. 28-36).\(^6\) *Geistesgeschichte* is said to have been seen by Ernst Gombrich—in what

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6 What Patterson means by his "positivist" characterization of Panofsky, beyond the notion that he tried to make generalizations about paintings, courts, and cultural milieus by moving from particular to generalization and back, is unclear. Indeed, his general picture of how particulars and generals relate in the process of historical reconstruction is weak; in another section, as Erlich has pointed out to me, Patterson's extended analysis of Theodor Adorno
Patterson calls an “oversimplification” but not an untruth—as a proto-Nazi-Hegelianism (p. 29, n. 44). It would appear to follow that Panofsky’s work, which is based on Geistesgeschichte, represents a species of neoconservative effort derived from this Hegelianism—from the notion that the “Time-spirit” simply manifests itself in the detail of specific works and can be discerned apart from the acts of specific reconstruction of the meaning of a work. Presumably, none of this would mean anything to Robertson or to those whom Patterson classifies as belonging to the school of exegetics, for they are blissfully ignorant of the subtleties of nineteenth-century German historiography and metaphysics. If they have caught the disease, they must have got it from Panofsky, who was an influence on Aby Warburg and his institute. And so it is on Patterson’s characterization of Panofsky and Warburg that much of the early part of his book rests.

In characterizing Panofsky, Patterson unfortunately does not use Michael Ann Holly’s Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History, which shows that, while the early Panofsky was influenced by Dilthey’s form of Geistesgeschichte, he was also influenced by the more scientific linguistic studies of Ferdinand de Saussure, by Charles Pierce and, perhaps, by the early Wittgenstein. Holly further demonstrates that the fundamental influence on Panofsky was Ernst Cassirer, who was hardly a practitioner either of Geistesgeschichte or positivism. Cassirer was, above all, a Kantian who was an opponent of Nazism and of the Heidegger whose subjectivism Patterson approves (p. 43). Cassirer, like Panofsky, seems to have hated all forms of hegemonic thought. Panofsky’s ideal modus operandi was, as he put it himself, “the use of historical methods tempered, if possible, by [the] common sense . . . to ask ourselves whether or not the symbolical signi-
ficance of a given motif is a matter of established representational tradition; . . . whether or not a symbolical interpretation can be justified by definite texts or agrees with ideas demonstrably alive in the period and presumably familiar to its artists" and is "in keeping with the historical position and personal tendencies of the individual master" (quoted by Holly, p. 164; see pp. 155-57 for Panofsky on the relation of the formal and the societal context). Panofsky's method is also said by Patterson to parallel that of Warburg in its reliance on Geistesgeschichte and the search for a Weltanschauung (p. 36). But Patterson cites Gombrich approvingly in much of this section while ignoring Gombrich's assertion, in his magisterial _Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography_, that Warburg's approach forced the "art historian to abandon the generalities of Geistesgeschichte" and focus on individual people and images. To the degree that exegetics has learned from Panofsky and Warburg, it has learned from their going beyond Geistesgeschichte to the characterization of artistic "languages" demonstrably alive to specific courts, villages, monasteries, and milieus and appropriated by specific individuals to speak, in the language of the cultural pattern, what goes beyond pattern. Where exegetics has failed, it has asserted the general without approaching it through the particular. That the people whom Patterson attacks have sometimes failed to do good analyses no one—certainly not they—would deny, but the demonstration of this depends not on the artificial creation of schools having members with dubious ancestors but on evidence showing where and how a specific analysis is "wrong" in senses that I shall endeavor to spell out.

First, the assertion that iconological investigations inevitably lead to the discovery of "hegemonic" meanings is incorrect. Although general assumptions about a period's or culture's character cannot be substituted for a close analysis of works written in the languages available to the culture, in principle, iconological understanding is neither "hegemonic" nor "anti-hegemonic": for example, the same Nimrod figure who served Augustine in his account of the origins of dominium (*The City of God*, 16.4) serves Chaucer's cry against the abuse of that dominium in the avarice, treason, and murder of his own day in _The Former Age_ (lines 58-63) and served, implicitly, in John Ball's revolutionary call to the Peasant's Revolt. The figure is the same, appropriated in differing directions.

Again, in the area of medieval editing, though I am not sufficiently an editor to enter into the quarrels over the Kane-Donaldson _Piers Plowman_, I
find it difficult to believe that Lachmann primarily sought the simple, modern, conservative "cultural" goal of "a text that was, above all else, stable" (p. 106). Further, the argument that allows for Kane-Donaldson's assumptions about the individualism and genius of the poet as opposed to the scribe, i.e., that "scribes habitually made the same mistakes independently" (p. 84), could surely be subjected to empirical verification using texts manually transcribed in modern cultures having a scribal tradition.

