

## Preface

The changes that have swept all areas of the graduate and undergraduate curriculum in recent years have slowly become apparent in medieval studies. Books "introducing" theory to general readers have been legion for a decade,<sup>1</sup> and essay collections about the role of contemporary theory in medieval literary criticism are now appearing.<sup>2</sup> The Medieval Academy of America recently devoted a special issue to the question of the "new philology," indicating that concern about the relevance of medieval studies has reached the highest institutional levels. Medievalists who wish to respond to new developments in their discipline while retaining their commitment to traditional analytical methods are concerned about the implications of contemporary theory for traditional critical practice. Many essays in the medieval collections offer stimulating rereadings of familiar texts, but few of them address the problems of articulating tradition and contemporary theory. The articulation of tradition and contemporary criticism is the subject of *Speaking Two Languages*.

The collection differs from other collections in two ways. The first, reflected in its title, is this volume's interpretation of critical methods as consciously chosen and spoken "languages"; each essay identifies distinct theoretical methodologies and explores the consequences of combining them and, hence, speaking two (or more) languages. The second, and related, difference is the volume's collaborative development: the number of essays was kept small so that each could be drafted in response to the "two languages" motif, developed at length, and discussed by all the contributors. That discussion took place at a seminar at Loyola University of Chicago in February 1989; it was designed to examine the languages chosen and to explore the problems involved in relating them; the essays were then reworked with the seminar discussions in mind. Aimed at the reader new to theory, as well as at the reader already engaged with contemporary criticism in some way, each essay concludes with a critical bibliographical note pointing to further reading in the languages it employs.

Contributors to *Speaking Two Languages* were educated in Old and Middle English literature programs devoted to traditional methods. They represent a variety of approaches current in the 1970s and 1980s, including

patristic criticism, the New Criticism, linguistics, philology, and literary history, and their recent work shows them moving beyond those approaches. Each contributor was asked to identify two methods or critical traditions and to conceptualize them as languages that were combined in his or her critical practice. Some essays in the collection that resulted identify two more or less traditional languages; others articulate traditional approaches with distinctively postmodern concepts.

Gillian R. Overing employs feminist theories of reading to read critical desire and its effects on Eve in *Genesis B*. Neither claiming that Freud is a "contemporary" critic nor reading Freud through Jacques Lacan, James W. Earl uses a psychoanalytic discussion of the theme of origins in *Beowulf* not to argue for a psychoanalysis of the text but to argue instead that the text psychoanalyzes its audience. Britton Harwood's discussion of feudalism and *Piers Plowman*, an inquiry into literary, economic, and political history, returns the poem to the material history of its point of production and simultaneously reidentifies the literary-historical tradition to which the poem is assigned. Karma Lochrie employs Kristeva's concept of abjection to discuss the body in medieval mysticism. John Miles Foley's essay opens the critical idiom of oral tradition to an examination of the aesthetic implications of Iserian reception for Old English verse. Clare A. Lees integrates language theory and sociolinguistics with patristic analysis of Old English homilies. Martin Irvine proposes an archive of discourse to be used in analyzing Latin and Old English texts in manuscript contexts. Because Adam Brooke Davis was requested to take Foley's place at the Loyola conference, he was invited to make an independent contribution in which he viewed the "two languages" motif and the larger issue of contemporary criticism in the graduate medieval studies curriculum. His essay serves as an epilogue to the collection, to which mine is a prologue. Since I could not presume to "speak" all the languages spoken by the contributors through an editorial language seeking to assert thematic coherence, I do not attempt the customary gesture of linking contributions or asserting their complementary nature. Instead, I raise the issues of the collection in a broadly institutional perspective and examine the often-invoked need for interdisciplinarity in the context of traditional disciplines, difference, and identity.

The order in which I have described the essays is the order in which the essays appear. Although that order is not entirely arbitrary, neither does it reflect a systematic spectrum, suggest a unifying syntax, or posit the existence of a larger order that the sequence of essays makes manifest. I could not hope to match Stephen Nichols's assertion that the essays he edited for the special issue of *Speculum* formed a continuum.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the continuum in the *Speculum* volume is a disadvantage, since most of the contributions emphasize Old French and romance philology (four of six,

two historical, two literary; the others concern Middle English). The volume, which resembles other collections concerning medieval French studies and edited by Nichols, focuses like them exclusively on the later medieval period, defining medieval as "1000 to 1500."<sup>4</sup> The *Speculum* volume is not a statement about the "new philology" so much as a statement about the impact of certain kinds of criticism on Old French literature and, more generally, historiography.

