

puts Left personal criticism out of synch with its modernist and Frank School past. Embittered alienation and sneering hauteur ring pretty hollow when one is throwing the self at the feet of the swine.

But there were also history and precedent for politically radical uses of mass, commodified culture. Every avantgarde since 1789 had deployed a cultural politics that fully embraced new technologies and the means of mechanical reproduction and mass distribution.²

One has to feel suspicious about glossy populism. Charles Altieri points out that Frank Lentricchia's life, Nancy Miller's (another founding figure of personal criticism), and Altieri's own are quite frankly boring.³ "The shaping events are so common, so interchangeable with events in other parallel lives" that critics' autobiographies do not serve to highlight anything.⁴ They serve to bury something:

Autobiographical criticism gravitates towards alienation stories, and even towards conversion stories like Lentricchia's, because critics want to displace into the realm of the personal, the disturbing fact that they are among the most intelligent members of a democratic society that grants them privileges but does not have any set of values which might justify those privileges (in contrast to medicine, say). We are stuck in a situation where we cannot produce a language that might convince society we can justify investment in us—hence Lentricchia's obsession with the failures of theory.⁵

Imagine the scene just painted: this unflattering tableau in which Lentricchia, unable to persuade the people that he deserves his privileges, throws aside theoretical language like a broken toy and turns to brood upon himself. Altieri it in aral h.w 02 Tm (g)10(r)3(a6a)9.16 270.6

method.... Disbelieving in a regulated method of reaching the historical other from the

intellectual culture and therefore insignificant. Only upon moving to the U.S. did he discover that autobiography could be calumniated and championed into full cultural proportions. But the cult, Simpson admits, has blossomed into a culture. For it has been nurtured and cherished awhile, and regularly fertilized; and it is, as a historical culture, inescapable, and not at all open to dismissal from some high point of disinterested inspection—as if it were a problem for them, or you, but not for me.¹¹

Vincent Pecora unexpectedly likes Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons* up to a point: Kaplan is doing a real disservice to her academic readers by "indicting this scapegoat [de Man]." ¹² Why? "I too [as did Kaplan's de Man-obsessed friend, Guy] refused to spend the night with a girlfriend, who refused angrily to understand, because I was too anxious about my work, and," he adds, "I can't testify that de Man had nothing to do with it."¹³ As for the premises of personal criticism,

there is something troubling about this project. It is perfectly clear that the biggest villains of the piece, fascist intellectuals from the 1940s to the 1980s, suffer (unlike de Man) from the same thing: an excess of strong emotion, welling up from the gut, utterly transparent as to personal interests, and spewed forth directly at Jews and any other 'inferior' group which happens to be available. Do we want figures like Bardeche [the French Holocauster] to be more in touch with what they feel? Or do we want them to think, calmly and rationally, about the evidence, about history, about how dominated they have been by emotional lives that are out of control?¹⁴

Pecora favors the second option.

As for Kaplan's own emotional revelations, she has little stomach for working through what she appears to feel. Her father, we learn toward the end, seems to have been an alcoholic. But we never know what this means to her.¹⁵ Instead, much of the memoir reads like a transcript of the censored narrative one occasionally gives to one's therapist—lots of smoothly hinged surfaces, with all the nasty work of finding out what

Critics (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 82.

¹² Vincent P. Pecora, "Through the Academic Looking Glass," in Veesper, *Confessions of the Critics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 76-

¹³ Ibid., 80.

¹⁴ Ibid., 79-80.

¹⁵ Ibid., 78-79.

¹⁶ Ibid., 79.

¹⁷ Ibid., 81.

¹⁸ Laura Kipnis, "Feminism: the Political Conscience of Postmodernism?" Andrew Ross, ed., *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 139-

¹⁹ Peter Brooks, "Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetry?" *Critical Inquiry* 20, (1994): 520.

²⁰ Marjorie Garber, "Overcoming 'Auction Block': Stories Masquerading as Objects," in Veesper *Confessions of the Critics* 113.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 115.