

11-2017

## Foreword to *D.W. Robertson, Jr., Uncollected Essays*

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Olson, Paul, "Foreword to *D.W. Robertson, Jr., Uncollected Essays*" (2017). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 187.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/187>

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# Foreword

by Paul A. Olson

## I

During the late summer of 1992, I received a call from Darryl Gless, a professor of Renaissance literature at the University of North Carolina and my former student, asking me if it would be all right if he and other people looking after the literary remains of D. W. Robertson would send me a package of published and unpublished articles that Robertson had left behind upon his death in July of that year. Gless had been a friend of Dr. and Mrs. Robertson in Chapel Hill, visiting with them frequently while trying a bit to look after their well-being in old age.

Professor Gless said that he and other former students of Professor Robertson wanted me to see what could be done about collecting and publishing Robbie's literary remains. Though I was slightly intimidated, I consented to take on the project. I offered to receive the items and promised to try to distribute the materials. At the time, I had good contacts with the University of Nebraska Press, which had published a number of Robertsonian pieces, and with a number of other places that had published analyses much in the vein of Robertson's. I also had a telephone call from Robbie's son, expressing his interest in my making public the items in the package through computerized publication if book avenues were not available.

When I received the aforesaid items, I added to them a large package of letters that I had received from Robbie across the years—from 1957 to just before his death.

Unfortunately, in the 1990s there was little interest in publishing Robertsonian material, largely because his research and interpretive methods, always controversial, had become increasingly unpopular with the rise of deconstructionism and New Historicism. Indeed,

Robbie told me, late in his life, that he had refused to have *A Preface to Chaucer* translated into Japanese because he thought that his way of doing things no longer had any serious following. Though the *New York Times* obituary said that he was “widely regarded as this [the twentieth] century’s most influential Chaucer scholar,” the halls of academe echoed with the idea that his methods were losing all of the battles with the French fancies. Eventually, after talking to a few people about methods of publication and failing to find one, I deposited the trove in the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries’ Special Collections so scholars could at least access them at another time. In later years, I felt guilty that I had not succeeded in fulfilling the trust that Gless and members of the Robertson family placed in me. I hoped that digitized access to the work could be prepared but was not clear about how.

Recently, Kathleen Johnson, a humanities librarian at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, called my attention to Paul Royster of the DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska–Lincoln, who also had been a student of Robertson. She indicated that he might well be interested in seeing to it that the materials would be made widely available. I had a few meetings with Dr. Royster, exploring what could be done, and he set about the task of editing first the uncollected published essays of Professor Robertson, those in this book. Later, he plans a publication of the written but unpublished materials that Robbie had in process when he died, unfinished materials containing wonderful insights and hypotheses that will give another generation of Chaucer scholars and late medieval students something to fight with. I am grateful to Dr. Royster for taking on the task I could not do.

## II

Though many critics and scholars have recently written of Professor Robertson and his overall contributions to medieval studies, it may be useful at this juncture for me to say a little about my personal experience with him, about the evolution of his methods as illustrated in the essays in this book, and about what scholarship might carry away from these materials. There is, of course, no substitute for reading

Robertson's major books and the pieces in *Essays in Mediaeval Culture* (1980), collected at the time of his retirement by Thomas P. Roche with Robbie's help. However, the pieces in this book add to the record and give us a more comprehensive picture of the evolution of Robertson's methods between the 1940s and the 1990s.

I first met D. W. Robertson in 1954 when I came to Princeton after having spent a year on a Fulbright, studying the construction of artificial languages in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, languages that anticipated in their assumptions the early work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle. I soon learned that Princeton was not a place to further such explorations, and I was looking for a direction. I met Dr. Robertson in a Medieval Romance class that included John Benton, Alan Gaylord, and other able students. He had come to Princeton in 1946, and I was told that he had been held over from getting tenure in 1953 at the end of seven years, the normal period for granting it, so Princeton could further review his record to see if it wished to keep him. Robertson was, in short, already a controversial figure, though naïve as I was about academia and attracted as I was to his course, I could not understand why.

Robertson was also already an extraordinary teacher—in the Romance class trying out hypotheses about the romances right and left, tracing iconological motifs from the Latin church fathers to the 14th-century from memory, and treating of romances in Old Gaelic, Provençal, Old and Middle French, and Middle English, while citing sources in a variety of other languages. As he taught, he would smoke stinky cigars, crouch down with his chin near the edge of the seminar table, and page through the romances as he formulated theories about them, raising his eyebrows from time to time while he laughed a *basso profundo* laugh. He was great fun.