The essays in *Speaking Two Languages* do not form a continuum of any kind that I can see. They are written to be read in any order the reader wishes; their interconnections and collective disjunctions will be apparent no matter what sequence is followed in approaching them. The collection is unusual in that it emphasizes Anglo-Saxon texts and problems more heavily than texts from the Middle English period. The emphasis on Old English is intended. Some collections contain no Old English at all;<sup>5</sup> the neglect of Old English is particularly conspicuous in the *Speculum* volume, in which Germanic philology barely surfaces. Our volume does not attempt to cover major figures, to balance studies of poetry with prose, or otherwise to scatter its subjects in "interdisciplinary" paradigms in the hope of providing something for everyone. Textual and literary cultures predominate, but they are broadly defined to include economic, sociolinguistic, and spiritual as well as artistic dimensions of medieval life.

Scholarship in languages other than English—in medieval French and Italian in particular—has responded more rapidly to the new critical climate than either Middle or (indeed, especially) Old English. But it cannot be said that recent discussions of Dante or French lyric and romance are without a parochialism of their own. The Medieval Academy volume illustrates this parochialism in two ways, ignoring Anglo-Saxon as well as early Latin literature and steering strangely clear of feminist criticism while taking to task more than once the political limitations of New Historicism. In many collections, it is to the Renaissance that medievalists look for guidance in their critical practice. While it would indeed have been desirable to present a collection attending to texts in other languages as well as in English, it proved more productive, in a collaborative experiment, to bring together scholars who already spoke one common language—that is, who recognized the major traditions in Old and Middle English literary and historical criticism—in the hopes that a shared sense of tradition would promote discussion of the need to revise and review that tradition. Eventually, I trust, scholars in other medieval languages will collaborate on collections that theorize particular areas of the medieval spectrum, and although there are limitations to the formation of such collaborations around languages—the emphasis on Old English in *Two Languages*, on Old French in the *Speculum* collection—it is also clear that the work of several scholars in

one area is required to theorize the history and the future of different scholarly traditions. When the historical formation of these traditions is more fully examined, cooperation among the traditions is more likely to take place.

The protocol of this volume is not thematic but problem centered and oriented toward praxis. In asking how medievalists present and future can use critical self-consciousness to extend the boundaries of medieval studies, we ask how new attitudes toward speaking, reading, and writing—whether they are Derridian, Lacanian, or Foucauldian—relate to the traditional study of the Middle Ages. While all the essays in this collection “read” literary texts, they do so in order to see texts as the embodiment of cultural forces that criticism can identify, dislodge, and scrutinize. But none of the essays simply applies a method to textual material or seeks to saturate a text (canonical or uncanonical) with details in order to produce a new reading. Most of the essays are concerned with several texts and with textual categories; essays that do concentrate on major texts—*Piers*, *Beowulf*, and *Genesis B*—avoid conceptualizing “theory” in one place and “text” in another, and “applying” the theory “to” the text to produce a reading. All the essays recognize that if a theoretical approach functions as a given, as an already-formed tool used to make sense of literature, its own hermeneutic and constructed nature is shielded from analysis. Our concern is not to “apply” theory to texts of recognized importance or to use theory to challenge the status of texts of “recognized importance” and assert the importance of others. Rather, our goal has been to identify and test the flexibility of theoretical paradigms.

As Ruth Waterhouse has reminded us, an innovative or “contemporary” approach to medieval culture does not remain separate and isolated from the texts or objects it studies; instead, it is modified by them. “Often the theories are developed with a particular period or type of literature in mind,” she writes, “and when they are tested against other periods or types of literature, they are seen to require modification or re-thinking in some way or other.”<sup>6</sup> Her point is worth some elaboration. Scholars are used to describing their work as looking *at* texts *through* theory; we are less accustomed to describing our practice as viewing one theory through another or looking at theory through texts. The dual-language motif of the volume requires several theoretical operations: the critic may look at two theoretical languages in complementary or contradictory ways but may also use one theory to modify another, look through theoretical constructs at texts, and consider the effect of texts on theoretical propositions about them. These perspectives permit the critic to test one theory against another, not to determine which is the better but to show that either, in isolation, is inadequate.

