

**REINVENTING OURSELVES:  
WHITE MALE BIBLICAL SCHOLARS AND  
THE RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE OTHER**

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## ENGLISH ABSTRACT **DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:



## ENGLISH ABSTRACT

The problem discussed in this thesis is how to resist and subvert the complicity of biblical studies with neo-colonialism as a white male biblical scholar. Traditionally the interpretation of the bible by white male biblical scholars has not been recognised as an interested and situated practice, unlike the interpretations by readers from marginalised backgrounds. The thesis put forward here is that it is the other — understood as infinite and irreducible — that opens up the habitual vicious circle of identity formation and identifiable practices. This interruption is a moment of true decision, i.e. a moment where the self cannot follow any pre-established ethico-political programme but has to respond in a truly innovative way. This innovation is understood to be brought about in a double strategy, which juxtaposes a hegemonic practice with its binary opposition in a non-dialectical way. The space in which such an interruption occurs is the interstitial borderline, the liminal space and interface between the self and its other. In the first part, the thesis critically engages with the work of three white male biblical scholars — Daniel Patte, Jeffrey Staley, and Gerald West — who try to overcome the traditional academic discourse of biblical studies by problematising the relationship between their own identities and their academic practices. In the second part, deconstruction, as shorthand for the work of Jacques Derrida, is subsequently presented as a thoroughly postcolonial critique of western ontological concepts and as a viable manner in which to theorise the critical contributions of Patte, Staley, and West. In the third and final part, three approaches within biblical studies — historicism, the bible as popular text, and literary approaches — are singled out and discussed as possible liminal spaces within which the identity of the white male biblical scholar can be reinvented in responsibility to the other.

## AFRIKAANSE SINOPSIS

Die vraagstuk onder bespreking in hierdie verhandeling is hoe om, as blanke manlike bybelgeleerde die onderlinge medepligtigheid tussen die studie van die bybel en neo-kolonialisme te weerstaan en te ondermyn. Volgens tradisie word die vertolking van die bybel deur blanke manlike bybelgeleerdes nie erken as 'n geïnteresseerde en geleë praktyk nie, in teenstelling met die vertolkings van geleerdes afkomstig uit minderheidsgroepe. Die stelling wat hier gemaak word is dat dit die 'ander' is — begryp as oneindig en onverminderbaar — wat die gebruikelike bouse kring van identiteitsvorming en identifiseerbare praktyke oopmaak. Hierdie onderbreking is 'n oomblik van ware besluitneming, i.e. 'n oomblik waarbinne die self nie enige voorafbepaalde eties-politiese program kan volg nie, maar waarbinne die self werklik op 'n oorspronklike en nuwe wyse moet reageer. Dit word verstaan dat hierdie nuwigheid tot stand gebring word in a dubbele strategie wat die heersende praktyk op 'n nie-dialektiese wyse langs sy binêre opposisie plaas. Die ruimte waarbinne hierdie onderbreking plaasvind is die tussengrensllyn, die oorgangsruiimte en skakel tussen die self en die 'ander'. Die eerste gedeelte van die verhandeling is 'n kritiese bespreking van die werke van drie blanke manlike bybelgeleerdes, naamlik Daniel Patte, Jeffrey Staley en Gerald West, wat poog om die tradisionele akademiese diskoers oor die studie van die bybel te bemeester deur die verhouding tussen hulle eie identiteite en hul akademiese gebruike te problematiseer. Die tweede gedeelte bied dekonstruksie, as snelskrif vir die werk van Jaques Derrida aan as 'n deurdagte post-koloniale kritiek van westerse ontologiese konsepte en as 'n lewensvatbare wyse waarop die kritiese bydraes van Patte, Staley en West teoretiseer kan word. In die derde en laaste gedeelte word drie benaderings tot die studie van die bybel, naamlik 'n historiese benadering, die bybel as populêre teks en litirêre benaderings uitgesonder en bespreek as moontlike oorgangsruiimtes waarbinne die identiteit van die blanke manlike bybelgeleerde herversin en bedink kan word met verantwoordelikheid teenoor die 'ander'.



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## 0 INTRODUCTION: INVENTING OURSELVES

“A critic may write with assurance as long as the critical institution itself is thought to be unproblematic. Once that institution is thrown into radical question, then one would expect individual acts of criticism to become troubled and self-doubting.”<sup>1</sup>

Terry Eagleton

“It is an exciting and confusing time for biblical studies.”<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Moore

### 0.1 Seismic events

This thesis takes its impetus, *inter alia*, from several crucial “events” that have shaken the once firm ground upon which its author used to practice his incipit biblical studies. Four of them I would like to present here by way of introduction. The first concerns the contemporary ethico-politicisation of the academic practice of biblical studies, the second relates to a radical questioning of western metaphysical concepts, the third converted twin towers into ground zero, while the fourth is a more personal, autobiographical vignette. I will briefly comment on these four “events” in turns.

#### 0.1.1 *Stuck in a rhetorical half-turn*

In 1987 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza delivered a presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature that would send tremors through the world of biblical scholarship.<sup>3</sup> In it she announced a forthcoming paradigm shift inaugurating “a rhetorical-ethical turn” that would highlight the “public-political responsibility of biblical scholarship” based on “both theories of rhetoric and the rhetoric of theories”<sup>4</sup>. She would have been the first president of the Society of Biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The function of criticism: from The spectator to post-structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984) 7.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels: the theoretical challenge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The ethics of biblical interpretations: decentering biblical scholarship”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107:1 (1988) 3-17.

<sup>4</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “The ethics of biblical interpretations”, 4.

Literature to have focused in a presidential address on the political contexts and rhetorical strategies of the profession for over forty years. The impression was that biblical scholarship had developed in a political vacuum, accountable only to its “fraternity of scientifically trained scholars”<sup>5</sup>. As Schüssler Fiorenza remarks, the hegemonic scientist ethos established for over half a century was that of the “emotionally detached, intellectually dispassionate, and rationally value-neutral”<sup>6</sup> critic, an ethos that proved valuable in the “struggle of biblical scholarship to free itself from dogmatic and ecclesiastical controls”<sup>7</sup>. The imminent challenge, however, was seen by Schüssler Fiorenza as one of “decentering the dominant scientist ethos of biblical scholarship by recentering it in a critical interpretive praxis of liberation”<sup>8</sup>. Schüssler Fiorenza’s point of view was explicitly shaped by her position as a “connected critic”, due to her critical and engaged commitment to marginalised women in the profession and in society in general.

Shock waves must not be underestimated.<sup>9</sup> They must not be overestimated either. Schüssler Fiorenza had the opportunity to reassess her interpretation of the disciplinary context seven years later in a paper she gave in the 1994 Pretoria conference on “Rhetoric, scripture, and theology”. Her diagnosis was disappointing: “biblical studies has become stuck in a ‘rhetorical half-turn’”<sup>10</sup>. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, biblical studies still “remained in the captivity of empiricist positivist science”<sup>11</sup> and committed itself to only one part of her challenging presidential address:

“[B]y reviving the technology of ancient rhetoric, rhetorical criticism in biblical studies has failed to make the full turn to a political rhetoric of inquiry insofar as it has not developed critical epistemological discourses and a hermeneutics of suspicion but instead has sought to validate its disciplinary practices in and through the logos of positivist

<sup>5</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “The ethics of biblical interpretations”, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “The ethics of biblical interpretations”, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “The ethics of biblical interpretations”, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “The ethics of biblical interpretations”, 9

<sup>9</sup> Several people who attended this address have told me in personal communication about the powerful impact it had on its audience.

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Challenging the rhetorical half-turn: feminist and rhetorical biblical criticism”, *Rhetoric, scripture and theology: essays from the 1994 Pretoria Conference*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 131 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 28-53; 29. Only after having drafted this introduction, did I come across her *Rhetoric and ethic: the politics of biblical studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), which connects these two papers in a similar way.

<sup>11</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Challenging the rhetorical half-turn”, 32.



or empiricist science that occludes its own rhetoricity.”<sup>12</sup>

The effects of biblical readings that posture as “scientific” are, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, that the constructed social system, often patriarchal or otherwise oppressive, is naturalised and thus reinforces the rhetoric of the text’s social system.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, by positing potentially liberating scholarly discourses, such as ideological criticism, as methods *alongside* other methods, rather than acknowledging them as dimensions of *every* interpretation, the socio-political agenda is restricted only to those liberating approaches, while other approaches may neglect the socio-political issues at stake.

But how does Schüssler Fiorenza envision such a rhetorical full turn? It would only happen, she argues, “if it owns its political roots and space.”<sup>14</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza advocates the juxtaposition of a “rhetoric of inquiry” to the “traditional” rhetorical criticism as “a second order reflection on the positivist practices, unacknowledged theoretical frameworks and socio-political interests of scholarship that undergird its self-understanding as value-detached, objectivist science.”<sup>15</sup> But would such a second order reflection be enough to unsettle the established discourses within biblical studies? Is not a more radical critique of its foundation necessary? A critique that would displace these foundations and transcend them?

### 0.1.2 *Structure, sign and play*

When — over twenty years before Schüssler Fiorenza’s address — Jacques Derrida was invited to deliver a lecture at the International Colloquium on “Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man”, held at the Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, USA) in 1966, he was expected to introduce structuralism to an American audience. Instead, he introduced what only later would be labelled “deconstruction” or, referring to the writings of a broader group of French thinkers, “poststructuralism”. In more than one sense Derrida’s paper<sup>16</sup> would associate shock waves with his incipient international career. Seismic metaphors

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<sup>12</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Challenging the rhetorical half-turn”, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Challenging the rhetorical half-turn”, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Challenging the rhetorical half-turn”, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Challenging the rhetorical half-turn”, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences”, *Writing and difference*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) 278-293.



adequately describe the event — the rupture he caused was going to shake not only structuralist thought-building, but a wide array of intellectual disciplines.

As Derrida explained in his lecture, structure, or rather “the structurality of structure”, had “always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin”<sup>17</sup>. Without such a centre, in fact, structure and its stability would have been totally unthinkable. The play within structure was made possible by basing it on a fundamental ground, that was immobile and reassuringly certain. The centre itself, though, always had to remain outside the structure, transcendental, untouched by the play it made possible. As Derrida remarks, this not only presented incoherence, but, as such, the characteristic western expression of “the force of a desire”<sup>18</sup>, namely: to master the anxiety of change and incertitude.

Up to the event Derrida was alluding to, this centre was associated with a series of metaphors and metonymies that subsequently substituted each other — God, Man, Truth and so forth. Thus far, Derrida’s elaboration could easily be reconciled with the narration of Kuhnian paradigm-shifts. His most radical challenge, though, would be the consequences he would draw from this argumentation. According to him, the matrix of this history of substitution was “the determination of Being as *presence* in all the senses of the word”<sup>19</sup>. And while the “event” would have come about through analysing how structure was possible in the first place, an obvious deduction would be that there never could have been a self-present centre to start with:

“This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse — provided we can agree on this word — that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of difference. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.”<sup>20</sup>

What would the absence of such a transcendental signified, the loss of an Archimedean point of reference, mean for ethics and politics? Are ethics and politics possible at all in such a scenario? How could one decide which ethics

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, “Structure, sign and play”, 278

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, “Structure, sign and play”, 279.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, “Structure, sign and play”, 279.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, “Structure, sign and play”, 280.

and what politics to pursue? One of the most media-covered terrorist acts has put these questions on the macro-political table.

### *0.1.3 Terrorism and the new world order*

On September 11, 2001 two planes, hijacked by Islamic fundamentalist members of the terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda, flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. The most remarkable characteristic of this event was not the degree of destruction, carnage and general sense of insecurity generated by this terrible act of terrorist violence. Comparable events with similar impacts have happened before in the world, without, of course, the same degree of media coverage. It was rather the fact that an act of violence of this magnitude and with these effects was unprecedented in the United States of America, the undisputable centre of the new global capitalist world order. One year later the tears are still showing not only in the fabric of US American self-image, but also in the perplexity and lack of success of US American foreign policy.

If former Spanish president González is correct in his assessment of the current situation, then the problem does not lie so much in the lack of international consensus or political will to act, but in the lack of concepts, guidelines, and paradigms, in short, in the lack of a discourse that properly answers to the reconfigured world order in the post-Cold War era:

“The codes that allowed us to orient ourselves in the immediate past, with its taxonomy of bloc politics, Cold War, and economic cycles, are insufficient or irrelevant for diagnosing this global crisis, both in its economic and financial and, particularly, in its political and security aspects.”<sup>21</sup>

The global crisis is characterised by new fractures that have opened up in the international landscape. It is shaped not only by the loss of relevance of Europe and Japan, the marginalisation of Africa, or the politico-economical collapse of Latin America, but by the new rift that is appearing between the occident and what is neither occident nor quite the orient itself, “‘the other’, that which remains outside and is beginning to be perceived as the origin of the threats, with the risk of being configured, in the end, as referential new enemy”<sup>22</sup>. The almost religious

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<sup>21</sup> Felipe González, “La extraña crisis (2)”, *El país* (Tuesday, 16 July 2002); all translations are mine.

<sup>22</sup> González, “La extraña crisis (2)”.



appeal by President Bush to rally against the “axis of evil” evolves in this understanding as the inefficient and dramatic occlusion of a lack of strategy that tries to extend the Cold War political discourse by substituting it for a clash of civilisations.<sup>23</sup>

The impact of this crisis would have been far less dramatic and consequential if it had not manifested itself on the symbol of hegemonic globalised capitalism and shown that the world’s foremost powerful nation is more vulnerable from within than from without, that what makes the western world powerful — transport, telecommunication and financial credit technologies — is what also makes it most vulnerable to terrorist acts. “9/11”, as it has become known in the media, is only a dramatic symptom of causes that have been brewing for a while on the international scene. But it has presented the world, particularly the western world, with a face of suffering that had been suppressed as a symptom of the non-western world. How do such global, macro-political crises affect the individual? How do they impact upon the thinking of people at the centre of the economic, political, and military globe? A few years before, it was another far more quotidian sight that shook my way of thinking.

#### 0.1.4 *From Frankfurt to Cape Town*

I remember clearly the dreadful sight of the shacks in an informal settlement along the N2 highway from the airport to the town centre, when I arrived in Cape Town for the first time in May 1995. They were put together from the most eclectic materials into a *bricolage* that symbolised poverty, the fight for survival and desperation. Only hours later, I would be driven by an acquaintance to the “Waterfront”, a luxurious shopping and leisure theme park at Cape Town’s old harbour. The contrast could not have been more disquieting. While I knew similar scenarios from the media and my own experience respectively, it took the immediacy of this juxtaposition for me to start realising that both might be interrelated by discourses that had remained hidden through numerous relays from my naïve world view.

Passing regularly the informal settlements on the side of the highway on

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<sup>23</sup> The repeated apocalyptic tone of Bush’s appeal to “friends” and his identification of the “enemy” in such a problematic way as the “axis of evil” can be seen as the quintessential classical binarism of the core concept of the political in west. See the modern classic by Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen: Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 1987) and Derrida’s philosophical genealogy of this distinction in Jacques Derrida, *Politics of friendship*, tr. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997).

my way between my room in a well-off district of Cape Town and the postgraduate seminars in Stellenbosch, the disturbance caused by this view pushed me to redirect my research from the application of relatively established literary-critical approaches to the Gospel of John, to more general ethical questions regarding my possible future as a biblical scholar. How could I responsibly practice biblical studies in view of this imbalance of wealth and power? Very soon I realised that my identity as white and male inevitably made me complicit as beneficiary of this injustice and that, as a potential intellectual, I would have to respond and transform the skills I had acquired during my studies in order to change. I had to think critically through the practice of academic biblical studies, before I could confirm whether this is what I really wanted to do. In order to “save the world”, I learned, I would have to be “saved” first.

Four quakes, four tremors that opened up (or revealed pre-existing) cracks, rifts, and faults on the once firm ground that made academic work relatively unproblematic. The institutional context of biblical studies has itself felt some of the impact of these seismic shifts and has changed considerably in the last few decades. These may not be the easiest times to become a biblical scholar but they are certainly the sort of “interesting” times, well characterised by the ambiguity of the well-known Chinese curse — “May you live in interesting times!”

Biblical studies is going through a major identity crisis. This identity crisis has reached such metacritical dimensions that it is not only some methodological aspects of the academic practice that are being problematised, but a whole array of issues pertaining to its genealogy, ethico-political implications, and rhetorical discourses within a world that is increasingly framed by a globalised economic and cultural system. I would like to highlight some aspects of the shifts within the discipline and profession of biblical studies before I go on to explain in more detail the issues with which I will deal in this thesis.



## 0.2 Shifting ground

### 0.2.1 *The academic discipline of biblical studies*

If Fernando Segovia is right in his reading of contemporary biblical studies, the discipline is characterised by “a situation of seemingly stable anomie or liminality”<sup>24</sup>. This has manifested itself in that the once unifying methodological outlook has given way to an array of approaches, imported from neighbouring disciplines, particularly from literary and social studies. Segovia has plotted this evolution as the largely sequential emergence of different paradigms in three stages.<sup>25</sup> Firmly entrenched since the middle of the nineteenth century was the dominant historical criticism. This paradigm became highly contested with the arrival of literary and cultural (sociological and anthropological) approaches in the beginning of the 1970s, which established themselves within the discipline during the 1980s and into the 1990s, but without fully replacing the historical approach. Finally, already during the 1980s, a third paradigm started to gain a foothold in the discipline: cultural studies or ideological criticism.

Several discussions within the neighbouring disciplines of literary criticism and cultural criticism eventually forced biblical scholarship to wrestle with the important issue of how the real flesh-and-blood reader reads the bible and what role this reader plays in the construction of meaning. In literary studies the focus on the reader gradually shifted from the analysis of the reader as found within the formal features of the text to the reading process as the construction of meaning. In cultural studies it was the neo-Marxist notion of readers and their readings as socio-economic and ideological products, as well as the anthropological focus on readers and readings as socio-cultural products, that foregrounded real readers.<sup>26</sup>

Another noticeable change concerns the demographics of the discipline. Since its inception as a discipline, biblical studies had been the exclusive domain of white male western clerics. During the last twenty years, however, an

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<sup>24</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, “Racial and ethnic minorities in biblical studies”, *Ethnicity & the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett, Biblical interpretation series 19 (Leiden, New York and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996) 469-492; 477. Cf. his “Cultural studies and contemporary biblical criticism: ideological criticism as a mode of discourse”, *Reading from this place*, vol. 2: *Social location and biblical interpretation in global perspective*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 1-17; 1: “a state of seemingly stable if not actually permanent anomie”.

<sup>25</sup> Segovia, ““And they began to speak in other tongues’: competing modes of discourse in contemporary biblical criticism”, *Reading from this place*, vol. 1: *Social location and biblical interpretation in the United States*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 5-31. Cf. “Cultural studies”, 2-3 for a summary.

<sup>26</sup> Segovia, “Cultural studies”, 3.

increasing number of western women and non-western critics have had the opportunity to voice their points of view. This was, of course, related as much to the liberalisation of the academy as to the historical circumstances of post-war immigration,<sup>27</sup> which allowed the displacement of large numbers of people into western countries. Many of those who attended tertiary institutions did so with the memory of their marginalised and peripheral provenance, and some did not accept the *status quo* and began to ask awkward questions concerning the implicit assumptions behind western knowledge. But, as Segovia points out in the case of biblical studies, these new academics had been socialised through the academic institutions of the west, with its then still influential reigning paradigm of historical criticism, the close supervision of western male scholars, and through the unavoidable channels of the patriarchal pedigree lines:

"As such, these outsiders were very much subject to the powerful centripetal and homogenizing forces of this training, with its emphasis on the classic ideals of the Enlightenment: all knowledge as science; the scientific method as applicable to all areas of inquiry; nature or facts as neutral and knowable; research as a search for truth involving value-free observation and recovery of the facts; the researcher as a giant of reason who surveys the facts with disinterested eyes."<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, their academic socialisation was meant to show them not only the progress that historical criticism represented over against their own traditional interpretive approaches to the bible, but also the superiority of the west in general. In spite of this enculturation, however, it was only a matter of time before the character and agenda of traditional biblical criticism came under scrutiny. It was particularly the concept of the objective and impartial researcher that was questioned:

"This growing insistence on the situated and interested nature of all reading and interpretation brought additional, pointed, and unrelenting pressure on biblical criticism — already in serious turmoil as a result of internal methodological and theoretical challenges — to come to terms with the question of real readers, the flesh-and-blood readers."<sup>29</sup>

Having the experience of marginalisation and oppression of these groups as a hermeneutical point of departure, an array of advocacy approaches has

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<sup>27</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism*, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Segovia, "Racial and ethnic minorities", 478f.

<sup>29</sup> Segovia, "Racial and ethnic minorities", 479.



resulted from this development. They have consequently given way to a range of liberationist discourses (labelled liberation, black, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and so forth, according to the group of advocacy) and, more recently, postcolonial readings,<sup>30</sup> which are slowly but systematically uncovering the thoroughly gendered and ethnicised character of the still Eurocentric discipline.

### 0.2.2 *The profession of biblical scholars*

A further change is affecting the *professional context* — i.e. the profession of biblical scholarship and its network of learned organisations. There is still — for obvious historical and economical reasons — no truly *international* learned organisation in any significant form that has its origins outside of the west.<sup>31</sup> Those already established ones, moreover, are still overwhelmingly orientated and dominated by white male scholars. As the number of scholars from outside the west is rapidly increasing, there is a growing demand for professional structures that allow these scholars to voice their concerns and challenge the Western agenda of the established organisations. The Society of Biblical Literature, the largest learned biblical organisation, has taken some initial steps in accommodating this demand by beginning to hold their “international” meetings outside the USA and Europe. In response to these demographic changes the society has instituted groups like the African-American Theology and Biblical Hermeneutics Group, as well as the Bible in Africa, Asia, and Latin America Group, and approved of the formation of further groups reflecting the agenda of ethnic and racial minorities. Concerning this development, Segovia expresses his hopes as follows:

“Given the developments within the SBL in the United States, the Society could very well become, if it were to reach out and incorporate — in keeping with its stated goals — the ever-growing number of scholars from outside the West in biblical criticism, the first truly international organization in the profession, with enormous and healthy ramifications for both Western and non-Western critics alike.”<sup>32</sup>

Given the slowly disintegrating foundations of the academic project of biblical studies and the recent changes within the discipline and profession, two

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Postcolonialism and scriptural reading*, eds. Laura E. Donaldson, *Semeia* 75 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996 [only published 1998]) and chapter 13, footnote 58.

<sup>31</sup> Segovia, “Racial and ethnic minorities”, 482.

<sup>32</sup> Segovia, “Racial and ethnic minorities”, 482f.



interrelated problematic areas emerge. The first pertains to the ethico-political challenge of globalised capitalism, the second is related to the identity of the white male.

### 0.3 Responsibility and resistance

The greatest ethico-political problem facing contemporary intellectuals is that of the devastating effects of a hegemonic and globalised economic and cultural system. The analyses of this emerging system and the resistant strategies against it — intellectual and otherwise — do not have to be invented from scratch. Globalisation has its roots in modern colonialism and the latter has produced a rich tradition of anti-colonial movements in Europe and, even more importantly, in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>33</sup> This tradition of Third World counter-modernity is a revolutionary mixture of indigenous and cosmopolitan forces, which found its academic manifestation in the diasporic formation that has led to the emergence of postcolonial studies. The intrusion of these radically new thoughts into the academy should be understood as an intellectual collaboration with the political anti-colonial struggle. This nexus is elemental for the meaningfulness of an ethico-political responsible academic discourse, for, as Gayatri Spivak writes, “If academic and ‘revolutionary’ practices do not bring each other to productive crisis, the power of the script has clearly passed elsewhere.”<sup>34</sup>

My choice to develop the core part of this thesis in dialogue with Jacques Derrida may come as a surprise to some. It is precisely his relation to tricontinental<sup>35</sup> activism that is difficult to imagine for those less familiar with his

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<sup>33</sup> The most exhaustive and insightful study is Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: an historical introduction* (Oxford and Malden [Massachusetts]: Blackwell Publishers, 2001). Postcolonial studies, as an academic field, has established itself in the last decade and has produced a number of anthologies, critical readers, introductions and dictionaries. Cf., in addition to the outstanding Young, *Postcolonialism*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The post-colonial studies reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); edited by the same, *Post-Colonial Studies: the key concepts*, Routledge key guides (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Padmini Mongia (ed.), *Contemporary postcolonial theory: a reader* (London, New York, Sydney, and Auckland: Arnold, 1996); C. Tiffin and A. Dawson (eds.), *Describing empire: post-colonialism and textuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial discourse and postcolonial theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the teaching machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 53.

<sup>35</sup> With Young (*Postcolonialism*, 4f.), I will prefer this term, instead of the more disadvantageous “Third World”, as a geographical, locational, and cultural description in reference to the three continents of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. It has its roots in the great “Havana Tricontinental”, the first conference of the “Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America” at Havana in 1966 and the journal *Tricontinental*. This designation tries to avoid

writings. As I will try to show in the second part of this thesis, however, Derrida's ethico-political importance can be traced back to his experience of hybridity and oppression as an Algerian Jew. The counter-colonial aspect of his writings is his radical critique of European thought — European, western, or occidental always understood as a hyper-real phenomenon. It is radical in a double sense: it tackles the unacknowledged concepts and gestures that are at the root of the hegemonic western discourse (radical as *radix*, Latin “root”) and it demands a total reinvention of ethics and politics as concepts and practices (radical as “extreme”). Ethics is redefined in a Levinasian sense as responsibility towards the other, while the other is understood as the irreducible and infinite element that disrupts the horizon, epistemologically and politically. A deconstructed biblical studies is thus envisioned in this thesis as a thorough postcolonial intervention. What this could mean for the discipline will be discussed from a particular point of view: my situatedness as white male scholar.

#### **0.4 How it feels to be a problem**

One of the many memorable sayings attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu follows along the lines of: “The gospel does not only comfort the afflicted, it also afflicts the comfortable!” As someone who has been emotionally afflicted by the suffering and oppression of the majority of the world's population and intellectually afflicted by the emerging resistant and subversive voices within the academy, I begin to feel the mirror effect of the phenomenon described by Du Bois — “How does it feel to be a problem?”<sup>36</sup>. As a white male the prospect of altering the discourse of biblical studies into a more ethically responsible and politically resistant discourse is ambiguous, at best. On the one hand, there is the insight that the hegemonic power structures, which have universalised the interests of white males, convert the latter into accomplices of the marginalisation and oppression effected by this system. On the other hand, it is these structures and the discourses that sustain them that make out and secure the very identity of the white male.

This critical aporia frames and fuels this thesis. Is there an ethically responsible way for white male biblical scholars to change in a way that goes

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homogenising and dichotomising these three continents as “the South” and/or the “non-West”.

<sup>36</sup> W. E. Du Bois, *The souls of Black folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989 [original 1903]) 1.



beyond either persisting in those discourses that maintain their privileged status or totally relinquishing their identity? Or, put in more existential categories: Is there an ethically responsible way between life (as usual) and death? How can white males survive this aporetic challenge? What would the elements involved be in a reinvention of a white male identity (of the biblical scholar) that resists, subverts, and transforms the oppressive structures from which he profits and with which he is implicated? How can we conceptualise this problem in a rigorous way? What are the contextual discourses that frame such a reinvention? Are there any specific strategies that can be followed for this to occur?

Due to this particular focus, I will use a critical discussion of projects by three white male biblical scholars — Daniel Patte, Jeffrey Staley, and Gerald West — as the starting point of my argument. The reason I have chosen these three scholars is related to the radicality — again in the double sense in which Derrida is radical — with which they have developed concrete stances in view of the contemporary ethico-political challenges to biblical studies, on the one hand, and their white male identity, on the other. This is *not* because I believe that white male scholars should be primary interlocutors — quite the contrary! — but because these three scholars have offered well-published projects, which problematise the ethico-political challenges to biblical studies *for* and *as* white male scholars. I understand my thesis to be a critical contribution to the issues raised by these three scholars. If I use the masculine gender to denote the biblical scholar and the feminine to denote the subaltern, I do so consciously, and to indicate that my thesis is written from a white male perspective, which I understand to be inherently hegemonic.

## 0.5 Thesis and outline

The generic characteristics of a thesis make it necessary to objectify a core issue as its centre and organise an argumentative line around this “problem”, towards its “solution”. As it will become clearer, particularly in part two of this thesis, however, the same gesture that makes this necessary will also reveal the impossibility of a “solution”. Keeping in mind this tension, and even contradiction, I will nevertheless venture such a discourse, while always allowing a more impressionistic and sometimes dialectic style to permeate my argumentation, in order to do justice to this aporetic character. What, then, is the problem addressed in this thesis?

The problem is how to resist and subvert the complicity of biblical studies with neo-colonialism, in the form of the totalising globalisation of capitalism, as a white male biblical scholar. My thesis put forward here will be that it is the other — understood as infinite and irreducible — that opens up the habitual vicious circle of identity formation and identifiable practices. This interruption is a moment of true decision, that is a moment where the self cannot follow any pre-established ethico-political programme but has to respond in a truly innovative way. The space in which such an interruption occurs is the interstitial borderline, the liminal space and interface between the self and its other. In order to translate this generalised thesis to the field of biblical studies, I will construct the intellectual and academic context as one in which the modern foundation, which provided the collective power of the intellectual and made the university an indispensable institution for the powerful nation-state, has largely been eroded. In this scenario the intellectual has been transformed from an ethical-cultural legislator into an interpreter-translator and the university from the institution that produced subjects for the nation-state to one that inculcates marketable skills for the global market.

In this context, the aporia that opens up the interstices of the university demands a double duty and a double strategy. The academic intellectual has a duty towards the institutional tradition, even as it is being transformed or eroded by market forces — an unconditional intellectual freedom. He also has a duty towards the ethico-political challenges with which he is confronted — a conditioned intellectual responsibility. The double strategy follows the traditional academic discourses in the most rigorous of ways, while, at the same time reinventing them, hybridising them and innovating in responsibility to the other. I will elaborate this double strategy in four areas within the discourse of biblical studies: historicist approaches, intervention in non-academic biblical practices, literary approaches, and, more generally, the academic practices of biblical scholars.

I will develop this thesis in three parts. The first part is a critical discussion of Daniel Patte's androcritical criticism, Jeffrey Staley's autobiographical criticism, and Gerald West's interfacial work with communities from poor and marginalised backgrounds. The second part brings the core concepts, gestures, and metaphors distilled from my discussion in part one under the philosophical scrutiny of Jacques Derrida's thinking. In the third and final part of the thesis I will elaborate some of the consequences of my thesis for the academic discourse of biblical studies.



## PART ONE

Daniel Patte, Jeffrey Staley, and Gerald West are arguably among those contemporary white male biblical scholars that have dealt most extensively with the ethico-political questions concerning biblical interpretation. Their work is of particular interest here, since they have not only contributed each with a strategic proposal to reconfigure biblical criticism, but have also each placed their problematised identities at the centre of these reconfigurations.

Daniel Patte, descendant of French Huguenots and formally educated in France, is Professor of New Testament and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, and Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at The Divinity School, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, USA. Jeffrey Staley, who grew up as the son of Plymouth Brethren missionaries in a Navajo reservation in north-eastern Arizona, teaches in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Seattle University, Washington, USA. South African Gerald West is currently Associate Professor at the School of Theology at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and is well known for his work as Director of the Institute for the Study of the Bible, a joint project between the School of Theology and local communities from a poor and marginalised background.

The purpose of this first part of the thesis is to critically engage each of these three proposals, a chapter being devoted to each scholar, in order to establish the relevant contributions that can be instrumental in developing an ethically more responsible professional discourse as white male biblical scholar. The contributions I will want to gain from these three scholars will not only consist solely of discursive strategies, but also of key metaphors and metonymies with which they formulate their singular constructions of the problem. A final chapter will eventually juxtapose the results of my assessments of each scholar and venture a more cumulative reading, which binds closer together some of the argumentative strands singled out in the previous three chapters.

# 1 DANIEL PATTE: CRITICISM AS FULL DISCLOSURE

“At root there is a ‘distance’ or rift between ourselves and our practices, between our vocation and what is supposed to be its implementation.”<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Patte

## 1.1 Taking the symptoms to be the disease: ruptured identities

“Are we ethically responsible when we perform critical exegesis? When we present in writing the results of our critical studies to an indefinite public of potential readers? When we teach critical biblical studies to classes in an academic or church context? When we preach on the basis of a critical exegetical study of a biblical text?”<sup>2</sup>

These were the central and disturbing questions that led Daniel Patte to a remarkable rethinking of central ethical questions concerning his practice of biblical scholarship. As he soon discovered, the ethical questions were closely related to his identity as one of the “male European-American critical exegetes”<sup>3</sup>. His honest reflection on his own practice gave way to a paradigm shift in his critical attitude. I call it an “attitude”, for Patte concludes that an ethically responsible gesture must, precisely, *not* present “a new methodology or a new procedure for ethically responsible critical biblical studies”<sup>4</sup>. Rather, it is a matter of acknowledging the ambivalence involved in biblical studies and the need “both to continue to follow these procedures and to practice exegesis according to very different procedures”<sup>5</sup>.

This conclusion was not a hasty one. It only emerged in reaction to the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Patte and Gary Phillips, “A fundamental condition for ethical accountability in the teaching of the Bible by white male exegetes”, *Scriptura* S9 (1991) 7-28; 10.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Patte, *Ethics of biblical interpretation: a reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Patte, *Ethics of biblical interpretation*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Patte, *Ethics of biblical interpretation*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Patte, *Ethics of biblical interpretation*, 5.



strong objections of feminist, womanist, African-American and male Hispanic participants in a conference on “Ethical responsibility and practices in biblical criticism”, held at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, U.S.A., on March 1991. Addressing the exclusion, alienation and co-optation of non-male, non-white scholars in universities and seminaries through the traditional teaching practices in biblical studies, the initial preoccupation led to focus solely on these symptoms, neglecting the far more subtle ramification of the problem. As Patte points out, this approach followed the discourse he was educated in and had thus become his second nature:

“I have been trained to proceed in a scientific and critical/methodological way: identify a problem; analyze it; formulate a way of addressing it; propose a solution. I could not be myself — that is, I could not be a ‘critical’ exegete — if I did not proceed in this way”<sup>6</sup>.

The instinctive double gesture of the European-American male participants, involved, firstly, to distance themselves from the effects of their practices and treat these effects as “objects” to be analysed and, secondly, to disavow their privileged status by assuming a sympathetic stance towards the marginalised and oppressed, and proceeded to represent their own points of view in an unproblematised manner. This double gesture not only situated them in the allegedly detached and neutral position from which they were trained to interpret the biblical texts, it also — as the other participants reiterated — revealed a more worrisome disease behind these symptoms, “the profound conflict that exists between our practices and our *raison d’être* — what we call our vocation — as critical exegetes”<sup>7</sup>. As Patte started to recognise this, he began to acknowledge that it was precisely at this point where things were going wrong:

“Instead of confronting this rift in an effort to bridge it, we ignore, suppress and ultimately deny it. Consequently, we live with a sort of ruptured identity embodied in all our practices and duplicated whenever we find new ways of distancing ourselves from ourselves and from others. Informed by a spirit of scientific inquiry and aided by positivist methods, we modern white male exegetes hold critical exegesis to be quintessentially an objectifying task whose goal is to distance ourselves even from the text and from the processes of

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<sup>6</sup> Patte, *Ethics of biblical interpretation*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Patte & Phillips, “A fundamental condition for ethical accountability”, 10.



interpretation.”<sup>8</sup>

This stereotypical approach of the white male hegemony in biblical studies — labelled “androcentric” by feminist scholars and “Eurocentric” by African-American scholars — had to be replaced by a more ethically responsible effort, an effort Patte put forward as “androcritical”. If the “androcentric”/“Eurocentric” mode of representation rendered the scholar invisible, the “androcritical” approach would have to discover, recover and own the hegemonic white male perspective in all its historical and contextual specificity.<sup>9</sup> Patte’s essential presupposition is that “the experiences of those who occupy the center are equally important for understanding the problem as those who are marginalized”<sup>10</sup>. Those experiences had to be acknowledged and affirmed first, and only then could they be problematised and altered. But in order to achieve this acknowledgment and affirmation, white biblical scholars have to think about their sense of vocation as biblical scholar.