Though I thought that Robertson might be let go when the next tenure review came up, I didn't care. I wanted him to guide my studies. In the Romance course, I encountered his revisionist hypotheses about so-called "courtly love," and, using his approach, wrote my first scholarly paper—on the *Roman de Flamenca*. Although he initially rejected my historical hypotheses, he put aside whatever reservations he might have had about my argument and eventually guided me toward

its publication, a typical gesture. Though often awkward in guiding discussion, he was a fine teacher because he was willing to throw out hypotheses that might be wrong but that were provocative, because he was always willing to have his approach shaped by his students when they had something to say, and because he cared intensely about his students' welfare. After my initial taste of Robertsonianism, I took his courses in Chaucer and in the Medieval Drama and Lyric, and wrote my dissertation under him. (For a fairly good account of what Robertson emphasized intellectually in his graduate Chaucer class late in his career when court, town, and estate history had become important to him, read his essay [pp. 224–31] in this volume; his teaching in my time emphasized biblical and classical iconology much more than does this 1980 account.) During the next nearly forty years of Robbie's life, he and I exchanged letters every few weeks, sharing ideas about Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the other bards, gossiping about our personal lives and occasional medical complaints, his letters typed impeccably, mine written in an almost illegible hand.

All of this is to illustrate that when Robbie took a student on, he took him or her on for life. Some of my most vivid memories of Robbie have nothing to do with medieval studies but with his reading the Chicken Little story to my son Lars when he was tiny, his telling me during his summer of teaching students at the University of Nebraska (1961) that "the University of Nebraska has no reason to exist save to serve the people of Nebraska," his quoting paragraphs from the Anna Livia Plurabelle section of *Finnegan's Wake* to illustrate Joyce's Chaucerian sense of what storytelling is about ("Well, you know or don't you kenet or haven't I told you every telling has a taling and that's the he and the she of it"), his restrained sorrow in the Princeton Chapel at the sudden, untimely death of his son at a very early age—the son to whom he dedicated *A Preface to Chaucer*, his meditations on the great sins and strengths of the South, and his offering of a wonderful dinner of oysters at Lahiere's Restaurant in Princeton where we both drank a bit too much wine and lurched in his car to a nearby airport. For Robbie, the business of teaching literature, that of lifetime friendship, and that of culture-creation were of a piece. In reading his essays, it is important to keep in mind the larger project of which they are a part.

## III

To assist the reader in understanding the larger project, I wish to look at the evolution of Robbie's methodology from the 1940s to the 1990s, as this evolution is quite clearly represented in this book.

Robertson began as a medievalist trained at the University of North Carolina—he always had enormous respect for state universities—in the traditional methods of study of the history of language and the study of sources, methods that had evolved in Germany and were dominant in American vernacular literary study through the 1930s and for many scholars into the 1940s and 1950s. The UNC teachers whom he mentioned to me as having had a considerable influence on him were B. L. Ullman, the editor of Coluccio Salutati's *De laboribus Herculis*; George R. Coffman, the polymath scholar of medieval vernacular and Latin literature; and Urban T. Holmes, the distinguished scholar of Old French and Middle French literature. All three were well schooled in traditional philological methods but extended that work toward exploring the implications of philology for literary interpretation. The history of language tradition appears in the essays on the Latin meaning of *buzones* (pp. 1–4 in this book) and the Old Gaelic meaning of certain phrases in “Cumhthach Labhras an Lonsa” (pp. 67–69), but Robertson always retained an interest in the semantic reconstruction of the precise meanings of the amatory, civic, theological, and legal terms in the medieval works he studied, an interest illustrated in many essays in this work. One of his first lectures in the Chaucer course stressed the great contributions of 19th and early 20th century philological analyses to the development of our understanding of earlier literatures.

The study of sources and literary genetics also appears in Robertson's early writing on literature related to the sacrament of penance, especially his examinations of the *Manuel des Péchés* (pp. 5–15) and of Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* (pp. 27–63). These essays illustrate two aspects of the tradition of study I am writing about, one the interest in identifying the “form” of a work—what kind of piece it purports to be in relation to earlier works performing a somewhat similar social and literary function, in this case, penitential manuals—and also

where specific locutions in the work under study had their origins, whether in earlier theological treatises, ancient or medieval rhetorics, Latin or earlier vernacular penitential manuals, or elsewhere. Robertson developed, in this early work, an instinct that served him well later, that of looking at the continuities between vernacular pieces and Latin “sophisticated” writing, either in a literary or an administrative mode, whether ecclesiastical or civil. He never assumes that the Latin pieces are, by nature, “sophisticated” and learned or that the vernacular ones are only pieces of vulgar pleasantries (see pp. 224–31). This beginning with penitentials also served him well later in his examination of Chaucer, as most of Chaucer’s ecclesiastical tales turn on questions of whether clerics administer the sacrament of penance authoritatively or corruptly. That question, to some extent, even undergirds the tales by contemplatives. It is not accidental that he began his Chaucer courses with a thorough examination of the Parson’s penitential manual as a Canterbury tale.

