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Afterword: medieval voice – a tribute to David Lawton

John M. Ganim

In the Blue Mountains World Heritage site, in Australia, slightly west of Sydney, there is a trail that takes you towards the Gladstone Pass, and, if you are up for it, you will make your way carefully through a rainforest and mossy boulders that rise up from Lawton's Creek. On some maps the area is actually called Lawton's Creek Valley, and, it is named after Professor David Lawton. Medieval studies have approaches and methods named after its luminaries, but David is the only one I can think of who has one of the most beautiful places on Earth named for him, in gratitude for a political campaign in the 1980s that opposed the degradation of the Jamison Valley. There are many stories such as this in David's life, but they will have to wait for his biographer, or (to drop a hint) his memoirs.

I am taking on an easier task here: enumerating some of David's many field-changing contributions to the study of medieval literature and its attendant discourses. David Lawton's recent work on the question of voice, especially as described in *Voice in Late Medieval Literature*, has a long prehistory. His work over the long span of his career led up to *Voice*. At the risk of restating the obvious, I would like to enumerate what some of these contributions have been. I wish to do so also because my own work has been in dialogue with David's earlier contributions, and many of my own articles and books have started with suggestions and hints embedded in his work. He has always managed to articulate the answers to new questions before the rest of us have even understood the question.

As a starting example, the recent resurgence of interest in fifteenth-century literature owes its starting point to his classic article 'Dullness and the fifteenth century'.¹ This widely cited essay has taken its place as one of the transforming articles in the

study of Middle English literature, along with articles by Anne Middleton, D. W. Robertson, E. Talbot Donaldson and a very few others. The dismissive scorn towards the century after Chaucer, reflected most memorably in C. S. Lewis, has been turned on its head, and Lawton explains how the muted voice of that century can be understood in a political and social context. But he has also unleashed a substantial effort to understand its poetic virtues. It seems at times as if the fifteenth century has come close to replacing the fourteenth as the medieval moment that we can understand best. In many ways the fifteenth century fits our current obsession with authority, subjection and power, and our increasingly pessimistic narratives, better than the fluid and experimental (though no less chaotic or disruptive) fourteenth century. It is difficult to find a subsequent book or article on any of the authors he discusses, or any reconsideration of the fifteenth century, that does not take 'Dullness and the fifteenth century' as its starting point. Indeed, what marked David's career from the beginning was his ability to revive scholarship and criticism on writings that had either been dismissed or had been stuck in critical logjams.

In his editions and in his scholarly essays, David Lawton helped overturn older paradigms of entire genres. His studies of alliterative poetry, many of them also published in the 1980s, are a case in point.² His close attention to manuscripts and texts, metre and provenance, leapfrogged the old debates about whether alliterative verse was a revival or a tradition. Rather than limiting our interpretation, as sceptical calls for unambiguous evidence sometimes do, he opened up new vistas, and, along with a handful of other scholars, made us rethink what the uses of this poetry might be. It helped that we were beginning to think of the golden age of Middle English poetry as the 'age of Langland' as much as the 'age of Chaucer', and David's research played no small part in that shift. Here, again, research that David published at an earlier phase of his career remains as influential and as generative as if it were an intervention published yesterday.

The revisionist approach to alliterative poetry that David helped to pioneer resulted in fresh editions of such works, and David himself contributed one of the most daunting and rigorous volumes for the Early English Text Society with our colleague Ralph Hanna III.³ *The Siege of Jerusalem* took a prominent part on the critical stage, partly because of its embodiment of medieval anti-Semitism,

but partly because of the bold emendations and arguments made by the editors. Hanna and Lawton provided a test case for the editorial controversies surrounding other alliterative poems, notably *Piers Plowman*. At the same time, the edition represented something of an amalgam of a practice of intelligent reading along with sophisticated textual scholarship. In so doing, it signalled one of the sea changes in the study of medieval English literature. What we now call the New Criticism (quite different in the United Kingdom and North America) tended to separate the sense of the text from its original material context, despite the fact that so many of the best New Critics were themselves excellent textual scholars. Middle English literature has always stood as something of a challenge to reigning critical paradigms. This was no less true 30 years ago, when medievalists tested the New Critical tenets of an organic work of literature, the ambiguity and complexity of poetic imagery and the possibility of close reading as a key to all essential meanings of a text, against the almost intractable demands of medieval writing, with its complex status in manuscripts and its uncertain authorial intent, its historically alien language and diction and its apparent allegiance to an aesthetic that did not conform to the precision and balance advocated by the New Criticism.