## **1.2 The vocation of a biblical scholar and the politics of inclusion**

What is the vocation of the critical exegete? Patte points out that the hegemonic sense of vocation is still rooted in the Enlightenment. It is epitomised in the critic’s aim to “free people from their obscurantist readings of the Bible”<sup>11</sup>. According to this understanding, it is particularly the dogmatic, evangelical fundamentalist, and the integrist paradigms that are causing psychological, social, political, cultural and/or religious damage by alienating people from one another. For Patte this has had different emphases in the successive stages of his academic career. First, he developed his critical readings in order to counter and provide a critical alternative to evangelical fundamentalist interpretations of the bible. Underlying this zeal was his first-hand experience — an experience shared by a large number of biblical scholars — of legalistic and stultifying readings that fostered several forms of alienation and oppression in the church and in society. A second

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<sup>8</sup> Patte & Phillips, “A fundamental condition for ethical accountability”, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Patte & Phillips, “A fundamental condition for ethical accountability”, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Patte & Phillips, “A fundamental condition for ethical accountability”, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Patte, *Ethics of biblical interpretation*, 75.

form of obscurantism, against which his vocation was meant to react, is inherent in the contemporary secularisation process in many western societies. The pervasive presence of fundamentalism claims sole ownership over the bible's interpretation and thus makes it almost impossible for modern people to appropriate the message of the bible. In a third stage Patte tried to counter the obscurantism that goes along with sectarianism and its resulting church divisions. This threefold vocation is fostered by the responsibility of the scholar/intellectual *vis-à-vis* the society in which he practices his critical readings.

The first aspect of his vocation provides for Patte a particularly insightful conclusion and it is this first aspect in which I am interested. The way in which biblical scholars had responded to fundamentalist obscurantism, however, created ambiguous effects, since it replicated one of the most essential fundamentalist traits — one-dimensionality — through their critical readings. On the one hand, the rift that separated the academic “ivory tower” from the rest of society increased, while fundamentalism could flourish and ignore critical scholarship. On the other hand, it created a dilemma for those exegetes who still maintained some sort of residual evangelical faith, for they were obliged to either deny their conviction concerning the authority of the bible and divorce themselves from their faith communities, or to adopt a fundamentalist attitude and become marginalised in the academy.<sup>12</sup> Patte acknowledges the failure of his practice in constructively engaging the oppressive effects of fundamentalist obscurantism. For the demand put forward to the fundamentalists implied a radical denial of their experience and thus of their *raison d'être* and identity. The clear line of demarcation drawn between fundamentalism and critical scholarship also alienated other evangelicals who shared some fundamentalist convictions, albeit in a less radical form.

The root problem, however, was the replication of the one-dimensional absolutisation of the fundamentalist faith experience in equally one-dimensional scholarly interpretations that pretended to offer the one true reading of the text. The text was seen as the repository of a single truth and the task of the critic was to retrieve this single truth in the one single reading. Hence the restriction of ethical issues to finding the right methodology for uncovering the single true meaning in the text.

It is clear from this argumentation that an ethical response to this situation had to transcend the one-dimensionality of both fundamentalism and traditional

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<sup>12</sup> Patte, *Ethics of biblical interpretation*, 81.



scholarship. Critical readings, argues Patte, will have to accept, at least several, if not all possible readings of a text as legitimate. Patte grounds this approach, informed by Greimasian semiotics, in an understanding of the “text” as characterised by a multiple meaning-producing potential:

“The text does not offer itself as a simple, one-dimensional puzzle, but rather as a complex, multi-dimensional puzzle, the pieces of which can be organized into several different coherent pictures — several coherent meanings of the polysemic text.”<sup>13</sup>

He illustrated this understanding of the text with a metaphor that is reminiscent of the Bakhtian carnivalesque: a text consists of multiple, discordant voices.<sup>14</sup> The act of reading, it follows, consists of the ability to recognise and choose among certain textual voices by making epistemological judgements based on the value standards of a particular reader.

### **1.3 Towards full self-consciousness: the ordinary and the critical**

If Patte’s vocation is so closely related to interpretations of the bible outside the academy, how does he conceive of the relationship between so-called “critical” readings performed by biblical scholars and so-called “ordinary” readings? Historically, this is a highly problematical relationship. In response to a collection of articles on this topic, Patte recognised the traditional view of this relationship to be “reminiscent of colonialist relationships”<sup>15</sup>. It is an unequal dualism that separates the two realms and the interaction is couched in colonial terms:

“According to the traditional conception, propagated by male European-American scholars, critical readers tend to present themselves as possessors of a knowledge (about the Bible and how to interpret it) which they impart to ordinary readers who lack such a knowledge and are therefore bound to have improper readings of the

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<sup>13</sup> Patte, *Ethics of biblical interpretation*, 99.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Patte, “Biblical scholars at the interface between critical and ordinary readings: a response”, *Semeia* 73 (1996) 270.

<sup>15</sup> Patte, “Biblical scholars at the interface”, 263.

Bible as long as they are not properly instructed.”<sup>16</sup>

But as Patte’s portrayal of his sense of vocation has shown, the difference between “critical” and “ordinary” runs right through the discourse of his own vocation. The reason for this is that, while the scholar defines himself *vis-à-vis* the “ordinary” reader in general, the dialectical relationship is also internalised in his own practice, for “*the same person can be at any given moment an ‘expert-critical reader’ or an ‘ordinary reader’ of the Bible*”<sup>17</sup> — it splits him into two halves. Similar to Steiner’s distinction between “critic” and “reader”,<sup>18</sup> Patte recognises this distinction to be disattached from individual persons: “It is a matter of attitude, not of person.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the distinction between the biblical scholar and the “ordinary” reader is the distinction between two discourses that are attached to certain institutionalised contexts, rather than to a particular personal identity. Patte’s concept of identity, therefore, is coherent with his concept of text. Both can be imagined as the accumulation of divergent voices or discourses. But the question remains: how are “critical” readings related to “ordinary” ones?

In what seems to be an inversion of their traditional evaluation, Patte emphasises the epistemological priority of ordinary readings *vis-à-vis* critical ones. The former seems to be always the preceding starting point for the latter: “critical resources and critical readings are not, and have never been, the initial entry into the reading process”<sup>20</sup>. Critical readings are ordinarily induced by “hunches” and “intuitions” — i.e. “ordinary” readings —, which are sought to be submitted to “critical” explanations.<sup>21</sup> These “hunches” and “intuitions” are, furthermore, usually “initiated because in scholars’ contexts certain pragmatic readings ... are problematic”<sup>22</sup>. The exegetical practice can be seen, in this context, as the pilgrimage from the “ordinary” to the “critical”, from the “ordinary” reader as “someone who has not taken the time to be self-conscious about the process of reading he or she performs”<sup>23</sup> to the desired state of full self-consciousness achieved in truly critical scholarship — hence the most elemental

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<sup>16</sup> Patte, “Biblical scholars at the interface”, 264.

<sup>17</sup> Patte, “Biblical scholars at the interface”, 266.

<sup>18</sup> George Steiner, “‘Critic’/‘reader’”, *New literary history* 10 (1979) 423-452.

<sup>19</sup> Patte, “Biblical scholars at the interface”, 266.

<sup>20</sup> Patte, “Biblical scholars at the interface”, 266.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Patte, “Textual constrains, ordinary readings, and critical exegeses: an androcritical perspective”, *Semeia* 62 (1993) 69.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Patte, “When ethical questions transform critical biblical studies”, *Semeia* 77 (1997) 279.

<sup>23</sup> Patte, “Biblical scholars at the interface”, 268.



and basic definition of criticism as a practise that “makes explicit ... *all* (rather than a few of) the different interpretive choices that it involves”<sup>24</sup>.

There remains, thus, a shortcoming on the side of traditional biblical scholarship. For, if it is the critical goal to elucidate *all* interpretive choices made during the reading of a biblical text, biblical studies has been traditionally too narrow in its focus. Patte shows the fatality of divorcing two integral aspects of the reading process — the textual dimension and the pragmatic dimension.<sup>25</sup> If “critical biblical studies’ have traditionally been limited to the critical assessment of interpretations *of the text* and of the ways it addresses monolithic readers”, true criticality needs to incorporate the aspect of “reading our human experience in terms of biblical texts”<sup>26</sup>. Hence “critical biblical studies needs to include the assessment of *both* the way in which we interpret the text from the perspective of specific contexts *and* the way in which the text interprets our contexts”<sup>27</sup>.

Patte has also described this incorporation as a dialectical negotiation between the “rights of the text” and the “rights of the reader”. This argument presents a critique of the subject/object dichotomy, whereby “an interpretation is *either* subjective *or* objective; one gives a marked priority *either* to the role of readers ... *or* to the role of texts and their constraints”<sup>28</sup>. Traditionally, the pragmatic or subjective aspects of biblical interpretations have been referred to neighbouring disciplines, like hermeneutics, theology, homiletics. At best they have been either suppressed or subordinated. While in approaches influenced by positivistic and hermeneutical perspectives the focus was on finding ways to bracket out preunderstandings from the reading practice, approaches that acknowledged the role of preunderstandings still focused primarily on the textual dimension.<sup>29</sup> Patte makes clear, however, that his insights cannot mean

“an exhortation to include the pragmatic dimension in critical readings. Such an exhortation would be needed if scholarly readings were not doing it already! Rather ... every reading of a biblical text always includes this pragmatic dimension. The question then becomes: How

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount: four legitimate readings, four plausible views of discipleship, and their relative value* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996) 2.

<sup>25</sup> Patte, “Ethical questions”, 273f.

<sup>26</sup> Patte, “Ethical questions”, 276.

<sup>27</sup> Patte, “Ethical questions”, 275.

<sup>28</sup> Patte, “Textual constraints”, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Patte, “Ethical questions”, 275.

must we reconfigure our critical practices in order to make this pragmatic dimension explicit?"<sup>30</sup>

Patte therefore does not wish to suggest merely an additional step, an afterthought. His proposal is rather the proposal of a new framework.

In order to map the interpretative procedures that take place during the reading — critical *and* ordinary — of the bible, Patte has developed a heuristic grid of conclusions and judgements that most directly shape and authorise interpretations. He distinguishes three kinds of conclusions that are reached in the process of reading the bible. First, there are the conclusions about what the text is and says (CAWs), including the conclusions about which features of the text are important. These are conclusions that are legitimated by grounding them on selected aspects of the meaning-producing potential of the text. Secondly, there are the conclusions about the teaching of the text (CATs). These concern "the teaching that has the potential to affect readers of the text ... because it is about a theme ... that is *plausible* for these readers"<sup>31</sup>. Thirdly, there also are the conclusions about the relative value (CARVs) of a given interpretation. These include conclusions "about the different ways in which their respective conclusions about the teaching of the text (CATs) affect the interpreter and other actual readers due to the positive or negative relationship of these interpretations to the readers' convictions and commitments in specific concrete situations"<sup>32</sup>. This latter category comes close to what in traditional biblical studies has been labelled the "application" of the text.

These conclusions have been reached via different judgements that are specific to each type of conclusion. Legitimacy judgements represent the critical argument in connection to the evidence, warrants, criteria and methods used in the interpretation. They ascertain the legitimacy of the specific interpretation as properly grounded in textual evidence and lead to the conclusions about what the text is and says. Epistemological judgements are the kind of judgements that conceptualise and establish the plausibility of the specific interpretation, making sense of the conclusions about the teaching of the text. Finally, there are the value judgements that lead to the conclusions about the relative value of the reading.

In an ideal critical interpretation *all* these judgements and conclusions

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<sup>30</sup> Patte, "Ethical questions", 276.

<sup>31</sup> Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*, 18f.

<sup>32</sup> Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*, 19.



should be made explicit during the interpretive process. But, as Patte notes, traditional scholarly interpretations fail to make explicit some of them. Patte juxtaposes the traditional scholarly approach to *pro me* or *pro nobis* interpretations. By these Patte means “ordinary” readings, which are characterised through a devotional or advocacy interest.<sup>33</sup> These readings are very explicit about their interested character, emphasising how the text affects the interpreter through a specific teaching. Hence “*pro me* or *pro nobis* interpretations cannot but foreground their *conclusions about the teaching* of the text”<sup>34</sup>. They usually also allude to the epistemology and value judgements without making them fully explicit. In contrast, scholarly interpretations seem to focus almost entirely on the conclusions about what the text is and says. They explicitly state their legitimacy judgements.

The comparison of these two discourses shows that they focus on different aspects of the interpretive process and make them explicit. The most pertinent aspect of their relationship is, according to Patte, that “each scholarly interpretation can be viewed as a second-level interpretation that makes explicit the warrants and the legitimacy judgments that a *pro me* or *pro nobis* reading left implicit”<sup>35</sup>. In view of an exemplary model for critical interpretation, both paradigms can be seen as complementing each other in making explicit different judgements and conclusions. The role of the critic, therefore, is to complement these two approaches and to make explicit the judgements and conclusions mostly implicit in both of them: epistemological judgements and the corresponding conclusions about the teaching of the text. This latter aspect may be seen as one of Patte’s most original contributions, for it constitutes the “grey area” which, being implicit in both *pro me/nobis* and traditional biblical scholarship, is still awaiting a critical disclosure. The critical reframing Patte is proposing could, therefore, constitute a first step towards bridging the rift between “critical” and “ordinary” interpretive discourses. The comparison between the three paradigms — *pro me* or *pro nobis* interpretations, traditional scholarly interpretations, and exemplary critical interpretations — can be illustrated in relation to the explicitness/implicitness of their judgements and conclusions in the following table form<sup>36</sup>:

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<sup>33</sup> Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*, 24.

<sup>36</sup> This table is a slight adaptation of Patte’s table in Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*, 24.



	<i>Pro me/nobis</i> Interpretations	Traditional Scholarly Interpretations	Exemplary Critical Interpretations
Conclusions about the relative value of the teaching of a text (CARVs)	explicit	implicit	explicit
Value Judgement	+/- explicit	implicit	explicit
Conclusions about the teaching of a text (CATs)	+/- explicit	+/- explicit	explicit
Epistemology Judgement	implicit	+/- explicit	explicit
Conclusions about what the text is and says (CAWs)	implicit	explicit	explicit
Legitimacy Judgements	implicit	explicit	explicit

Being consistent with his point of departure, Patte has applied this grid to the various readings on the Sermon of the Mount by a number of white male scholars.<sup>37</sup> If white male scholars need to acknowledge and affirm the contextual character of their critical practice, this is a vital step that Patte is taking for himself and on behalf of other white males. All these readings are shown to be legitimate (i.e. they are grounded on aspects of the text) and plausible (i.e. they make sense in specific contexts). They are, however, not equally valuable. Assessing the value of each reading, Patte's own singularity shines through his otherwise tolerant embrace of otherness. It is here where the radical edge of his pluralistic stance seems to end. This should not come as a complete surprise, since Patte acknowledges the contextual character not only of his critical reading practice, but also of his theoretical stance. Ultimately, everybody prioritises a single interpretation as truly sensible and truly valuable: "a multidimensional study is always practiced by a one-dimensional interpreter"<sup>38</sup>. There exists, therefore a dialectical tension between these two approaches. A tension Patte would like to maintain.<sup>39</sup>

But does Patte fall back at this point to the problematic onedimensionality? Does the multidimensional mask slip, at this point, from the

<sup>37</sup> Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*. The scholars analysed are G. Strecker, J. D. Kingsbury, R. A. Edwards, U. Luz, W. D. Davies and D. Allison, as well as Patte himself.

<sup>38</sup> Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*, 48.

onedimensional face. The question for me, then, is: how am I to assess the value of his proposal? What is Patte's contribution towards a more responsible critical practice in biblical studies? There is no question in my mind that Patte's androcritical ethics present a timely challenge to the hegemony of biblical studies. But how radical is this challenge? What are its political implications? Does it go far enough?

#### 1.4 A step in the right direction: but is it enough?

As Robert Crosman once argued, the discussions between advocates of onedimensional and multidimensional models of textual meaning rest, in the end, on political arguments and models.<sup>40</sup> On the one hand, there is the monarchic model, where the king imposes his imperial decision on the rest of society. His truth is one — unambiguous, self-consistent, and knowable. This model has been sufficiently criticised in recent times, particularly for its implication in western colonialism and imperialism. On the other hand, there is the model of a liberal and pluralistic democracy, where, at least ideally, diversity is tolerated and truths are relativised. In view of this suggestion, Patte's paradigm change seems a timely imperative. It would mean the replacement of monarchic metaphors with more contemporary images of tolerance and diversity. Rather than being a radical assertion, then, Patte's proposal could be seen as the timely adaptation of a critical discourse to the discursive demands of society at large. As Crosman also pointed out, however, it is the role of the critic that feels the impact of this change most dramatically. While in the monarchic political model the onedimensional meaning is anchored in the authorial intention or the coherent text, it is the critic who, due to his expertise, is able to decide which of the various interpretations is the "true" one. The critic is thus elevated to function as a critic-judge.<sup>41</sup> In the pluralistic model, however, the critic's function is generally evaluated according to the usefulness of his readings to specific "ordinary" readers. The questions arising in this case concern the political effects of Patte's

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Crosman, "Do readers make meaning?", *The reader in the text: essays on audience and interpretation*, eds. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1980) 149-164, cf. 157. Although Crosman's discussion focuses on the issue of whether the text or reader "make" meaning, his insight can be slightly expanded to include one- vs. multidimensionality in general.

<sup>41</sup> Crosman, "Do readers make meaning?", 160.



approach. Are there interests, strategies, or tactics that are meant to remain hidden? What happens if one discloses them? What may be useful for one interpretive community may be dangerous for another. Is Patte's project then desirable in every case?

If, according to Patte, the role of the biblical scholar is to bring to critical understanding and full self-consciousness *all* the decisions made in the reading process of the bible, what should be gained with this consciousness? Why is it desirable? Who does it benefit? For Patte's main interlocutor — the white male biblical critic — his challenge consists of the possibility of owning up to one's interpretive practice. The contextual character of any interpretation is a phenomenon readily acknowledged when it concerns other interpreters. When problematised in relation to white male scholars, the situation seems somewhat more delicate. There are issues of political power at stake. There is also the aspect that a hegemonic white male identity has been "naturalised" to such a degree that it takes additional effort to recognise such an identity as situated. But this is a vital step, if white male scholars want to change those interpretive practices that have been complicit in systemic oppression and marginalisation. But what about this contextualisation in view of its broader social ramifications?

A move towards a democratisation and pluralisation of biblical interpretations may constitute a radical step forward in the eyes of the current hegemony, but it is hardly radical in the eyes of critics and "ordinary" readers from marginalised communities. Homi Bhabha's distinction between diversity and difference in relation to "culture" may be helpful in elucidating this point.<sup>42</sup> Patte's admirable attempt to capture all interpretive judgements and conclusions into his classificatory net may well be a necessary first step,<sup>43</sup> it will not solve the problem posed by liberal notions of multiculturalism:

"Culture only emerges as a problem, or a problematic, at the point at which there is a loss of meaning in the contestation and articulation of everyday life, between classes, genders, races, nations. Yet the reality of the limit or limit-text of culture is rarely theorized outside of well-intentioned moralist polemics against prejudice and stereotype, or the blanket assertion of individual or institutional racism — that describe the effect rather than the structure of the problem. The need to think

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<sup>42</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 32ff.

<sup>43</sup> It would be unfair to criticise Patte's work-in-progress for not having taken a second step, but the stakes and need for this additional aspect have to be pointed out at this moment.

the limit of culture as a problem of the enunciation of cultural difference is disavowed.”<sup>44</sup>

If Bhabha is to be followed, then the diversification of equally legitimate and plausible interpretations overlooks the liminal space that is created when established classifications are disturbed and contested and, thus, deconstructed. This liminal space, furthermore, must escape traditional categories of representation. It will also escape Patte’s closely-knit conceptual grid.

As I have already argued, there is a point at which Patte opts for a single interpretation, a point where his tolerance and acceptance *vis-à-vis* other interpretations ends. This twist is suspiciously parallel to the privatisation of religious beliefs in liberalised societies. Everything is accepted and tolerated in the public, as long as it does not sufficiently jeopardise the hegemonic order. In the secluded private sphere, the *pro me/nobis* sphere, however, the “true” partisan convictions may have their say. This model is too close to the neo-pragmatist model of Stanley Fish, which is as radical as it is inconsequential.<sup>45</sup> Readers from marginalised communities will, therefore, find this a step closer to real change, but a step that does not go far enough.

How radical, then, is Patte’s proposal? Patte’s central insight is that his critical practices have been a betrayal of the vocation as a critical scholar, which consists of achieving full explicitness and full self-awareness. As Patte himself would admit, this is hardly a new ideal. He responds to the ethical challenge posed by marginalised scholars within the limits of his Enlightenment ideal of full self-consciousness. But does not responsibility towards the other demand the transgression of such limits? Can one still speak of a real change, if we remain within those limits? Is Patte’s suggestion merely a new move in an old game?

A relatively original contribution by Patte is his rehabilitation of “ordinary” readings of the bible. If his assertion that every interpretation is ultimately grounded on such a reading is to be followed, then biblical studies has to rethink its dismissive attitude towards the “ordinary”. Such an assertion parallels liberation hermeneutic’s preferential option for popular readings, without the qualification of class. Patte’s effort to include such a discourse in a super-critical approach is an important contribution to addressing the pervasive concern of bridging the rift between the academic study of the bible and society at large. It

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<sup>44</sup> Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Stanley Fish, “Consequences”, *Doing what comes naturally: change, rhetoric, and the practice of theory in literary and legal studies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 315-341.



remains to be considered, though, whether such an inclusion does not co-opt the potential of resistance to oppression in many (but not all) “ordinary” approaches. There still remains a certain superiority of the critical discourse, in that it has a greater level of self-consciousness than both “ordinary” and traditional academic interpretive practices. The paternalistic and “colonial” *colour* of the academic discourse, in other words, is not relativised and diminished, it still retains some degree of its old attitude.

It seems to me that the answers to these questions can only be addressed if one goes on to make a further step in the journey towards ethical responsibility. This would lead to a more explicit encounter with the other. Up until now Patte has mainly retained white male scholars as his interlocutors. As I already remarked, this has been for strategic reasons and criticism is therefore limited. But how would Patte’s practice change if he were to be exposed more radically to the marginalised and oppressed? While this encounter provided the catalyst for his rethinking, the other still remain too marginalised in his theory and is unable to challenge his vocational ideals more radically.

A set of additional questions arise: Patte rightly recognises himself as a person who performs both “critical” and “ordinary” readings of the bible. According to him, the two are clearly related and their relationship should be acknowledged more explicitly in their inter-relationship. But what happens with such a disclosure? Are the “ordinary” reasons for “critical” readings to remain side by side? Is it possible to keep these two discourses — once their inter-relatedness is discovered — apart? Patte’s point of departure was the encounter with marginalised scholars (and students). Why do we read so little about this encounter in his writings, beyond some very abstract categorisations?<sup>46</sup> Will the abstract mode of biblical scholarship resist the temptation to disclose the concrete experiences that shape interpretations? This brings me to Jeffrey Staley and his autobiographical approach.

But before I turn my focus to Jeffrey Staley’s work, I wish to point out at this stage some important conclusions I draw from my discussion of Daniel Patte’s critical contribution. To begin with, his proposal shows the crucial role of the other in motivating such a rethinking of his own critical practice. That his engagement with the other is not entirely satisfactory is related to his legitimate caution not to co-opt the other. There seems to be a border between Patte and

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<sup>46</sup> For a more autobiographical style, however, see Daniel Patte, “The guarded personal voice of a male European-American biblical scholar”, *The personal voice in biblical interpretation*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 12-24.

his white male colleagues, on the one side, and the marginalised other(s), on the other, which Patte is not ready to cross yet. Another border — that between ordinary and academic discourses — is treated with less caution. Thus Patte's conceptual grid is applied with less hesitation and, as I have argued, critical liminal aspects of the "ordinary" other have to remain unrecognised in his approach.<sup>47</sup> This shows the dangers and, to a certain extent, legitimises Patte's hesitation in engaging the other more explicitly.

Besides the notion of the border, there is another metaphor that captures my critical assessment in this chapter — the circular gesture. Patte succeeds in showing how the Enlightenment ideal of full self-consciousness can be used successfully in denaturalising and situating the interpretive practices of white male scholars. This is, as he rightly points out, a necessary first step. But his proposal consciously stays within the limits of his conceptual paradigm, which consequently urges him to redirect his critical gaze towards himself and his white male peers. This gesture, therefore, presents an indispensable self-critical circular movement. The problematic aspect of Patte's proposal lies, however, in that the circle seems to remain within the borders of the same, without a necessary exposition to otherness. In other words, it does not become evident how this strategy, while certainly indispensable, can create change.

If the ethically necessary reinvention of white male identity could, therefore, be conceptually linked to these two notions — the dividing border and the circular movement — how can we reconfigure the gestures around these metaphors in order to facilitate a responsible encounter with difference, with the other? Perhaps Jeffrey Staley can help to answer this question.

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<sup>47</sup> As I will argue in chapter 15, this kind of conceptual grid should be considerably altered and extended by social theories that have been forged in the colonial encounter.



## 2 JEFFREY STALEY: A PASSIONATE PLEA FOR AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### 2.1 The print's first kiss: the reader victimised and repressed

From the middle of the 20th century onwards, biblical scholarship on the gospels saw the introduction of reading strategies that would subsequently focus on the author, the text, and the reader. Biblical scholars had roughly emulated the theoretical plot their secular cousins in literary studies had been acting out. The early 1950s saw the emergence of redaction criticism, a method that was interested in the theological motivations the author disclosed through the redactional changes done on the supposed sources.<sup>1</sup> In the late 1970s some biblical scholars started to focus on the narrative nature of the gospels. Informed by formalist approaches in literary theory, the interpretive attention was directed to the story narrated through the development of the plot, characterisation, and other rhetorical strategies characteristic of narrative forms. By the end of the 1980s, finally, the focus shifted again towards the reader, and the first monographs using reader-response criticism were published.

While in secular literary studies similar successive stages displaced the previous approach almost totally, in biblical studies they were rather superimposed on each other, causing considerable limitations to the full development of the succeeding stage. It is therefore telling, that an article by Robert Tannehill presented not only the first tentative application of reader-response criticism to the gospels but also a seminal study in the text-centred narrative criticism of the same.<sup>2</sup> Concurring with Stephen Moore's convincing portrayal of the development of literary approaches to the gospels,<sup>3</sup> institutional

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<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that redaction criticism produced its most successful studies on the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, since, by then, the two-sources hypothesis was firmly entrenched in biblical studies. This hypothesis allowed the relatively confident assumption that the Gospel of Mark, a reconstructed source Q (for German *Quelle*), and a pertinent strand of traditions were used as a *Vorlage* in writing Matthew and Luke. The gospels of Mark and John underwent less convincing redaction critical readings, since there is no persuasive consensus on the question of their sources.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Tannehill, "The disciples in Mark: the function of a narrative role", *Journal of religion* 57 (1977) 386-405.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels: the theoretical challenge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

and disciplinary constraints allowed the development of a reader-response criticism approach that amounted merely to a reader-oriented narrative criticism. Jeffrey Staley would admit by now that his dissertation, entitled *The print's first kiss* and published in 1988,<sup>4</sup> is a case in point.

Conceived as a rhetorical investigation of the implied reader in the Fourth Gospel, Staley offered an innovative and fresh reading that relied heavily on a communication model for narrative texts developed by Seymour Chatman.<sup>5</sup> According to this model the real flesh-and-blood author of a narrative communicates to the real flesh-and-blood readers through the text's implied author. This implied author<sup>6</sup> comprises "the unifying sense that the reader makes of a narrative"<sup>7</sup>. It represents the "static, overarching view of a text that a reader might develop from multiple readings" and, therefore, "the text's strategies and manipulative ploys".<sup>8</sup> Corresponding to this construct is the concept of the implied reader. Enjoying — in contrast to the implied author — temporal qualities, the implied reader represents "the affective qualities of the text"<sup>9</sup>, following "the unidirectional, forward movement of the text"<sup>10</sup>.

*The print's first kiss* argued convincingly how the Gospel of John's text uses a rhetorical strategy of misdirection in order to victimise the reader by manipulating the reader to make the wrong conclusions, "like false leads in a detective novel"<sup>11</sup>. "The text's evasive but no less intriguing and provocative strategies — typified by its misdirection — covertly invite the implied reader (and thus real readers) to learn ... what the nature of faith really is."<sup>12</sup> The text turns the implied reader into a victim of its irony by initially deceiving the reader into a trustful relationship with the implied author. It creates the misleading impression

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, *The print's first kiss: a rhetorical investigation of the implied reader in the Fourth Gospel*, Society of Biblical Literature dissertation series 82 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Story and discourse: narrative structure in fiction and film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> This heuristic concept was coined by Wayne Booth in *The rhetoric of fiction*, 2nd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> Staley, *The print's first kiss*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Staley, *The print's first kiss*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Staley, *The print's first kiss*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Staley, *The print's first kiss*, 35. The implied author is further distinguished from the narrator, as is the corresponding narratee from the implied reader. The narrator is "the teller of the story" (37) and the narratee, "the one to whom narrators address comments" (43). These two concepts will be neglected in my argument, since they don't effect the kind of observations I wish to make.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, *Reading with a passion: rhetoric, autobiography, and the American west in the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum Books, 1995) 4.

<sup>12</sup> Staley, *The print's first kiss*, 117.



that both are on a level intellectual and spiritual ground by sharing privileged insights: “The implied reader is thus drawn into the bosom of the implied author as the *monogenes* shares with ‘the Father’ (1:18).”<sup>13</sup> This relationship is soon undermined by the repeated victimisations in chapters 4, 7, 11, 13 and 21 only to be followed by disclosure of inside views that regain the allegiance of the implied reader. Clearly, Staley succeeded in showing the complexity of the relationship between the implied author and reader through a careful attention to narrative levels and sensitivity to changes in the reading process.

The brand of reader-response criticism advocated by Staley in *The print's first kiss* provided a series of advantages over against previous approaches to gospel texts. One of them was the way it disclosed the gospels as dynamic events. As Staley would characterise by hindsight, for many scholars this approach was a breeze of fresh air that carried with it the hopes of the restoration of a meaningful and persuasive text — a welcome reminiscence of their own devotional readings. The cross-disciplinary expedition to the territories of literary studies undertaken by a number of biblical studies was, after all, motivated by the hope to find “an antidote to the hard-line historical sorcery that vivisected the biblical text and sucked out its readerly impulse”<sup>14</sup>. Hence these scholars engaged in close readings of the text in search of signs that may reveal the thus far concealed life of a reader hidden within and below the text, and who would breathe new life into the biblical text.

The neglect of the rhetorical dynamics in biblical studies was acknowledged by Staley in the way he contextualised and framed his dissertation. Staley recognised that the gospel texts were produced and initially interpreted in a residual oral culture, in which the primary experience of such a text would have been to listen to the text being read aloud. Since then, western culture had experienced what Walter Ong coined as the “technologizing of the word”<sup>15</sup> — from handwriting or chirography to a stabilised print culture. The internalisation of the print medium had considerable consequences, particularly in proliferating an epistemology that would have recourse to spatial metaphors: “The utter regularity, completeness, and compactness of the modern printed text, its portability and perfect reduplicability, all encourage its conceptualization as

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<sup>13</sup> Staley, *The print's first kiss*, 92.

<sup>14</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. his classical monography: Walter J. Ong, *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word* (New York: Methuen Inc., 1982).

object, artifact, static spatial form.”<sup>16</sup> The apotheosis of the print culture left its imprint on the pages of the biblical texts in the subsequent appended verse and chapter numbers, preparing the grid that fostered the scientific method, which would excavate minute editorial layers and establish the complex redactional relationship to other texts in the same tradition.

Staley problematised the anachronistic nature of the kind of reader response criticism with which he chose to read John’s gospel, but chose to accept the influence of the print culture upon his interpretation as inevitable. Ironically, as Stephen Moore pointed out, reader response criticism did, inadvertently, more justice to the oral-aural historical context of the gospels than the author- and text-centred approaches of redaction criticism and narrative criticism. By highlighting the temporal aspect of reception, these critics focused on this, until then, almost totally neglected factor.

“Even as they move[d] away from traditional historical criticism, they t[ook] a significant if inadvertent step on behalf of the historical exegesis of the Gospels. They show[ed] us a time-bound exegetical method that is more adequate to the oral-aural situations that would have formed the original noetic and hermeneutic horizon of the Gospels.”<sup>17</sup>

This paradox could not have been better expressed as with the juxtaposition of “print” and “kiss” in the title of Staley’s dissertation, thus contrasting the traditionally spatial and innovative temporal aspects integrated in this approach.

There is another advantage of this form of reader response criticism, again pointed out lucidly by Stephen Moore. While, as we already remarked, the shifts of focus from author to text and reader in biblical studies were idiosyncratically characterised by the influence that the previous paradigm had upon the subsequent one. This created a positive, albeit ambiguous, spin-off for the focus upon the reader. Narrative criticism had generated a discourse that brought the biblical stories with its characters, plots, and so forth to the front. Superimposed on the text-centred story of narrative criticism, the reader became the hero/ine, the fictional character in a second story. As one could argue for Staley’s *The print’s first kiss*, his portrayal of the victimised reader could be seen as a strategy that allegorised his frustrations as suspenseful misdirection and confusion, and his arrival at solutions as happy endings to the story of the reader.

<sup>16</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 88.



This rendered the once hidden features of his critical readings explicit and reflected them back at the public. Washed ashore among those hidden features were also the disciplinary constraints imposed upon the emerging implied reader. The dispassionate objectivity and psychological distance of established scientific interpretations permitted only a reader who was “emotionally retarded”<sup>18</sup> and performed reactions to the narrative rhetoric of the text that were primarily noetic. The biblical guild’s strict rules of accreditation made sure that any idiosyncratic aspects betraying subjectivity were kept off-limits. Biblical studies has hardly been known for its innovations and this had, as Moore puts it, good reasons: “Thereby are the subjective proclivities of member readers kept within manageable bounds, critical consensuses and orderly disagreements made possible, and business-as-usual regularity maintained.”<sup>19</sup>

The formalist paradigm controlling reader response criticism in biblical studies had introduced the narrative dynamics of the reading process, but only by allowing readings that were “sensitively attuned to what may pass as permissible critical reading”<sup>20</sup> without challenging the established disciplinary discourse. The traditional critic, who had detailed familiarity with the text, created an idealistic *alter ego*, that provided the jaded and voyeuristic scholar with enough fresh and virginal responses that he would decently get away with without causing too much of a scandal within the guild. At the end of his portrayal of this formalist approach, Moore allows the reader to preview things to come: “Reader theory in literary studies is a Pandora’s box into which we, infant literary critics of the Bible, have barely begun to peer. Opened more fully it might release some unsettling, but possibly timely, ways of reconceiving biblical interpretation.”<sup>21</sup> Seven years later, after having knocked against the box’s lid, Staley would look back and remark with somewhat self-ironically: “The signs are clear and unambiguous: Warning: Reading in Process. Wash your hands, disinfect your clothing, and check your personal effects at the door.”<sup>22</sup>

Almost a decade later, Staley would present himself to the world of biblical scholarship in an explicit post-formalist dress. How and why did he change? It is upon this question that I will focus in the following section.

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<sup>18</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 107.

<sup>21</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 107.

<sup>22</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 13.

## 2.2 Dropping a mask

When an article of Staley's was published 1991 in the 53rd issue of *Semeia*, the experimental journal for biblical studies, along with other literary readings of the Gospel of John, Mary Ann Tolbert wrote in her response to the whole issue some remarks on his contribution that would prove to be crucial to Staley's hermeneutical development:

"What Staley's generalized reader masks is, of course, the critic himself: Staley's reader reads the way Staley does. ... Let me hasten to say that there is absolutely nothing wrong with such a critical reading; the problem arises only in the fiction of a generalized reader who actually functions as a blind for the author. In the wider world of literary criticism today, critics and readers are being forced out from behind their masks and asked to own their views as their own and not as everyone's or anyone's; such a process for biblical critics might prove very salutary ..."<sup>23</sup>

Staley was willing to take up the challenge posed by feminist and poststructuralist theories. And almost a decade after the publication of his dissertation, he published *Reading with a passion*, "an attempt to discover the Staley who is the real reader behind the objectified, implied/encoded reader of [his] public scholarship"<sup>24</sup>. This book makes one of the most exciting, innovative and theoretically self-conscious readings by a biblical scholar on the Gospel of John I have read so far! *Reading with a passion* is organised into two parts: the first containing three reader-response readings of John's Gospel, the second presenting autobiographical theory, a sketch of his own autobiography, and the highly experimental and bold climax of the book:

"a postmodern, dramatic reading of the Johannine passion narrative. There, in a dialogue between the three corpses on their crosses ([Staley him]self as a social world critic, as literary critic, and as autobiographer), an eroding sense of self and text wrestle for interpretive control at the site of Jesus' crucifixion."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Ann Tolbert, "A response from a literary perspective", *Semeia* 53 (1991) 206.