As every student of Robertson knows, the first great shift in his methodology came with his arrival at Princeton in 1946; his reading of *La Renaissance du XIIe Siècle: Les Écoles et l’Enseignement* by Paré, Brunet, and Tremblay; and his work with Bernard F. Huppé, 1946–50, a fellow faculty member at Princeton. Robbie often spoke of the wonderful times he and Huppé had together in the late 1940s while trying to formulate a new methodology for reading medieval literature rooted in the practices of medieval modes of interpretation, especially of the Bible. From those discussions came the approach to medieval literature commonly labeled “exegetics,” and from them also came their two joint publications: the 1951 *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition* and the 1963 *Fruyt and Chaff: Studies in Chaucer’s Allegories*. These were not, in my mind, great pieces of critical interpretation, but they *were* steps toward forming a methodology.

At about the same time came the pieces in this book referring medieval poems and works of art to exegetical theory or exegesis itself, such as the pieces on Marie de Frances’s Prologue to the *Lais* (pp. 64–67), *La chanson de sainte Foy* (pp. 107–11), Jaufré Rudel’s *Amors de terra lonhdana*, as well as several essays from this period contained in *Essays in Medieval Culture*, especially “The ‘Heresy’ of the Pearl,”

“The Pearl as a Symbol,” “The Doctrine of Charity in Mediaeval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach through Symbolism and Allegory,” “Historical Criticism,” and “Some Medieval Literary Terminology, with Special Reference to Chrétien de Troyes” (cf. p. 162 in this volume). Robertson’s evolving approach to medieval texts depended, in my view on three assumptions: 1. That medieval poetry, though its surface was largely fiction, should be studied for deeper levels of meaning in somewhat the same way that the medieval Bible was studied by its interpreters; 2. That the *allegories of things* and the *allegories of words* discovered by biblical exegetes could be used to assist in penetrating to “deeper” iconological meanings in serious poetry like Dante’s or *Piers Plowman*; and 3. That the fundamental concern of poetic writing, like the fundamental concern of biblical writing as Augustine understood the matter, was to encourage charitable love and condemn its selfish alternative. The same assumptions applied to the interpretation of art, and Robertson learned a great deal from the great iconological interpreters of his own and earlier times, especially from Émile Mâle and Erwin Panofsky.

All three of the interpretive assumptions listed above were, in the fifties, highly controversial, but the first is largely supported by what medieval poets and interpreters of poetry say about how they go about their business, and this book’s essay on Marie de France’s Prologue as well as *Mediaeval Culture*’s essay on Chrétien’s terminology support this view, as do numerous later critical writings by, for example, Dante, Mussato, Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Richard Du Bury. That does not mean that medieval pieces on what poetry is and how to read it may not have been, on occasion, flimflam designed to expand the importance of the creator’s own work. However, efforts to read medieval texts systematically on four levels do not often appear in interpretations that come to us from the 12th to 15th centuries, and Robertson largely abandoned the effort to do four-fold interpretation after his work on *Piers Plowman* (though the Rudel piece in this book contains some of the approach). Anyone who wishes to watch the methods according to which medieval critics contemplated a heavy-duty text from their own time should go to the dozen and more 14th- to 16th-century commentaries on Dante, to Petrarch’s and Boccaccio’s readings of their

own and other works, and to a gloss like that on the French *Roman de la Rose*-like poem, *Les Echecs Amoureux*. By the time Robertson wrote *A Preface to Chaucer*, he had come to a much more nuanced view of how the reconstruction of medieval biblical meanings plays into the work of medieval poetry than is to be found in his early experiments in this direction. However, he remained proud of his early experiments with taking medieval poetic theory seriously and basically supported their general tenor.

The second assumption, that the allegories of things and the allegories of words discovered by biblical exegetes could be used to assist in penetrating to “deeper” levels of meaning in serious poetry like Dante’s or *Piers Plowman*, is illustrated in the essay “Why the Devil Wears Green” (pp. 159–61) and in etymological allegories that appear everywhere in English medieval and renaissance writing from Chaucer’s “Tale of Melibee” to Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Such an etymological allegory appears in Professor Robertson’s interpretation of, for example, the name Octovien to mean Christ in *The Book of the Duchess*. The assumption seems to me to have gradually come to be broadly accepted in medieval studies, the primary dispute remaining being how insistently to employ these techniques to determine metaphorical meaning, whether only in interpreting clearly fabulous stories and situations, where secondary meanings are assumed, or also in treating verisimilitudinous stories and poetic histories.