David Lawton's technical scholarly editions and his sweeping critical essays have reshaped how we think about authorship. It had been as if the criticism of medieval literature paralleled on a separate track some of the most startling claims of literary theory. That is, the criticism of medieval literature articulated what in other fields would be avant-garde statements by means of a documentary and historicist turn. Who or what is an author? The troubling of the concept of the author, formerly a more or less naturally assumed position, can be traced to the structuralist emphasis on the system of literature, and, in poststructuralism, on the virtual autonomy of the discourse of writing – distinct, as it were, from a person writing. The most famous statements of this reconceptualisation of authorship are the well-known essays by Roland Barthes, 'The death of the author', and Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?'.⁴ Foucault and Barthes, among their other agendas, were questioning the notion of a heroic, autonomous self behind and within writing itself. Although it is often regarded by those outside the field as a reserve protected from the effects of postmodern theory, medieval literary scholarship

has advanced claims that were in their own way as striking. One was the well-documented medieval tendency to defer to previous authority above and beyond one's own experience, a tendency often dramatised, and perhaps parodied, in Chaucer's *personae* in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Another direction was the study of the making of books and manuscripts, which over the past few decades began to question the genetic model of descent and definable authorial intention and paid new attention to such factors as scribal improvisation, patronage and traditions of miscellaneous compilations. Emphasis shifted, in other words, to the way texts were written, read and understood by contemporary readers from a sole focus on the intentions of the author. Sophisticated revisions of an older evolutionary notion of manuscript transmission gave new weight to the role of scribes, book collectors and patrons in the shaping of what we think of as medieval literature. In Hanna and Lawton's edition, one finds these issues fully articulated from the very beginning.

If editorial principles and the literary history of alliterative verse were being called into question at the start of David's career, an even more spectacular intervention was his contribution to the vexed issue of the Chaucerian narrator. The New Criticism, in its American adaptation, had emphasised lyric poetry and formal coherence, but that consensus had already been challenged by the work of, for example, Wayne Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, with its taxonomy of modes of narration.⁵ Booth's ideas had appeared roughly at the same time as the field-forming essay by E. Talbot Donaldson 'Chaucer the pilgrim'.⁶ Following Booth, the narrator becomes as much the subject of critical analysis as what was being narrated, and, as a result, criticism could identify a coherence and unity beneath such unruly forms as the novel, or, say, the *Canterbury Tales*. By the mid-1980s that coherent subjectivity was open to question, partly because, under the pressure of structuralism, the subject itself was open to question. Enter David Lawton. In 1985 he published *Chaucer's Narrators*, yet another of his works that remains as urgent today as it was when it was published.⁷ *Chaucer's Narrators* was fully aware of the definition of the subject following Lacan and Foucault and of the possibility of heteroglossic voicing following Mikhail Bakhtin. His book opened up the question of the consistency of the Chaucerian narrator as a

principle of unity. The result was both an explosion of the previous consensus and a newly available heuristic approach that guides our reading of Chaucer to the present day.