<sup>24</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 21.



Between the first three chapters, in which Staley presents formalist reader response readings, and the lengthy autobiographical fifth chapter, Staley intercalates a theoretical chapter on autobiography, “sort of a bridge between ‘[him]’ the formalist reader and ‘[him]’ the some-other-kind-of-reader”<sup>26</sup>. Having already confessed his formalist reader construct as a mask for his own, subjective inclination, Staley goes over to analyse the effect that autobiography would have on biblical studies. As he acknowledges, there is a strong interest to maintain “an impermeable, distance-enhancing membrane that would protect the reader from invading any given text and would protect the text from invading the reader”<sup>27</sup>. Bearing with this anatomical metaphor, autobiography would have to be seen as a health hazard, “an insidious disease invading our discipline, threatening its solidly modernist, dispassionate, professional bodies”<sup>28</sup>. The autobiographical moments that are currently seizing academic papers are merely regarded as “rhetorical imperfections on the epidermis of our antiseptic papers”<sup>29</sup>.

It is at this point that Staley expresses his dissatisfaction with the space and function allocated to these autobiographical vignettes attached to exegetical writings. For, mainly restricted to footnotes, they still remain an alien element whose presence hardly threatens the scientific discourse they briefly interrupt. Furthermore, Staley complains about the shallowness of these narratives by comparing them to the low nutritional content of fast food. They function as a kind of disclaimer, a throat clearing, after which business can go on as usual. After analysing three atypical autobiographical vignettes by white Euro-American biblical scholars and struggling his way through a brief sketch on contemporary autobiographical theory, Staley has to disappoint one particular expectation. If one expects the “real”, naked, pure essence of the interpreter to appear from behind the mask of the “reader in the text”, one will only discover that the autobiographical “I” portrayed as the authentic subject behind the critical readings is no less constructed by discourses that are shaped in equal measure by institutional and individual contexts.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Staley succumbs to the perceived disease and offers us a glance into his bicultural upbringing, being unable to resist the effects of the viruses as deadly as AIDS. After all, they are “Autobiographical Intrusions Destroying

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<sup>26</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 114.

<sup>27</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 117.

<sup>28</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 117.

<sup>29</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 118.

<sup>30</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 18.

Scholarship”<sup>31</sup>:

“Like many others in our academic discipline of New Testament studies, I have come to the guild of biblical scholarship through the roots of American Protestant fundamentalism. But the anti-intellectualism that I was raised with, in the fierce primitivism and sectarianism of the lay-led Plymouth Brethren, was tempered by a childhood spent exploring the eroded cliffs and canyons of the Navajo Indian Reservation in northeastern Arizona. There, as the son of a missionary school teacher and a school cook, I encountered a culture radically different from that of my own family.”<sup>32</sup>

Staley recognises how the dual environment in which he grew up fostered in him “a natural curiosity about contrasting ways of perceiving the world”<sup>33</sup>. This inquisitiveness not only led him to formulate a series of existential questions concerning the contradictions and exclusions of both the worlds in which he grew up, but also to challenge the authoritarian and anti-intellectual attitude of his fundamentalist upbringing. In view of his family history, formalist reader response criticism functioned as a bridge between his past and his present, tying a close and cohesive reading of the bible with imagination and drama. It was precisely this intertwining between his biography and the biblical text that makes it virtually impossible for Staley to distinguish between text and (flesh-and-blood) reader: “I can just as easily find the Gospel of John in my life as I can find my life in the Gospel of John”<sup>34</sup>.

But if the dropping of the scholarly mask only discloses the fiction of an autobiographical guise, if the I/eye of the beholder cannot be disclosed in all its nakedness, why would one want to give in to the autobiographical urge? “Perhaps it is time”, Staley muses, “to don a new mask in biblical exegesis, time to move to a different stage. Perhaps what we need today is an openly expressive, human creation; an artistic invention; some form of discourse that will allow the reflected subjectivity of the person to speak as freely as the critically distanced exegete.”<sup>35</sup> Only later, the language of the inventive human genius will be juxtaposed to the language of political responsibility. In his conclusion, Staley

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<sup>31</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 145.

<sup>32</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 148.

<sup>33</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 186.

<sup>34</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 196f.

<sup>35</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 199.



expresses the hope that “recent literary theories of autobiography may help us biblical reader-response critics reinvent ourselves for a postcolonial, postmodern age”<sup>36</sup> — a hope that is closely related to a belief: “I believe that critically reflective, readerly fictions that give voice to the voiceless, which give a place at table to the dogs ... of the world, are those that ultimately are theologically and socially constructive and useful.”<sup>37</sup> Through his approach Staley tried to “portray the multi-positionality of [his] interpretive choices”<sup>38</sup>.

## 2.3 Unbinding the dead

In the conclusion to *The print's first kiss* Staley asked the question whether the application of reading strategies informed by literary theory “can ... at last arouse Lazarus from the grave, and still allow him to be Lazarus?”<sup>39</sup>. In the second chapter of *Reading with a passion* the episode in question is submitted to an interesting reading. Inspired by Schüssler Fiorenza’s liberating hermeneutics, he is led to suspect “a resistant ideology that has gone unnoticed in past androcentric exegesis. ... In this Gospel Mary and Martha’s premeditated action functions as the key to unlock Jesus’ passion.”<sup>40</sup> What is it that Lazarus’s sisters unlock? Informed by social scenarios from cultural anthropology, Staley suggests a situation in which there was a strong socio-economic dependence between Lazarus and his two sisters. Lazarus, a unmarried man, lived with his two widowed sisters for whose welfare he must have been responsible. Thus, “with his death, the sisters lose not only their dearest family member but also their only voice in the public sphere of justice.”<sup>41</sup>

The courage to begin a life without a man, though, is closely related to man’s death: “In this, the last of the Johannine signs, it is the men who die or are at the edge of death. ... Only the women break out of these manacles of death

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<sup>36</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 236. As Staley put it recently, *Reading with a passion* “was an attempt to position the Fourth Gospel within the context of postcolonial discourses”. See Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, “Changing woman: postcolonial reflections on Acts 16.6-40”, *Journal for the study of the New Testament* 73 (1999) 113-135; 116, footnote 7.

<sup>37</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 237.

<sup>38</sup> Staley, “Changing woman”, 117, footnote 12.

<sup>39</sup> Staley, *The print's first kiss*, 122.

<sup>40</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 68.

and, in that process, present Jesus with the familial model he will appropriate to sustain his disciples ...”<sup>42</sup> In fact, “the deaths of the story’s male characters empower these women, freeing them to ever bolder speech and action.”<sup>43</sup> Mary and Martha speak no as a collective but in their own independent voices. “Encircled by dying men, the sisters’ purposeful, independent actions reflect a sense of community whose unity is based on noncompetitive diversity.”<sup>44</sup>

If Jesus’ last sign in John’s Gospel is indeed “the death sign of patriarchy”<sup>45</sup> how will male readers respond to it? Staley, for one, is quick and direct in displaying the disarming self-subversion that characterizes his entire book:

“As a male, I want to be an assenting reader of this story. Yet I find myself resisting any identification with the stinking corpse of Lazarus, the one bound up in linen cloths. ... What I found doubly disturbing is this: that as a male reader I read through this sign ... as if I were the one become dead, the one without a voice, pretending to experience precisely that which I find impossible to experience — the silence of the zombie-like Lazarus. ... To be alive in this text as a male is to live the death of Lazarus, whose death is the means whereby the sisters’ verbs are transposed into active voice. To be alive in this text as a male is to have one’s death celebrated prematurely, to discover that only the hero’s absence can make the women’s hearts and minds grow strong.”<sup>46</sup>

At this point, I will have to respond to Staley’s reading in a way that does justice to his ambition and form, namely in a somewhat autobiographical fashion. Staley’s ambiguous response mirrors my own response, as I wish to take on the challenge posed by the social circumstances which biblical studies is starting to respect as a crucial responsibility. On the one hand, I feel that as a white male I am situated squarely within the (increasingly decomposing) centre of power discourses. Thus I am part of the problem and my (bad) conscience demands the death of white male hegemony at the risk of committing social suicide. On the other hand, I am not ready to give up. I may not know were all this is leading to

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<sup>42</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 77.

<sup>44</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 82.

<sup>46</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 82-84.



and I am apprehensive about this unknown factor, but there is something life-affirming about it too. After all: I believe in life after and despite death, “from water and spirit” as John says. I feel caught in an existential dilemma in which the binary opposition of life and death seems to play a major role. But before I say more about these existential issues let me briefly state why I do not think (and I assume Staley would partly agree) autobiographical interpretations provide a “final” solution in the search for a non-oppressive white male discourse in biblical studies.

“Can packaging the gospel in autobiographical literary criticism and imprinting it with postmodern and postcolonial postmarks send it off to new, unforeseen dustynations [sic]?”<sup>47</sup>, asks Staley.<sup>48</sup> The responses already generated by this approach are multiple. There certainly are problems related to this strategy, many of which Staley is aware and I will discuss some of these below. But there is one particular expectation that is bound to end in disappointment and which I must stress again at this point. If one expects the “real”, naked, pure essence of the interpreter to appear from behind the mask, one is up to encounter a surprise: “In my search for a real reader beneath my Johannine implied/encoded reader, I find that I am continually recovering and reseeding in plots no less imaginatively framed than those that I originally built for my Johannine implied/encoded reader.”<sup>49</sup> “My / marks only the dropping of one mask — that antiseptic shield protecting me from allergies, infection, and death.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> For other autobiographical readings of biblical texts see “*Taking it personally*”: *autobiographical biblical criticism*, ed. Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, *Semeia* 72 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) and *The personal voice in biblical scholarship*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (New York and London: Routledge, 1999). For autobiography in literary studies in general see *Confessions of the critics*, ed. H. Aram Veeseer (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 144.

## 2.4 Changing oneself as/for an other

The characteristic self-criticism of the autobiographical turn in literary criticism makes any critical assessment easy and difficult at the same time. The problematic areas are quickly acknowledged, notably by the practitioners of autobiographical approaches themselves.

Steven Mailloux points out three of the most problematic areas of this sort of rhetorical self-consciousness.<sup>51</sup> Firstly, there is the questionable aspect of self-indulgence. Narcissistic self-display, rather than the honest disclosure of the “real” motivations behind critical practice, may be easily suspected behind this rhetorical strategy. The fashionable redirection of the critical focus upon itself would be more of a self-gratifying act than a necessary confession. Secondly, there is the aspect of rhetorical emasculation. If critical decisions and theory itself are determined by biographical experiences, why should they be valid for anybody else? The individualisation of criticism seems to undermine its persuasiveness. Criticism becomes rhetorically ineffective and therefore meaningless. This point leads logically to the third problematic area. If criticism is transformed into this allegedly meaningless practice, then its political role is seriously problematic. Depending on the ideological point of view, this practice could be accused to lead to an anarchic and nihilistic “anything goes”, or, on the other hand, to a neoliberal “everything stays”, precisely because “anything goes”.

But, as Staley himself has lately remarked, the autobiographical turn could prove to be critical for biblical studies in more than one sense.<sup>52</sup> It could be “critical” in the sense of being “decisive” or marking “a turning point”. This decisive moment would be one of political disturbance, I would argue. If the distinction between the private and the public can be seen as “the distinction between things that should be hidden and things that should be shown”<sup>53</sup>, then autobiographical criticism presents the attempt at decomposing a borderline with a problematic political history. “The bourgeois individual is not born until one discovers the pleasures of privacy.”<sup>54</sup> This privacy, however, collapses under

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<sup>51</sup> Steven Mailloux, *Rhetorical power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) 167-168. Cf. Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 23.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. the abstract of his paper “What is *critical* about autobiographical criticism?” at <http://members.tripod.com/-gaichele/2000program.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The human condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) 72. Cf. Bhabha’s application in *The location of culture*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: who speaks for ‘Indian’ pasts?”, *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992) 9.



rigorous questioning and turns out to be a deferred public, not only oriented towards but also controlled by the same discourses that control the public. The myth of the secluded private sphere can be easily related to discourses of discipline and control by the state and the colonial metropolis. To disturb this borderline, therefore, is to uncover an important instrument of hegemonic maintenance, which will have to be criticised if critical scholarship wants to make a decisive contribution.

The disturbing autobiographical disclosures, therefore, reveal aspects of critical practice that normally remain hidden in private behind the public veil of universal objectivity. An autobiographical turn presents the chance to understand and own the singularity of some of the interpretive decisions made in biblical scholarship. Autobiography, though, has a particular advantage over other discourses of contextualisation — it narrates change. The temporal aspect of emplotment in biography makes it possible to represent change. But if it can represent change, can it also generate change?

Staley refers to another sense in which autobiographical criticism can be “critical”, namely as a “careful analysis and judgment”. How could something so personal, private, and idiosyncratic be “critical” in this sense? Robert Maldonado’s suggested distinction of two levels of autobiography<sup>55</sup> can illustrate this critical aspect of this approach. There is, first of all, the usual understanding of autobiography, which Maldonado labels the “idio-autobiographical”. This includes “the particular events, moods, motivations, agenda, etc. that comprise the life story of the individual interpreter”<sup>56</sup>. More elusive and subconscious, but also more crucial and critical, is the “meta-autobiographical”, which refers to “the available and recognizable autobiographical *plots* that the culture of the teller determines”<sup>57</sup>. Seen in the light of this distinction, autobiographical acts appear less individualistic:

“At the idio-autobiographical level, the interpreter appears to have relative control, e.g. the positive and negative elements, the opportunities and challenges that one might not include in one’s life story. This control is more illusory than real when one begins to

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<sup>55</sup> See Robert D. Maldonado, “Reading Malinche reading Ruth: toward a hermeneutics of bterayal”, *Semeia* 72 (1995) 91-92.

<sup>56</sup> Maldonado, “Reading Malinche reading Ruth”, 91.

<sup>57</sup> Maldonado, “Reading Malinche reading Ruth”, 91.

recognize the power of the meta-autobiographical level.”<sup>58</sup>

Autobiography has, therefore, a decisively social and heterosyncratic element, which makes it objectifiable to critical procedures that are no less arbitrary than any other traditional approach.<sup>59</sup>

The juxtaposition of the meta-autobiographical to the idio-autobiographical level, however, adds to this discourse another important “critical” aspect. If the idiosyncratic, personal level of this discourse is so closely related to a heterosyncratic, cultural level, then both the decisive and the analytical critical focus is relocated to the borderline between these two levels. Furthermore, change — individualised on one level and submitted to cultural structures at the other — can be located at the interstices of this dialectic relationship, where this borderline is shown to be divisible by the disturbing confrontation with the other. Two episodes in Staley’s autobiographical turn further exemplify this point.

In what, I would argue, is the most remarkable chapter of his *Reading with a passion*, his allegory of the raising of Lazarus, Staley identifies with the story’s anti-hero Lazarus. At the climax of the miracle itself, Lazarus stands in front of everybody, still wrapped in cloths, helpless, silent and smelling bad. Staley stands here at the edge of a transformation between the dead Lazarus, representing “the destructive power of patriarchy and androcentrism”<sup>60</sup> on the one hand, and the newly born Lazarus, insecure, perplexed, and undefined on the other. What will be revealed when the former corps has been freed from his bandages? Staley is not sure, as he still struggles with the aspect of death. More important, though, seems to me the question of who will facilitate Lazarus’s new identity. Following the social scenario Staley created for his reading of this passage, it would have to be the sisters who will help Lazarus out of his bandages.<sup>61</sup> The crossing of the borderline between life and death is facilitated by the formerly oppressed other! Who, then, was the other who facilitated Staley’s change?

In the autobiographically most explicit chapter of this book, Staley

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<sup>58</sup> Maldonado, “Reading Malinche reading Ruth”, 91f.

<sup>59</sup> But it is also this aspect that makes autobiographies in the public sphere less “free” than one could think. Cf. Sarah Nuttall, “Telling ‘free’ stories?: memory and democracy in South African autobiography since 1994”, *Negotiating the past: the making of memory in South Africa*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998) 75-88; and Steven Robins, “Silence in my father’s house: memory, nationalism, and narratives of the body”, *Negotiating the past*, 120-140.

<sup>60</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 83.

<sup>61</sup> This insightful observation was suggested by Prof. James Cochrane at a staff seminar at the University of Cape Town, where I discussed elements of my thesis.



grounds his practice as biblical scholar in his childhood experience as a son of missionaries in a Navajo reservation in north-eastern Arizona. There, his Plymouth Brethren upbringing was disrupted by the contrasting perception of the world of local First Nations Americans in the reservation. Staley learned that the traits of the Navajos, notably their “brown skin”, “denoted intelligence, along with beauty, cleanliness, and everything that was good in the world”<sup>62</sup>:

“As I have begun to think more recently in terms of how my own social context, geographic location, and personal experience interpret the biblical text, I have come to believe that difference, distance, and defamiliarization have been part of my psychological makeup from the age of seven, when my family moved to the Navajo Indian Reservation.”<sup>63</sup>

Having left unfading traits in his memory, this encounter with the other prepared the way for an equally influential questioning by a feminist biblical scholar, Mary Ann Tolbert.<sup>64</sup>

On the borderline between the death of the old and the raising of the new, Staley carves out a liminal space in which his encounter with the other transforms him into a more responsible scholar. It is, then, precisely, this anchorage between his theoretical relativism and the political challenge from the other that countervenes some of the criticisms launched against an autobiographical approach. But, how can one enter this liminal space? Can one institutionalise work at this borderline?

Again, the two metaphors I pointed out in my assessment of Patte clearly reappear in Staley’s proposal. But in Staley’s portrayal the other — here in the postcolonial form of the Navajos or of Lazarus’s marginalised sisters — moves more into the limelight of critical scrutiny. Staley’s fine theoretical argumentation pushes the limits of representation to its extreme, to the extent of catching a glimpse of the other side of this borderline he captured so insightfully in Lazarus’s passage through death. In contrast to Patte, Staley breaks open the circle of representation by emphasising the role of this liminal space through which he has to go, in order to responsibly transform his white male identity.

The reinvention of the white male scholar, we can establish at this stage,

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<sup>62</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 172.

<sup>63</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 191f.

<sup>64</sup> Staley, *Reading with a passion*, 196.

can only occur at the rupture in the circle of critical self-representation caused by the engagement with the other. Only when this circular gesture crosses the limits, which separates sameness from difference, can responsible change occur. Staley also succeeds in capturing the impossibility of (totally) predicting this change with the figure of the raised, but still cloth-wrapped Lazarus. The reinvention of the self, one could further argue here, is closely linked with the invention — the coming — of the other.

If Staley offers a meticulous analysis of some of the crucial aspects at the threshold of re-inventing a white male identity, Gerald West may offer a bold step across that threshold.

### 3.1 Decentring: the postcolonial displacement of the political commitment

As West remarked in his contribution to John Rogerson's *Reading the Bible* (1995), there have been four particular movements that have shaped the postcolonial hermeneutical landscape — liberation hermeneutics, feminist response criticism, and enculturation criticism. In the wake of the heterogeneity of their discourses, West recognised the need for biblical studies, theology and Christian life in South Africa to move towards plurality, ambiguity, partiality and indeterminacy. For readers, and the Christian faith, have become unstable. The two paradigms — liberation hermeneutics and postcoloniality play a central role in West's quest for a morally responsible method for the scholar. What is more, I would maintain that West's strategy, that is, his work, within the tension between these two paradigms, and many of his subsequent can be seen as the negotiation between his theoretical commitment to

<sup>1</sup> David D. West, 'Reading the Bible and doing theology in the new South Africa: the new South African society: essays in honour of John Rogerson', eds. M. Daniel Galvin H. Gervais, G. Gervais and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (Sheffield, 1995) 445-458, 445.



### **3 GERALD WEST: WORKING AT THE INTERFACE**

Since the end of the 1980s, Gerald West has managed to challenge the world of biblical studies with a widely published and theoretically sound interpretive program. While there is considerable argumentative overlap between his publications, he has succeeded in engaging a considerable number of interdisciplinary points of view and weaving them together into a relatively coherent and persuasive web. There are several narrative undercurrents woven together in his project, some of which I would like to unweave, in order to clarify the importance his work might have for the responsible future of white male biblical scholars.

#### **3.1 Decentring: the postmodern hermeneutical shift and political commitment**

As West remarked in his contribution to John Rogerson's *Festschrift*, there have been four particular movements that have shaped the more recent South African hermeneutical landscape — liberation hermeneutics, postmodernism, reader-response criticism, and enculturation criticism. While acknowledging the heterogeneity of their discourses, West recognises their collective influence upon biblical studies, theology and Christian faith in South Africa, which consists of “a move towards plurality, ambiguity, partiality and particularity. The Bible and its readers, and the Christian faith, have become unstable.”<sup>1</sup> Two of these paradigms — liberation hermeneutics and postmodernism — play a particularly central role in West's quest for a morally responsible practice as a biblical scholar. What is more, I would maintain that West's strategy has been developed within the tension between these two paradigms, and many of his publications can be seen as the negotiation between his theoretical commitment to the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald O. West, “Reading the Bible and doing theology in the new South Africa”, *The Bible in human society: essays in honour of John Rogerson*, eds. M. Daniel Carroll R., David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the study of the Old Testament supplement series 200* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 445-458; 445.

breaking up of modernity's discursive structures, on the one side, and his social commitment to the fate of the poor and marginalised, on the other. Moreover, as can further be argued, this tension brings him close to the same issues discussed and negotiated in the emerging cluster of postcolonial discourses.<sup>2</sup>

Liberation hermeneutics, as it emerged in third world countries, has been defined by Per Frostin in reference to five interrelated emphases.<sup>3</sup> Among them is the central role of the interlocutors of the academic discourse. Since the Enlightenment, theology, and hence biblical studies, has been organised around ideas rather than social relationships. Liberation hermeneutics has inverted this dichotomy and has started to ask who the interlocutors are and who has provided the questions to which their discourse would attempt some sort of answer. According to one of the foremost representatives of Latin American liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, the main interlocutor of "progressivist" western theology, particularly since Schleiermacher, had been the educated non-believer. Liberation theology, by contrast, made a "preferential option for the poor" as its point of departure. This option was not merely based on ethical concerns, as the choice of interlocutor had been traditionally in western theology, but was an epistemological starting point. The solidarity with the experience of oppression and exclusion was, therefore, to shape the perception of social reality.

West considers postmodernism as "[p]erhaps the most significant decentering movement"<sup>4</sup> in the recent epistemological developments. Along with David Tracy, he situates contemporary theological discourses within a paradigm that privileges "plurality, ambiguity, partiality and particularity"<sup>5</sup>, a context in which the notion of the innocence of interpretations, interpreters, and texts is lost. In order to characterise postmodernism, West paraphrases a popular postmodern litany: "All is uncertain; all is unstable; presence proclaims absence and absence presence; all is not as it seemed. Difference and deconstruction foreground the particular and the partial."<sup>6</sup> Though the importance of postmodernism is generally seen positively, West also points out one of the dangers:

"While plurality, ambiguity, partiality and particularity have created

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<sup>2</sup> For an elaboration of this dialectic in the same context cf. Beverley G. Haddad, "Constructing theologies of survival in the South African context: the necessity of a critical engagement between postmodern and liberation theory", *Journal of feminist studies in religion* 14:2 (Fall 1998) 5-18.

<sup>3</sup> Per Frostin, *Liberation theology in Tanzania and South Africa: a first world interpretation*, *Studia theologica lundensia* 42 (Lund: Lund University Press; Bromley: Chartwell-Bratt Ltd, 1988) 6-11.

<sup>4</sup> West, "Reading the Bible and doing theology", 446.

<sup>5</sup> West, "Reading the Bible and doing theology", 449.

<sup>6</sup> West, "Reading the Bible and doing theology", 447.



space for the poor and marginalized to articulate and practice their own christianities, these same impulses have led biblical scholars, theologians and other christian intellectuals into postmodern play or postmodern nihilism.”<sup>7</sup>

On the positive side, the postmodern shift frees the biblical scholar from the quest for certainty, the one and “true” reading of the bible “in favour of the more humane concerns for useful readings and resources — readings and resources that are a part of a discourse that takes seriously questions of ethics, practices, and effects”<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand stands the rejection of autonomy by postmodernism, which sees any practice already qualified by the linguistic culture. This notion is resisted by Gerald West as “[t]he postmodern *Angst* of middle-class intellectuals and its accompanying analysis”<sup>9</sup>. West sees the necessity of first asserting and affirming the subjectivity of those who have been denied such a privilege through a structural alienation.<sup>10</sup> It is in light of his political commitment that West qualifies his recourse to postmodernism: “Instead of adopting a postmodern perspective which nihilistically dissolves the self, we can construct, via liberation perspectives, postmodernism as a form of discourse”<sup>11</sup>.

### 3.2 Of hidden revolutions: revelations from colonial history

Similar hermeneutical and epistemological issues, as well as a similar political agenda, motivated the monumental and challenging effort by Jean and John Comaroff of rewriting the historical anthropology of colonialism in southern Africa. There are many aspects in *Of revelation and revolution* that make this endeavour stand out from similar projects. Some of them deserve a special discussion for their importance in relation to Gerald West’s work.

The colonial encounter between the British Nonconformist missionaries, on the one hand, and the people that would be known subsequently as the

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<sup>7</sup> West, “Reading the Bible and doing theology”, 449.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald O. West, “Reading the Bible differently: giving shape to the discourses of the dominated”, *Semeia* 73 (1996) 21-41; 27.

<sup>9</sup> Gerald O. West, “Being partially constituted by work with others: biblical scholars becoming different”, *Journal of theology for southern Africa* 104 (July 1999) 44-53; 50.

<sup>10</sup> West, “Being partially constituted”, 50.

<sup>11</sup> West, “Being partially constituted”, 51.

Tswana (as well as significant others) on the other, has provoked only narrations in which not all *dramatis personae* in this interaction had found sufficient attention. The obvious observation that the power-relations of this encounter were so obviously asymmetrical, with a clear inclination towards the interests of the European missionaries, had led to the neglect of those aspects that would have revealed that the same encounter was more intricate, contested and dialectical than a superficial reading of this colonial episode would have us believe. The initial moments of the contact between Europeans and Africans was particularly significant, for they would have set the terms for the “long conversation” to follow, reaching forward into the colonial era, apartheid and beyond towards contemporary negotiations of identities in the “new” South Africa.

The main challenge for the Comaroffs was a revision of that particular historical period that would take account of all the players of the game and they went about meeting this challenge by tightening their conceptual nets. In the introduction to the first volume of this multi-volume work, the Comaroffs present the entries to their enlarged analytical lexicon, spun neatly into a fine methodological web “within which to capture the story, the history, which [they] have to tell”<sup>12</sup>. Central to this is the concept of the “cultural field” that has the double advantage of respecting the “fluid, often contested, and only partially integrated mosaic of narratives, images, and signifying practices”<sup>13</sup> that inhabit the meaningful world, and the plurality of cultures contained in the semantic scape of “reality”. “Power” is entailed in this field and permeates it in fluid contestations. Two polar “dominant forms”<sup>14</sup> characterise its movement, “best visualized as the ends of a continuum”<sup>15</sup> — hegemony and ideology.

The power encountered in a cultural field is described by the Comaroffs as Janus-faced, with its agentive and nonagentive sides. Like a coin, viewed from the one side “it appears as the (relative) capacity of human beings to shape the actions and perceptions of others by exercising control over the production, circulation, and consumption of signs and objects, over the making of both subjectivities and realities”<sup>16</sup>. But a simple flip reveals a more natural and ineffable side to it, hiding itself in everyday life. Here, it escapes the

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 1: *Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) 19.

<sup>13</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 1, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 1, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 1, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 1, 22.



straightforward attribution to human agency, it even lacks the immediate impression of power as such, “since its effects are rarely wrought by overt compulsion. They are internalized, in their negative guise, as constraints; in their neutral guise, as conventions; and, in their positive guise, as values.”<sup>17</sup>

The distinction between agentive and nonagentive power corresponds, more or less, to the two polar extremes that characterise the exercise of power within the cultural field, hegemony and ideology. These extremes are differentiated as follows:

“Whereas the first consists of constructs and conventions that have come to be shared and naturalized throughout a political community, the second is the expression and ultimately the possession of a particular social group, although it may be widely peddled beyond. The first is nonnegotiable and therefore beyond direct argument; the second is more susceptible to being perceived as a matter of inimical opinion and interest and therefore is open to contestation. Hegemony homogenizes, ideology articulates.”<sup>18</sup>

The Comaroff’s triangulation of culture, hegemony and ideology leads them to a similar conceptual triad between consciousness, representation and the aforementioned power. It is the dualistic and “unspecified Cartesian assumptions about personhood, cognitions, and social being [in which] ... consciousness is all or none, true or false, present or absent”<sup>19</sup> that they problematise with the revision of these concepts. Again, social cognition is situated along the chain that incorporates the submerged and the apprehended in correspondence to hegemony and ideology.

The cumulative effect of these conceptual revisions is the expansion of the field of resistance, and thus the inclusion of the subaltern into the narrative, incorporating the tacit, the silent, and the hidden. Of central importance thus becomes that “liminal space” within which both the extremes meet and start to engender the discourse of the colonial encounter. This is

“the realm of partial recognition, of inchoative awareness, of ambiguous experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even into

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<sup>17</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 1, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 1, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 1, 28.

articulate conceptions of the world; in which signs and events are observed, but in hazy, translucent light; in which individuals or groups know that something is happening to them but find it difficult to put their fingers on quite what it is. It is from this realm, we suggest, that silent signifiers and unmarked practices may rise to the level of explicit consciousness, of ideological assertion, and become the subject of overt political and social contestation — or from which they may recede into the hegemonic, to languish there unremarked for the time being. As we shall see, it is also the realm from which emanate the poetics of history, the innovative impulses of the bricoleur and the organic intellectual, the novel imagery called upon to bear the content of symbolic struggles.<sup>20</sup>

While the Comaroffs provide a conceptual net that is fine enough to capture the hidden discourses of resistance against colonialism, James Scott has developed a similar kind of reading into an equally refined theory on “the art of resistance”. Originating from his puzzlement over the contradictions he observed in the statements given by Malay villagers on issues of land transactions, wage rates, social reputation, and technological change, Scott outlined a discourse of resistance that had remained relatively unnoticed in scholarly readings of asymmetrical power-relations. The traditional approach to understanding the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups focuses on their respective *public* discourses. Left unconsidered is a discourse that Scott has labeled the “hidden transcript”.

In order to understand this discourse, it might be helpful to situate it within the various forms of resistance among subordinate groups. Scott offers four insightful categories for resistance. The first, and more obvious, category is the conflict on the level of the public transcript. This discourse is basically “the *self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen. ... It is designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule.”<sup>21</sup> The public transcript of the elite can serve as a basis for resistance since it is, as Scott points out, the “safest and most public form”<sup>22</sup> of protest. It is also, in some cases, less restrictive than generally expected, since “[o]wing to the rhetorical concessions that this self-

<sup>20</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 1, 29.

<sup>21</sup> James C Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990) 18.

<sup>22</sup> Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 18.



image contains, it offers a surprisingly large arena for political conflict that appeals to these concessions and makes use of the room for interpretation within any ideology"<sup>23</sup>.

A second form of resistance is the hidden transcript itself. This discourse "takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders. The hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript"<sup>24</sup>.

This discourse is, thus, "specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors"<sup>25</sup> and it is there in the safety of the offstage that a "sharply dissonant culture is possible"<sup>26</sup>.

The most intriguing mode of resistance, though, is that which lies in between the first two discourses and takes advantage of the ambiguity and fluidity of significations. Strategically positioned between public and hidden transcript, this form develops "a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have double meanings or to shield the identity of the actors"<sup>27</sup>. It represents "a partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript [that] is always present in the public discourse"<sup>28</sup>. It may be a low-profile form of resistance but it is elemental to the survival and sanity of the subordinate group. It is also a particularly important form of resistance, since it negotiates the frontier between both transcripts and thus allows the only publicly available manifestation of "infrapolitics of subordinate groups"<sup>29</sup> and of the hidden transcript. The only other realm of politics in which the hidden transcript reveals itself in a more manifest form is the fourth variety, in which the "political *cordon sanitaire*"<sup>30</sup> between hidden and public transcript is ruptured and the infrapolitics of the subordinate explode into the public realm in a saturnalia of power — revolution.

But, if the history of colonialism, of oppression and resistance, is to be

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<sup>23</sup> Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 4f.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 19.

rewritten, caught within a refined conceptual net informed by Jean and John Comaroff, as well as by James Scott, how will “colonialism” have to be redefined? How has colonial history to be renarrated? Stereotypically, colonisation has been associated with spatial distance between metropolitan powers and the “third world” colonies, the extension of overrule by the imperial state through a permanent settler population, and a discourse that, distinct from other forms of imperialism, was marked by racial difference.<sup>31</sup> While the Comaroffs do not want to refute that this was so in many cases, it is the additional aspects disclosed in their story that alter the nature of this “long conversation” and place it nearer to other forms of structural inequality, dominion or overrule.

Both the Comaroffs and Scott, then, base their revisionist interpretation of imperialist encounters on a particular sensitivity for the hidden and unconscious aspects of oppression and resistance. I have indulged in presenting this theoretical achievement at such a length in order to illustrate the care and effort put into this approach that pushes the margins of the representable so that the voice of the other appears in a less prejudged fashion. Of particular heuristic importance emerges the focus upon the liminal space, the thin border that separates the hidden from the obvious and the conscious from the unconscious. The unequal power-relations start to appear in a more ambiguous and undecidable light.

Such an understanding is eminent in West’s approach and has influenced especially his latest project. While West also uses this sensitivity to liminal phenomena in general, he focuses his analysis on a particular border that has emerged as particularly problematic in biblical studies — the interface between the professional and the “ordinary” reader of the bible.

### **3.3 Entering the liminal space between the critic and the ordinary**

In what comes close to an evangelistic testimony, West narrates his conversion experience from his socialisation as “white, middle-class, male and Christian

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<sup>31</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol. 2: *The dialectics of modernity on a South African frontier* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997) 16.



identity [in] the South African context” to a socially engaged biblical scholar, after hearing the “call to serve”, first uttered by black South African exiles.<sup>32</sup> A prophetic insight should transform his intellectual vocation radically: “I did hav[e] something to offer in our struggle for survival, liberation and life. The resources and skills that I had obtained through my position of privilege, and at the cost of their oppression, should be made available to the struggle.”<sup>33</sup> At this point, one reckons, West had already experienced a crucial change — “the struggle for survival, liberation and life” had become also his struggle, as his subsequent inclusive use of the pronoun “we” shows. The complicity with the state of oppression, the resources and skills he had acquired at the cost of oppression could be transformed, after this calling, to serve the ministry of liberation, without his identity being an impediment. How is this to be imagined?

The change of insight was not followed immediately by a change of identity. It would take a prolonged interaction with ordinary poor and marginalised people for West to experience his identity being altered and increasingly “cleansed” from its inherent oppressive character:

“I am discovering in the process that I am becoming partially constituted by my work with them. Work with poor and marginalized communities enables white, middle-class, male biblical scholars like me to be constituted partially by the experiences, needs, questions and resources of such communities. This does not mean that my ‘whiteness’, ‘middle-classness’ and ‘maleness’ cease to be the major factors that constitute me, but they are no longer the whole story. ... I now know that I need not remain content to always be so.”<sup>34</sup>

But what kind of identity does the socially engaged biblical scholar assume through his work? It becomes clear that the new, re-constituted identity of the socially engaged biblical scholar emerges in the relationship with ordinary readers. Who exactly are these readers?

West distinguishes three aspects of the kind of ordinary reader he has in mind. While “reader” may allude to the literary reception of the bible, West makes clear that he also includes “the many who are illiterate, but who listen to, retell

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<sup>32</sup> Gerald O. West, *The academy of the poor: towards a dialogical reading of the Bible*, Interventions 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 36.

<sup>33</sup> West, *Academy of the poor*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> West, *Academy of the poor*, 36f.

and remake the Bible”<sup>35</sup>. And, while “ordinary” also refers to “all readers who read the Bible pre-critically”, it denotes a more specific group, namely “those readers who are poor and marginalized”.<sup>36</sup> Socially engaged biblical scholar, on the other hand, are defined as those who have acquired “structured and systematic sets of resources” and “have chosen to collaborate with the poor and marginalized in their struggle for survival, liberation and life”.<sup>37</sup>

Already at this point, some crucial traits begin to emerge in West’s re-constitution of his intellectual identity. As a critic, his work is re-evaluated in terms of the resources he is able to offer to the concrete political struggle to which he is committed. This is a central aspect to West’s research agenda and legitimisation discourse for the ethical responsibility of the biblical scholar. The socially engaged biblical scholar is partially constituted by the needs and interests of the subaltern group with whom he has committed himself to collaborate.