The third assumption, that the fundamental concern of poetic work, like the fundamental concern of all biblical writing, as Augustine understood the matter, was to encourage charitable love and condemn its selfish alternative, does not work as well. It ought not to become a ruling hermeneutic principle in the interpretation of poetry just because St. Augustine said that was how the Bible should be interpreted. Few medieval poetic theorists refer to the hermeneutic of charity. Robertson sometimes seems to suggest such a unitary interpretive strategy, and his critics certainly thought he said as much. If much medieval interpretation moves toward a celebration of divine love and a condemnation of selfishness, it may be because the pattern of the culture was integrated around the opposites of divine and selfish love in a way that often demanded that one interpret in accordance with

the dominant values of the culture. However, it is hard to argue that the battle and war poems of Bertran de Born admonish one to follow divine charity, in any standard understanding of it. Dante clearly believed that Bertran had not followed such love (see *Inferno* 28), and Robertson himself sometimes said that not all medieval poetry fulfilled Augustinian biblical purposes. He once told a group of which I was a part that medieval poetry forwards all kinds of loves—"come live with me and be my love" and every other dimension of love possible to sinners and saints.

Robertson's interest in the hermeneutic of charity led him to question productively what he called the myth or the fantasy of courtly love, the literary apotheosizing of adultery and sexual yearning as a major feature of many of the central literary texts from the 12th century on. He reinterpreted important parts of Chrétien's *Cligès*, Andreas Capellanus, and Chaucer using this assumption. Indeed, this revisionist work is pretty generally recognized as providing a tenable scholarly entrance to love literature in the period after the publication of the John Benton's 1960s essays on the Aquitanian courts from which "courtly love" was said to spring,<sup>1</sup> and of F. X. Newman's *The Meaning of Courtly Love* in 1968.

Robertson appeared to be abandoning two paradigmatic approaches to literature, and in doing so caused much controversy. The *first* of these was the philological, historical method with which he began, though he regarded his reconstruction of the iconological resources and language games of medieval poetry as an extension of the work of historical philology and literary genetics.<sup>2</sup>

1. Cf. "Chretien's *Cligès* and the Ovidian Spirit" in *Essays in Medieval Culture* but first published in *Comparative Literature* 7 (1955): 32-42; cf. work on Andreas Capellanus in this volume (pp. 130-58), and on Chaucer, especially "Chaucerian Tragedy," (pp. 70-106, later revised from its *ELH* version in *Preface to Chaucer* in a form that answered the animadversions of some of its original critics. Cf. John F. Benton, "The Evidence for Andreas Capellanus Re-examined Again," *Studies in Philology* 59 (1962) and "The Court of Champagne as a Literary Center," *Speculum* 36 (1961).

2. For an exploration of this point, see Paul A. Olson, "Review of Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature by Lee Patterson," *MLQ* 49 (1988), 386-395.

The *second* was the New Criticism that grew up in the 1930s as an extension of Southern agrarianism and I. A. Richards's work, which emphasized the close reading of texts in a self-referential way, independent of authorial intention and of the historical circumstances of the work being read. Though some New Critical interpretations—for example, of John Donne's work—relied on historically reconstructed nuances, they often seemed indifferent to the question of whether words, phrases, or iconic configurations seemingly understandable in the 20th century might have carried quite a different burden in their own time. Historical scholarship often appealed to authorial intention as a guide to a work's meaning. By the early 1950s, Robbie sometimes appealed in his essays to authorial intention, but by the mid-fifties, he began to cite Wimsatt and Beardsley, arguing that his difference with these New Critics was that they tended to ignore the meanings of words and phrases *as they meant to their original audiences*—that they did not complete the job of historical semantic reconstruction that the philologists had begun. The job of criticism was not to discover private authorial intention but precisely the full burden of what the language meant historically. Methodologically by the mid-fifties that meant resorting to the classical and medieval commentaries on Ovid and Virgil and the ancient myths that circulated widely in the High Middle Ages as guides to semiology of medieval works that used classical myths. The “exegetical” phase of Robertson's criticism extends through the work in *A Preface to Chaucer* and in this volume is represented by much of the writing extending from pages 64 to 174.