Indeed, the formalism that David Lawton revised in his account of narration had stood as a stumbling block to integrating theology and spirituality into a coherent critical framework. Criticism has only recently come to terms with the religious dimension of Middle English literature, and David played a key role in that re-evaluation. More often than not critics read back from a secular and sceptical cultural perspective, emphasising the comedy and realism of even obviously devotional religious writings. This lack was partly a result of the value that the New Criticism placed on irony and scepticism, so that only works that seemed to question religious orthodoxy were considered worthy of attention. One of the oddities of the study of Middle English literature during the middle of the twentieth century was its insistent secularity, against the grain of a medieval culture so profoundly religious. In some ways this was an effort to rescue medieval literature from its still powerful dismissal by the Enlightenment and subsequent modernities. Indeed, formalism provided us with a medieval literature, at least in Chaucer, that we could think of as modern. When D. W. Robertson, in the early 1960s and late 1950s, proposed an elaborate system of allegorical interpretation of medieval literature, the arguments against that system directly or indirectly objected to the totalised belief system propounded in Robertson's picture of the Middle Ages.⁸

We do not ordinarily think of theology as a species of theory, but theory and theology are inescapably linked, even if deconstruction would question the metaphysical assumptions that underlie most theological speculation. The genealogy of theory can be traced to the natural supernaturalism of romantic writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and to the Higher Criticism of Christian scriptures in the nineteenth century, even if theory rarely acknowledges that past. The language of the scholars who led the conversion of American academia to theory, the so-called 'Yale School' of Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman and J. Hillis Miller, would be unimaginable without the widely read theologians of the 1950s and 1960s, including Martin Buber, Rudolph Bultmann, Paul Tillich and Thomas Altizer. These theologians and theorists wrestled with

the difficult legacy of Martin Heidegger, upon whose thought so-called deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man both depended and struggled. Theory and theology have been in a mutually dependent relation. Thanks to David and others, Middle English literature is now seen not as distinct from or even merely reflective of the pervasive religiosity of medieval English culture but as actively participating in spiritual exploration. Just as the New Historicism understands texts to construct rather than simply reflect historical events, so too are Middle English writings now often seen as complex sites of interaction between a multiplicity of religious and theological viewpoints. Throughout his career David Lawton has been more aware than most critics of the theological climate that we now take for granted, but his contribution to understanding it was in fact on transhistorical rather than period-based terms.

David published works devoted to what might loosely be called religious cultural study. His book *Blasphemy* was widely reviewed and discussed, both outside and inside academia.⁹ In *Blasphemy*, Lawton analyses a number of case studies, ranging from the medieval persecution of heretics through reformation religious controversies to modern figurations of blasphemy, such as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and the reaction to it, and the uses of blasphemy in popular culture. He points out how the accusation of blasphemy itself historically has always involved questions of power, closing off arguments arbitrarily and abruptly. Those who invoke blasphemy, suggests David, typically speak as if their particular segment of the community represents the entire community, precisely because they seek a narrowing of that community. At the same time, David is remarkably sympathetic to the plaintiffs (who, he points out, tend to cast themselves in the role of defendants), without falling into the simple rhetoric of cultural relativism. For blasphemy almost always involves representation through texts, languages and performances. And David develops a complex and striking series of interrelated theses: that literature itself is almost by definition blasphemous; and that reading itself is a further act of blasphemy. The discourse of blasphemy, that is, includes those who purport to be offended by it, and yet its tolerance is at the very basis of civil society. His *Faith, Text and History: The Bible in English* similarly tracks what might be called the reception of the Authorised Version and its uses and misuses.¹⁰

One of the more prescient and urgent themes in David's writings grew out of his time teaching in Turkey after he completed university studies. He has turned to that experience often, tracing the connections of time and language, and the way in which the literary imagination moves from Europe to its borders and to the East and back again. If postmodernism taught us that space is the primary category of intellectual analysis, David's project doubles back, like his subject itself, to the existential category of time that postmodernism sought to displace. The result has been a fresh and original look at some very well-known and some obscure writings, and it takes us from werewolves in Sicily to the English marshes, and also to Istanbul as it loses its identity as Constantinople, and shows us how these are all connected.¹¹ Transcending the received discourses of postcolonialism and orientalism, David excuses neither the past nor the present for their prejudices and oppressions. I like to think that the critique of intolerance in *Faith, Text and History* is related to his stunning analysis of the bizarre medieval dramatisation of anti-Semitism, 'Sacrilige and theatricality: the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*' (2003).¹² He had an expert knowledge of the trail of strange geographies and mythic histories as a result of his scholarly editions of *The Siege of Jerusalem*, in which the Roman–Jewish wars become akin to a crusade, and *Joseph of Arimethea*, which provides a prehistory of the Grail.¹³ His Turkish experience led to some astonishing collocations of medieval anxieties about Ottoman expansion and modern Turkish literature, especially the novels of Orhan Pamuk, notably in '1453 and the stream of time'.¹⁴ At Washington University of St Louis, he helped arrange an honorary award for Pamuk.