One of the most interesting aspects of this re-constitution is the way it is connected to the deconstruction of a borderline — in this case, the borderline between oppressor and oppressed — and with it the deconstruction of the white male hegemony:

“as a boundary crosser, someone who moves between the worlds of the dominant and the dominated, and as a boundary betrayer, someone who has exposed the logic of domination, the socially engaged biblical scholar may provide additional information for charting the boundaries and borders”<sup>38</sup>.

How is this liminal space to be theorised? Two aspects have been particularly problematic. One problem relates to the power relationship between the two groups from each side of the social divide. Another pertains to issues of representation and evaluation of popular culture. Gayatri Spivak and Juan Luis Segundo, respectively, offer particularly insightful discussions on these problems, to which I will now turn.

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<sup>35</sup> West, *Academy of the poor*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> West, *Academy of the poor*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> West, *Academy of the poor*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Gerald West, “Contextual bible study: creating sacred (and safe) space for social transformation”, *Grace & truth* 16:2 (August 1999) 55.



### 3.4 “Reading with”:

#### the relationship between the intellectual and the subaltern

In her highly influential essay “Can the subaltern speak?”, Gayatri Spivak elaborated on the problem of representation as it comes to bear on the relationship between the academic/intellectual and the subaltern by differentiating between two aspects of representation she found to be problematic. The first aspect concerns the issue of representation as substitution for the other in the political sphere (*Vertretung*), the second concerns the aspect of representation that implies portrayal or reportage (*Darstellung*). Both aspects have been dominated by the concept of the “self-knowing subject” in which the difference between “being” and “knowing” had been conflated. Spivak strongly advocates the deconstruction of this concept that allowed to keep the role of the intellectual unacknowledged

“either by creating the impression that the voice with which the intellectual speaks is the authentic, unmediated voice of the subaltern, which the intellectual shares by virtue of their common ... experience, or by concealing the extent to which the subject of the self-knowing, self-representing subaltern has in fact been constructed by the intellectual”.<sup>39</sup>

Spivak illustrates her distinction in a discussion of the abolition of the Hindu rite of widow-burning (*sari*) by the British colonial powers. The two opposite extremes in this episode exemplify the two representational pitfalls for intellectuals. On the one hand were the colonial authorities, who in a genuinely benevolent way saw this as a case of “[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men”<sup>40</sup>. Representation here foregrounds the aspect of substitution in which women were espoused as objects in need of protection. The colonial authorities engaged in “speaking for” these women, denying their subject status altogether. On the other hand, there was the “Indian nativist argument” according to which “[t]he women wanted to die”.<sup>41</sup> The representer engaged here in a form of *Darstellung* in which his role was rendered transparent. Again, this

<sup>39</sup> Jill Arnott, “French feminism in a South African frame?: Gayatri Spivak and the problem of ‘representation’ in South African feminism”, *Pretexts* 3:1-2 (1991) 122.

<sup>40</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?”, *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan Education, 1988) 297.

<sup>41</sup> Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?”, 297.

representation presupposed the voice of an entirely self-knowing subject that is able to make “free choices in the full and undistorted understanding of the determinants and consequences of those choices”<sup>42</sup>. Both extremes mask ideological interests through representation. The objectivisation of the women naturalised the role of the imperial authority in “speaking for” them, and thus disguised the interests of imperialism. The subjectivisation of the women concealed the fact that this representation was done by and promoted the interests of the Hindu men and the patriarchal social structures.

It was only a matter of time until the problem of representation would catch up with liberation theology and its emphasis upon the experience of the poor and marginalised. Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo described Latin American liberation theology in the middle of the 1980s as representing two heterogeneous strands with their particular pre-supposition, strategies, and methods.<sup>43</sup> Although he narrated the emergence of one strand of liberation theology as the development of a more radical stance than the former, he also remarked that both paradigms coexisted within liberation theology despite their contradictory nature, even in one and the same theologian, for example in the case of Leonardo Boff.<sup>44</sup>

Liberation theology, born out of “a commitment to think for the sake of poor and oppressed people”<sup>45</sup>, taking their experience of oppression as an epistemological point of departure (the “preferential option for the poor”), and siding with them in the struggle against their oppressor, was first formulated by and addressed to a group within society that was situated at neither of the extreme points of the struggle, while recognising their subtle complicity in this scenario — the “middle-class”. On the one hand were the “designers” of this theology — theologians and priests, educated in sociological methods acquired in Europe and preaching repentance from an ideological complicity with the oppressing elite. On the other side

“it was not the oppressed people, but the middle classes, beginning with students, who received the first features of this liberation theology as a joyful conversion and a new commitment. As middle-class, they clearly perceived that they themselves belonged to the side of the

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<sup>42</sup> Arnott, “French feminism in a South African frame?”, 124.

<sup>43</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, “The shift within Latin American theology”, *Journal of theology for southern Africa* 52 (September 1985) 17-29.

<sup>44</sup> Segundo, “The shift within Latin American theology”, 24.

<sup>45</sup> Segundo, “The shift within Latin American theology”, 20.



oppressors and were more or less linked with an ideology fostering their interests.”<sup>46</sup>

This first attempt, however, failed to fulfil the raised expectations. Beside the apologetic and over-politicised appearance that met with considerable hesitation from the Catholic church and pressure and threats of civilian and military authorities, it was the strong criticism and virtual denial of popular religion as being oppressive — a “false consciousness” — and non-Christian that prevented this initial approach from being successful among those on whose behalf its advocates wanted to think and act — the poor and marginalised. As Segundo puts it, “they discover[ed] not only that they [were] not understood by the people for the sake of whom they ha[d] tried to think and to speak, but also that the main stream of history le[ft] them apart from popular victories”<sup>47</sup>.

Thus, it was the rejective attitude towards popular religion, characteristic of this first strand of liberation theology, that prevented those theologians from filling the gap between themselves and the grass-roots people on whose behalf they were challenging the *status quo*. A different approach to popular religion was necessary — a conversion from critical elitism towards a critical stance that is able to recognise the subtleties in the art of resistance expressed in popular culture. This conversion involved a kind of self-negation: “Instead of teaching, they should learn. And in order to learn from common people, they should incorporate themselves, even mentally, with these common people, and give up the chronic suspicion among intellectuals that common people are always wrong.”<sup>48</sup> To some extent, this conversion demanded “a renunciation of critical and creative characteristics which the intellectual can draw out of himself, in order to be freely engaged as an instrument of the people”<sup>49</sup>. Thus the critical stance characteristic of the first strand of liberation theology was transformed by a “hermeneutics of charity”<sup>50</sup>, in order to promote the process of “becoming the other” within the church.<sup>51</sup>

Gerald West has clearly learned the lesson from this episode of liberation theology. An intellectual who has been called to serve the oppressed cannot

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<sup>46</sup> Segundo, “The shift within Latin American theology”, 21.

<sup>47</sup> Segundo, “The shift within Latin American theology”, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Segundo, “The shift within Latin American theology”, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Segundo, “The shift within Latin American theology”, 25.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the faithful: what Christian intellectuals can learn from popular religion* (Grand Rapids [Michigan]: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994) 15-19.

<sup>51</sup> Segundo, “The shift within Latin American theology”, 29.

enter this relationship ignoring the resources that have proven vital for the resistance and survival of that group. This is a recognition West has gained from the kind of revisionist postcolonial analyses I discussed above. The critic who only sees the surface phenomena in situations of oppression overlooks the resistant infrapolitics Scott calls the “hidden transcript”. And as those studies have convincingly shown, this is a crucial aspect of any successful revolutionary change.

It is at this point where the political rationale of West’s intellectual activity becomes more evident. If the structurally oppressed could only sporadically reveal their resistant politics, this does not mean that such a culture of resistance was not cultivated. While West wishes to ground his intellectual role on this more nuanced reading of domination and resistance, the role of the intellectual in this context is less clear than in more simplistic models. It cannot be a “listening to” — a naïve stance that romanticises and idealises the interpretation of the poor and marginalised — or a “speaking for” — a patronising stance that minimises and rationalises the same interpretation.<sup>52</sup> Rather, West suggests a “reading with”, which “takes seriously the subjectivity of both the biblical scholar and the ordinary poor and marginalized ‘reader’ of the Bible, and all that this entails for their respective resources, categories and contributions”<sup>53</sup>.

This activity is made somewhat easier by the democratisation process South Africa has recently undergone. Resistant infrapolitics was a means of survival during the apartheid years. But, while these aspects still remain characteristic of the new dispensation, “there has been a growing eagerness and boldness not only to speak what has been hidden and disguised..., but also to “own” what is liberating and life giving”<sup>54</sup>. The democratisation of the society at large makes the inherent democratic nature of “reading with” a more valuable tool for the development of the necessary skills in the pursuit of a more just society.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, more resources are needed for the political struggles of the

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, West, *Academy of the poor*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> West, *Academy of the poor*, 53. Snyman’s criticism of West’s work fails, in my opinion, to understand the dialogical nature of the interaction between academic and non-academic readers in West’s project. He does not seem to risk his own views as critic in such an endeavour, focusing too much on the intellectual’s critical role. Such an emphasis, while partly legitimate, rests, however, too much on a naïve and possibly outdated concept of the intellectual. See Gerrie F.Snyman, “‘*Ilahle elinothuthu*’?: the lay reader and/or the critical reader — some remarks on Africanisation”, *Religion & theology* 6:2 (1999) 140-167.

<sup>54</sup> West, “Reading the Bible differently”, 34.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Gerald West, “The role of contextual Bible study in developing democratic processes in South Africa”, *A democratic vision for South Africa: political realism and Christian responsibility*, ed. Klaus Nürnberger, NIR reader 3 (Pietermaritzburg: Encounter Publications, 1991) especially 141f.



poor and marginalised. While traditional approaches have proven to be a welcome resource in West's contextual bible studies, a more nuanced analysis of the resistant reading strategies remain a *desideratum*. Where would one look for those resources? Perhaps in the history of the reception of the bible in Africa.

### 3.5 Revolutions whose histories still remain to be written

What would an interpretational history of the bible in southern Africa look like, if the hidden and unconscious social elements elaborated by the Comaroffs and by Scott are considered and incorporated? Jonathan Draper and Gerald West have started to tackle this history by focusing respectively on the two agentive sides of the colonial encounter — the missionaries and the missionised.

As Jonathan Draper points out in a recently published study,<sup>56</sup> some missionaries coming from England had a relative predisposition to engage with and be challenged by African cultures, due to the “accute intellectual and social crisis arising out of the related phenomena of the Enlightenment and industrial capitalism”<sup>57</sup>. Thus, drawing from the Comaroff's analytical lexicon, “the (contested) area of ideology was prominently large in comparison with the (silent and uncontested) area of hegemony”<sup>58</sup>. In fact, the missionary drift towards other societies appears to have been a sort of compensation for the cognitive dissonance occasioned by the “disconfirmation of fundamental aspects of Protestant beliefs by scientific discovery and industrialization”<sup>59</sup>. The considerable gaps emerging in the ideological make-up of the missionaries proved to provide an important space of interaction where the dialectical nature of this mission can be shown to have altered not only the consciousness of the missionised.

Bishop John William Colenso (1814-1883) illustrates this dialectic particularly well, in contrast to the British Nonconformist missionaries in southern Africa. Coming from a poor lower middle-class family, his decision to seek ordination in the state Church of England and marry into an upper middle-class

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<sup>56</sup> Jonathan A. Draper, “Hermeneutical drama on the colonial stage: liminal space and creativity in Colenso's *Commentary on Romans*”, *Journal of theology for southern Africa* 103 (March 1999) 13-32.

<sup>57</sup> Draper, “Hermeneutical drama on the colonial stage”, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Draper, “Hermeneutical drama on the colonial stage”, 15.

<sup>59</sup> Draper, “Hermeneutical drama on the colonial stage”, 15, footnote 6.

London family facilitated his social upward mobility and provided him with a foothold in an intellectual circle, which challenged “the received ideas and practices of European society ... In the language of the Comaroffs, this circle with which Colenso felt affinity with was engaged in bringing these matters out of the silence of hegemony into the contested field of ideological discourse.”<sup>60</sup> The Zulu society, to which Colenso went in order to do missionary work, was also involved in a social and political crisis, due to the ongoing wars and colonial incursions that destabilised the young Zulu kingdom. Colenso’s commentaries on Romans (1861) and the Pentateuch (1862-63) provide evidence for the encounter between both the different cultures and its effects upon biblical interpretation, in general, and the nature and authority of the bible, in particular.

In his commentary on Romans, Colenso worked with the then “unstable” emerging reconstructions of the Greek text and his own translation of it, which showed considerable sensitivity towards the Zulu language. This allowed him to bypass the eighteenth century English Authorized Version and create an English text that proved to be more congenial to the Zulu environment in which he worked. Also aware of the recent development of the historical critical method in Germany, Colenso read the historical situation of Romans as one in which Paul was seeking to “overcome Jewish prejudices against Gentiles and their own sense of superiority and privilege”<sup>61</sup>. This reconstruction led him to allegorise Romans, identifying the Jewish addressees as the (Calvinist) British Christians of his own day and the “Greeks” or Gentiles with the Zulus. The British Christians, therefore, “were those who relied on their inherited possession of the faith and wished to exclude the heathen Zulu from eternal life and consign them to eternal damnation. They were the ones who wished to impose customs and laws other than the gospel as a condition of salvation”<sup>62</sup>.

This allegorical reading of Romans implied the anti-imperialist critique of colonial Britain and its Christian mission, and thus the accusation that with the Jewish addressees, Britain would be accused of a triple prejudice: “belief in favoured status and rights to enter the kingdom through race; refusal to accept the complete equality of the meanest Gentile, and a trust in the Law and rites and ceremonies”<sup>63</sup>. Colenso’s allegiance to the emerging Enlightenment hermeneutics can only explain in part, why his publications caused a storm of

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<sup>60</sup> Draper, “Hermeneutical drama on the colonial stage”, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Draper, “Hermeneutical drama on the colonial stage”, 23.

<sup>62</sup> Draper, “Hermeneutical drama on the colonial stage”, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Draper, “Hermeneutical drama on the colonial stage”, 24.



controversy and were key evidence in the trial in which he was convicted as heretic in the ecclesiastical court in 1863. Even more radical scholars escaped this fate. Another reason was probably more decisive: “It was his status as a Colonial Bishop, with all that [it] entailed in terms of legitimating empire both by the silence of European hegemony and the discourse of imperial ideology, which made his ‘defection’ so unforgivable.”<sup>64</sup> Colenso’s reading of Romans shows that the missionary encounter indeed altered both sides, the missionised *and* the missionaries. But, if Jonathan Draper was able to show this so convincingly, are there any signs that the converted Africans subverted the missionary readings of the bible?

Gerald West has found a first heuristic orientation in the recent work done on the reception of the Bible by African-American slaves. Vincent Wimbush,<sup>65</sup> in particular, elaborated a fourfold typology of approaches to the Bible by African-Americans that, while overlapping considerably, roughly corresponds to the historical development of this group in the USA. The first two reading types, reflecting on the initial reception of the bible and the subversion of the missionaries’ interpretations, are especially important, since they decisively influenced the subsequent history of interpretation up to the contemporary context, and are the two reading types that West suggests have a heuristical effect when “applied” to the African colonial/missionary context.<sup>66</sup>

The first reactions of the African slaves were determined by the disorientation they experienced when they were uprooted from their African homeland and forced to labour in a strange place. This was noticeable most evidently in the dismantling of their language of communication, which was stripped of their religious heritage and ushered into their “social death”<sup>67</sup>. The slaves’ first reception of the Bible was characterised by a mixture of “rejection, suspicion, and awe” of “Book Religion”.<sup>68</sup> The central role the bible played in the discourse of legitimisation for slavery and the oral culture of the slaves’ homelands caused a contradictory reaction:

“On the one hand, they seemed to reject or be suspicious of any notion

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<sup>64</sup> Draper, “Hermeneutical drama on the colonial stage”, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, “The Bible and African-Americans: an outline of an interpretative history”, *Story the way we trod: African-American biblical interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

<sup>66</sup> The third and fourth of Wimbush’s reading type don’t seem to provide that much of a heuristic orientation (yet?) for West’s work.

<sup>67</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, “The Bible and African-Americans”, 83.

<sup>68</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, “The Bible and African-Americans”, 83.

of 'Book Religion.' As is the case with most nonliterate peoples with well-established and elaborate oral traditions, the Africans found the notion of piety and world view circumscribed by a book to be absurd. On the other hand, the fact that those who had enslaved them and were conquering the New World were 'Bible Christians' was not at all lost on the Africans: It did not take them long to associate the Book of 'Book Religion' with power."<sup>69</sup>

Still under the influence of this ambiguous relationship the African-Americans developed a second interpretational strategy towards the bible. The revival movements of the eighteenth century with their emphasis on testimonials and spontaneous community fellowship attracted many African-Americans to convert to Christianity. The sacralisation of the bible by the evangelists, the diversity in denominational and interpretative traditions, as well as the personal freedom granted by the emphasis upon spiritual guidance allowed the African-Americans to appropriate the Bible as a "language-world" which they "could enter and manipulate in light of their social experiences"<sup>70</sup>, providing a symbolic universe that would both provide them with a language for communication and would be instrumental in orientating them in their daily struggles for survival.

The different genres in which biblical readings found their expression — spirituals, sermons, testimonies, addresses — coined the idiosyncratic strategy the African-Americans adopted in this particular period that Wimbush labels as the "[t]ransformation of 'Book Religion' into Religion of Slave Experience"<sup>71</sup>. Wimbush describes how the different genres

"reflect a hermeneutic characterized by a looseness, even playfulness, vis-à-vis the biblical texts themselves. The interpretation was not controlled by the literal words of the texts, but by social experience. ... Many of the biblical stories ... functioned sometimes as allegory, as parable, or as veiled social criticism. Such stories well served the African slaves ... because their situation dictated veiled or indirect social criticism — 'hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick.'<sup>72</sup>

These two strategies proved to be foundational for the subsequent interaction of the African-Americans with the bible: "All other readings to come

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<sup>69</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African-Americans", 85.

<sup>70</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African-Americans", 86.

<sup>71</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African-Americans", 85.

<sup>72</sup> Wimbush, "The Bible and African-Americans", 88.



would in some sense be built upon and judged against it. ... In sum, it represents Africans' pragmatic, relative accommodation to existence in America."<sup>73</sup>

The question remains, however, how far this historical outline has parallels to the reception of the bible in Africa. One of the central problems may be the relative scarcity of documentation on the everyday interpretive practice of the first African converts. If an adequate picture is to be obtained, the interpretive practices will have to encompass all kinds of reception, including art, hymnology, and oral traditions.

### **3.6 The anonymity of the “in-between”**

Gerald West succeeds in pointing out the problems and possible solutions of an intellectual practice that consciously and explicitly commits itself to the political struggle of specific communities. It constitutes therefore one step further than merely acknowledging the contextual character of an intellectual practice. West also shows how cutting edge social analysis and biblical scholarship can function as a resource for “ordinary” readers. The epistemological privilege of systemically marginalised voices can find, on the other hand, a way into academic discussion without falling prey to the co-optations characteristic of similar approaches in the past. Critical theory and political commitment are therefore shown to engage in a fruitful dialectical relationship, a dialectic that poses an invaluable challenge and contribution to the discussions surrounding the renegotiations of the critical practises of white male biblical scholars.

West is exemplary in highlighting the problems posed by the traditional power relations between the scholar and the ordinary reader. He also succeeds in grounding his vocation on the challenge posed by the other and shows the way ahead in developing methods to face the radical demand to this call. It is his reconstitution of the intellectual's work as borderline-crosser that points to a critical space of resistance and change, both for society at large and for the white male biblical scholar specifically. However, some questions arise concerning the future challenges in this area of research.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Wimbush, “The Bible and African-Americans”, 89.

<sup>74</sup> I will discuss such an approach in more detail in chapter 15.

One problematic aspect of West's discourse could find a possible explanation in the nature of the interface he seeks to establish. The two sides of this encounter — the socially engaged biblical scholar and the ordinary reader from poor and marginalised communities — appear fixed and almost stereotyped in his descriptions. West remains mostly anonymous, hidden behind social class stereotypes. So does the mass of ordinary readers West works with. Hardly any singularity shines through the more general remarks on his work.<sup>75</sup>

What would happen if singular difference would fragment the homogenous mass of ordinary readers? How are differences negotiated in this interface, say between women and men, heterosexuals and homosexuals, able-bodied and challenged readers? Is the academic/ordinary interface also an interface between the people across these lines? Given that the interpretive strategies of the poor and marginalised await a more detailed analysis, what will further work in this direction show? Would it show a more complex picture, one that is not necessarily as strategically desirable.

West's own identity remains similarly anonymous. He appears almost exclusively as an intellectual. But does he ever read the bible in an "ordinary", devotional way? There are few examples of how West himself reads, despite his allusion to standard scholarly interpretations. How does West read the bible? Are his readings dictated solely by his socialisation as a scholar? Are there also unstructured and unsystematic aspects in his own reading practice? Where and how do they feature in his encounter with (other) ordinary readers?

This anonymity may be due in part to the workings of the liminal space of the interface. Homi Bhabha underlines the strategic importance and characteristics of work at the borderline: "These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular and communal — that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."<sup>76</sup> More than the meeting point of diverse identities, it is the enunciation of difference of identity that "takes you 'beyond' yourself in order to return, in a vision of revision and reconstruction, to the political *conditions* of the present"<sup>77</sup>. West's partial (re)constitution of identity

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<sup>75</sup> This critical remark can only be directed at his published work. At a visit to the Institute for the Study of the Bible in Pietermaritzburg, I could ascertain that the people involved in this interface, stereotyped for argumentative sake in West's publication, well have faces, names, singular biographies and that this also seems to be an important aspect in West's work. My assessment must, therefore, be understood with this restrictive *caveat*.

<sup>76</sup> Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 1f.

<sup>77</sup> Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 3.



happens precisely at the borderline between systemically fixed identities, hence his stereotypical portrayal. But it also constitutes a crossing of these fixed borders with the hope that it “opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy”<sup>78</sup>. The new partially constituted identity acquired in this process must remain — at least initially — anonymous. It cannot yet have a name, it is a priori unknowable, unrepresentable. But when will it return to the present? How exactly does this transformed white male disrupt the hegemony?

West’s testimonial-style conversion narrative adds to his project a challenging illocution. How is the challenge of his work to be heard by white male scholars? How could it be translated into a first world context? Could his work be expanded to include work with affluent ordinary readers? If the evils of poverty and marginalisation are indeed systemic problems, then why only focus on the subaltern? The subaltern perspective has to remain a point of departure for any discourse that wants to achieve social change. But there is another interface that could offer a fruitful space of political intervention — the interface between the subaltern and the hegemonic “ordinary” reader. This would be an interface with very similar and some very idiosyncratic problems, but one which already constitutes a front for heated (infra)political negotiations. Not taking this additional step could only contribute to the reinscriptions of fixed identity borderlines — borderlines that are in desperate need of deconstruction — as South Africa’s post-apartheid experience amply illustrates. As liturgical communities still remain divided along racial and class borders, work along this line is elemental.

In conclusion, West’s work shows the necessity to cross the borderline to the other at crucial points, to let this act of crossing reshape the critical discourses and, hence, to reinvent oneself in light of this experience. It shows the necessity to formulate this liminal work in concrete contexts with specific commitments, despite the risks involved. The circular gesture I have been pointing out repeatedly has not only to trespass this borderline, but also return, in order to establish maintainable political practices. It will return, though, with a difference, with difference, and therefore facilitate a change that is both calculable and unforeseeable.

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<sup>78</sup> Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 4.

## 4 OPENING UP THE VICIOUS CIRCLE: PATTE, STALEY AND WEST IN COMPARISON

### 4.1 Trespassing the threshold

After having discussed Patte, Staley, and West individually, I would now like to compare their contributions collectively.<sup>1</sup> There are obvious points of convergence and common ethico-political motivations among all three scholars. All share a common dissatisfaction with the traditional critical practices of biblical studies. All three see the implication of their problematised identity as part of the problem. All three call for changes that will not only affect the discipline, but also the discourses, which mark their identity as white males. But how do they compare to one another? Do they complement or do they contest one another?

Arranged in the sequence I have chosen to critically present aspects of Patte's, Staley's, and West's work, one could detect a plot, which revolves around a certain circular gesture in relation to a borderline. Daniel Patte suggested in his androcritical reframing of biblical scholarship that the (white male) scholar should make all aspects of the interpretative process fully explicit. This would consist of a circular gesture in which the critic turns towards himself, in order to become fully conscious of all his interpretive aspects. But even where Patte has applied his analysis to other scholars, thus far these have all been white males. The circular movement, thus, not only closes upon the critic himself, but does not yet extend beyond the confines of the same. Jeffrey Staley has a very similar suggestion to make. Autobiography would be the quintessential narcissistic turn upon oneself. There is, however, a twist in his merger of

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparison of West and Patte with Kwok Pui-lan's dialogical approach, see Fernando F. Segovia, "Reading-across: intercultural criticism and textual posture", *Interpreting beyond borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, *The bible and postcolonialism 3* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 59-83, particularly 67ff. I disagree with Segovia's otherwise insightful discussion in that I do not consider West's proposal as "a classic example of modernism by way of counterdiscourse" (68), nor Patte's literary semiotics as being informed *sufficiently* by poststructuralism (68). Neither is poststructuralism, as I will argue in part three of this thesis, a "predominant Western mode" (68). West's importance is, on the contrary, related to the way he puts postmodernist theories in dialogue with modernist liberation theology. Patte's literary semiotics is rather structuralist than poststructuralist. Poststructuralism refers to the work of a heterogeneous group of French thinkers who have been shaped considerably by the experience of the colonisation of Algeria and the subsequent war of liberation. It should be therefore seen rather as a hybrid discourse.



autobiography and biblical criticism: Staley encounters the borderline, the limit and, ultimately, the impossibility of self-representation. His allegorisation of the raising of Lazarus points out the split within the circle of self-identification — the point where the circular gesture touches upon and is essentially disturbed by this borderline. The hegemonic self encounters the subjugated other and is confronted to the necessity of a change that re-invents Lazarus in the in-betweenness of the death of his former self and his raising towards a still unknown new identity. In contrast, Gerald West writes as someone who has been called by the other and is experiencing a continuous re-constitution of his identity, as he commits himself to offer his work as resource for the empowerment of others within the liminal space of the interface. He appears as someone who has recognised the strategic *sine qua non* of transformation *within* this borderline.

Patte, Staley, and West could thus be seen as representing three stages of a process towards an ethical recreation of the identity of white male biblical scholars. But there is a sense in which even West's suggestion seems to fall short in making fully explicit his newly re-constituted identity. This would bring us back to Patte's suggestion, albeit no longer in the form of a circle, but — with the benefit of this progression — in the form of a spiral. The need for an ethical motivated recreation of identity could, in this way, also be imagined as a spiralling movement that repeatedly opens up the circle of identity, in order to respond to the call of the other at the threshold of life and death. The split of the circle therefore also marks an unsurpassable point: the responsibility towards the other cannot be left behind. It thus marks a threshold and presents a double demand: it needs to be passed and it is impossible to pass. This encounter — if it has indeed an element of responsibility — will always seek to displace and not to come back to the point of departure.

Before I bring these metaphors to a philosophical scrutinisation in the next part of this thesis, it will remain necessary to contrast Patte, Staley, and West around some central conceptual juxtapositions that have emerged during the previous chapters.

## 4.2 Differences within binary oppositions

If the three scholars can be seen as complementing each other to form a spiralling movement around a borderline, this borderline can be shown to permeate and mark the binary opposition of a series of concepts.

First, and in a way most important, is the pair of the same and the other. Patte, Staley, and West agree in the need for change within critical practices. The crucial challenge comes in all three cases from the other — invariably, marginalised voices that are making themselves heard in the corridors of academia from within (particularly Patte) and from the outside (particularly West). Interestingly, in all three cases the problematic exclusion of the other is linked to the colonial heritage of biblical scholarship. Colonialism serves as a sort of contextual master-narrative for all three critics and as a result, they are seeking to reinvent themselves as postcolonial critics. As I have already indicated, Patte and West represent two extremes. The former opts for a change from within, by bringing to full explicitness every single interpretative aspect of his own work and that of his white male peers, while the latter opts for a change from without, by committing himself to collaboration with the subaltern. Staley, on the other hand, elaborates a discourse that centres around the threshold that has to be passed, in order to bring this change about.

In Patte's case, then, the self takes the initial impulse from the other, but does not succeed significantly in breaking out of the circle of sameness. Staley opens himself up to the other, but, in his case, the other is the other as she is interiorised in his autobiographical memory. While the circle begins to show its crack, Staley does not yet offer a true openness over against the other. West, by contrast, gives himself away to the other. The other is the one who calls and hosts him and, ultimately, uses his resources as she sees fit. One of the reasons for this difference is that the three scholars have chosen different interlocutors for their critical practice. Patte has not (yet?) gone significantly beyond his white male peers. While Staley and West are still in conversation with the same audience, they have shifted their focus towards marginalised, ordinary interlocutors. West is most explicit. Staley could be read as going, implicitly, in that same direction too. Otherness is conceptualised, implicitly, by all three scholars as concrete otherness, i.e. as otherness that is experienced in all three cases as something that is specific and knowable. In Staley's case, though, a different kind of otherness shines through. It is the irreducible and infinite



otherness that is alluded to in the speechlessness of the raised Lazarus who is unable to express his liminal experience. It is this latter kind of otherness, I will argue in this thesis, that is the crucial aspect of an ethically responsible reinvention of the white male biblical scholar.

The opposition of the self and the other is typically exemplified in biblical studies by another conceptual pair, that of the critical and the ordinary. Patte incorporates both discourses in what I have called a super-criticism, but without really succeeding in mixing them. For him, the ordinary is merely the unacknowledged former aspect of the critical. While the two are added to each other in his androcritical model, they are merely put together and still remain distinguishable. It is West who exposes himself more radically to ordinary readings. But one still awaits more explicit examples of how ordinary readings of texts reconstitute his own ordinary and critical readings. Staley, by contrast, seems to be more successful in mingling these two discourses. He makes use of the fact that he himself incorporates both discourses within his own experience. His own ordinary readings appear as inseparably intertwined with their critical manifestations. Autobiographical biblical criticism represents a true innovation by hybridising these two discourses.

Another important aspect emerging in the previous chapters is the problem of representation. This problem is usually linked to juxtaposition of the apparent and the hidden. All three scholars are driven by the desire to elucidate as much as is possible — or necessary — of interpretive practices. In Patte's case it is the forgotten pragmatic reasons, which forged critical readings, that are brought to light. Staley argues passionately for the inclusions of experiences that have been hitherto excluded from critical practice for their alleged subjectivity. West, informed by postcolonial social models, recognises the necessity to consider the hidden transcripts of the subaltern as an important counter-hegemonic impulse to criticism. Again, it is Staley who points to the limit of this endeavour. His passionate plea for autobiographical criticism is not without the recognition that, ultimately, aspects of his life will remain unrepresentable. The autobiographical narrator is no more authentic than the disembodied critical voice that dominated his former scholarly interpretations. This ultimate unrepresentability of his self could be conceptualised as the other within himself.

The issue of representation, therefore, also has a bearing on the relationship towards and between the self and the other. It is interesting to compare the discourses that Patte, Staley, and West have opted for in representing this binary pair. Patte offers a structural and sociological approach

to represent himself as super-critic. The other, one could argue, seems to fall according to him the same categorical grid. Patte, however, resists this representational step and focuses instead on the self and the same; putting it differently, the only visible other is his white male peer. Although the marginalised play a crucial role in his theoretical aetiology, it is only in order to disappear from sight. The encounter with the other is thus still postponed. Staley represents himself and the other autobiographically. The self, however, still remains the central character. The other appears in the form of secondary characters that have had an impact on his life. West spends most energy in analysing the power-relationship between the hegemonic self and the systemic other. Although both are represented in rather stereotypical social categories, the other comes to occupy the centre of the interface. His own presence as a socially engaged scholar becomes subordinated to the subaltern. The relationship is strategically inverted.

The different emphases Patte, Staley, and West place on the respective sides of these binary oppositions — the self and the other, the critical and the ordinary, the apparent and the hidden — only highlight the dialectical nature of the problems that have caused their critical responses. The crucial moment, I will argue, lies in the borderline between these dichotomies. Staley and West have recognised this in different approaches. Staley alludes to the ultimate impossibility of trespassing that borderline. West indicates the necessity of creating spaces of interaction on this borderline. This threshold is circumvented by a movement that regularly touches upon this limit.

In the following part of this thesis I will discuss the relation between these two — the borderline and the circular movement — and point out the ethical moment that from time to time comes to haunt western metaphysics. Few philosophers have problematised more radically the borderline between binary oppositions than Jacques Derrida. It will be to him that I will now turn to in order to work out the philosophical, ethical and political stakes in maintaining or deconstructing this binary order.



## PART TWO

The history of society and culture is, in large measure, a history of the struggle with the endlessly complex problems of difference and otherness. Never have the questions posed by difference and otherness been more pressing than they are today.<sup>1</sup>

Mark C. Taylor

Difference and otherness, the self and identity. In the current intellectual landscape few topics seem to deserve more critical thought than these. The pervasiveness of the ethical questions gathered around these keywords discloses the urgency with which they push themselves to the foreground of our thinking and our practice. In the aftermath of colonialism and the emergence of capitalist globalisation, difference and otherness acquire a distinct political aspect. Tolerance, conversion, integration, domination, exclusion, repression — the strategies developed by the west in dealing with its other have become increasingly problematic and, even though only recently, increasingly problematised. It is here that the borderline between thinking and acting, theory and practice, ideology and politics can be shown to be extremely porous, to the extent of giving rise to the suspicion that this borderline itself may only be the product of a certain ideological interest.

In the following chapters I will turn to Jacques Derrida, in order to discuss the bearing of deconstruction on the critical problems we face in the legacy of western thinking about difference and otherness.

Why Derrida? Passionately revered or feared, Derrida seems a legitimate dialogue partner, if one wishes to probe the foundations of hegemonic western metaphysical thought. The popularity of his writings and the grimness with which he is criticised shows that he must have touched upon a neuralgic point of philosophy. Renowned for the rigorous and eccentric style with which he pushes the limits of traditional thought, Derrida's work promises the right stimulus for a theory which attempts to go beyond hegemonic identity politics. But does Derrida

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<sup>1</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) xxi.

not push too far?

This is an important question. Particularly if it is a political strategy one wants to facilitate — the reinvention of a non-oppressive white male identity. For one of the objections of Derrida's critics is that it is precisely impossible to ground any political practice on his thought. Bill Readings aptly summarises the three main charges against Derrida in this area:

“(1) that it preaches a pantextualism that infinitely regresses from the possibility of political action; (2) that deconstructive indeterminacy offers no criteria for political judgment; (3) that deconstruction's assault on traditional conceptions of subjectivity erases the possibility of a potent agent of political action.”<sup>2</sup>

I will return to this question in chapter 9 of the thesis, for a satisfying answer will have to wait for a presentation of deconstruction's bearing upon our question. I am able to indicate already, however, that it will be a sympathetic presentation of Derrida's thought. Anyone taking on the philosophical hegemony, I would argue, deserves a certain advance of sympathy.

Using Augustine as an example, the fifth chapter will introduce some central tropes that will feature in my argument. The problem of the loss of the beloved and the loss of the self found in Augustine a classical solution. At the centre of Augustine's aporia was the passing of time, which, after his conversion experience, he could reconceive through God's eternity. Presence and identity were firmly established in their superiority to flux and difference. This shift materialised itself in his autobiographical *Confessions* where Augustine could transform himself from the protagonist of his life to the narrator of his biography. The memory of the self-conscious subject became the site where the anxiety for presence, both in time and space, was thought to be fulfilled. Thus the subject could be seen as exercising full mastery over itself as it reappropriates itself through an autobiographical recollection.

De Saussure, Nietzsche, and Levinas will be the three thinkers that will function as indices for my discussion of Derrida's deconstruction. De Saussure's theory of the sign promised to be a potential point of departure for modern linguistics, if it would not have been tamed by basing his theory on spoken language only and thus stopping the endless reference from sign to sign in what

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Readings, “The deconstruction of politics”, *Reading de Man reading*, ed. Linsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, *Theory and history of literature* 59 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 224.