Patterson's efforts to avoid the tyranny of context lead him periodically to avoid the detailed as he looks for the general or to seize on the general while avoiding important details that cry out for interpretation. If, for the deconstructionists, as Paul de Man says, "texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions," in Patterson they shed the masquerade but do not acquire a body; they do not refer to, or derive their meaning from, specific detailed history that takes in all of the surfaces of the passages interpreted. For example, Patterson's argument for a hedonistic reading of Chaucer's *Troilus* through the eyes of the monastic translation of David of Augsburg does not place the analogies between ghostly and carnal love drawn in the translation against anyone aside from Ovid, not against the larger *Canticum* tradition that surely informs the passage (pp. 115-53). The *Canticum* was the favorite monastic book dealing with love and included the notion treated in the translation of David of Augsburg that spiritual and carnal love were, in some sense, parallel, and that one could quite readily be sick with love: "quia amore languo." Patterson appears to feel it unusual that the translation, the *Disce mori*, sees the action of the *Troilus* as fully "real . . . accurate . . . depiction of human conduct . . . an exemplary instance" (p. 147) without an allegorical subtext. But tragedies, according to medieval criticism, always treated of exemplary instances, the presence of the real does not always exclude the allegorical subtext, and, if the *Canticum* was read as an allegory, it was also often read as an account of a male/female love relationship—Pierre d'Ailly reports that some say it concerns a love between Solomon and a concubine but that it really treats that between Solomon and his wife. On the basis of the *Canticum*, the *Disce*

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13 For an account of an editing procedure that rejects aspects of Lachmann and concentrates on individual texts as indices of the local and individual, see David Anderson, "The Method of Billanovich," unpublished paper available from the author. For Billanovich's own position, see his *I primo umanisti e le tradizioni dei classici latini* (Friburgo, Svizzera: Edizioni universitarie, 1953).

14 *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 165. Although Patterson includes an excellent attack on the deconstructionists' reduction of the past to "textuality," his own emphasis on subjectivism in the understanding of texts from the past tends to have the same effect; for a useful essay on the notion that de Man's type of reading will eliminate "not only literary history but history itself," see David H. Hirsch, "Paul de Man and the Politics of Deconstruction," *SR*, 96 (1988): 390-38, a cautionary essay that also has some relevance to Patterson's approach.

15 *Canticum* 5.8.

mori translator had every reason to note the analogies and differences between ghostly and carnal love, whether attractive young novices of the opposite sex were available to him or not (see p. 144). And he had every reason to use the Troilus as an example of the latter.

Again, Patterson's interpretation of the medieval historicism (pp. 157-83) appearing in the Roman d'Eneas would be stronger if it recognized the character and limits of the differing sorts of historicism implicit in common readings of Vergil available in the twelfth century—Servian, Fulgentian, and Chartrean interpretations of the great Roman poet of history and the beyond-history. His insightful analysis of the analogies between the Roman d'Eneas and Chrétien de Troyes's Erec et Enide would be strengthened through consultation with the same commentary traditions. For example, the adorning of Erec after his Vergilian quest with the Macrobian robe of the quadrivium and the scepter of creation (lines 6671-6824) surely refers both to Macrobius's characterization of Vergil in The Saturnalıa as creating a world like God's (5.1.18-20) and to subsequent commentary, especially on Book 6, that sees Aeneas's journey into fabulous places as not only a historical trek but one to the mastery of the liberal arts' trivium and quadrivium. The Erec may celebrate not so much the power of Enide's subjectivity as the possibility of humankind's coming to the quadrivium's objective knowledge.

Finally, Patterson's reading of the Morte Arthure, given his political discussion and his placement of the work in 1399—shortly after Richard II's deposition—curiously does not relate the poem's continental imperial theme either to Richard II's imperial ambitions late in his reign or show why it does not refer to the king's designs on the continent.17

In short, in order to find his sort of "liberal, humanist" meanings with the poems analyzed, Patterson has to ignore many of the works' semiotic contexts that I believe important to interpretation, whether one finds in the end a "liberal" or a "hegemonic" meaning. I would argue that works of late medieval poetry are usually written in qualifying contexts that are more than constructs in the battle between Whig and Tory. By knowing in detail these historic constraining contexts—linguistic, generic, political, social—we can, I think, know both what is individual and what is cultural in what the poet says and find, at the end of our search, something that goes beyond what we began seeking. In the end we will have to decide what our own political stance is in relation to the work—do we in fact see it as legitimizing tyranny and injustice? But that is a separate act from negotiating the past and should not be confused with it. Mâle, Lowes, Panofsky,

and Robertson all may be wrong in specific interpretations of artistic works, but showing this depends not on placing them in a tourney of Whig and Tory and predicting who will win. It depends on displaying how, in their interpretations of specific works, they ignore or misconstrue the words of poems and their qualifying contexts. The same may be said of the other schools Patterson creates and criticizes. He is surely right to ask us to look at whole texts, but he ought to ask us to look more closely and—dare I say—accurately. Patterson warns us against operating "beyond the closed world of textuality" where we posit the literature we read as the historically real. There is another sense in which the world of textuality is open, open to reconstruction in terms of what we can know of history—through the study of archaeology, historical linguistics, medieval reader response, the remnants of the past extant in modern institutions, and, most of all, through the study of the language games outside literature used in specific contexts, without which the language of literature would not exist.

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