That award is only one example of David's impact as an impresario of academic life. David once mentioned his experiences as a child actor (I believe it was a performance of *Oliver!*) in responding to a question from the audience objecting to the blasphemy of Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, and his theatrical timing and humour inform many of his public presentations. Some of us remember his hilarious recounting of being assigned to lead the Queen around his college during her visit on the occasion of its anniversary. These many experiences also are part of the reason for his success as an academic leader, chairing departments on three continents, and, as executive director, leading the New Chaucer

Society into a more inclusive future. He directed the famous London Chaucer Society conference in 2000, commemorating the 600th anniversary of Chaucer's death, and arranged a reading by Andrew Motion, then the poet laureate of the United Kingdom, in Westminster Abbey. The result was a media event as well as a scholarly conference, and, not unimportantly, a signal event for the general public and poetry lovers.

David has mastered and pioneered forms of scholarship in his career that are usually thought of as distinct and incompatible. The understanding of medieval narrative from a largely semiotic point of view, now part of the fabric of the field, was pioneered in his book *Chaucer's Narrators*. The interface of medieval literary culture with cultural study found its editorial home in the series he co-founded called *New Medieval Literatures*, required reading in the field since its first issue. David, a superb technical editor, is also a scholar's scholar, and most recent articles on late medieval and early modern book circulation and production regularly cite his work. The contours of medieval English literary study as we now know it, with its shift from the fourteenth to the fifteenth century as a privileged period, with its shift from Chaucer to Langland as its signature author and with its combination of sweeping *Annales* vistas and local literary histories, is either directly or indirectly the result of David Lawton's influence and example. His many ongoing projects, from specialist editions to large-scale studies of the shifts in time and space by which literature engages us, affirm his continuing importance. I recently taught a Chaucer class using his new Norton edition, the *Norton Chaucer*, and I felt as if the course were being taught by David himself, with his elegant explanations of small difficulties and his masterful view over the distance of centuries.¹⁵ It was like having a friend in the classroom, and I too became his student, as we all are.

Notes

- 1 D. Lawton, 'Dullness and the fifteenth century', *ELH*, 54:4 (1987), 761–99.
- 2 See D. Lawton (ed.), *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background: Seven Essays* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982); and D.

- Lawton, 'The unity of Middle English alliterative poetry', *Speculum*, 58:1 (1983), 72–94.
- 3 R. Hanna and D. Lawton (eds), *The Siege of Jerusalem*, EETS o.s. 320 (New York: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 2003).
 - 4 R. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. S. Heath (London: Fontana, 1977); M. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).
 - 5 W. C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).
 - 6 E. T. Donaldson, 'Chaucer the pilgrim', *PMLA*, 69:4 (1954), 928–36.
 - 7 D. Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators*, Chaucer Studies 13 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985).
 - 8 D. W. Robertson Jr, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962).
 - 9 D. Lawton, *Blasphemy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).
 - 10 D. Lawton, *Faith, Text, and History: the Bible in English* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1990).
 - 11 See, for instance, D. Lawton, '1453 and the stream of time', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 37:3 (2007), 469–91; and D. Lawton, 'History and legend: the exile and the Turk', in P. C. Ingham and M. R. Warren (eds), *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval through Modern* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 173–94.
 - 12 D. Lawton, 'Sacrilege and theatricality: the Croxton Play of the Sacrament', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 33:2 (2003), 281–309.
 - 13 D. Lawton (ed.), *Joseph of Arimathea: A Critical Edition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983).
 - 14 Lawton, '1453 and the stream of time'. See also Lawton, 'History and legend'.
 - 15 D. Lawton (ed.), *The Norton Chaucer* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).