Derrida has called the “transcendental signified”. In chapter 6, I will argue that *différance*, one of the most popular keywords of deconstruction, has the potential of rescuing the radical element contemporary semiotics seeks to tame by freeing the sign from the obsession with presence. Nietzsche, furthermore, offers metaphors that will assist me in disentangling the idea of the unified self in chapter 7. By thinking of life as revolving in repeating circles, which regularly confront the self with death, a fragile space is opened up, in which the self faces the other. For Nietzsche autobiography becomes a metaphor for life in general. While in the circular movement of self-appropriation the self seeks to recollect itself, it also runs the risk of appropriating the other. Levinas, in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, will be shown to share strategic moral sentiments with deconstruction, which allow me to point out the ethical contribution deconstruction can make to the central problem of this thesis. In order to subvert the western supremacy of the self over the other, Levinas has inverted the relationship by showing that the unknowable other is what calls the self into being. This call to responsibility and decision will be read through Derrida’s thoughts on the concept of ‘invention’ which marks the space where deconstruction promises to open up the self to the other.

In chapter 9, I will draw the consequences of deconstruction for ethics and politics. I will argue that Derrida’s thought should be seen as a tricontinental and postcolonial resistance to and subversion of western imperialism in the field of ontology. The intention of chapter 10 is to link race, ethnicity, and gender, on the one hand, to colonialism and global capitalism, on the other. Deconstruction’s resistance and subversion, finally, will be exemplified on the discussion of European identity in chapter 11.

## 5 AUGUSTINE, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE METAPHYSICS OF PRESENCE

Although it may be a slight exaggeration that Augustine of Hippo is the one “who must be credited with the discovery of personal subjectivity”<sup>3</sup>, Augustine is a particularly useful example of how Western metaphysics came to treat the topic of the self. In his *Confessions*, a *locus classicus* of a particular understanding of time, Augustine not only reinforced the connection between autobiographical and metaphysical issues, but did this with recourse to tropes that would influence the theoretical developments up to contemporary discussions. By using the *Confessions* as an example, I would also like to underscore the relationship between the formal and thematical centre of this work — Augustine’s conversion in book 8 — with the philosophical-theological speculations on time in book 11.<sup>4</sup>

For Augustine time constituted a problem he only gradually came to understand and to master after his conversion. The literary autobiographical form of the first 9 books of his *Confessions*, in particular, and the philosophical elaborations in the latter part of the work, to use this simplistic dichotomy, are intricately intertwined. The troubling experience Augustine sought to come to terms with was the loss of two persons in his life — the death of an unnamed, but intimately close friend in book 4 and the passing away of his mother Monica in book 9. Both episodes formally frame the important event of his conversion and thus determine his change in the psychological experience of time. His youthful response to the death of his close friend, is interwoven with themes from the Aristotelian concept of friendship in the concluding books of his *Nicomachian ethics*, particularly the topic of ‘the friend as a second self’.<sup>5</sup> Augustine experienced his grief as a partial loss of his self. The mortality of the object of his love disclosed the fragility of his possession of selfhood, and confronted Augustine with the fear of death:

“I felt that our two souls had been as one, living in two bodies, and life

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<sup>3</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: a postmodern a/theology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) 35.

<sup>4</sup> This introduction owes heavily Genevieve Lloyd’s *Being and time: selves and narrators in philosophy and literature*, Ideas (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd, *Being and time*, 16.



to me was fearful because I did not want to live with only half a soul. Perhaps this, too, is why I shrank from death, for fear that one whom I had loved so well might then be wholly dead.”<sup>6</sup>

Time was hereby experienced by Augustine as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, time helps to heal the wounds of grief. On the other hand, time exposes one to new vulnerability. But already here Augustine hints at the role memory will play in his deliverance from the anguish of time. Memory functions as a ‘stomach of the mind’, in which experiences from the past can be ‘digested’:

“Time’s destructive flight into non-existence is countered by the act of memory. Having found in his own soul the act of attention which approximates in its all-encompassing presence the ‘standing present’ of eternity, he will now be free to love changeable and mortal things in God, who is never lost.”<sup>7</sup>

The experience of his mother Monica’s death after his conversion, in contrast, is overshadowed by the experience of God’s eternity. The tears of grief become now the expression of hope of eternal life. Even though Augustine’s emotions are still lagging somewhat behind, in this episode

“the destructive passage of time is framed by the soul’s journey towards eternity. ... Eternity is here not an empty abstract contrast with the reality of time, but a fullness of presence to be attained after death — a fullness towards which the soul strains during life and of which it gets occasional glimpses.”<sup>8</sup>

Augustine’s privileging of the ‘present’ could be seen as a polemic against Aristotle, who positioned the mind as a transcendental observer, and Plotinus, who saw time as the unfolding of the soul. For Augustine the troublesome experience of the soul within the flux of time, led him to orientate himself by the stretching out of consciousness. In what could be seen as the interpretation of the trinity in terms of subjectivity,<sup>9</sup> Augustine moved from seeing the fleeting present as the durationless instant through which time passes as the not-anymore-existent past and the still-non-existent future to seeing the present as the only tense of time manifesting itself in three modalities: “the present of things past is memory; the present of things present is sight; the present of things future

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<sup>6</sup> *Confessions* iv, 8; 79. Quoted after Lloyd, *Being and time*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd, *Being and time*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd, *Being and time*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 38.

is expectation”<sup>10</sup>. Augustine’s shift can also be seen as a shift from seeing consciousness within time to its inversion to seeing time within consciousness.

It is, interestingly, the spoken word that provides Augustine with the ultimate model for his understanding of time and its unified structure. The spoken word is a recurring theme throughout the *Confessions*. Augustine explains that learning how to speak facilitates autonomy and self-directedness. In contrast to learning how to read, speaking involves the capacity of spontaneity. Reading is merely following a set of instructions. But, the spoken word also shows the necessity of life, that everything has its proper time. Poetry, for example, allegorises the rhythmical rules to which everybody has to submit: the rising and setting of the sun, growing up and dying. The mortal and fragile world shifts according to the rhythms of life’s necessity and the soul that seeks its rest in those things is torn by a destructive desire. In book 11 it is the recital of a Psalm that illustrates Augustine’s shift in his understanding of time. Before he begins the recital, the whole of the Psalm is engaged by expectation. Once one is underway in the recital, the memory is engaged by relegating the sounding words into the past. It is consciousness, though, that offers the “province of memory”. The sounds of the words cannot be really measured until they have been consciously heard, until they have been deposited into memory. A “true” understanding of time, according to Augustine, requires an inner look. And this inner look reveals the relationship between the stretching out of consciousness — the distension of the soul — and God’s eternal present.

The lost and inwardly divided self is united in God’s eternity, and this unification remains incomplete if it is not narrated as an autobiography of conversion. After years of apparently pointless erring, Augustine finally found himself. By shifting from a protagonist in the history of his life to the narrator of his story, Augustine found a discourse that could provide him with unity and stability. As the author of his autobiography he became master over himself. Retrospective memory allowed him to imitate God’s eternal point of view and impose a plot on his life. It is ultimately the desire for mastery over his fragmented life that Augustine was seeking. And he found it in its incorporation into memory. The past is digested in the womb of consciousness. The outcome is an approach to life that would perennially prefer presence and identity over and against the flux of time and difference:

“Through the process of re-presentation, the subject re-collects the

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 43.



past and integrates it with the present. Such re-membering presupposes the self's transparency to itself. In the final analysis, subjectivity must be 'reduced' to total self-consciousness in which nothing remains obscure."<sup>11</sup>

While Augustine is not the originator of this thought, he epitomises, in this reading, the metaphysical desire of "the One and the Same" characteristic of western philosophy. This will be my point of entrance for the radical criticism of deconstruction. For, if it is the spoken word that serves Augustine as a model, what would happen if one turns instead to writing? Will philosophy still remain captive to its obsession with spatiotemporal presence? Will its mastery over the self be unmasked as a myth? What will happen, when the eternal circle of self-appropriation is broken up by the other? Will the subject still remain the same? These are the questions to which the following chapters will attempt to give an answer.

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Altarity*, 191.

## 6 WRITING THE INAUDIBLE: DE SAUSSURE AND THE SIGN WITHIN THE ECONOMY OF *DIFFÉRENCE*

Since, as Derrida has remarked, the moment the metaphysical building began to tremble and its foundations started to lay bare in front of the “masters of suspicion” was also “the moment when language invaded the universal problematic”<sup>1</sup>, it will be helpful to start with the problematical nature of modern linguistics itself. The basic foundation of contemporary theories of language is the theory of the sign. Semiotics constitutes, thus, the beginning of linguistics. And Derrida’s aim was to show how this beginning was problematic, to start with. Indeed, his point (if it is a point) would be that the sign or a theory of the sign *cannot* be a beginning, and that there may not be a beginning at all.

Ferdinand de Saussure, who is generally considered the father of modern linguistics, asserted an influence on French poststructuralism that cannot be overestimated. De Saussure aimed to build his new linguistic theory upon a more general theory of the sign, according to which the sign (*signum*) was classically defined as being constituted by a signifier (*signans*) and a signified (*signatum*). The signifier would correspond to the sound pattern of the utterance, while the signified would correspond to the concept to which the sound pattern refers.

Two important propositions were made by de Saussure concerning language and the sign. Firstly, he asserted that the relationship between signifier and signified, i.e. the sign itself, is arbitrary, as a quick comparison between different languages amply illustrates — there is no necessary or indispensable link between a particular concept and any sensible representation of it. This was hardly a new discovery, but for de Saussure it became “the organizing principle of the whole [of] linguistics”<sup>2</sup>. The second proposition is related to the first. If arbitrariness is the organising principle, what is the necessary condition in order to make signification possible? According to de Saussure, it is the differences distinguishing one signifier from another that makes language possible in the first place. He went even further and pronounced the now classical assertion:

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, “Structure, sign and play”, 280.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted after Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the foot of the cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 16.



“*In the language itself, there are only differences. Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, and no positive terms.*”<sup>3</sup>

The potentially unsettling consequences of these two propositions, though, were quickly tamed by de Saussure in a move that would later offer the point of intervention for Jacques Derrida. Wary of the negative character his linguistics would present, de Saussure engaged in a move that practically reversed the radical nature of his propositions by counter-balancing them with a positive quality. While it may be right that, when considered separately, signifier and signified appear “purely differential and negative”<sup>4</sup>, he argued, the combination of the two characterised the sign positively. De Saussure went on to suggest that “the term *difference* should be dropped” altogether as “no longer appropriate”<sup>5</sup>. It is precisely de Saussure’s “maintenance of the rigorous distinction between signifier and signified” that is met by Derrida with suspicion as to whether it “inherently leaves open the possibility of *thinking a concept signified in and of itself*”<sup>6</sup>. Divorced of its relationship with a signifier, this signified would not constitute a sign and would, thus, transcend any signifying system, exceed any chain of signs. This notion of the “transcendental signified”, as Derrida calls it, is meant to “place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign”<sup>7</sup>. What is more, it is the quintessential stabilising concept of western metaphysics with its emphasis upon presence, both spatial and temporal.

The reason why de Saussure could make this strategically stabilising move is because, although he wanted to formulate a *general* theory of language, he excluded writing and concentrated only on speech. Writing, according to him, was a neglectable factor in language, since it was only a narrow and derivative phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Being only one discursive modality amongst others, the idiosyncrasies of writing are only seen as an exception to the rule. The oral characteristic of spoken language seems to function unaffected by writing. Furthermore, the originality of spoken language makes out of writing a secondary

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted after Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted after Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted after Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, tr. and annotated by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; London: The Athlone Press, 1981) 19.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*, corrected edition, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 49.

<sup>8</sup> See Derrida, *Of grammatology*, 30ff. for this criticism of de Saussure.

representation. De Saussure's limitation of his endeavour to speech and his legitimation thereof was characteristic of linguistics as it developed after him. His focus on the spoken form as the *only* object of his linguistics, though, picks up on a very old tradition that goes back to the elaborations on writing by Plato and Aristotle, according to which writing is conceptualised as phonetic writing.<sup>9</sup> The binary opposition between speech and writing, whereby the former is always preferred to the latter, became fundamental of western metaphysics, the reason being the occidental privilege of presence, both spatial and temporal, over against absence.

What is both fascinating and intolerable in this relationship, though, is that, while writing is considered merely the representation of speech, the latter needs the former in order to define itself through its difference from the other. Derrida manages to tease out at this point the aporia of western representation:

"[B]y a mirroring, inverting, and perverting effect, speech seems in its turn the speculum of writing ... Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer. A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable."<sup>10</sup>

Writing, considered by de Saussure as an *exterior* threat to the *natural* relationship between the voice and sense, had to be kept vigilantly out of linguistics. But, as Derrida points out, this would be a futile effort, since writing haunts language and makes any metaphysical mission to exorcise it and keep it neatly out of the system impossible.

Derrida's deconstructed semiotics — grammatology — is, therefore, *not* a semiotics that has its foundation on writing at the exclusion of speech. It is rather the recognition that language, generally, has aspects that were characteristically attributed to writing:

"Deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing

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<sup>9</sup> Something that, according to Derrida does not exist in a pure and rigorous form anyway, since even so-called "phonetic writing" must admit nonphonetic signs, like punctuation and spacing, in order to function. See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982) 5.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, *Of grammatology*, 36.



does not *befall* an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first ... writing. 'Usurpation' has always already begun. The sense of the right side appears in a mythological effect of return."<sup>11</sup>

This characteristically deconstructive move appears to sublimate, in Hegelian style, the opposition between writing and speech. But this is better seen as the recognition that both concepts are intimately intertwined and that both play a role in how language works. If Derrida retains writing as his preferred concept, he does this for strategic reasons and only as *paleonymics*:

"[I]t seems necessary to retain, provisionally and strategically, *the old name* [of 'writing']. This entails an entire logic of *paleonymics* ...: an opposition of metaphysical concepts (e.g., speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the confrontation of two terms, but a hierarchy and the order of a subordination. Deconstruction ... must, through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing — put into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is on this condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of *intervening* in the field of oppositions it criticizes and that is also a field of nondiscursive forces. ... Deconstruction does not consist in moving from one concept to another, but in reversing and displacing a conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which it is articulated."<sup>12</sup>

What then had been left out of hermeneutics and linguistics? Derrida's dispute with John Searl is especially instructive in this case, for it not only shows how deconstruction differs from classical semiotics, but also highlights the institutional and political stakes involved in this discussion. Speech act theory,<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *Of grammatology*, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, tr. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 21. Derrida's ensuing explanation of this strategy is instructive and worth quoting, too: "[W]riting, as a classical concept, entails predicates that have been subordinated, excluded, or held in abeyance by forces and according to necessities to be analyzed. It is those predicates (...) whose force of generality, generalization, and generativity is liberated, grafted onto a 'new' concept of writing that corresponds as well to what has always *resisted* the prior organization of forces, always constituted the *residue* irreducible to the dominant force organizing the hierarchy that we may refer to, in brief, as logocentric. To leave to this new concept the old name of writing is tantamount to maintaining the structure of the *graft*, the transition and indispensable adherence to an effective *intervention* in the constituted historical field. It is to give to everything at stake in the operations of deconstruction the chance and the force, the power of *communication*." *Limited inc.*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Speech act theory sees language as constituting or being part of acts or performances. J. L. Austin was the first to develop this insight into a theory in his 12 William James lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955 and published as *Sense and sensibilia: how to do things with words*



furthermore, as one of the most advanced contemporary linguistic models, has found a particular congenial reception in some recent reactionary projects in biblical studies that pretend to offer a critical reading of contemporary theory and rescue a theologically sound approach to the bible.<sup>14</sup> I will follow here, for argumentative reasons, Derrida's side of the discussion.<sup>15</sup>

J. L. Austin based his classical and foundational exposition of speech act theory on a model of oral communication as it appears in "ordinary" language. He furthermore excluded cases of infelicitious performatives by giving six indispensable conditions of success that mark off the discursive territory for which speech act theory claims validity. These conditions included, as Derrida noticed,

"once more those of an exhaustively definable context, of a free consciousness present to the totality of the operation, and of absolutely meaningful speech [*vouloir-dire*] master of itself: the teleological jurisdiction of an entire field whose organizing center remains *intention*"<sup>16</sup>.

The contradiction in this approach consists of the acknowledgement that the infelicities and quotations are a structural possibility within speech acts, on the one hand, and, on the other, it excludes the risk by considering those cases as accidental, exterior, abnormal, or parasitic. This is problematic insofar as speech act theory attempts to delineate a generally applicable theory. Intentionality, totally present and immediately transparent, provides the determining centre for an exhaustibly determinable context.

Derrida locates the difficulties he encounters in Austin at the site where both writing and presence are at question. The instance of the "juridic signature" illustrates Derrida's problematisation. Austin justifies his preference of the first person present indicative active voice with reference to the source it provides, at

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(Oxford University Press, 1962). John Searl developed this theory further in his influential *Speech acts: an essay in the philosophy of language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) and *Expression and meaning: studies in the theory of speech acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> I am referring to Anthony C. Thiselton, *New horizons in biblical hermeneutics: the theory and practice of transforming biblical reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text?: the Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998) and Francis Watson, *Text and truth: redefining biblical theology* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1997), in particular. On the dogmatic or systemic theological side of the same move I could refer to Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine discourse: philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> The dispute was originally published in the journal *Glyph*. The subsequently published *Limited Inc.* offers Derrida's papers along with an afterword by Derrida and only short summaries of Searle's contribution.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida. *Limited inc.*, 15.



the moment of the utterance (in this case a signature) the author is present to it. What is more, the signature itself assures this tie between source and signature by implying “his having-been present in a past *now*”<sup>17</sup>. The paraphrase retains the absolute singularity of the signature-event. It is at this moment when Derrida intervenes by showing that there are particular characteristics of writing that can be generalised. For,

“in order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is this sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal [*sceau*].”<sup>18</sup>

Iterability<sup>19</sup> and, thus, the absence of the receiver *and* the sender come to corrupt the purity of Austin’s neat speech act theory. Written communication must be readable, and thus iterable, even after the death of the author, otherwise it could not function as communication at all. Derrida does not accept this structural absence of the author as “a continuous modification of presence”<sup>20</sup>. Rather, “it is a rupture, the ‘death’ or the possibility of the ‘death’ of the receiver inscribed in the structure of the mark”<sup>21</sup>. The same goes for the absence of the author: “For a writing to be a writing it must continue to ‘act’ and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written”<sup>22</sup>. The iterative structure of writing, thus, shows the sign circulating, even if cut off from metaphysical constraints, “orphaned and separated at birth from the assistance of its father”<sup>23</sup>. This is nevertheless also the case with the cunningly thought-out counter-examples with which Searl replies in his response. The shopping list one writes for oneself, for example, implies, at least, the possibility of absence of memory in a moment that is not identical with the moment of remembering; and in the case of the note one passes to a friend during a

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida. *Limited inc*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida. *Limited inc*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> It will be interesting, in linking this aspect of deconstruction to ethics, to note that Derrida links iterability to alterity by referring to its etymology: *iter*, again, probably comes from *itara*, *other* in Sanskrit, and everything that follows can be read as the working out of the logic that ties repetition to alterity”; Derrida. *Limited inc*, 7. For an analytical presentation of Derrida’s argument on iterability and a criticism of the Wittgensteinian arguments against Derrida see Gordon C. F. Bearn, “Derrida dry: iterating iterability analytically”, *Diacritics* 25:3 (Fall 1995) 3-25.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida. *Limited inc*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida. *Limited inc*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida. *Limited inc*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida. *Limited inc*, 8.

function, in which both sender and receiver are present (both to each other and to themselves), this move is only possible by implying that it could work, as a structural possibility, even if, say, one has to leave and asks somebody to pass the note to the friend, or the friend briefly leaves and one gives him the note after his return.

Derrida concludes from this observation a fourfold disengagement of the graphematically transformed concept of communication: firstly, from the concept of the “communication of consciousness or of presences and as linguistical or semantic transport of the desire to mean what one says”<sup>24</sup>; secondly, from the semantic and hermeneutic horizon; thirdly, from the concept of polysemy in favour of dissemination; and fourthly, the severe limitation of the concept of context, “inasmuch as its rigorous theoretical determination as well as its empirical saturation is rendered impossible or insufficient by writing”<sup>25</sup>.

Few words capture Derrida’s deconstruction of a semiotics captivated by western metaphysics better than the witty neographism *différance*. It is witty because its difference to the French *différence* is only marked by writing. It takes revenge, if one likes to see it that way, on a linguistics that orientates itself on speech and discards writing. What *différance* could convey, thus, is “recognized and situated in advance as prescribed by the mute irony, the inaudible misplacement, of this permutation”<sup>26</sup> — something for which metaphysics’s ears are not tuned finely enough. Derrida’s graphic intervention, thus, escapes the order of apprehension, insofar it is defined by metaphysics altogether. And when Derrida delivered his paper on *différance* to the French Society of Philosophy, he had to clarify every time whether he was saying *différ( )nce* with an “*e*” or with an “*a*”, thus referring to the written text of his paper and insinuating that it would have been impossible “to do without the passage through a written text”<sup>27</sup>, even if traditionally we have been misled to think so. At this point Derrida hints at the kind of (non)terrain he is going to lead to, “between two differences or two letters, a *différance* which belongs neither to the voice nor to writing in the usual sense”<sup>28</sup>.

If *différance* is “located” in this mystic and slippery field beyond

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<sup>24</sup> Derrida. *Limited inc*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida. *Limited inc*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 5.



metaphysics, it will be clear that it is neither a concept nor can it simply be presented as such. It cannot be a concept, since it is what makes concepts possible in the first place.<sup>29</sup> And it cannot be presented because it does not belong to the sphere of presence or truth, the space controlled by metaphysics. In order to give a paper on *différance*, Derrida will thus have to recur to a rhetorical trick. He will have to talk about *différance* much like negative theology does about God. Only that Derrida does not want to do the same as the negative theologians — proposing that it is a subject which is “beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, ... only in order to acknowledge [its] superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being”<sup>30</sup>.

“*Différance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological — ontotheological — reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology — philosophy — produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return.”<sup>31</sup>

What *is*, then, *différance*? I will only be able to give an answer to this question by submitting it, to a degree, to metaphysical violence and attempting “a simple and approximative semantic analysis that will take us to within sight of what is at stake”<sup>32</sup>. Parting from the ambiguity of the French *différence*, Derrida summarises the double aspect captured in the quasi-concept *différance* as “temporisation”.<sup>33</sup> In its more “common” usage *différence* denotes a non-identity, an otherness. It therefore necessitates an interval, a distancing, a *spacing* between the two different objects. Another usage denotes a detour, a delay, a deferral, putting it off until later, hence taking account of *time*. Since *différence* only refers to one of these aspects at a time, Derrida has created his neographism in order to “refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meanings”<sup>34</sup>.

But how are the two aspects joined? Derrida alludes here to his deconstruction of the Saussurian semiotics. As I have already noted, de Saussure took the arbitrary and differential character of the sign as the

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 8.

correlative characteristics of his foundational semiotics. If the play of differences is the condition of signification between signifier and signified, then, according to Derrida, difference itself cannot be a concept, since the signified is already the conceptual side of the sign. It is “rather the possibility of conceptuality ... in general”<sup>35</sup>. Saussurian difference not only plays with, but it also produces other differences as effects, i.e. difference constitutes a sign that produces at the same time as it is an effect. *Différance*, though, cannot be seen as an origin, since it cannot be part of the differential system. On the other hand, it is the condition for the possibility of this differential play. By speaking of the “trace”, Derrida indicates a way out of this framework, for the trace “is no more an effect than it has a cause, but ... in and of itself, outside its text, [the trace] is not sufficient to operate the necessary transgression”<sup>36</sup>. Precisely here, at this point, a rift breaks up the differential play of the sign, and it is worth quoting Derrida *in extenso*:

“An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject. In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*). And it is this constitution of the present, as an ‘originary’ and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, *strictu sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions ..., that I propose to call ... *différance*. Which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization.”<sup>37</sup>

Derrida’s contribution to semiotics could be thus seen as a super-Saussureanism. Having discovered de Saussure’s insight into the correlation of the arbitrariness and difference of the sign, he rescues its radical potential by cutting it loose from the transcendental signified and the metaphysical obsession with spatiotemporal presence. Iterability and absence adds the aspect of time (and space) to the differential play of the sign, while *différance* shows every sign to be a trace of both the effects of the past and the product of the future. The

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<sup>35</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 13.





## 7 HOW TO BECOME WHAT ONE IS: NIETZSCHE AND THE POLITICS OF THE PROPER NAME

In one of his introductory remarks to "Otobiographies", a paper that includes a close reading of Nietzsche's autobiography *Ecce homo*, Derrida complains about the dichotomy that characterises traditional genre of "lives of the philosophers". In that genre the philosophical system, the philosopher's "work", is juxtaposed to the "life" of the philosopher. Usually these endeavours limit themselves to an "immanent" reading of the work or a reading that seeks to explain the genesis of the philosophical system by recourse to the "life" of the author. For Derrida neither of these approaches "have ever in themselves questioned the *dynamics* of that borderline between the 'work' and the 'life'. ... This divisible borderline traverses two 'bodies,' the corpus and the body, in accordance with laws that we are only beginning to catch sight of."<sup>1</sup> The negligence of this questioning is precisely where the sort of complications that interest Derrida surface.

The first complication occasioned by this dynamic borderline is that that which is called "life" does not stand in opposition *vis-à-vis* "death". Life as such cannot come away or disentangle itself from death. A science, therefore, that has "life" as its object (e.g. biology or biography), falls for a phantasm. Nietzsche expresses this by talking about his father and mother in *Rätselform*, i.e. "symbolically, by way of riddle; in other words, in the form of a proverbial legend, and as a story that has a lot to teach"<sup>2</sup>. "I am," he wrote "to express it in the form of a riddle, already dead as my father, while as my mother, I am still living and becoming old." This enigmatic aphorism makes the borderline between life and death tremble in more than one way. Nietzsche is also referring to his "real" parents. His father existed for him only as a pale and fragile "memory", "more a gracious memory of life rather than life itself"<sup>3</sup>, for he died at the age of 36, shortly before Nietzsche's birth. Thus he was not simply outlived by his son, but was already dead when the latter was born. Nietzsche's mother, on the other hand, had the sad fate of living long enough to bury her own son. Nietzsche, when

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The ear of the other: otobiography, transference, translation*, tr. Peggy Kamuf, ed. Christie McDonald (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) 5f.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, *The ear of the other*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, *The ear of the other*, 17.



writing *Ecce homo*, was terminally ill. He was, as he himself puts it, already “with one foot *beyond* life”<sup>4</sup>. But there is another way in which Nietzsche’s *Rätsel* shakes the alleged foundations of a science of pure life, and Derrida is prepared to formulate this, not without irony, in a bold assertion, elevating this logic to a universal: “In sum and in general, if one ‘sets aside all the facts,’ the logic can be found in all families.”<sup>5</sup>

Derrida mentions another complication in relation to the problem of the borderline: while the proper name must be able to function to refer to a single being — since, according to monotheism, to be is to be one — the proper name can dispense of the bearer of the name. Even the proper name does not escape the economy of *différance*, carrying, thus, the characteristics of the trace. A proper name functions even if the person of that name has died. Structurally, it implies the death of the bearer. And if what makes a proper name proper is the instance that it is the property of the bearer of the name, this quality is frustrated by the constant flux, change, and potential change of the named, in short, by the temporisation of *différance*: “The identity bestowed by naming opens rather than closes the drama of selfhood. By marking the paradoxical coincidence of freedom and fate, the name forces each self to decide ‘How One Becomes What One Is.’”<sup>6</sup>

The most fascinating manifestation of the borderline in *Ecce homo* is localised by Derrida in the single page that lies between the title and the beginning of the proper text. In this exergue, “an outwork, an *hors d’oeuvre*”, which “like (its) temporality, strangely dislocates the very thing that we, with our untroubled assurance, would like to think of as the time of life and ... the time of autobiography”<sup>7</sup>, Nietzsche offers Derrida echoes of some of his central thoughts on the self. This exergue functions as a medieval *data littera*, providing the work with the time and date of a legal act. It dates and signs *Ecce homo* on the day of Nietzsche’s 45<sup>th</sup> birthday — a highly symbolical date. For “[t]he anniversary is the moment when the year turns back on itself, forms a ring or annulus with itself, annuls itself and begins anew”<sup>8</sup>. The 45<sup>th</sup> birthday could be considered as the “midday of life” — after all, it marks the time around about which the midlife crisis is usually situated. At this point Nietzsche is capable to see clearly, his life

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<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *The ear of the other*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *The ear of the other*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 34f, quoting *Ecce homo*’s subtitle.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, *The ear of the other*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *The ear of the other*, 11.

illuminated by a clear ray of sun that dissipates any shadow (*ein Sonnenblick*), in both directions — his glorious past and his gloomy future.

This moment is both life-affirming a time of mourning. On the one hand, it is the instant of gratitude for the gifts of the past. But, at the same time, like the inaudible “a” of *différance*, this vanishing instant “remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb”<sup>9</sup>, the tomb into which Nietzsche buries his 44th year (*begrub ich heute mein vierundvierzigstes Jahr*). It discloses the cannibalism of the work of mourning, whereby the living incorporates the dead through mourning by symbolically devouring them in an inner sepulchre, or stomach, in a process of object idealisation.<sup>10</sup> If Nietzsche recognises this moment as the occasion for autobiography (*Und so erzähle ich mir mein Leben*), it is due to the fact that autobiography is not different from mourning in that “the schema of object(me)-devoured-by-subject(me) remains in place”<sup>11</sup>. In burying the past (death) through an act of object idealisation (mourning) the past is immortalised for life: “this is what *constitutes*, gathers, adjoins, and holds the strange present of this autobiographical *récit* in place”<sup>12</sup>.

But who or what is the ‘I’ that performs this act of idealisation at that moment? Again, in the foreword to *Ecce homo*, Nietzsche has recourse to a strange allegory in order to disclose his real identity to the world. His life is maybe only a prejudice (*es ist vielleicht nur ein Vorurtheil [sic], daß ich lebe*), his identity is only made possible by a credit he has drawn from himself. Taking out a loan from himself (he the living from him the dead) this credit can only be honoured at his death. This makes the assertion that “he lives” a prejudgment, a risky prediction, for one never knows the outcome for sure, only afterwards. In the proper name the bearer extends a credit to the bearer himself. The life of the bearer of the name cannot be known presently, it rather lies suspended between the two parties of an economic transaction. The “I” is thereby split, right from the beginning.

This, of course, raises the issue of agency, of the self as originator of something, of the “I” as source. Derrida problematised this concept in a lecture he gave on Paul Valéry’s centennial birthday celebration. In “Qual Quelle”, he

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> This idea was endorsed by the psychoanalytical tradition, established by Sigmund Freud in “Mourning and melancholia”. Cf. Robert Smith, *Derrida and autobiography*, Literature, culture, theory 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 131.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *Derrida and autobiography*, 131.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *The ear of the other*, 13.



takes issue with two tropes with which the source has been imagined as a “face”. The source has often been described as the glance of an eye. But in order for the source to be present (to itself), it has to divide itself and perform Narcissus’ turn, i.e. it has to unite itself to itself in a moment of extreme existence in which the source loves itself to death. In the specular reflexion of the water the “I” multiplies itself and, instead “of constituting the ‘I’ in its properness”, it “transforms the origin into effect, and the whole into a part”.<sup>13</sup>

The other trope, while implying the circular appropriation from mouth to ear, focuses on the inner voice, unmediated thought. In this trope the exteriority of the water, the mirror, or even the air is not necessary. This is the quintessential trope that influenced the metaphysical arrest of truth into presence:

“Between what I say and what I hear myself say, no exteriority, no alterity, not even that of a mirror, seems to interpose itself. ... The voice, it appears, therefore can accomplish the circular return of the origin to itself. In the circle the voice steps beyond the interdiction which made the eye blind to the eye. The true circle, the circle of the truth is therefore always an effect of speech.”<sup>14</sup>

But, although “the lure of reappropriation this time becomes more interior, more twisted, more fatal”<sup>15</sup>, even in the case of the “inner voice”, an element of appropriating circularity is needed, in order to signify this event. Hence, even the inner voice succumbs to the economy of *différance*. The snake bites its tale, but not without harm and deception:

“To hear oneself is the most normal and the most impossible experience. One might conclude from this, first, that the source is always other, and that whatever hears itself, not itself hearing itself, always comes from elsewhere, from outside and afar. The lure of the I, of consciousness as hearing-oneself-speak would consist in dreaming of an operation of ideal and idealizing mastery, transforming hetero-affection into auto-affection, heteronomy into autonomy. (...) [T]his (...) permits me to give myself to hear what I desire to hear, to believe in the spontaneity of the power which needs no one in order to give pleasure to itself.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 285.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 287.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 287.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, 297.

The selfsame I, the identity of the self, is only made possible by dividing and repeating itself, by passing through the crypt that disjoins the circularity of appropriation. In an “eternal repetition” the self keeps on coming back upon itself and appropriates itself only through the credit that it extends to itself. Like the sign within the economy of *différance*, identity never exists in the present moment, or in the presence of itself. Humans are beings of habit. There is a “compulsion to come to oneself, to get back home, to work by habit, to open a habitat where the self occupies itself — that is the profounder drive”<sup>17</sup>. But this *habitat* “is not a place and it does not take place”<sup>18</sup> in any present way. It is constituted, precisely, as the problem of the borderline that escapes the metaphysics of presence as “an instantly vanishing moment”<sup>19</sup>. It is furthermore an aspect that permeates being with every return, every annulus, be it the year, the day, or the second.

Autobiography, thus, is crucial for this moment of self-appropriation and recollection: “Recollection *graphs* the self or plots the stages of the subject’s journey to selfhood. The activity of remembering re-presents the story of its own becoming to the self-conscious subject ... — the subject attempts to weave the various strands of experience into a unified whole.”<sup>20</sup> Yet the same move also has a counterproductive effect. As a character in a narrative, the self is also dispossessed of its narrative continuity. By presenting itself as both the writing subject and the object written about, autobiography makes the self appear by making it disappear. Presence and the present are always already fugitive, unable to master the trace. If the politics of the proper name is to name one and the same, it is inevitably doomed to fail. It is as though one would follow oneself at a funeral, always chasing oneself, but never really reaching the goal. Autobiography comes only by detour. Only by going through the crypt, by stepping beyond a threshold, is life possible at all.

What exactly happens in this space that splits the circle of reappropriation? In the next chapter I will answer this question by focusing on how the other is “invented” into life.

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Derrida and autobiography*, 138.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *The ear of the other*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *The ear of the other*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 44.



## 8 RESPONSIBILITY: INVENTIONS OF THE OTHER

The best way of explaining the ethical and political moment in deconstruction may be by pointing out the large space of convergence between the thought of Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>1</sup> Levinas' project to question the totality of western philosophy, dominated by "the supremacy of the One and the Same"<sup>2</sup>, was received affirmatively by Derrida. Levinas hereby redefined ethics as the calling into question of the freedom and spontaneity of the self and his/her subjectivity by the other (person), thus understanding ethics in relational terms. If this relationship wants to escape the closure of western metaphysics, the other must not, indeed cannot, be comprehended or subsumed, i.e. appropriated, under the categories of understanding. This unknowability of the other makes possible a relationship based on acknowledgement and respect. In his material phenomenology of subjective life, Levinas established the responsibility to the other as the deep structure of subjectivity that precedes consciousness itself. As John Llewelyn puts it:

"The Other is he to whom and in virtue of whom I am subject, with a subjectivity that is heteronomy, not autonomy and hetero-affection, not auto-affection. The Other is not the object of my concern and solicitude. ... He is not the accusative of my theoretical, practical, or affective intentionality or ecstasis. He is the topic of my regard (*il me regarde*) only because I am the accusative of his look (*il me regarde*) (...)"<sup>3</sup>

If responsibility must not be subsumed under the program of ethics, how

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<sup>1</sup> It has been Simon Critchley's merit to point out the fruitfulness of this approach in several publications. See "The chiasmus: Levinas, Derrida and the ethical demand for deconstruction", *Textual practice* 3:1 (1989) 91-106; "'Bois' — Derrida's final word to Levinas", *Re-reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, *Studies in continental thought* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991) 162-189; and *The ethics of deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). Cf. for a similar assessment Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the language of theology* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 177-234 and a collection of essays on this relation by John Llewelyn, *Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas*, *Studies in continental thought* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Paola Marrati-Guénoun, "Derrida et Levinas: éthique, écriture, historicité", *Tympanum* 2 (1999) (<http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/2/marrati-guenoun1.html>), cf. note 2.