## IV

The last stage in Robertson's evolution as a critic comes with his deepening interest in the contextualizing of medieval works in contemporary social and political history. Some of this begins with *A Preface to Chaucer*, in which he undertakes to place Chaucer's works in the context of contemporary exegetical and penitential disputes and the history of Wycliffite debate. However, one need only look at the 1980 essay from *Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*

(pp. 224–31 in this volume) to see the new emphasis. There Robbie emphasizes that “Chaucer lived among clerks and administrators familiar with the law” and that an understanding of the legal references, as a clue to the structure of society, is crucial to understanding the Chaucerian *métier*. At the same time, he emphasizes changes in rural law and custom and in the evolution of industry and trade in the English countryside as clues to understanding the references of Chaucer’s commercial and rural tales. The best example of this new mode is probably “Some Medieval Literary Terminology, . . . Some Disputed Chaucerian Terminology” (*Speculum* 52 [1979]: 571–581, also republished in *Essays in Medieval Culture*, pp. 291–304). In this volume, the essays on pages 181 to 223 illustrate the usefulness of the approach, as do the essays on pages 374 to 432; that the approach is productive does not mean that Robertson’s findings are definitive, but that the kind of investigation he undertook will have to be refined by future scholars if they wish to understand Chaucer’s language at all.

Going beyond the broad legal and administrative references that this new sort of study permitted him to penetrate, Robertson also sought to understand specific topical references to court and government news that appeared especially in Chaucer’s later works. His analysis of *Troilus*’s picture of English military and court decay in the 1380s, while the country endured imminent invasion threats from the French or “Argives,” relate the work to concerns of his audience among the Knights of the Chamber and his patronage by John of Gaunt (pp. 337–73). Here the meaning of a work begins with its probable meaning to its first audience. This method is equally apparent in Robertson’s picture of the “Knight’s Tale” as an adumbration of possible new beginnings in European civilization, a work conforming more or less in its idealism to the idealism of the Chamber Knights and the Order of the Passion in the 1390s (pp. 433–56). This late Robertsonian effort to situate Chaucer’s works in the immediate history of late 14th-century England as well as in the broader history of European civilization gave Chaucerian works “a local habitation and a name” that completed the task of historical criticism as Robbie understood it. The modus of these latter explorations is a modus that I pursued independently throughout my Chaucerian investigations from my 1957 dissertation

under Robertson through my various journal essays on Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society*.

During the period from the mid-1960s on, Robertson relied heavily on a tradition of sociological analysis that he seldom mentions in his essays: that of Emile Durkheim and his structural functionalist successors. Robbie was always interested in seeing medieval culture as a tangle of routine habitual actions that gave solidarity and meaning to social life. Hence, he was interested in the law and the routines of its administration and its perversion in 14th-century culture, in routine religious observance, and in 14th-century civic ceremonial that appeared from a structural functionalist point of view to be designed to counter anomie and cushion change. The sociological works that were particularly meaningful to him, as he recounted things to me, were George Caspar Homans's *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, whose use of manorial rolls gave Robbie an introduction to tools for understanding the precise language of routine manorial administration; Jerome F. Scott and R. P. Lynton's *The Community Factor in Modern Technology*, which suggested ways of organizing societies to counter anomie and social dislocation; and J. H. van den Berg's *The Changing Nature of Man*, which investigated the relationship between historical changes in how human beings organize themselves into groups and how the individuals in those groups are able to function in their inward and social lives, an analysis that privileges small group societies and social solidarity sustained by customs, rituals, and predictable networks of social support. (Robertson also relied somewhat on the sociology that Ortega y Gasset develops in his *Man and People*, a sociology that argues that the social penetrates into the most minuscule experiences of our lives: for example, the conventions of language or the experience of a handshake; for Robbie, the study of a society is also the study of its linguistic conventions, even those basic to literature.)

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that “to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life” (PI §19). Setting

down this aphorism is for Wittgenstein part of showing that language and ways of doing things are imbedded in—create—one another. One cannot, for example, separate a language game in which the word “slab” commands someone to bring a slab to, say, the construction work that is underway from that construction work. When the philosopher says that “The meaning of a word is its use in the language,” he is speaking not only of how the word works with other words in syntactic structures to create meaning at the level of words but of what it does in our various life forms, the various contexts in which it can “act” and what its actions are. That indeed is its meaning. Robbie’s quest was to understand the life forms of late medieval and early modern culture and to imagine with as much detail as possible how the words of that culture, particularly the words in poems, and its life forms related. Since in my career I was interested in constructing the cultural usages that went into the use of words in, say, Lakota works like those of Black Elk, I would often discuss method with Robbie. He would wonder why contemporary literary criticism so often attended to how the languages of many contemporary cultures and their life forms were one while we did not attend to how we had to imagine the forms of past life in detail if we were to imagine their languages. He was right to ask the question.

Lincoln, Nebraska  
October 2017