While it is obvious that all critical methodologies are based on assumptions and values that determine what the methods can be used to achieve, those methodologies are not all obviously hermeneutic. Marxism and feminism are easily identified as politically interested, while scholarship that results in a "definitive" edition or historical study is, by definition, perceived as objective and scientific. Criticism of the latter sort enjoys the status of "scholarship" that is prior to interpretation, which is seen as subjective and secondary. But the hermeneutic nature of textual criticism has long been acknowledged, even by some of its most traditional practitioners (for example, Richard D. Altick and James Thorpe),<sup>7</sup> and revisionist textual critics, especially Jerome McGann, have demonstrated the benefits of ideological analysis on textual criticism.<sup>8</sup> Hermeneutic and interested functions are likewise important to patristic exegesis, the New Criticism, literary history, oral studies, and any traditional method that seems to offer a neutral approach to the "data" of texts and contexts.

Just as traditional analysis holds the "new" to the level of a supplement, a second language added to current parlance, it holds theory to a secondary level of "interpretation," implying that access to unreconstructed, uninterpreted data is somehow accessible in medieval scholarship. "Speaking two languages" is a trope that brings contemporary criticism to parity with traditional methodology, but not as a step toward replacing the old with the new. Instead, our essays recognize methodological choices as individual critical acts that lead to the continuing and mutually modifying exchange between innovation and tradition, an exchange between already accepted and emerging critical constructions.

*Speaking Two Languages* includes no call for sleepers to awake. At the end of 1990 such a call is hardly necessary. It is true that some medievalists continue to resist innovations in critical tradition, overlooking the covertly theoretical nature of their own discourse while dismissing overtly theoretical work as a passing fad. And we can already see evidence of the predictable response of those skeptics who believe that, jargon apart, contemporary criticism offers nothing "new." Arguments incorporating contemporary criticism (in any age) are liable to be recognized, as Peter Travis has recently put it, as "the redeployment of various linguistic problems and the replication of certain medieval philosophic issues"—in other words, as old wine in new bottles. Citing Travis's remark, a recent review notes that "a tradition for which it was an article of faith that 'now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face' is not going to be shattered merely by hearing the Derridian litany, 'Difference, Presence, Absence'"; the reviewer adds that the real test of theory is whether "it can teach them [medievalists skeptical about theory] something new about the literature they study."<sup>9</sup> Traditional scholars may take some pleasure in defanging the monster of

contemporary criticism, thinking that if there is nothing new, there is nothing to fear and reassuring one another that the chaff may change, but that the fruit will stay the same (the phrase is Karma Lochrie's). Hans Robert Jauss and Michel Foucault seem to have become among the most easily appropriated contemporary critics; "reception" is a term that seems almost self-explanatory to those who have not thought about it, and the relationship of power to knowledge likewise seems clear. One can, it would seem, refer to reception theory or discursive formations without the inconvenience of having to learn about the complexities that either concept entails. Through such glibness the antitheoretical can acquire a sheen of theoretical awareness, but that polish is too superficial to disguise either the plodding positivism of certain scholarly practices or the dismaying and even self-congratulatory sureness with which some scholars seek to establish the "linguistic facts about poetic style" upon which mere critics may be permitted to construct interpretations.<sup>10</sup> In an age in which scientific theories are constantly being revised, perhaps even linguistic facts may change.

Even if they dismiss new theorists as interchangeable, medievalists who confront the complexity of critical theory in its historical situation, "poststructuralist" or not, can hardly rest assured that the real test of theory is whether "it can teach them something new about the literature they study." The object of criticism is not only to teach literature, but to teach critical paradigms, their transformation, and the business of the critics who activate them. The essays in *Speaking Two Languages* do not assume that the objective of theoretical inquiry is the production of new interpretations; rather, they assert the importance and the consequences of critical self-consciousness.

Many medievalists are concerned with the techniques and approaches offered by poststructuralist thought; graduate students and faculty who are acquainted with contemporary criticism see the future in articulating tradition and innovation, not holding them apart. That articulation is the purpose of this book. Conscious of critical diversity and the tensions it creates, we have tried to keep in mind our role as medievalists educating one another and as future medievalists in an ongoing institutional reexamination of longstanding convictions about a plurality of methodological approaches and of the meaning of "pluralism."<sup>11</sup> The premise of this collection is not that pluralistic responses to contemporary theory mean a "fall" into relativistic chaos, in which all methods are seen as equally effective, or equally ineffective. Rather, it is that two languages—two paradigms—are better than one, and that both "languages" should be chosen rather than inherited, selected rather than given.

The discussions before, during, and after the "two languages" seminar have been opportunities for candid and sustained exchange. We invite our

readers to join our discussion of the implications of speaking two languages and to join us in learning how academic practices guided by tradition can continue to thrive in a critical climate that challenges tradition. All medievalists are affected by this challenge; all have an interest in meeting it.