<sup>3</sup> Llewelyn, *Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas*, 4.

is this relationship to the other to be imagined? In “Psyche” Derrida relates the responsibility to the other to the history of the concept of “invention” and its problematics. By correlating the Latin roots with the modern juridico-political evolutions of “invention”, Derrida tries to facilitate a glimpse at the implication of such a venture. Throughout its conceptual history, “invention” appeared in two registers, in a double movement that was always meant to be imagined as harmonious unity. On the one hand, an invention had to be unique, particular, original. It had to happen a first time in order to be a true invention. On the other hand, the event of the invention had to lead to an *advent*, a repetition, a description and patentation. The identity of an invention had to correlate its archeology with some sort of eschatology.

The seventeenth century, “perhaps between Descartes and Leibniz”<sup>4</sup>, saw the stabilisation of a semantic and juridical shift in the use of “invention”. While invention was, up until then, understood as “an erratic occurrence, the effect of an individual stroke of genius or of unpredictable luck”<sup>5</sup>, this aleatory aspect, though, increasingly gave place to the technical control of a “programmatics of invention”<sup>6</sup>. In order to master the aspect of chance — “as it were, to know chance, to know how to be lucky, to recognize the chance for chance, to anticipate a chance, decipher it, grasp it, inscribe it on the chart of the necessary and turn a throw of the dice into work”<sup>7</sup> — a research program, a method, an *ars* or *ordo inveniendi* was established. Reinforcing this development were the institutions of property rights. In 1883 the Convention of Paris, a document legislating industrial property, was signed. Essential to its formulation were not only the amount of casuistic specifications, but also the essential distinction between the inventor’s right and the patent, and between the scientific idea and its industrial exploitation.<sup>8</sup> A patented invention had become implicitly an invention that could be exploited industrially. The cumulative effect of the developments was to program, and thus to master, inventions: “The aleatory margin that they seek to integrate remains homogeneous with calculation, within the order of the calculable; it devolves from a probabilistic quantification and still

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Psyche: inventions of the other”, tr. Catherine Porter, *Reading de Man reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, *Theory and history of literature* 59 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 25-6548.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 46.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 53f.



resides, we could say, in the same order and in the order of the same.”<sup>9</sup>

Since the second aspect of invention — the repetition, exploitation, reinscription — asserted, since its inception, its undivided supremacy upon the inaugural and unique aspect of invention, and to a considerable degree succeeded, invention can be seen to mean the invention of the same. This explains, according to Derrida, the contemporary desire to reinvent invention itself, which he relates to “a certain experience of fatigue, of weariness, of exhaustion”<sup>10</sup>. But, on the other hand, this desire is one that is shared by deconstruction:

“Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all; it does not settle for methodical procedures, it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail; its writing is not only performative, it produces rule — other conventions — for new performatives and never installs itself in the theoretical assurance of a simple opposition ... Its *process* involves an affirmation, this latter being linked to the coming — the *venire* — in event, advent, invention. But it can only make it by deconstructing a conceptual and institutional structure of invention that would neutralize by putting the stamp of reason on some aspect of invention, of inventive power: as if it were necessary, over and beyond a certain traditional status of invention, to reinvent the future.”<sup>11</sup>

Derrida allegorises this event through a fascinating reading of Ponge’s poem *Fable*. Already the first line of this piece confronts Derrida with the double movement of invention. In taking recourse to speech act theory, he acknowledges the impossibility of deciding whether the illocution of this line is constative or performative, whether it discovers, unveils, points out or says something or whether it produces, institutes, transforms that very thing. It is both constative *and* performative, whereby the “and” does not relate two different activities.<sup>12</sup> The irony of the temporality of this text seems to shunt the two illocutions into each other in an infinitely rapid circulation:

“This infinitely rapid oscillation between the performative and the constative, between language and metalanguage, fiction and nonfiction, autoreference and heteroreference, etc., does not just

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 42.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 34.

produce an essential instability. This instability constitutes that very event ... whose invention disturbs normally, as it were, the norms, the statutes, and the rules. ... The fabulatory economy of a very simple little sentence, perfectly normal in its grammar, spontaneously *deconstructs* the oppositional logic that relies on an untouchable distinction...”<sup>13</sup>

At the end of *Fable* Ponge writes about a woman who breaks her mirror after seven years of misfortune. Derrida decides to call her Psyche, for the name is not only connected with the mythological figure who, being loved by Cupid, disappeared after seeing Eros, the rising sun, and lost her husband for contemplating him, despite it being forbidden to her, but also, in French, “to a large double mirror installed on a rotating stand”<sup>14</sup>. In Ponge’s *Fable*, Psyche becomes speculum that has come to relate the same to the other. A relation which is caught up in the circle of self-appropriation. A technical mechanism meant to produce merely the admirable mirror effect. In this speculation Psyche carries out a program that lets the other emerge as the same. Deconstruction, through a double move of “bending the rules with respect for the rules”<sup>15</sup>, allows the other to come through the dehiscence occasioned by the accelerated rotation of the mirror, in the opening of this dehiscence.

Deconstruction gets under way in a paradoxical predicament: if invention brings about the possible, if it is the effect of a program and, thus, enclosed by a metaphysical desire for “the One and the Same”, it invents nothing. The other that appears at the horizon — hermeneutical, ethical, or political — remains always possible and is, therefore, reduced to the same through the specular appropriation. Hence, the only possible invention is the invention of the impossible: “an invention has to declare itself to be the invention of that which did not appear to be possible; otherwise it only makes explicit a program of possibilities within the economy of the same”<sup>16</sup>. Is it possible? “Of course it is not, and this is why it is the only possible invention.”<sup>17</sup>

However, the invention of the other should not be imagined in opposition to the invention of the same, since this dialectical opposition would resubmit the

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<sup>13</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 34f.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 60.



other to the regimen of the same. It is not through an agonistic activism that the dream for this invention is realised. But neither is it total passivity. For in a resigned inertia, in which anything goes, “everything comes down to the same”<sup>18</sup>. Its initiative is merely that of opening up spaces, destabilising foreclosed structures, in order to allow the passage toward the other. It is without status, without the assurance of reappropriation, without programming, “it remains very gentle, foreign to threats and wars. But for that it is felt as something all the more dangerous.”<sup>19</sup>

The deconstruction of the metaphysical hegemony of self-appropriation is illustrated by Levinas through a juxtaposition between the Greek and Hebraic mythological experiences, between repetition and dissemination. On the one hand, there is Ulysses with his departure to the Trojan war and his return to Ithaca. His is the affirmation of being as identity with oneself, the reduction of the other to the same. On the other hand, there is Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever towards an unknown land without returning back home. This is the radical movement of the same towards the other without ever returning to the same. The site from which Derrida wants to question western metaphysics, and thus create the space in which the invention of the other is possible, embraces neither the one experience nor the other. It is a non-site beyond the Jewish influence of his youth and the Greek philosophical heritage of his French education.<sup>20</sup> It is in fact the systematic search of this non-site that preoccupies Derrida like no other thing. This (non-)site is the womb, the crypt, the aporetic space of *différance* where Derrida utters an archaic prayer — *Viens!* — trembling in expectation as to what the invention of the other will mean for him.

It begins to become understandable why Derrida does not want to talk about the subject in connection with ethical and political decisions, if these are to be responsible to the other. If one poses the question of the “who” and the “what” of the subject in advance, before the decision, as an epistemological horizon, then the other is already comprehended and thus reduced to the same:

“once one poses the question in that form and one imagines that the who and the what of the subject can be determined in advance, then there is no decision. In other words, the decision, if there is such a thing, must neutralize if not render impossible in advance the who and

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<sup>18</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, “Psyche”, 61.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, “Deconstruction and the other”, 107.

the what. If one knows, and if it is a subject that knows who and what, then the decision is simply the application of a law. In other words, if there is a decision, it presupposes that the subject of the decision does not yet exist and neither does the object.”<sup>21</sup>

If there is to be a decision, it has to come from and take place in the name of the other, without in the least diminishing the responsibility of the self. There is a hesitation, thus, that evolves from Derrida’s resistance to the idea of horizon as such. For any horizon “sets limits and defines expectations in advance”<sup>22</sup>. Responsibility to the other is infinitely excessive on any limit.

This excessiveness, the shattering and opening up of any horizon through the invention of the other, has been imagined by Derrida as an eternal messianic structure. But true to his Jewish roots, the maintenance of this structure implies that the messiah must never come. In other words, the messiah must remain ghostlike, elusive, never really arriving. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida develops this idea and uncovers its dynamic in Marx’s political writings through an imaginative and superb reading of Hamlet’s hauntedness. The Shakespearean character experiences the injustice committed in Denmark via the revelations of ghosts, neither living nor dead, and as the disjunction of time. Wittily, Derrida sees here a necessary hauntedness of western ontology by a “hauntology” — again, the difference is inaudible, only writing discloses it. The undecidable structure of the spectre makes a ghost neither present nor absent — the ghost is not “real”. But the ghost is real enough to disturb the dream of presence. The disturbance of being — “To be or not to be” — furthermore appears as disturbance of time — “The time is out of joint”.

The other, here, comes as the spirit of the past and the justice to come. Responsibility is undertaken in the name of justice, and this is done out of a “respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born”<sup>23</sup>. The ghostly twilight, in which the invention of the other is made possible, where one can be responsible, is when the present time is dis-jointed, un-gathered,

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Remarks on deconstruction and pragmatism”, *Deconstruction and pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 84.

<sup>22</sup> John D. Caputo, *The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida: religion without religion*, The Indiana series in the philosophy of religion (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) 117.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the state of debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*, tr. Peggy Kamuf, intro. by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) xix.



“unhinged from the gathering unity of the living present”<sup>24</sup>. Caputo’s summary and correlation to *différance* captures “hauntology” with elegance:

“This dis-jointed, messianic time which provides the opening for the invention of the event of the other, is an effect of *différance* ... which opens up the space between a memory and a promise. So *différance* does not mean only deferral, delay, and procrastination, but the spacing out, the extension between memory and promise or *à-venir*, which opens up the here-now in all of its urgency and absolute singularity, in the imminence of the instant. ... But the here-now does not mean does not mean the fullness of the living present but the passion of the appeal that is made upon us, here and now, the appeal for what is to come, for *the impossible*.”<sup>25</sup>

At this stage of theorisation, one important issue begs the question: can deconstruction offer any support for a concrete political stance? Is it possible to speak of political strategies after having problematised almost everything in the name of *différance*? It is time now to return to the initial hesitations I expressed at the beginning of this part of my thesis and provide the reasons why I think that deconstruction could be one of the most radical tricontinental interventions in western thought, that Derrida is very much a postcolonial thinker.

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<sup>24</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and tears*, 123.

<sup>25</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and tears*, 124.

## 9 DECONSTRUCTIVE RESISTANCE

### 9.1 The postcolonial moment

The philosophical thoughts expressed above could easily be dismissed as insignificant mind games that provide no helpful advice for the oppressed and marginalised, except the escape into the nihilistic and thus fatalistic jargon of poststructuralism. These generalised and unworldly theoretical models must be contextualised, it could be objected, in the post-1968 disillusionment of a generation of French academics who experienced the powerlessness of intellectual resistance against an almost almighty hegemonic system. While this contextualisation has its moment of truth, it overlooks one important aspect. Robert Young attempts to reconstruct an alternative historical background for this tradition of thought: "If so-called 'so-called poststructuralism' [sic] is the product of one single historical moment, then that moment is probably not May 1968 but rather the Algerian War of Independence"<sup>1</sup>. Most of the "poststructuralist" French intellectuals were, incidentally, either born in Algeria or somehow personally involved in the war of independence.<sup>2</sup>

Poststructuralism was, so to speak, the Algerian anticolonial liberation struggle playing itself out as "an insurrection against the calm philosophical and political certainties of the metropolis"<sup>3</sup>. Franco-Maghrebian political activism extended thus its struggle to the theoretical sphere under the name of poststructuralism, "for its theoretical interventions have been actively concerned with the task of undoing the ideological heritage of French colonialism and with rethinking the premises, assumptions and protocols of its centrist, imperial

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Young, *White mythologies: writing history and the west* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Young mentions Sartre, Althusser, Derrida, Lyotard and Cixous as among those for whom this is the case. See Young, *White mythologies*, 1. Lee Morrissey argues this connection between Derrida and Algeria in "Derrida, Algeria and 'Structure, sign, and play'", *Postmodern culture* 199 (2000), also available online at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.199/9.2morrissey.txt>. Young has since deepened this line of argumentation in relation to Derrida in *Postcolonialism*, 411-426.

<sup>3</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism*, 412.



culture”<sup>4</sup>. French Marxism, dominant among French intellectuals when Derrida moved to Paris, supported the *status quo* of Algeria as French colony, which made it a highly ambiguous ideological stance for anti-colonial intellectuals. It is possible, then, with this background, to begin to understand the political implication of Derrida’s deconstruction of western metaphysics for a structurally related western colonialism as a gesture that serves to take it apart and overturn it and as a resistance to the violence that is as ontological as it is military, bureaucratic, cultural, and economic.<sup>5</sup>

Two factors contribute to this line of argumentation. One was the ascendancy of structuralism among French intellectuals. From 1945 onwards this approach initiated something of a theoretical decolonisation, since it allowed, as a highly generalized theory, to turn a critical way of understanding that was developed to analyse non-western cultures, onto western societies. Structuralism — developed by Russian exiles in Prague — had, therefore, a democratic and egalitarian air about it, defying any bourgeois notion of cultural superiority.<sup>6</sup> Derrida’s deconstructive reading of structuralism — as in his already discussed paper that was meant to introduce it to a North American audience — allowed him to depart from a space that was already shaped towards tricontinental sentiments.

The other factor was Derrida’s Jewish Maghrebian background. The colonization of Algeria put the native Jews in a most ambivalent and hybrid position. Acculturated and embourgeoisified after 1870, they were cut off from Arab-Berber culture. Yet, they were never fully assimilated into French culture either. Their trait thus became one of undecidability between these two extremes. Colonial cruelty was thus felt from either side of the encounter, which could not provide any referent to a discourse of identity.<sup>7</sup> One should resist reducing Derrida’s thought to this autobiographical *factum*, but it is, nevertheless, an important factor in his writings, and one that is increasingly acknowledged by Derrida himself.

It should, therefore, not come as a surprise that critics from tricontinental backgrounds like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha or Dipesh Chakrabarty have been attracted by Derriderian deconstruction. One could argue that they disclose

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<sup>4</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism*, 413.

<sup>5</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism*, 416.

<sup>6</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism*, 420.

<sup>7</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism*, 421ff.

the political side of Derrida's writings, which are often accused of being too reserved in this matter. Bhabha, for example, finds in Derrida the conceptual tools to think through the dynamic complexities of the colonial encounter beyond a simplified polarising systematics.<sup>8</sup> It is the new temporality of the colonial encounter that makes renegotiation of identity and resistance possible. Bhabha illustrates this by juxtaposing the temporality of Casablanca and Tangiers.

In Casablanca, as eternalised in the now classical film, the passing time preserves the identity of the differential play of signs through repetition: "Play it again, Sam', which is perhaps the Western world's most celebrated demand for repetition, is still an invocation to similitude, a return to the eternal verities."<sup>9</sup> In Tangiers, however, "as time goes by", the occidental space of repetition is disjointed into an iterative temporality in which the borderlines of binary polarisation are disrupted. This facilitates the possibility of resistance: "this liminal moment of identification — eluding resemblance — produces a subversive strategy of subaltern agency that negotiates its own authority through a process of iterative 'unpicking' and incommensurable, insurgent relinking"<sup>10</sup>. This is the liminal space of mimicry, hybridity, and subversion.

It is now understandable why such a (para)discourse of resistance cannot feature in the binary maps of western thinking. It is designed, one could argue, not to be detected. The force of deconstruction is not its applicability to the realm of politics. This would imply some sort of isolation between a theoretical sphere into which deconstruction could be transposed. Rather, "the force of deconstruction is the extent to which it forces a rethinking of the terms of the political"<sup>11</sup>. Deconstruction, I shall argue, points to the unperceived aspects of politics, the aspects that must remain unrepresentable. Deconstruction is, therefore, orientated towards the always transcendent other, while it tries to show, at the same time, that the "real world" does not transcend the limits of textuality. Any description of empirical reality is already inside the signifying web and this is inherently political: "If description is conflated with prescription, if

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<sup>8</sup> For similar reasons more and more feminists are finding deconstruction attractive. Cf. Chris Weedon, *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory* (Cambridge [Massachusetts] and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), Nancy Fraser, *Unruly practices: power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1989) and Diane Elam, *Feminism and deconstruction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 185.

<sup>11</sup> Readings, "The deconstruction of politics", 225. Cf. Geoffrey Bennington, "Derrida and politics", *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: a critical reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge (a.o.): Cambridge University Press, 2001) 193-212 and Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the political*, Thinking the political (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).



justice can be justified, then those upon whom the law operates are not oppressed, they simply do not exist.”<sup>12</sup> And it is precisely the non-existent that interests deconstruction.

But, what ethical grounds remain after deconstruction has done its work? None, if by ethics we mean a set of rules which, if followed, make us behave in an ethical way. John Caputo expresses this aspect of deconstruction most radically:

“Ethics makes safe. It throws a net of safety under the judgments we are forced to make, the daily, hourly decisions that make up the texture of our lives. Ethics lays the foundations that force people to be good; it clarifies concepts, secures judgments, provides firm guardrails along the slippery slopes of factual life. It provides principles and criteria and adjudicates hard cases.”<sup>13</sup>

To follow such a reassuring ethical programme is to foreclose decision. A robot would then be the most ethical of beings. Responsibility, in contrast, is characterised by the moment of decision that cannot rely on any rule. A true decision cannot be predicted. It will decide from case to case, from moment to moment how to respond. Ethics as responsibility to the other confronts us with the moment of undecidability in which we have to decide anyway.

A postcolonial politics of resistance and change cannot offer a clear-cut political programme, except by denying the closure of politics within the clear-cut dualisms of the west. But deconstruction is more than a mere negation of closure, it presents a crucial supplement to any responsible politics. Like a virus, deconstruction befalls the hegemonic system, disrupts its machinery and forces it to change. It also makes sure that change does not come to a halt, the system and the subject never reaches complete identity with itself/its self. Where does this leave the self?

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<sup>12</sup> Readings, “The deconstruction of politics”, 232.

<sup>13</sup> John D. Caputo, *Against ethics: contribution to a poetics of obligation with constant reference to deconstruction*, Studies in continental thought (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) 4. For a similar stance in relation to biblical studies see A. K. M. Adam, “Twisting to deconstruction: a memorandum on the ethics of interpretation”, *Perspectives in religious studies* 23:2 (1996) 215-222.

## 9.2 Subject to change: groundless identity politics

If the circle of appropriation is eternally split, if it has a wound that never heals, then the self must not ever and can never fulfil its desire for pure identity. This narcissistic dream can only be interrupted by the other. The other remains an essential aspect of a responsible identity politics, though it remains always inessential, beyond the textual field we call reality. The subject loses in this scenario its mastery over itself. It is split, it is fragmented.

This revealing gesture of deconstruction has attracted criticism from those who cannot imagine a politics without a subject. The subject, according to this criticism, is “liquidated”. Derrida has tried to answer to this objection and to put things in a more sympathetic light.<sup>14</sup> Discussing the strategies of his “poststructuralist” colleagues, Derrida claimed that “the ‘subject,’ without having been ‘liquidated,’ has been reinterpreted, displaced, decentered, re-inscribed”<sup>15</sup>. This is precisely how:

“The singularity of the ‘who’ is not the individuality of a thing that would be identical to itself, it is not an atom. It is a singularity that dislocates or divides itself in gathering itself together to answer to the other, whose call somehow precedes its own identification with itself, for to this call I can *only* answer, have already answered, even if I think I am answering ‘no’”<sup>16</sup>

This reinterpreted, displaced, decentred, re-inscribed subject rather than having been let off the hook by being shown in its hopeless fragmentation is continuously undergoing a radical analysis:

“It is ... a matter ... of ceaselessly analyzing the whole conceptual machinery, and its interestedness, which has allowed us to speak of the ‘subject’ up to now. And the analysis produces always more and something other than an analysis. It transforms; it translates a transformation already in progress.”<sup>17</sup>

I deduce a double strategy from these thoughts. A strategy that cannot in

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, “‘Eating well,’ or the calculation of the subject: an interview with Jacques Derrida”, *Who comes after the subject?*, eds. Eduard Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991) 96-119.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida and Nancy, “‘Eating well’”, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida and Nancy, “‘Eating well’”, 100f.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida and Nancy, “‘Eating well’”, 109.



itself provide a comprehensive ground for politics, but rather point towards the open-endedness and impossibility of the task. On the one hand, there is the need for critical self-reflection and self-representation. Particularly those subjects who have been socialised to be “naturally” invisible, whose traits have been universalised, who are not aware of their singularity and situatedness, those subjects have to learn how to confess. White males have to relinquish their hegemonic birth-right for being the invisible and unacknowledged subject of master-narratives. This is as interminable as, perhaps, it is impossible. It is nevertheless an imperative. There has to be an element of calculation, planning, strategy in order to re-invent the hegemonic self as something else. The liminal spaces which disturb the neat dichotomisation between hegemonic and subaltern, oppressor and oppressed could be just one of the most important spaces for transformation.

On the other hand, there is the need for acknowledging that there remains something “nonreappropriable, nonsubjectivable, and in a certain way nonidentifiable, a sheer supposition, so as to remain *other*, a *singular* call to response or to responsibility”<sup>18</sup> that is as crucial as it will never be formulated into an ethical programme — not even the one I’m trying to elaborate!

To put this double strategy in a simple image, responsibility towards the other makes us stand with one leg well grounded, while the other is in the air, looking to land on ground that is totally unknown to us. I have to look for the best ethico-political strategies for transformation, while always knowing that following them will never lead me where I have to go. The tremors caused by deconstruction will keep on shaking the structures of metaphysics, without offering an alternative to it.

Following the benevolent reading of deconstruction elaborated in this part of the thesis, I would argue, helps to conceptualise in a more rigorous way the metaphysical stakes involved in the proposals of Patte, Staley, and West. Conceptually, as well as strategically, this means the simultaneous need to and impossibility of transcending the borders established in western metaphysics and a politics that is informed by its concepts. This explains the aporetic character Patte, Staley, and West are struggling with in their reinventions.

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<sup>18</sup> Derrida and Nancy, “Eating well”, 110f.

In the following chapters I will succumb to the temptation of calculation. It will be necessary to analyse the context in which white male biblical scholars practice their trade, and then to ask what a responsible practice could look like concretely, though always only provisionally.

What does "Europe" mean today? and what does it mean to ask the ways in which European identity has been divided and redivided? How has the view of gender work/identity changed? "Europe" is a name for a contemporary hyper-real discourse that seeks to offer a new alternative discourse of the world. It has made a claim to a universal pretension over the entire globe via a promise of a new world. The heart of an identity discursive that defines itself as the "other" of the male, by linking masculinity to a certain way of life, to a certain way of thinking, to the one hand, and with capitalism, on the other. Today, biblical scholars wish to overcome the consequences of their past, but they will have to deal firstly with their "European" heritage itself, and the ways in which to overcome it. In this chapter I will try to show the importance for such a project by presenting Jacques Derrida's work on identity and its deconstruction in one of his most explicit political texts.

In "The other heading",<sup>1</sup> Derrida assumes what he calls the "history and the responsibilities vis-à-vis the future" of the "other heading." "Today" closely determines Derrida's thoughts; urgency is what can be delivered during an international colloquium on "Europeanism and the World Turn" on May 20, 1990, his words were prompted by the collapse of the "European unionism" in the aftermath of the destruction of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the eastern European block which ushered in the democratisations and idealistic euphoria. They were also related to the Gulf War with its propaganda machineries and the "other heading" discourses that were at play in that war. "Something unique is at play here, something that is still called Europe even if we no longer know very well what it means by this name."<sup>2</sup>

In this paper Derrida focuses on the writings of Paul Valéry, which he

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The other heading: memories, responses, and responsibility," in *The other heading: reflections on today's Europe*, ed. Pascale-Anne Breuil and Jacques Derrida, *Journal of Continental Thought* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 101-102 and 123.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, "The other heading", 5.



## 10 THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

What does “Europe” mean today? And what does it mean to be European? Do the ways in which European identity has been defined traditionally still hold in view of current worldwide changes? “Europe” stands, first of all, for the contemporary hyper-real discourse that seems to permeate each and every alternative discourse in the world. It has succeeded in extending its totalising pretension over the entire globe via a pervasive economic system. It is also the heart of an identity discourse that defines beforehand what it means to be a white male, by linking masculinity in a certain way with the modern colonial project, on the one hand, and with capitalism, on the other. Thus if white male biblical scholars wish to overcome the oppressiveness of their hegemonic identity, they will have to deal firstly with their “European” heritage and then seek strategies and ways in which to overcome it. In this chapter I will argue deconstruction’s importance for such a project by presenting Derrida’s analysis of “European” identity and its deconstruction in one of his most explicitly political publications.

In “The other heading”,<sup>1</sup> Derrida explores what the legacies of European history and the responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the future of Europe signify today. “Today” closely determines Derrida’s thoughts: originally conceived as a paper to be delivered during an international colloquium on “European Cultural Identity” in Turin on May 20, 1990, his words were prompted by the imminence of a “European unification” in the aftermath of the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the eastern European block which ushered in a wave of democratisations and idealistic euphoria. They were also overshadowed by the Gulf War with its propaganda machineries and the technological-political discourses that were at play in that war. “Something unique is afoot in Europe, in what is still called Europe even if we no longer know very well *what* or *who* goes by this name.”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper Derrida focuses on the writings of Paul Valéry, who reflected

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The other heading: memories, responses, and responsibility,” *The other heading: reflections on today’s Europe*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, *Studies in Continental thought* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992) 4-83 and 111-129.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 5.

on these issues in a context of similar imminence — the years between the two world wars, between 1919 and 1939. In response to the question of the distinctiveness of Europe, Valéry concluded by defining the *Homo Europeus* not by referring to discourses of race, language, or customs, but by evoking a distinctive European “spirit”<sup>3</sup> whose “essence ... offers its phenomenal image to an economico-metaphysical determination ... Europe is the name of that which leads the desiring or willing subject towards his objectivizable *maximum*. Capital belongs to the series of Europe’s phenomenal manifestations.”<sup>4</sup>

Given the prominence of a certain lexematic family in Valéry’s definition — he developed this definition by following the history of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome as cultural capitals, as examples of “the *City par excellence*” — Derrida feels compelled to propose a “program for reading (census, logical indexing, interpretation) the uses of the *capitalistic* lexicon and its stakes in Valéry’s text”<sup>5</sup>. Europe can be shown to have defined itself within the lexicographic parameters of the “capital” and its derivatives, and — concurring with Valéry — Derrida elaborates convincingly how this lexicon discloses both the characteristics of European history as well as the possibility of reinventing a responsible European identity in the future.

First, the idea of Europe as a cape, a headland, is put forward:

“Europe has always recognized itself as a cape or headland, *either* as the advanced extreme of a continent, to the west and south (the land’s end, the advanced point of a Finistère, Europe of the Atlantic or of the Greco-Latino-Iberian shores of the Mediterranean), the point of departure for discovery, invention, and colonization, *or* as the very center of this tongue in the form of a cape, the Europe of the middle, coiled up, indeed compressed along a Greco-Germanic axis, at the very center of the center of the cape.”<sup>6</sup>

It would be easy, at this point, to link the “European” aspect of advancement, discovery, and colonisation to the emergence of modern masculinity in the way Catherine Keller has done in a recently published article.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Spirit” possibly being an allusion to Marx’s understanding of capitalism as the spectre that haunts Europe. See Derrida, *Specters of Marx* as a fruitful reading of this spectre-like phenomenon.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 114.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Keller, “The breast, the Apocalypse, and the colonial journey”, *Journal of feminist studies in religion* 10:1 (1994) 53-72.



Identifying the beginning of modernity with the journeys of Critobál Colón — only later anglicised as Christopher Columbus — Keller seeks to uncover the evolution of a distinctive form of masculinity in order to problematise the androcentrism of European colonialism:

“Unlike the androcentric vision of its premodern fathers, which radiated along the vertical axis, this masculinity looks *forward*, penetrating its own future, piercing horizons. Its eschatology will render the planet endlessly available to cartography, to conquest, to control, to commodification.”<sup>8</sup>

This was achieved by femising the *otra mundo*, the other world as including both land and people, first as the paradise of gratified desire, then as object of enmity and assault. Few acts could symbolise the phallic nature of this encounter more clearly than the “planting” of the standards of Spain and the cross of Christ at the arrival of Colón’s expedition. The new world, imagined as virgin innocence, mysterious and fertile at the same time, was inseminated by the conquering seamen:

“We begin to discern the contours of the inaugural relationship of European culture to both a people and a land. In its forcefield, discovery, acquisition, and mastery depict themselves as male adult conquest of feminized and infantilized space. ... [W]e are here beginning to trace the effects of a new literalization of paradise as the space of an eroticised commodification.”<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of the “discovery” of the “new world”, a new cartographic genre emerged. The old maps were purged of their charming illustration of mythic and exotic figures; vivid imagination gave way to the geometric exactitude of empty spaces. Colón, however, succumbed to the temptation of vivid imagination: the world, according to his speculations and calculations, was shaped in the form of a female breast. At its centre, the nipple represents the paradise of the continental *terra firme*. This imagery, according to Keller, “looms as forbidden fruit, the virgin body ripe for plucking, the mother breast ready to suckle death-ridden, oppressed and depressed Europe into its rebirth.”<sup>10</sup> While Colón was still ridden with ambiguous emotions about his new “discovery”,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Keller, “The breast, the Apocalypse, and the colonial journey”, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Keller, “The breast, the Apocalypse, and the colonial journey”, 59f.

<sup>10</sup> Keller, “The breast, the Apocalypse, and the colonial journey”, 63.

<sup>11</sup> “This ambivalence, alternating between repulsion and fascination, characterizes his bifurcation of

those who came after him made sure to flood Europe with the gold and silver squeezed out from the slave labour of the native people. At the cost of the Colonised,<sup>12</sup> a new economic system would arise which would force the new masculinity upon the other and eventually succeed in creating a worldwide expansion of itself.

Derrida's analysis of the concept of Europe adds another aspect, which has historically been linked to Europeanness, to this masculinist aspect of the cape/headland. He describes it as the idea of Europe as a heading, as a caption or a banner for humanity in general, thus representing universal values:

“Europe is not only a geographical headland or heading that has always given itself the representation or figure of a spiritual heading, at once as project, task, or infinite — that is to say universal — idea, as the memory of itself that gathers and accumulates itself, capitalizes upon itself, in and for itself. Europe has also confused its image, its face, its figure and its very place, its taking-place, with that of an advanced point, the point of a phallus if you will, and thus, once again, with a heading for world civilization or human culture in general. The idea of an advanced point of *exemplarity* is *the idea of the European idea*, its *eidos*, at once as *arché* — the idea of beginning but also of commanding (the *cap* as the head, the place of capitalizing memory and of decision, once again, the captain) — and as *telos*, the idea of the end, of a limit that accomplishes, or that puts an end to the whole point of the achievement, right there at the point of completion. The advanced point is at once beginning and end, it is divided as beginning and end; it is the place from which or in view of which everything takes place.”<sup>13</sup>

If this self-definition was determined to a great extent by the language, the lexicon and the grammar of which Derrida scrutinised with detailed philological observations,<sup>14</sup> it would also capitalise its effects within its own idiom as divided

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the indigenous peoples into good Indians and cannibals — which in Europe would constitute the complementary traditions of the Noble Savage and the Savage Beast.” Keller, “The breast, the Apocalypse, and the colonial journey”, 64.

<sup>12</sup> Is it just a coincidence that the name of the man at the centre of one of the most savage colonising projects in the wake of European modernism shares a lexematic trait with the name of the phenomenon itself?

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 24f.

<sup>14</sup> “The word ‘*cap*’ (*caput*, *capitis*) refers, as you well know, to the head or the extremity of the extreme, the aim and the end, the ultimate, the last, the final moment or last legs, the *eschaton* in general. It here assigns to navigation the pole, the end, the *telos* of an oriented, calculated,



into two kinds of issues [*genres*], following the genders [*genres*] of its two French articles: *la capitale* and *le capitale*.

*La capital*, the capital city, refers to the search and desire for a centre, symbolic or otherwise, around which Europe and the rest of the world would evolve. This planetisation of the European model seems outdated nowadays — “there will be no official capital of European culture”<sup>15</sup> — but it has not disappeared altogether. It appears in the fierce struggles for cultural hegemony, in a context of the globalisation of economy in multinational empires, in connection with technologised telecommunications. This quest for a hegemonic centre cannot any longer be fixed to the metropolis, nor even to the state. This profound techno-scientific and techno-economic transformation force a rethinking and translation of how this struggle is fought.

At the heart of this problematic Derrida sees a double injunction that characterises the identity of Europe and, as I have already argued, identity in general: on the one hand, (Europe’s) identity must not be dispersed “into a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable”<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, it must not accept the capital of a centralising authority that would control and standardise discourses by subjecting them to intellectual, philosophical, aesthetic or economic norms. This hegemonic centre, no longer being linked to the *polis*, will, therefore, not submit itself to the *topos* of the political, it will be “quasi-political”. This aporia sets the tone for what responsibility means in relation to the invention of a new European identity:

“Responsibility seems to consist today in renouncing neither of these contradictory imperatives. One must therefore try to *invent* gestures, discourses, politico-institutional practices that inscribe the alliance of these two imperatives, of these two promises or contracts: the capital and the a-capital, the other of the capital.”<sup>17</sup>

Derrida argues that this aporia already characterises the European

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deliberate, voluntary, ordered movement: ordered most often by the man in charge. Not by a woman, for in general, and especially in wartime, it is a man who decides on the heading, from the advanced point that he himself is, the prow, at the head of the ship or plane that he pilots. Eschatology and teleology — that is man. It is he who gives orders to the crew, he who holds the helm or sits at the controls; he is the headman, there at the head of the crew and the machine. And oftentimes, he is called the *captain*.” Derrida, “The other heading”, 13f.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 44.

*advance*.<sup>18</sup> Europe advances itself, i.e. it introduces, shows, identifies and names itself. This involves a certain politics of self-presentation. A politics that also implies a certain risk: to undertake adventures, to stick one's neck out, to advance into unknown territory, etc. "It advances and promotes itself as an advance, and it will have never ceased to make advances on the other: to induce, seduce, produce, and conduce, to spread out, to cultivate, to love or to violate, to love to violate, to colonize, and to colonize itself."<sup>19</sup> Derrida illustrates this by referring to official documents of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Congress on European Cultural Space (held in Stuttgart, June 18, 1988), and the European Community, invoking the European spirit in asserting their responsibility as leaders, models and facilitators for the rest of the world by cultivating its *avant-garde* position. Again, Derrida's philological elaborations are both fascinating and intriguing, for they disclose the close connection between language, ideology, politics and ethos. In this case the circularity of ontotheological self-representation:

"'Avant-garde' ... capitalizes upon the figurehead, the figure of prowess, the figure on or of the prow, of the phallic point advanced like a beak, like a quill, or like the nib of a pen — the shape of the headland or the cape, therefore, *and* of the *guard* or of memory. It adds the value of a proposed or advanced initiative to that of recollection: the responsibility of the guardian, the vocation of a remembrance that takes it upon itself to take the initiative, especially when it is in advance a matter of guarding, of anticipating in order to 'conserve,' as the official text says, an 'avant-garde position,' and thus of conserving itself as the *avant-garde* that advances in order to conserve what is its due, namely, venturing forth in order to conserve what is once again its due, namely, an 'avant-garde position' — of course."<sup>20</sup>

It is the proliferation of publishing enterprises, print and electronic, that is exploited in the service of this spirit of the *avant-garde*. This development, however, should not lead to the blind rejection of such projects, but rather to an increased vigilance, for "it is necessary that we learn to detect, in order then to resist, new forms of cultural takeover"<sup>21</sup>. The cultural takeover can take such subtle forms as the advocacy for communication in the public space, for there is

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Derrida, "The other heading", 48f.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, "The other heading", 49.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, "The other heading", 53.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, "The other heading", 54.



the danger of imposing and naturalising a certain model of language — and Derrida seems to have logocentrism in mind<sup>22</sup> — which discredits anything that would question this model to start with.

This links Derrida's characterisation of the capitalistic problematic to another aspect — that of *le capital*, economic capital. He expresses here the need “for a new culture, one that would invent another way of reading and analysing *Capital*, both Marx's book and capital in general”<sup>23</sup>. This new culture would, again, have to go through the aporia in the form of the double injunction of resisting both capitalistic totalitarianism, which is seemingly overtaking the world through globalisation, and, *simultaneously*, a certain counter-dogmatism to the totalising economic system. Derrida feels confirmed by “the neo-capitalist exploitation of the breakdown of an anti-capitalist dogmatism in those states that had incorporated it”<sup>24</sup>. He is, of course, talking about the collapse of eastern European communism and the slow incorporation of these countries into the free market with the reopening and denaturalisation of the partitions of the Cold War era. In the wake of this situation Derrida senses a certain imminence to act. In a time of shifting geographico-political borders one has to face the crisis of the capital, the capital crisis. This happens “when the *regional* or *particular* necessity of capital produces or calls for the always threatened production of the *universal*”<sup>25</sup>.

That this capital crisis has affected the postmodern construction of male identity can be readily seen in the proliferation of the predicament of the contemporary white male as a topic of popular culture. *Fight club*, for example, the controversial novel by Chuck Palahniuk<sup>26</sup> and equally controversial film directed by David Fincher,<sup>27</sup> problematises the link between masculinity and consumerist capitalism by narrating the autobiography of a white-collar worker for a major automobile manufacturer. The main character's desire and anxiety caused by his job — he has to assess whether it is economically viable to recall

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<sup>22</sup> Although Derrida has often expressed his closeness to the Frankfurt school of social analysis, it is specifically its pragmatics he criticises here: “With this concern, among others, in mind, it would be necessary to study certain rhetorical norms that dominate analytic philosophy or what is called in Frankfurt ‘transcendental pragmatics.’” Derrida, “The other heading”, 55.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 65.

<sup>26</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight club* (London [a.o.]: Vintage, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Released 1999 by 20th Century Fox. See Jim Uhls, *Fight club — the original screenplay: based on a novel by Chuck Palahniuk* (n.p.: Twentieth Century Fox, 1999) and the official website <http://www.foxmovies/fightclub/>.

models with dangerous manufacturing defects that have been involved in fatal car accidents — cannot be satisfied by the consumerist life-style his job facilitates — his condo is transformed into the living picture of the pages from an Ikea catalogue. He reacts, firstly, by showing severe symptoms of insomnia and, then, by developing a schizophrenic personality, which splits him into a feminised self and an overconfident *alter ego* who begins to develop ever bolder and more violent resistant and subversive projects. In its final climax, *Fight club* narrates the ultimate attempt to break away from the disciplinary control of capitalist consumerism by blowing up the buildings of all major credit institutes in order to destroy all records and thus facilitate a new beginning for everyone.

*Fight club* portrays men as both beneficiaries and victims of capitalist consumerism. Schizophrenia is the attempt of the main character to both resist capitalism and disassociate himself from hegemonic masculinity by creating a hyper-masculine *alter ego*. The victimised narrator is initially feminised, only to develop more masculine traits in relation to his female love interest towards the end of the story. By splitting the personality of the main character into two — literally in the form of two different actors — *Fight club* offers an albeit radical strategy for overcoming the capitalist predicament of white males. This (personality) split, I would argue, signifies the subversive opening of a vicious circle as a site of transformation.

While *Fight club's* solution may not appeal to many, how can we imagine a strategy for a responsible transformation of “European” identity? Derrida describes such a strategy of responsibility towards the future European “identity” with familiar witticism. He surprises his readers, although only for a momentary instant, by talking about the capitalistic politics of Europe: “I would even be ready to subscribe to it” he says, but goes on immediately to add “but with one hand only, for I keep another to write or look for something else, perhaps outside Europe”<sup>28</sup>. Deconstruction’s concern is to prevent the closure of the border to the future (*à-venir*), to the one (Messiah?) who comes (*vient*), to an *event* that would deserve the name of the invention of the other. The capital logic that Derrida has been elaborating discloses the threat not of Europe’s identity, but of the universality attached to it, which is its surplus value. In fact, “the experience and experiment of identity or of cultural identification can only be the endurance of these antinomies”<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 71.



A multiple duty arises out of this aporia.<sup>30</sup> First, there is the duty of responding to the call of European memory, a rewriting of its history, a sort of re-identification through meeting the ghosts of the past. Then there is the duty of opening Europe up to what is on the other side of the shore, on the other shore, without ever appropriating it. There is also the duty to welcome foreigners without the sole aim of integrating them, but also in order to recognise and accept their alterity. Furthermore, this duty not only dictates criticism “in-both-theory-and-in-practice”<sup>31</sup> of any sort of dogmatism and anti-dogmatism, but also cultivates the virtue of that kind of criticism. The same duty also mandates the cultivation of the European idea of democracy, which is a democracy that will never and cannot ever be fulfilled, present, owned by anyone — not even, and especially not by Europe. It dictates respect to both difference expressed in idioms, minorities and singularity — as well as to the universality that makes formal law possible, and creates the desire for translation and agreement. This same duty also demands tolerance vis-à-vis everything that is not subordinated to reason — faith, but also any thought that exceeds the order of reason. Compliance to this double contradictory imperative of the aporia may also demand the refusal to respond before every instituted tribunal.

Without pretending to have exhausted this list, Derrida allows a glimpse of what a future identity in responsibility to the other could look like. He makes it clear that, although he ventures a series of positive assertions, the conditions for a “true” responsibility can only be formulated negatively (“without x there would not be y”<sup>32</sup>). One must not fall into the deceitful trap of a positive conditionality. Furthermore, the new European identity, responsible to the other, will only come through the disruption, the split of the aporia. In other words, Europe will not be the same, it will be another Europe, it will have become an other. The name “Europe” should only be understood as though in quotation marks, the use of an old name — a paleonym — with caution. “Europe” in this case would be more “what we recall (to ourselves) or what we promise (ourselves)”<sup>33</sup>. To be a responsible European, then, would *not* mean to be a European through and through. Full membership, “belonging as ‘fully a part,’ should be incompatible with belonging ‘in every part’”<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 76-80.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 80f.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 82..

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, “The other heading”, 83.

But how does this duty translate into the academic world of the academic intellectual. How would a white male biblical scholar, for example, follow his duty in the context of the intellectual discourse of the university? In the final part of this thesis I will translate deconstruction's concern for the other into the world of biblical studies. I will thus relate Patte, Staley, and West's project to Derrida's thought by pointing out sites of possible transformative interventions in the academic practice of biblical studies, show the aporiae that are confronted at those sites, and suggest possible strategies.



## PART THREE

Contemporary biblical scholarship practices its critical discourse in a context that has undergone considerable changes in recent decades. These changes have to be accounted for, if a realistic ethically responsible transformation is sought. Two general markers of the discourse of biblical scholarship will be discussed in the following two chapters. The first marker relates to the position the scholar enjoys in society as an intellectual (chapter 11), the second concerns the institutional paradigm that qualifies his discourse as academic (chapter 12). Both have been shaped by the broader changes that late modernism has brought with it. This will serve as a contextualisation that will make it possible to discuss how deconstruction as an ethico-political response to the other can be translated into the field of biblical studies. I will do this firstly by dealing with the most traditional paradigm that has characterised the modern academic study of the bible — historicism — in chapter 13. In the following chapter, it will be the bible as popular and ordinary reading practice that will be elaborated as one of the most innovative and promising fields of study within biblical studies. Finally, in chapter 15, I will focus on literary approaches to the bible as a strategy to open up the institutional practices to the other.

## 11 THE INTELLECTUAL

### 11.1 The birth of the intellectual and its prehistory

January 1898 marked the public coinage of a concept that would subsequently refer to a new, powerful political force in France rallying around a political idea. In protestation against the mistrial of Dreyfus hundreds of distinguished publicly known figures — novelists, poets, artists, journalists, scientists and others — signed Emile Zola's open letter to the President of the Republic, Felix Faure. To be sure, this concept was never more than "a postulate, a project, a mobilizing call," hardly "an empirical, 'objective' definition of a particular category of the population"<sup>1</sup>. It was more an attempt at resuscitating the tradition of "men of knowledge" who would embody and practice "the unity of truth, moral values and aesthetic judgement"<sup>2</sup>. In the context of the specialisation of the knowledge class and, therefore, its fragmentation, on the one side, and the declining political significance of the learned profession and the public in general, on the other,<sup>3</sup> this group "felt it their moral responsibility, and their collective right, to interfere directly with the political process through influencing the minds of the nation and moulding the actions of its political leaders"<sup>4</sup>.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, the announcement of this new force was thus built on two tacit assumptions.<sup>5</sup> Firstly, this group considered itself as the guardians of truth and objectivity — a role they thought to have acquired thanks to their demonstrated knowledge which raised them above the level of narrow

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in fragments: essays in postmodern morality* (Oxford and Cambridge [USA]: Blackwell Publishers, 1995) 225. For a similar narrative, albeit restricted to the university cf. "Universities: old, new and different", *The postmodern university?: contested visions of higher education in society*, eds. Anthony Smith and Frank Webster (Buckingham and Bristol [USA]: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1997) 17-26; Edward W. Said, "Identity, authority, and freedom: the potentate and the traveler", *The future of academic freedom*, ed. Louis Menand (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 214-228. Cf. also Said's more general *Representations of the intellectual: the 1993 Reith lectures* (London, Sydney, Auckland, and Bergvlei: Vintage, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and interpreters: on modernity, post-modernity and intellectuals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987) 1.

<sup>3</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 225.

<sup>4</sup> Bauman, *Legislators and interpreters*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 223f.



group interests and partisan prejudices and gave them the right to speak with authority on questions not directly pertaining to their specialist credentials. The exercise of political power that this knowledge legitimised was located beside the elected politicians against whom this new group could — if necessary — turn their activity. Secondly, this group saw for itself the responsibility of monitoring and scrutinising the actions of the appointed wardens of public values and the obligation to intervene, should the occasion arise that the standards were not reached. Bauman summarises this new political identity as follows:

“‘[I]ntellectuals’ are those who possess (or claim to possess) both the ability and the duty to act as the ‘collective conscience’ of the nation and thus to transcend both the specialist divisions in their own ranks and the sectional, interestbound division inside the nation whose supreme values they protect and promote. They are defined by what they do over and above their professional duties. Being an intellectual means performing a peculiar role in the life of society as a whole.”<sup>6</sup>

This social type, though, goes back a long way in history.<sup>7</sup> Phenomenologically, it is connected to the fear caused by the uncertainties of life’s struggles with its unpredictable outcome and lack of control. Magicians and priests, as well as scientists and politicians have been nurtured by this discomfort. They have capitalised on this phenomenon by postulating some kind special knowledge accessible only to themselves. Power, thus, was transferred from the subject to the object, and hence knowledge over these objects became the source of the new power/knowledge nexus. The remarkable effect of this new knowledge, however, only generated as many new questions as it answered — fear and uncertainty were only deferred. And in order to meet those new fears the holders of knowledge had to be consulted on a regular basis, they needed to become a constant presence so as to intervene in society in an ongoing way through the production of new knowledge. A relationship of dependency was created.

Hence, the enthronement of knowledge brought about a category that would denote “a structural element within the societal figuration, an element defined not by its intrinsic qualities, but by the place it occupies within the system of dependencies which such a figuration represents, and by the role it performs in

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<sup>6</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 224f; emphasis omitted.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Bauman, *Legislators and interpreters*, 10ff.

the reproduction and development of the figuration”<sup>8</sup>. The apparent incapacities of individuals to live their lives on their own forged a discourse of knowledge production that fits Foucault’s description of “pastoral power”. Foucault saw the emergence of Christianity less as the creation of a new code of ethics than as the dissemination of a new power relation. This “pastoral power” aimed at assuring the individual’s salvation, not only through direction but also through sacrifice. The emerging pastoral focus on the individual involved a knowledge of the “inside” of people’s minds, the revelation of their innermost secrets.<sup>9</sup>

Intriguingly, it was the symbiosis between the discourses of “pastoral power” and a new form of state power that formed the modern intellectual. As Foucault argues in the introduction to his *History of sexuality*, the ancient sovereign power over the life and death of subjects manifested itself by either taking life or letting live. Starting in the seventeenth century, this regime of power was gradually replaced by a more subtle power over life itself — what Foucault labels “bio-power”. It was characterised, on the one hand, by an “anatomopolitics of the human body”<sup>10</sup>, encompassing all the disciplines that centred upon the human body as a machine, and having the effects of “its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extorsion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic control”<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, formed somewhat later, a further strand of “bio-power” focused on the body as biological organism, introducing the regulatory controls of “a bio-politics of the population”<sup>12</sup>: “The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life.”<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, this regime became indispensable for the development of the capitalist economic system with its reproductive institutions and the fusion of power and knowledge.<sup>14</sup> In Europe this had particular consequences for the

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<sup>8</sup> Bauman, *Legislators and interpreters*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality*, vol. 1: *An introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley (London [a.o.]: Penguin Books, 1981 [1978]) 214ff. For an application of Foucault’s theory of power to biblical studies see Elizabeth A.Castelli, *Imitating Paul: a discourse of power*, Literary currents in Biblical interpretation (Louisville: Westminster/John Know Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, “The subject and power”, Afterword to Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) 139.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, “The subject and power”, 139.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, “The subject and power”, 139.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, “The subject and power”, 139f.

<sup>14</sup> This, of course, raises the question of whether this genealogy of power has any relevance outside western modernity. Bhabha seems to disagree: “The combination of modern and archaic



forging of modernity and the role attributed to the intellectuals within it.

## 11.2 Legislators: intellectuals in modernity

The emergence of modernity in Europe was characterised by what Roger Muchembled called the “civilising process”. It was a time of cultural desynchronisation between the elite and the masses. Very consciously the former separated itself from the latter group by defining itself as “cultured” and, therefore, as proper and superior congealing the rest of the population in a “mass” — mostly defined according to their perceived character of being ignorant, irrational, vulgar, brutal, etc.<sup>15</sup> The consequence was the establishment of a cultural hegemony and the transformation of the “mass” into the prospective object of either a protracted civilising crusade or close surveillance, monitoring and control.<sup>16</sup>

In this scenario a third category found space and usefulness in refining, civilising and enlightening the masses, as missionaries and teachers became the major vehicle of the new order.<sup>17</sup> The modern order legitimated, presented and understood itself as being a self-conscious, self-reflecting and self-monitoring system, the only alternative to anarchy and chaos.<sup>18</sup> While theory assumed the need of assistance and help from the knowledge class to face the complexities and constraints of the new social life, practice established the rule of this same group “to elevate the indoctrination to the position of the decisive mechanism of production and sustenance of social order”<sup>19</sup>. As Ernest Gellner pointedly remarks:

“[A]t the base of the modern social order stands not the executioner but the professor. Not the guillotine, but the (aptly named) *doctorat d'etat* is

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regimes of power produces unexpected forms of disciplinarity and governmentality that make Foucault's epistemes inappropriate, even obsolete.” Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 194. I concur with Bhabha, but still see the heuristical value and innovative contribution of Foucault's genealogy.

<sup>15</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 226.

<sup>16</sup> The models for this kind of exercise of power were, of course, partly imported from the colonies, where they had been tested on the native society. Cf. Comaroff & Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, vol 2, 24f.

<sup>17</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 226.

<sup>18</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 227.

<sup>19</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 227.

the main tool and symbol of state power. The monopoly of legitimate education is now more important, more central than is the monopoly of legitimate violence.”<sup>20</sup>

The outcome was a mutually gratifying co-operation of the knowledge class and the modern state: “They needed each other, as long as power without knowledge was by definition headless; knowledge without power, toothless.”<sup>21</sup>

The role of the intellectuals, however, was considerably altered in the countries at the periphery of modern states. There, modernity had been conceived of before it had become reality; it was a project, a goal. A somewhat beautified and sanitised rendition of their modernised neighbours gave birth to the utopia of the “developed” centre and the “undeveloped” periphery.<sup>22</sup> Intellectuals from the not-yet-modernised countries measured and evaluated their native reality after having embraced the foreign patterns of the modernised centre. They became the rational opposition and critics of their immediate local context. For them, their countries were simultaneously an object to be transformed and an obstacle towards such a transformation of which they became the major carrier.

Revealing is the eastern European juxtaposition of the knowledge class — the “intelligentsia” — and the “people”:

“The ‘intelligentsia’ was, so to speak, the defining agent in the opposition; the image of the ‘people’ was construed as the other of the intelligentsia. ‘The people’ were inert clay to the intelligentsia’s creative zeal; they stood against the intelligentsia as ... backward, against progress[.]”<sup>23</sup>

In this context intellectuals were born to be unhappy. They were inscribed into a sad, inescapable fate. They were inhabiting the no-man’s land between their own alienated society which hated and despised them as bastards, hybrids and their “pattern society” — the modernised states — from which they were to expect no honours. In their own countries they saw themselves in a double-bind. By “the people” whom they had chosen to make happy, they were viewed

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 227.

<sup>21</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 227.

<sup>22</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 228f.

<sup>23</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 230.



suspiciously, by the elite they were condescendingly tolerated.<sup>24</sup>

But, the situation of not belonging to any class nor committing themselves to any of them was considered by Karl Mannheim as the guarantee of impartiality and truth of intellectual judgement — hence, his concept of the “freefloating intelligence” (*freischwebende Intelligenz*).<sup>25</sup> Francis Bacon’s “House of Salomon”, the site from where the laws of society are pronounced became the home of the intellectuals, at least in their own self-understanding. For, being part of this re-established knowledge class meant to move away from parochial, particularistic, and localised practices towards universality:

“Only the few self-chosen individuals who detach themselves fully from the habitat of the classes they have been born into, and devote themselves fully to the promotion of culture, can secure the ultimate triumph of harmony where now class egoism and inter-class conflict rule.”<sup>26</sup>

The other side of the coin, however, was less flattering to the intellectual ego: the new intellectual (dis-)location made their relationship towards the “people” problematic. It affected their attitudes towards their “human objects” of transformation, converting them into passive recipients of expert skills, overcoming popular inertia and resistance by access to the same means of coercion and persuasion administered by the political classes. In short, the resulting attitude was one of arrogance and disdain. Intentions to “converse” with the lay public were less than scarce, only “colleagues” were (and are) seen as potential partners.<sup>27</sup>

### 11.3 Translators: intellectuals in postmodernity

An ironic twist in Bauman’s narrative displaces the intellectuals to the political-public margins of society. Once the structures were established as the result of modern nation-building processes in which the educated elite played a central role, the state left the cultural domain fully in the hands of the intellectuals.

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<sup>24</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 230.

<sup>25</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 231.

<sup>26</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 232.

<sup>27</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 234.

However, in the course of the time, the area of cultural creation, choice and consumption has become privatised, politically irrelevant, and, worst of all, the domain of market forces.<sup>28</sup> Intellectuals, therefore, have been expropriated by a structure that accepts no cultural hierarchy except the one of saleability:

“The modern foundation of the collective power of the intellectual has been eroded: there is little demand left for the skills they prided themselves on throughout modern history — those of the ethical and cultural legislators, the designers and guardians of proper cultural standards.”<sup>29</sup>

Consequently, intellectuals have been transposed to what George Steiner has called the “cosmic casino”: the discourse is one of rhetorical games with at least the appearance of an impact, but always with entertainment value, following the market rules of “maximal impact and instant obsolescence”.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, the intellectual pursuits never were suited to being conducted under public gaze, nor calculated for instant applause. Bauman sharply remarks:

“When notoriety rather than fame is the measure of public significance, the intellectuals find themselves in competition with sportsmen, pop stars, lottery winners, as well as terrorists and serial killers.”<sup>31</sup>

Hence, intellectuals are now forced to offer their products as “merely another commodity in the overcrowded superstore of selfassembly identity kits”<sup>32</sup>.

As conclusion to this story Bauman’s comment is worth quoting *in extenso*:

“It may well be that the historical glory of intellectuals was tied closely to other, now largely extinct, factors of the modern age — great utopias of perfect society, projects of global social engineering, the search of universal standards of truth, justice and beauty, and institutional powers with ecumenical ambitions willing and able to act upon them. The elevated rank of intellectuals as agents and arbiters of historical progress and the guardians of the collective conscience of the self-improving society could not outlive the belief in progress and survive

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<sup>28</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 236.

<sup>29</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 238.

<sup>30</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 239.

<sup>31</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 239.

<sup>32</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 239.



the privatization of self-improvement ideals. Intellectuals ... have lost their role as cultural legislators, hoping at best to make indispensable their new function of cultural interpreters-translators in the ongoing exchange between autonomous, diverse but equivalent cultural styles.”<sup>33</sup>

Following Bauman’s narrative, the evolution from legislators to translators is one that roughly overlaps with the change from a modern to a postmodern world. The myth of the essentially orderly totality of modernism evoked a stereotypical strategy for the intellectual which would “consist of making authoritative statements which arbitrate in controversies of opinions and which select those opinions which, having been selected, become correct and binding”<sup>34</sup>. By contrast, in a postmodern world in which an unlimited number of ordering models coexist in relative autonomy with each other, the intellectual becomes more of a translator who translates statements “made within one communally based tradition, so that they can be understood within the system of knowledge based on another tradition”<sup>35</sup>. The change, however, was not one of total elimination. Traits of a legislative tendency are still existing among intellectuals. Legislative speech acts are still performed within their own circles. While abandoning the universality of their ambition, the meta-professional authority as legislators — i.e. the procedural rules that arbitrate controversies and produces binding statements — is still visible in the universality of their statements.

Antonio Gramsci formulated what has become the classical concept of critical intellectual agency. Gramsci subscribed to an “amalgamated” notion of the subject that was based on the common sense, dialectical thinking, and intellectual possibility attributed to the individual.<sup>36</sup> Since, according to him, “all men [sic] are intellectuals”<sup>37</sup>, he subscribed to the optimistic point of view that hegemonised subjects have the potential to contest their ideological positioning. To assume a counter-hegemonic position was potentially possible for everyone and the intellectual who did so spoke from and for the working class: “her or his

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<sup>33</sup> Bauman, *Life in fragments*, 239f.

<sup>34</sup> Bauman, *Legislators and interpreters*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Bauman, *Legislators and interpreters*, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Carmen Luke, “Feminist politics in radical pedagogy”, *Feminism and critical pedagogy*, eds. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 27.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted by Luke, “Feminist politics in radical pedagogy”, 27.

expertise is organic to 'real' class interests"<sup>38</sup>.

This statement was based on Gramsci's understanding of intersubjective relations. In his essay "What is man?" Gramsci wrote:

"The individual does not enter into relations with other men in opposition to them but through an organic unity with them, because he becomes part of social organisms of all kinds from the simplest to the most complex."<sup>39</sup>

Gramsci's critical anthropology, therefore, contested one of the most fundamental obsessions of western thought: the binary opposition between individuality and collectivity of which the intellectual/masses opposition is but the exacerbation.<sup>40</sup> Gramsci, furthermore, saw the individual as a function of the collective that itself was considered the expression of a mobile and ever-changing system of relationships. He historicised "man" through and through by viewing the act of being human as a process.<sup>41</sup>

Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual" can be seen as a logical development of his anthropology:

"Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields."<sup>42</sup>

The "organic intellectual" is, therefore, understood as a specialist that fulfils a technical, directive and organisationally indispensable need:

"[T]here is no organisation without intellectuals, that is, without organisers and leaders, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus distinguishing itself concretely in a stratum of people who 'specialise' in its conceptual and philosophical elaboration."<sup>43</sup>

One of the classical conceptualisations in poststructuralist thinking is

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<sup>38</sup> Luke, "Feminist politics in radical pedagogy", 27.

<sup>39</sup> Gramsci quoted by R. Radhakrisham, "Toward an effective intellectual: Foucault or Gramsci", *Intellectuals: aesthetics, politics, academics*, ed. Bruce Robbins, Cultural politics 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 82.

<sup>40</sup> Radhakrisham, "Toward an effective intellectual", 82.

<sup>41</sup> Radhakrisham, "Toward an effective intellectual", 83.

<sup>42</sup> Gramsci as quoted by Radhakrisham, "Toward an effective intellectual", 85.

<sup>43</sup> Gramsci as quoted by Radhakrisham, "Toward an effective intellectual", 90.



found in Michel Foucault's social theory. Two aspects of Foucault's theoretical discourse are somewhat surprising, namely his own positionality, on the one hand, and his rejection of representation on the other. Concerning his political location Foucault has been characterized as somehow contradictory:

"In his own brilliant and probing ways he has tried to think the 'unthinkable,' but from a subject position that has been assigned by the dominant ideologies of western thought. The valence of his critical thought is then by very definition 'always already' homeless and marginal: on the one hand it lies 'outside' the contours of official Eurocentric thought, but on the other hand, it cannot and will not be part of an hegemonic order interested in establishing its own hegemonic articulations. In short, his is a highly attenuated but diagnostic politics that will not affirm a new axiology: a politics that paradoxically achieves its interventionary effects within a macrological vacuum. It is an orphanated politics that cannot be 'in the name of' any principle or cause."<sup>44</sup>

In aiming his critique more generally and fundamentally at the very algorithm of representation, Foucault wanted to prevent deregionalisation and denying the legitimacy of events by "speaking for" discontinuous and autochthonous articulations.<sup>45</sup> In Foucault's theoretical world, representation was defunct and simply not present.

But how could Foucault reach such a pessimistic view on the agency of the intellectual? Radhakrishnan contextualises Foucault in the events of May 1968 in Paris where the French philosopher had to learn the lesson that

"there exists a profound assymetry, within society, between the perspectivity of the intellectual and that of the masses. The May events become that transformed space where the masses are their own protagonists fully capable of empowering themselves and speaking for themselves without the mediation of the intellectuals."<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, Foucault not only celebrates the independent masses, but decelebrates the intellectuals as agents of repressive systems of power. What remains for the intellectual, thus, is "to struggle against the forms of power that

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<sup>44</sup> Radhakrishnam, "Toward an effective intellectual", 62f.

<sup>45</sup> Radhakrishnam, "Toward an effective intellectual", 65.

<sup>46</sup> Radhakrishnam, "Toward an effective intellectual", 67.

transform him into its object and instrument”<sup>47</sup>.

The problem with Foucault’s position, however, has been expressed eloquently in Gayatri Spivak’s classic article “Can the subaltern speak?”, when she criticizes Deleuze and Foucault of ignoring the question of ideology and their own implication in intellectual and economic history.<sup>48</sup> Radhakrishnan puts it sharply:

“It is quite astonishing that Foucault, the thinker of specificity, does not identify himself problematically as a European and Eurocentric intellectual who has gone on to make sweeping generalizations about power, discourse, subjectivity, disciplinary societies, and micropolitics, on the basis of limited and exiguous French empirities.”<sup>49</sup>

The rejection of intellectual agency is rooted within a European experience. In Gramscian terms “European intellectuals, having lost their sense of ‘organicity,’ ordain that ‘organicity as such’ is dead”<sup>50</sup>. The same contextual reading, however, could be performed with Gramsci’s theory, situating him within the context of Mussolini’s Italy. Much has changed since Gramsci’s theoretisation and one has to wonder whether his theory can be applied to present constellation without major alterations.

Juxtaposing Foucault and Gramsci confronts us with the aporia that characterises intellectual work in the contemporary context. On the one hand, the intellectual cannot deny the new contextual constraints that have transformed his discourse from a legislative mode to one of translation. But to abandon any representative discourse (both as *Vertretung* and as *Darstellung*) or surrender to the powerlessness of this new situation would be irresponsible. On the other hand, it is impossible to rehabilitate in an unproblematic way an outdated concept of the intellectual — organic or otherwise. The crucial relationship, in any case, seems to be the relation between the intellectual and “the people”.

How is the intellectual practice affected by the academic institution? In the following chapter I will discuss the impact of the emerging globalised economy upon the university, and draw conclusions from the resulting shift within the academy for the responsible work of the academic.

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<sup>47</sup> Radhakrishnam, “Toward an effective intellectual”, 68.

<sup>48</sup> Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?”, 275.

<sup>49</sup> Radhakrishnam, “Toward an effective intellectual”, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Radhakrishnam, “Toward an effective intellectual”, 75.



## 12 THE UNIVERSITY

"Today, how can we not speak of the university? ... [I]t is impossible, now more than ever, to dissociate the work we do, within one discipline or several, from a reflection on the political and institutional conditions of that work."<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Derrida

### 12.1 The rise of the university of culture

1793 marked the beginning of a turning point in the history of the university as institution. It was the year the University of Halle was founded, introducing the early-modern reformation of the German university — an institutional concept that would soon spread throughout Europe and, eventually, with considerable variations, all over the world. In his elaborate historicisation of this event, Ian Hunter points out one significant factor that characterised the founding of this university as discontinuous with its predecessors:<sup>2</sup> The immediate aim of the founding authority, the Hohenzollern dynasty, was to create an institution that would be instrumental in building the Prussian state. Rather than being in allegiance with the state-based and trans-territorial Lutheran church, the Hohenzollern saw the need to educate jurists, civil administrators, teachers and pastors primarily committed to the needs of the civil society in the emerging state.

The new institution was built in clear juxtaposition to the orthodox universities of Leipzig, Wittenberg and Jena. This institutional aim was reflected in the administrative-structural organisation of the University of Halle, which was mainly accountable to a state ministry. The ministry, in turn, appointed the rectorate who governed the faculties through a college of deans and the senate. The shift in focus had serious consequences for the distribution of power among the faculties: the faculty of theology, up until then the "queen of the faculties", passed on its intellectual and political dominance to the faculty of law. Hence

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The principle of reason: the university in the eyes of its pupils", tr. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *Diacritics* (Fall 1983) 3-20; 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Hunter, "The regimen of reason: Kant's defence of the philosophy faculty", *Oxford Literary Review* 17:1-2 (1995) 51-85.

prominence was given in the statutes to the new doctrines of the *Staatsraison*, and the political prudence and civic decorum could be observed in the law faculty. The complex of new doctrines laid down in the statutes were meant to “divorce politics from theology and to fashion a style of thought and conduct that would allow jurists and administrators to subordinate the uncompromising ideals of religion to the peace and prosperity of the state.”<sup>3</sup>

When, 17 years later in 1810, the University of Berlin was founded, the modernisation of the university would have already had its decisive breakthrough and the German idealists, from Schiller to von Humboldt, would have entrenched the ties between the university and the nation-state, epitomised in the idea of “culture”. Culture would be the rubric under which the university was assigned “the dual task of research and teaching, respectively the production and inculcation of national self-knowledge”<sup>4</sup>. As Bill Readings points out, the achievement of the German idealists was a remarkable one: they “articulated and instituted an analysis of knowledge and its social function”<sup>5</sup>.

An intermediate institution would prepare the “natural character of mankind [sic]” for “the state of reason” and develop an “ethnicity that is raised to rational self-consciousness”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the perceived destructiveness of traditions during the French revolution would be circumvented and a process of hermeneutic reworking within the pedagogical space of the university would be set in motion. There, “the present could fuse past tradition and future ambition into a unified field of culture”<sup>7</sup>. This process had a double articulation:

“On the one hand, culture names *identity*. It is the unity of all knowledges that are the object of study; it is the object of *Wissenschaft* (scientific-philosophical study). On the other hand, culture names a *process of development*, of the cultivation of character — *Bildung*. In the modern University, the two branches of this process are research and teaching, and the particularity of the Idealists was to insist that the specificity of the University comes from the fact that it is the place where

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<sup>3</sup> Hunter, “The regimen of reason”, 56.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Readings, *The university in ruins* (Cambridge [USA] and London: Yale University Press, 1996) 15. Cf. Dominick LaCapra, “The university in ruins?”, *Critical inquiry* 25:1 (Autumn 1998) 32-55 for a critical assessment of Readings book.

<sup>5</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 62.

<sup>6</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 68.



the two are inseparable.”<sup>8</sup>

It was Schleiermacher who grounded this project on historical ethnicity. The national language would provide the framework for science.

The kind of person the university would deliver to the civil society, though, was subtly altered by the German idealists. The university should not train servants of the state, but subjects. Thought and the acquisition of knowledge would be exercised freely and autonomously. Hence Fichte’s conceptualisation of pedagogy as process in Reading’s words:

“The teacher does not transmit facts (which can be better learnt from books, the reading of which leaves more room for autonomous thought) but rather does two things. First, the teacher narrativizes the search for knowledge, tells the story of the process of knowledge acquisition. Second, the teacher enacts the process, sets knowledge to work. What is thus taught is not facts but critique — the formal art of the use of mental powers, the process of judgment.”<sup>9</sup>

Von Humboldt pictured the relationship between state and university in ideal symbiosis and respect. According to Reading, this entailed that

“[t]he University seeks to embody thought as action toward an ideal; the state must seek to realize action as thought, the idea of the nation. The state protects the action of the University; the University safeguards the thought of the state. And each strives to realize the idea of national culture.”<sup>10</sup>

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the import of the German university of culture to Anglophone territories. Notably Newman and Arnold developed the work of the German idealists with the remarkable difference that literature was to replace philosophy as the central discipline of the university. Cultural (national) identity was thus defined primarily (though not exclusively) through national literature. This is evident in the institutional weight placed upon literary departments in the Anglophone world. The relative recent coinage of “literature” is linked by Readings to the rise of the bourgeois public sphere and its impact on textual production — “literature emerges when writing is

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<sup>8</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 64.

<sup>9</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 69.

analysed in terms that leave public oratory behind”<sup>11</sup>. Even though literature was also institutionalised in Germany and Spain<sup>12</sup>, nowhere was social mission of literature as prominent as in the Anglophone world.

## 12.2 Globalisation and the decline of the nation-state

The plot of Bill Reading’s narrative reaches a turning point when the emerging aspect of globalisation is acknowledged as the decisive marker of the contemporary context, and he introduces his structural post-mortem of the university’s symbiosis with the state. With the decline of the nation-state, the national cultural mission of the university is obsolete: “the University is becoming a different kind of institution, one that is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture”<sup>13</sup>.

Globalisation is characterised by a shift of the reproduction of capital from the nation-state to a number of transnational corporations that can control more capital than most states could. These transnational entities transfer capital in search of profit without being directly influenced by or responsible to national boundaries. This does not result in the disappearance of the nation-state, which “simply becomes more and more managerial, increasingly incapable of imposing its will as the *political* content of economic affairs”<sup>14</sup>. Assisted by the technological advance of telecommunication and transport, migration is increasingly economically, rather politically motivated, and renders labour forces more flexible and adaptable to capital, thereby eroding the integrity of nation-states as unified cultural formations.

The immediate effects upon this “‘posthistorical’ university,”<sup>15</sup> concern, first of all, a reorientation in the kind of subject the university produces. International and crossdisciplinary flexibility will generate subjects that are

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<sup>11</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Readings refers to the respective research in Readings, *The university in ruins*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Readings prefers this expression, rather than ‘postmodern’, in order to denote an “institution [that] has outlived itself [and] is now a survivor of the era in which it defined itself in terms of the project of the *historical* development, affirmation, and inculcation of national culture”, Readings, *The university in ruins*, 6.



equipped to meet the fluctuating needs of a global market. It also concerns the guiding forces that influence the institution. The modern university, originally conceived as collaborating with and responsible to the state, is, if Reading's narrative is to be believed, in ruins. Its traditional function is no longer needed. Transnational capital is now economically supporting and thus controlling the organisation of research and teaching via the sponsorship of programmes. Rather than following the interests of the states, the university increasingly serves the commercial and industrial interests of the multinationals. The crisis generated for the university in this context is exemplified by the new master category — “excellence”<sup>16</sup>. Most universities claim to aim for and provide “excellence” in the academic practices. But what “excellence” precisely means is often left unqualified. The new flexible globalised context seems to necessitate equally flexible categories that can be remoulded to the ever shifting needs of the market place.

### **12.3 The university and responsibility towards the other**

It becomes evident from this brief and sketchy genealogy of the contemporary university that the issue of responsibility is highly complicated by the emerging globalisation of its working. I would like to briefly discuss some crucial aspects that responsibility within the university would have to consider along several familiar concepts — rationality, interest, class — and their respective stereonomical axes or borderlines — stability/change, inside/outside, hegemonic/marginalised.

#### ***12.3.1 The principle of reason***

In a lecture given at Cornell University, Derrida posed the question of the *raison d'être* of the contemporary university. With this familiar French expression he was, of course, playfully alluding to reason (*raison*) as the foundational concept of the university and its essential link to being (*être*). Reason is traditionally

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<sup>16</sup> Readings, *The university in ruins*, 21-43. That this is a discussion that is not restricted to Readings immediate context (Before his untimely death Readings taught at the University of Montreal) could be shown by referring to the mission statements of universities all over the world. See Johannes N. Voster, “The rhetoric of religion within ‘the ruins of the university’”, *Religion & theology* 5:1 (1998) 3-34 for a discussion of the role of religious studies in such a scenario.

associated with visual metaphors. The desire to know — even beyond the constraints of its usefulness — can be expressed with the opening wide of the eyes in order to see everything that can possibly be seen. There is, however, a constraint implied in this image, when applied to humans. Unlike sclerophthalmic animals — animals with hard, dry eyes (from Greek *tôn sklerophthalmôn*) and without eyelids — humans have to close their eyes from time to time. The added trope of time, characteristic for Derrida, reveals a central problem with reason as the firm foundation of the university: blinking, closing the eyes in regular intervals, twinkling, winking, lowering the sheath, adjusting the diaphragm, narrowing the sight — these are essentially human characteristics. Humans rely on other sensory impulses, and Derrida suggests that another form of experience is always supplementing the visual. This supplement is, in fact, a necessary complementary foundation for the university. In order to be responsible one has to close the eyes from time to time in order to, say, listen.<sup>17</sup>

The architectonic history of Cornell's landscape illustrates this point very well.<sup>18</sup> When the boards of trustees of Cornell University had to decide where to build the university, the trustees favoured a location close to the town. Ezra Cornell, however, convinced the board to build it on an upper site. His inclination was not only related to practical reasons — the upper site provided more room for expansion — but also to the Romantic idea of the sublime inspiration by a certain landscape. The Romantic sublime was to evoke certain thoughts in a "cultivated man" — death, solitude, and melancholy. As a result, the university had to be accessed through several bridges hanging over a gorge. In 1977 the question arose whether to build protective railings along the bridges in order to prevent thoughts of suicide in view of the precipice. Derrida allegorises this incident: "'Barriers' was the term used; we could say 'diaphragm,' borrowing a word which in Greek literally means 'partitioning fence.' Beneath the bridges linking the university to its surroundings, connecting its inside to its outside, lies the abyss."<sup>19</sup> One member of the faculty, however, strongly opposed the building of the barriers as they would "destroy the essence of the university"<sup>20</sup>!

Derrida ventures two assertions in view of the question of reason as the foundation of the academic institution: First, the dominance of reason as the modern foundation of the university was strongly intertwined with the

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, "The principle of reason", 4f.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, "The principle of reason", 5f.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, "The principle of reason", 6.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, "The principle of reason", 6.



interpretation of essence as objects placed and positioned — thus present — before the subject.<sup>21</sup> It is the latter who ensures the mastery over the totality of what is knowable, and this mastery is grounded, ensured, and protected. In Heideggerian terms this means that

“The principle of reason installs its empire only to the extent that the abyssal question of the being that is hiding within it remains hidden, and with it the question of the grounding of the ground itself, of grounding as *grunden* (to ground, to give or take ground: *Bodennehmen*), as *begrunden* (to motivate, justify, authorize) or especially as *stiften* (to erect or institute ...).”<sup>22</sup>

The second assertion can be seen as a logical conclusion from the first: the institution of the modern university cannot only be built upon the principle of reason, but must also rest on what remains hidden in that principle. The organised amnesia or resistance to uncover this aspect is essential for this institution: “nowhere is this principle thought through, scrutinized, interrogated as to its origin. ... And this dissimulation of its origin within what remains unthought is not harmful, quite the contrary, to the development of the modern university”<sup>23</sup>. Starting to recognise this ‘forgotten’ second leg upon which the university stands, opens up the risky possibility for change. For, if the principle of reason *and* what is beyond that principle form the basis of the institution, then one will not have only to respond to the university’s *arkhe*, but also to its an-archy: “Between the two, the difference of a breath or an accent”, and one could add, the blinking of the eyes,

“on the *enactment* of this ‘thought’ can decide. That decision is always risky, it always risks the worst. To claim to eliminate that risk by an institutional program is quite simply to erect a barricade against the future. The decision of thought cannot be an intra-institutional event, an academic moment.”<sup>24</sup>

This leads me to a further aspect concerning responsibility within the academic institution — the *intra* and the *extra*.

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<sup>21</sup> Derrida, “The principle of reason”, 9f.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, “The principle of reason”, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, “The principle of reason”, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, “The principle of reason”, 19.

### 12.3.2 *The limits of the university*

That the university is “a *political* institution for the *disinterested* pursuit of knowledge”, implies the paradox that “the supposed unwordlyness of scholarly investigation requires a massive and worldly institution in order to be possible”.<sup>25</sup> This worldly shell around the spiritual kernel of the university easily discloses its cracks. The borderline between the inside and the outside starts to shake even under superficial scrutiny. Or, to stay with Derrida’s allegorisation of Cornell’s landscape, the founders of this institution have made sure that it is connected through a few strategic and well controlled bridges to the outside world.<sup>26</sup> The foundational “principle of reason”, especially in its classical formulation by Kant, was meant to preserve some independence of the university *vis-à-vis* the outside world. In Kant’s case it was the incipient modern state. After the increasing demise of the modern nation-state, the main force to be reckoned with is, of course, the market. Within this scenario one may start to think how the university could sell its contradictory image, whereby “the university is supposed to be both the political institution in which nonpolitical thought can occur and the nonpolitical institution in which political thought can occur”<sup>27</sup>.

This aporia concerns particularly the politics of the censorship of research and teaching. As Readings convincingly points out, this issue can no longer be reduced to the university’s relation to the state, but instead “it is now centered ... on multinational military-industrial complexes or techno-economic networks, or rather international technomilitary networks that are apparently multi- or transnational in form”<sup>28</sup>. In this context the royal censorship of the state is succumbing to a dispersed, decentralised, multiple system of presses, foundations, and mass media, and its evaluative actions in accepting, certifying, and legitimising discourses, research projects, and courses at the university.<sup>29</sup> The distinction between fundamental or basic research — politically or economically

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<sup>25</sup> Diane Elam, *Feminism and deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1994) 93.

<sup>26</sup> The focus on the bridge is, of course, a focus on the political aspect of the academic university. This goes back as far as to the Latin obsession with boundaries from the mythical foundation of Rome to the ideology of the *Pax Romana*. Cf. Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, New York, and Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 27: “If boundaries are not recognized, then there can be no *civitas*. ... Bridges are sacrilegious because they span the *sulcus*, the moat of water delineating the city boundaries: for this reason, they may be built only under close, ritual control of the Pontifex.”

<sup>27</sup> Elam, *Feminism and deconstruction*, 94.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, “The principle of reason”, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Derrida, “The principle of reason”, 13, for the *desideratum* of analysing those procedures more closely.



disinterested, not aimed at being 'applicable' to some utilitarian purpose — on the one hand, and orientated or applied research — committed to some project or programme — on the other, is breaking down. If it was once possible to believe in a pure science shielded from power, inaccessible by the outside world — the state, civil society, or capital interest — where the pursuit of “knowledge, truth, the disinterested exercise of reason, under the sole authority of the principle of reason”<sup>30</sup> was possible, this will have to be left behind as part of our naïve past.

Already a deconstruction of Kant's principle of reason in his *Conflict of the faculties*<sup>31</sup> shows that his proposal of a higher echelon of faculties, which are responsible to the state, and a lower faculty — a faculty to which all other faculties are responsible and which is totally independent of the state — was something like a compromise with the state power. But even before he drew this general line of division within the institution, Kant encountered a prior difficulty that is today far more in evidence than during his own time. This difficulty concerned the definition of the outside border of the university in relation to certain other institutions.<sup>32</sup>

There exist, for example, the organisations of specialised scholars, the professional societies, which are usually not associated to any academic institution. In a time in which “information” is no longer only stored in university libraries and archives, the university is losing its archival monopoly to competing electronic databases, which are accessible via electronic networks. Some of these databases are hosted by these societies (others may be hosted by publishers). Moreover, these societies are increasingly taking over what we could call the profession. A profession organises a particular “field of knowledge” by creating standards that define its adequate practice, limiting the access to its knowledge, and controlling the discourse of credentialisation.<sup>33</sup> The university, once able to keep these societies at its margins, sees itself being pushed to the margins of society by this outside competition. Furthermore, research institutions outside the university are increasingly becoming more attractive for public or private capital, including the state. Research is more and more entrusted to these institutions, while the university is increasingly confined to the pursuit of

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<sup>30</sup> Derrida, “The principle of reason”, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Mochlos; or, the conflict of the faculties”, tr. Richard Rand and Amy Wygant, *Logomachia: the conflict of the faculties*, ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) 1-34.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, “Mochlos; or, the conflict of the faculties”, 13-19.

<sup>33</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the subject: women's discourses and feminist theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 320f.

reproductive teaching.

A second group Kant would have liked to keep outside the university are what he calls the “businessmen, or technicians of learning”<sup>34</sup>. According to Derrida, today this group includes “every responsible figure in the public or private administration of the university, every ‘decision-maker’ in matters of budgets and the allocation or distribution of resources ..., every administrator of publications and archiving, every editor, journalist, etc.”<sup>35</sup> It is clearly this group that exercises control upon the nature and ideological direction of outside influences upon the university. The contemporary situation has allocated unprecedented powers to the managerial class within the university. The domination of academia from outside is shaped mainly by this group: The ivory tower’s walls appear as permeable as never before.

As Derrida points out, the precise demarcation of the university’s parameters by Kant and his zeal to protect this purity were based on the same understanding of language that Derrida precisely seeks to deconstruct in his work. It is the indivisible and rigorously uncrossable line of separation between truth (inside) and action (outside), between constative and performative speech acts, that Kant wants to maintain. The introduction of the problematic of language, however, only helps to uncover that this border is essentially already divisible and porous, that the two discrete spaces that Kant wanted to disassociate at all cost bleed into each other. The white male academic who enjoyed almost exclusive privilege in the academy for decades was, from the beginning, a border crosser — he lived in two worlds simultaneously and made sure to erase the tracks of his daily trips between academia and its outside. Kant “continually effaces something in language that scrambles the limits which a criticist critique claims to assign to the faculties, to the interior of the faculties, and ... between the university’s inside and its outside”<sup>36</sup>.

Derrida’s deconstruction of the institutional context would however be grossly misunderstood, if it were to be read as a levelling of the borderline that delineates the contours of the university as institution. Rather than dismissing Kant’s ideal as naïve, Derrida’s is a reinvocation of this ideal as a profession of faith. The professor, the professional academic, is thus understood again in its medieval sense as someone who professes a doctrine, someone who “pledge[s]

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<sup>34</sup> Derrida, “Mochlos; or, the conflict of the faculties”, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, “Mochlos; or, the conflict of the faculties”, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, “Mochlos; or, the conflict of the faculties”, 18.



[him]self while declaring [him]self, while *giving [him]self out to be*, while promising this or that”<sup>37</sup>. The doctrine professed is that of the unconditionality of the university:

“[T]he modern university *should* be without condition ... This university claims and ought to be granted in principle, besides what is called academic freedom, an *unconditional* freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge, and thought concerning the *truth*.”<sup>38</sup>

This principle is, however, not simply propagated. It is also, at the same time, reflected upon, invented, and posed in the university. This reflection takes on the form of a permanent metadiscourse that seeks both conserve to it and to change it in a non-dialectical mode:

“[A] certain neutral theoreticism is the chance for the critical and more-than-critical (deconstructive) unconditionality that we are talking about and that, in principle, we all uphold, we all declare to uphold, in the university ... [but, at the same time,] it must be admitted, and professed, that this unconditional theoreticism will itself always suppose a performative profession of faith, a belief; a decision, a public pledge, an ethico-political responsibility and so forth”<sup>39</sup>.

In order to do this, the Humanities — the place where this unconditionality presents itself, according to Derrida — “will have to study their history, the history of the concepts that, by constructing them, instituted the disciplines and were coextensive with them”<sup>40</sup>.

The distinction between the constative — the truth, if one wills, which governs the inside of the university — and the performative — the necessary ethico-political commitment to the outside world — opens up for Derrida the crucial limit at which a responsibility towards the other summons the academic to render accounts of his work beyond the credentials of his academic competence. This borderline is where real invention occurs, where the institutional shape is interrupted by something that cannot yet be fathomed, cannot be, therefore,

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<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The future of the profession or the university without condition (thanks to the “Humanities,” what *could take place* tomorrow)”, *Jacques Derrida and the humanities: a critical reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 24-57; 36.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, “The future of the profession”, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, “The future of the profession”, 39.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, “The future of the profession”, 50. See pp 50-53 for a list of such concepts.





## 13 RESPONDING TO SUBALTERN PASTS

One of the most substantial contributions to the discussion of the theoretical and ethico-political problems of a historicism approach in biblical studies has been recently put forward in a lengthy article by F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp.<sup>1</sup> Troubled by the “alarming disinterest in history” and the “severely wrongheaded” “current ahistoricist orientation of biblical literary criticism”,<sup>2</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp wishes to reinstate a theoretically sanitised “critical historicism” as the central paradigm of biblical studies:

“I want to reclaim the literary priority intrinsic to historical criticism. But to do so requires reconceptualizing historical criticism in such a way as to facilitate the integration of the full panoply of literary methods, theories, and strategies of reading currently employed by literary scholars, as well as rethinking and retheorizing the objectivist and foundationalist assumptions which have informed and motivated historical-critical practices in the past.”<sup>3</sup>

Since, in a welcome gesture of humility, Dobbs-Allsopp himself characterises his arguments as “but initial forays into a process that requires constant and ever vigilant attention”<sup>4</sup>, I would like to contribute to his rethinking, necessarily in an equally sketchy way, and follow his invitation to “submit itself ... to rigorous theoretical scrutiny, and, if need be, to cast aside aspects of its theory and practice which are no longer compelling”<sup>5</sup>. For, like Dobbs-Allsopp, I would like to retain the historicist paradigm. I will retain it, however, not as a hegemonic paradigm, but because it is necessary rather than a desirable approach.<sup>6</sup> My

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<sup>1</sup> F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Rethinking historical criticism”, *Biblical interpretation* 7:3 (1999) 235-271.

<sup>2</sup> All Dobbs-Allsopp, “Rethinking historical criticism”, 235.

<sup>3</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, “Rethinking historical criticism”, 236.

<sup>4</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, “Rethinking historical criticism”, 271.

<sup>5</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, “Rethinking historical criticism”, 271.

<sup>6</sup> For other similar apologetic appeals to retain the historicist paradigm in biblical studies see Paul Joyce, “First among equals?: the historical-critical approach in the marketplace of methods”, *Crossing the boundaries: essays in biblical interpretation in honour of Michael D. Goulder*, eds. Stanley E. Porter, Paul Joyce, and David E. Norton, *Biblical interpretation series 8* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: E. J. Brill, 1994) 17-27 and Heikki Räisänen, “Biblical critics in the global village”, *Reading the Bible in the global arena: Helsinki*, co-authored with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, R. S. Sugirtharajah, Krister Stendahl, and James Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical

response, moreover, will engage only if one crucial aspect of Dibbs-Allsopp's lengthy argument.

The crucial aspect I would like to critique as a point of departure for this chapter is Dobbs-Allsopp's core ethical (and, by implication, political) motivation for his plea for a renewed hegemony of a historicist discourse in biblical studies. For, according to him, it is particularly the "valorization [sic] of the other that lies at the heart of the historicist project. ... [R]espect for the other morally compels us to strive for a just estimation of the past on its own terms"<sup>7</sup>. Historicism's "willingness to embrace the other"<sup>8</sup>, however, masks a more sinister and complex relation towards its object, a relation that can be better appreciated when considering its European genealogy and its formal gestures. It is precisely this relationship of alleged valorisation and respect towards its other that is problematic and in need of a thorough rethinking in the light of the critique by and experience of postcolonial tricontinentalism.

### 13.1 Biblical historicism and the colonised other

Since its inception as an academic discourse towards the end of the eighteenth century, biblical studies has been determined by post-Enlightenment historical consciousness. It is the German scholar Johann Philipp Gabler who is usually seen as one of the originators of this particular academic practice. In his inaugural lecture in Altdorf "*Oratio de justo discrimine theologicae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*" (1787), Gabler elaborated his vision for a new discipline — biblical theology — within the faculty of theology.<sup>9</sup> Biblical theology as a genuine historical endeavour, according to Gabler, had to be separated from dogmatics, for they were of a different kind. While the former was supposed to produce hard, unchangeable facts *e genere historico*, the latter had a purely didactic function (*e genere didactico*), which necessarily had to change over time. Biblical theology itself consisted of the "true", meticulous historical research — the *interpretatio* — on the one hand, and the "pure"

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Literature, 2000) 9-28.

<sup>7</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, "Rethinking historical criticism", 268.

<sup>8</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, "Rethinking historical criticism", 261.

<sup>9</sup> See Walther Zimmerli, "Biblische Theologie: i. Altes Testament", *Theologische Realenzyklopedie* 6 (1980) 426-455, particularly 427.



distillation of core concepts with the help of philosophical reflexion — the *comparatio*, which had a bridging function between biblical theology and dogmatics. Although Gabler was not the first in suggesting historical approaches to the bible within academic theology, in his inaugural lecture we can discern in a nutshell the predicament in which biblical studies would find itself for over a century and a half.<sup>10</sup>

With the establishment of the historical-critical method(s), biblical studies had thus succeeded in setting the foundation for a set of rules that would be instrumental in discriminating between valid and invalid interpretations, between *exegesis* and *eisegesis*, between diachronic and synchronic approaches, and anachronistic misreadings. These two negative criteria — the rejection of *eisegesis* and anachronism — delineated the parameter around the proper interpretation of the bible. As I will argue more fully in the next chapter, the renegotiation of the rules of *proper* interpretation, namely those of the historicist paradigm, should be read as the appropriation of the religious symbol of the bible taken away from one social entity by another. But why did the ownership of the bible become such an important issue? And, more importantly, from whom was the bible taken from?

It is hardly a coincidence that Gabler's inaugural lecture predated the foundation of the University of Halle by only a few years. As already pointed out,<sup>11</sup> the structural changes the academy was undergoing at the time shifted the allegiances of the academy from the church(es) to the state. It was now more and more the new liberal political philosophy of emergent modern Europe that was beginning to govern biblical studies, and less Christian orthodoxy.

“It was in the seventeenth century, in the aftermath of one hundred years of bloody conflict from which no European nation was exempt, that the modern system of sovereign nation-states emerged and finally won complete ascendancy over institutional Christianity.”<sup>12</sup>

Following the need for the establishment of peace and civil order in Europe, the European states adopted a patronising mediatory role in dogmatic disputes in a series of constitutional settlements. It was thus a political requirement that motivated the states to gradually take control of the central religious symbol of

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in modern culture: theology and historical-critical method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> See chapter 12 on the university as institutional context.

<sup>12</sup> Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in modern culture*, 263.

the Wars of Religion. State reason — and only to a much lesser degree dogmatic truth — was to guard from now on the ownership of the bible, at least in the academy,<sup>13</sup> the new hegemonic space for the production of knowledge.

Although the vast majority of biblical scholars still came from an ecclesiastical background, many experienced the modern academic institution as liberating. Practicing their scholarship in an ambience in which the controlling grip of the church was considerably loosened, biblical scholars engaged in readings that “made Christianity and its origins and traditions earthy, questionable and humane”<sup>14</sup>. The historical other in biblical history, it was believed, could be now encountered without ecclesiastical distortion. Meticulous historical research could virtually guarantee that the biblical text could talk for itself. It was thus not only the scholar but also the historicised other that was liberated. This liberation, however, came at a considerable price. Except for liberal Protestantism, the historical-critical interpretations of the academy had little or no impact in Christian communities. The modern nexus between the university as a privileged site for the production of knowledge and the power exercised by the modern nation-state, transformed biblical studies into a discipline that was both public and marginal in relation to the more and more privatised religious life of society at large. Thus biblical scholars not only distanced themselves from the church, but also from their own religious socialisation.<sup>15</sup>

This portrayal, however, is missing one crucial aspect. For the true price of the transaction of ownership leading to the new academic discourse was to be paid by somebody else altogether. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, historiography — mostly practiced by jurists and magistrates in the service of the prince — developed as a “science” that functioned both as a legitimisation of political power and the charting of possible power-relations.<sup>16</sup> One of the crucial political projects and power-relations to be legitimised was that of modern colonisation.<sup>17</sup> While European history between 1492 and 1945 is full of instances of expansions and occupations of most of the global landmass, it was precisely at this time that historiography as an academic practice became

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<sup>13</sup> Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in modern culture*, 264.

<sup>14</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Critics, tools, and the global arena”, *Reading the Bible in the global arena: Helsinki* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000) 49f.

<sup>15</sup> See my discussion of Patte on this subject in chapter 1.2 and in chapter 14.

<sup>16</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The writing of history*, tr. Tom Conley (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1988) 6f.

<sup>17</sup> There is no need in my argumentation to further specify this concept and link it to imperialism and neo-colonialism. Cf. however the lucid historical and conceptual discussion in Young,



instrumental in this sphere.

It was Edward Said who popularised the view that the Franco-British colonial involvement in the orient — based on “the ontological and epistemological distinction between the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident’”<sup>18</sup> — went hand in hand with a corresponding academic enterprise. The academic production of “knowledge” about the orient contributed in no small measure to this discourse:

“Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient — dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>19</sup>

As an academic discourse, it was its strong association with and usefulness for other discursive spheres — like the public institutions of governments, trading companies, geographical societies, (and not to forget: missionary societies!) as well as literary genres like travel writing, books of exploration, fantasy and exotic description — that made the humanities complicit with colonialism.<sup>20</sup>

Particularly at the beginning of the eighteenth century, modern biblical studies with its historicist rationality was at the forefront of the production of Orientalist knowledge. During this particular time most Orientalists were biblical scholars or scholars specialising in the related areas of classics and philology.<sup>21</sup> Although scholarship in Germany — champion of the new, historicist discipline of biblical theology — did not share with that in France and Britain the degree of close partnership between their academic Orientalism and the vested national interest in the orient which had developed, it nevertheless made an important contribution:

“What German Oriental scholarship did was to refine and elaborate techniques whose application was to texts, myths, ideas, and

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*Postcolonialism*, 15-56.

<sup>18</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London [a.o.]: Penguin Books, 1995 [1978]) 1.

<sup>19</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 202.

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 51. Said also mentions Islamists and Sinologists. E. S. Shaffer's *'Kubla Khan' and the fall of Jerusalem: the mythological school in biblical studies and secular literature, 1770-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) includes material of relevance to German biblical scholarship.

languages almost literally gathered from the Orient by imperial Britain and France. Yet what German Orientalism had in common with Anglo-French and later American Orientalism was a kind of intellectual *authority* over the Orient within Western culture.”<sup>22</sup>

Hence, it can be shown that the appropriation by modern biblical scholarship of historicist rationalism as state reason, and its gradual shift of allegiance from church to state, situated the biblical scholar within a discourse of epistemological mastery and violence over its allegedly liberated object — the historicised other — and, inevitably, resulted in complicity with the colonial subjugation, exploitation, and oppression by the European states.

But how exactly does historicism tame its other? What were and are the political stakes of modernist historicism? And can this discourse be transcended, can its objectified other speak with its own voice, and how?

Since up until the beginning of the nineteenth century the orient in most cases only comprised the biblical lands and India, it could be of help for biblical scholars to look over the disciplinary fence to their traditional “oriental” neighbours in India to develop some answers to these questions. Here, in the intellectual climate of post-independence India, a group of historians have sought to address the shortcomings of the historiography of independent India via a host of influential studies of both a theoretical and interpretive nature, since the 1980s.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Most of the studies by the Subaltern Studies historians have been gathered and made public in regularly published collections: *Subaltern Studies i: writings on South Asian history and society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); *Subaltern Studies ii: writings on South Asian history and society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); *Subaltern Studies iii: writings on South Asian history and society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984); *Subaltern Studies iv: writings on South Asian history and society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985); *Subaltern Studies v: writings on South Asian history and society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); *Subaltern Studies vi: writings on South Asian history and society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); *Subaltern Studies vii: writings on South Asian history and society*, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Pandey, Gyanendra (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992); *Subaltern Studies viii: essays in honour of Ranajit Guha*, eds. David Arnold and David Hardiman (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); *Subaltern Studies ix: writings on South Asian history and society*, eds. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); *Subaltern Studies x: writings on South Asian history and society*, eds. Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash, and Susie Tharu (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). Thus far there have been two anthologies: *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and *A Subaltern Studies reader 1986-1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), and one critical reader: *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi, Mapping (London and New York: New left review and Verso, 2000).

Another fruitful theoretical renewal for biblical historicism, not totally unrelated to the problematisations of historicism by Subaltern Studies, could be New Historicism. See *Biblical studies and the New Historicism*, ed. Stephen D. Moore, Biblical interpretation 5:4 (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: E. J. Brill, 1997) and Gina Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, Guides to biblical



## 13.2 Subaltern Studies and the politics of historicism

The problem the Subaltern Studies historians encountered was the pervasiveness of historicism as the hegemonic academic/intellectual discourse to “make sense” of the political change that led to the creation of modern India, on the one hand, and the incapability of this discourse to read the local, non-revolutionary acts of popular resistance by the masses of ordinary people, on the other. The fact that this latter group had customarily fallen outside the nationalistic historical narrative, which was invariably written as the biography of the popular nation-state, led the Subaltern group to look for new forms of historiography and a new understanding of and validation of the anti-colonial politics rejected by the new hegemony, in order to render these visible. As particularly those Subaltern Studies historians with poststructuralist inclinations soon noticed, at the heart of their problem lay the European genealogy of the historicist discourse, in general, and its materialist variation, in particular.

The problems of materialist historicism were relatively easy to address. Marxism had been translated to Indian society from its original context — nineteenth century industrialised Britain — with its clearly divided class politics and the proletariat as the sole revolutionary class. The group addressed this issue by searching for a concept that was more suitable than “class” and could be applied to the resistance of the masses. Departing from Gramsci’s concept of the “subaltern”, the group considerably altered this category to denote, more generally, any marginalised or disempowered “minority” group and thus rewrote these groups into a less restrictive power structure.<sup>24</sup> In this aspect we can see the work of the Subaltern Studies historians as an instance of the transformation of a European materialist discourse to suit the needs of tricontinental political activists. But the Eurocentric predicament of historicism is of a far more general nature.

That the historicist mode of thinking is so hegemonic and pervasive in the social sciences and humanities of virtually every modern(ised) university, indicates the success with which Europe — as a hyperreal and hegemonic presence — has established itself as the global subject of any academic discourse. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of *all* histories”<sup>25</sup>. This, of course, means that the provenance

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scholarship: Old Testament series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002),

<sup>24</sup> See Young, *Postcolonialism*, 352ff.

<sup>25</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: who speaks for ‘Indian’ pasts?”,

of the grounding metaphysical concepts underlying historicism has remained hidden behind a veil of generalisations and universalisations, rather than being acknowledged as belonging to a specific European tradition. This Eurocentrism posits a predicament for any academic discourse that seeks to transcend its inherent violence, for the knowledge protocols of the university create “a field of possibilities that is already structured from the very beginning in favour of certain outcomes”<sup>26</sup>.

But, what kind of parameters are set by historicism? What kind of relationship to its object is envisioned by the historicist practice? According to Michel de Certeau, two fundamental conditions inform the apprehension of historicism’s archived other.<sup>27</sup> Firstly, the other must be conceptualised as absent since the historical archives only present us with traces of what happened in the past. The second condition is that of difference. The traces of the archive are interpreted as belonging to a past, which differs considerably from the historicist’s present. The epistemological mastery is thus achieved by this double gesture, which sets up the space for this discourse, while, as I will seek to show shortly, at the same time, already frustrating it. This is the formal gesture behind Dobbs-Allsopp’s understanding of historicism when he states:

“The notion of Otherness is essential to historicism, for the historical imagination exists only when one can conceive of a time, a place, a people, a culture different from ours, only when the past becomes something other than a mirror image of our concerns and interests.”<sup>28</sup>

The epistemic violence of historicism, as a discursive mode, demands that everything be comprehended as a historically developing entity.<sup>29</sup> That is, it has to be understood as an individual unity, firstly, and, secondly, as an entity that develops over “the secular, empty, and homogenous time of history”<sup>30</sup>. This

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*Representations* 37 (Winter 1992) 1, emphasis mine.

<sup>26</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Radical histories and [the] question of Enlightenment rationalism: some recent critiques of Subaltern Studies”, *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi, Mapping (London and New York: Verso and New left review, 2000) 273.

<sup>27</sup> De Certeau, *The writing of history*. Cf. Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: interpretation and its other*, Key contemporary thinkers (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) 96 for this summary.

<sup>28</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, “Rethinking historical criticism”, 265f, quoting J. N. Cox and L. J. Reynolds, “The historicist enterprise”, *New historical literary study: essays in reproducing texts, representing history*, eds. J. N. Cox and L. J. Reynolds (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 15.

<sup>29</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton studies in culture/power/history (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000) 22f.

<sup>30</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 23.



violence has a number of political implications.

The historicist's other is an entity, which, in the first place, inhabits the present time of the historian. It is only constructed as being from an absent and differing past *through* the historicist work. As such, this should be seen more as a reordering of the present into a specific space, rather than a comprehending of something, which is, from the outset, in a distant past. This can be seen particularly well in the role historicism played in the colonial encounter. By confronting the colonised with the historicist concept of time, the coloniser placed the colonial other within the developing history of Europe as an anachronism. To quote Chakrabarty, "Historicism ... came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody's way of saying 'not yet' to somebody else"<sup>31</sup>. Objectifying the past and relegating the colonised to it freed the present to a certain degree from premodern elements. The colonised had to enter the colonised present by undergoing a transformation, by becoming like the coloniser, by mimicking him. At the centre of this transformation was Europe's modern political philosophy, which insisted on "the universalization of the nation-state as the most desirable form of political outcome"<sup>32</sup>. If the colonised wanted to play any political role in a modern democracy, they had to subordinate themselves to this historicist scheme. Any other discourse was either not recognised or was given its subordinate place within the modern liberal state. In order to be heard in the public sphere and gain access to democratic political rights, the subaltern has to make her voice heard by telling her stories in a mode that complies to publicly shared and accepted rational and evidentiary rules, in other words: through a historicist discourse.

That this predicament was carried over from colonialism to post-independence nationalism can be seen in its inability to make sense of the role of popular resistance in the historical narratives of the emergence of the postcolonial nation-state. Political resistance and empowerment is homogenised by historicism, leaving no space for any heterogeneous tactics for survival. Ranajit Guha — one of the leading scholars in the Subaltern Studies group — critiqued this anachronising attitude of modern Indian historiography, which categorised peasant consciousness as "prepolitical".<sup>33</sup> As most other tricontinental histories, the history of India was written within the parameters

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<sup>31</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 12f.

posed by the liberal discourse of transition and its themes of development, modernisation, and capitalism.<sup>34</sup> The subject of Indian history therefore became a split one, one which is both subject and object of modernity. On the one hand, was the modernised and modernising elite, and on the other, the yet-to-be modernised peasantry. Only those elements that imitate, mimic the European colonisers can be represented within such histories. The outcome is a subaltern that is only recognised but as “a sad figure of lack and failure”<sup>35</sup>. In contrast, the peasant has to be considered as being as much a fundamental part of modern India as a real contemporary of colonialism. The boundaries of European political thought inherent in historicism needed to be effectively stretched, if the collective actions of peasants were to be appreciated for their political role.

Guha soon discovered in his own work that the aims of the Subaltern Studies historians presented them with unsurpassable aporiae, particularly when struggling to understand the religious character of peasant consciousness.

### 13.3 Religion and the limits of historicism

Few phenomena illustrate the relation towards the historicised other better and are more pertinent to biblical studies than the way in which historicist rationality deals with the religious. Here, I would argue, we can see the predicament of the relationship that historicism establishes between its own secularised understanding of time and its heterogeneous other:

“A secular subject like history faces certain problems in handling practices in which gods, spirits, or the supernatural have agency in the world. ... Such histories represent a meeting of two systems of thought, the one in which the world is ultimately, that is, in the final analysis, disenchanted, and the other in which humans are not the only meaningful agents. For the purpose of writing history, the first system, the secular one, translates the second into itself.”<sup>36</sup>

The reason why anything religious is subsumed within historicism lies in the historicist belief that *everything* can and must be historicised. Historicism is

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<sup>34</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 72.



therefore, from the outset, an intrinsically totalitarian and thus hegemonic project that can explain everything it renders intelligible within its paradigms and declares everything it cannot grasp as inexistent. This is an aspect from which even the Subaltern Studies historians could not escape.

When Guha encountered texts in which the Santal rebels ascribed the agency for their rebellion to a deity, he was confronted with a problem, for in this case the subaltern was denying the agency the Subaltern Studies project was attempting to assert for her. The common demystifying practice of materialist historicism would have been to “see religion simply as a displaced manifestation of human relationships that are in themselves secular and worldly (class, power, economy, and so on).”<sup>37</sup> Resisting this move, Guha resorted to a more politically correct move. He anthropologised the phenomenon before he could include this incident into his historiography:

“Guha’s position with respect to the Santal’s own understanding of the event becomes a combination of the anthropologist’s politeness — ‘I respect your beliefs but they are not mine’ — and a Marxist (or modern) tendency to see ‘religion’ in modern public life as a form of alienated or displaced consciousness.”<sup>38</sup>

The anthropologisation of the supernatural can thus be seen as an instance of the failure of historicism to appreciate the other within a different epistemic system. The supernatural needs to be carried across, trans-lated, into the interpretative system of historicism. And since historicism follows here the hegemonic capitalist ideology with its generalised exchange of commodities as a model for translation, it needs the mediation of master categories, of middle terms, which necessarily have to be universal and homogenising.<sup>39</sup> In the case of the Marxist tradition of the Subaltern Studies historians, the universal master category was that of “labour”. Hence the interpretation of the north Indian Vishvakarma holiday, for example, in which workers worship their machinery, in purely functionalistic terms as “insurance policy” against accidents and contingencies, as pertaining to a discourse that manages and disciplines labour

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<sup>37</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 103.

<sup>38</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 105. Interestingly enough Chakrabarty’s discussion contains one of the rare appearances of historiographic theory developed within biblical studies by quoting Rudolf Bultmann extensively. The latter made some of the now classical assertions concerning biblical historicism, assertions which still govern this paradigm, even in its more theoretically sanitised versions (cf. 104f).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 85. It is important to remark here that approaches from sociology and cultural anthropology thus provide the complementary, albeit dialectically opposed, counterpart to historicism and thus remains essential to a historicist discourse.

by Chakrabarty himself.<sup>40</sup>

But the poverty of such a materialist translation becomes evident through the cracks of the historicist narrative, which does not succeed in *fully* translating the subaltern into its epistemic system. It is the shortcoming of the necessary universal master category in relation to the specificity and singularity of the subaltern, as much as the heterogeneity of the two systems that frustrates the dream of epistemic mastery. The heterogeneous character of the subaltern is only perceivable as a disturbance in the homogenous fabric of the historicist narrative. The presence of the supernatural has enough of an uncanny air about it and triggers enough of an epistemic shock within the historiographer to cause the limits of historicist representation to tremble:

“[T]he translation from godly time into the time of secular labor ... must possess something of the ‘uncanny’ about it. An ambiguity must mark the translation: ... it must be enough like the secular category ‘labor’ to make sense, yet the presence and plurality of gods and spirits in it must also make it ‘enough unlike to shock.’ There remains something of a ‘scandal’ — of the shocking — in every translation, and it is only through a relationship of intimacy to both languages that we are aware of the degree of this scandal.”<sup>41</sup>

### 13.4 Provincializing Europe

If historicism is such an inadequate mode of representation, why do we hold onto it? We do so because it remains as indispensable as it is inadequate. Even though historicism is involved in reproducing deep-rooted forms of social hegemony, it remains a *sine qua non* of political change in the public sphere. This is due to the fact that the nexus between the production of academic knowledge and the power discourses of the nation-state are still very much in place. The logic of the secular human sciences and the workings of bureaucracies, according to Chakrabarty, are closely intermeshed:

“One cannot argue with modern bureaucracies and other instruments

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<sup>40</sup> See Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 77ff.

<sup>41</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 89, quoting from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the teaching machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 182.



of governmentality without recourse to the secular time and narratives of history and sociology. The subaltern classes need this knowledge in order to fight their battles for social justice. It would therefore be unethical not to make historical consciousness available to everybody, in particular the subaltern classes."<sup>42</sup>

And it is precisely the aporia presented by the historicist discourse that has led Chakrabarty to reformulate the historiographical project of Subaltern Studies as "Provincializing Europe", a project, which

"both begins and ends by acknowledging the indispensability of European political thought to representations of non-European political modernity, and yet struggles with the problems of representations that this indispensability invariably creates"<sup>43</sup>.

Chakrabarty's response to this aporia is formulated in decidedly Derridean terms.<sup>44</sup> He devises a double strategy that departs from the desire to write histories, which are inclusive of those elements that have been excluded in mainstream historicist narratives. As such, this desire to be inclusive is characteristic of liberal and representative democracies. This desire, therefore, leads the historian to write "good histories", histories, that is, that are better than the previous ones insofar as they incorporate those elements and aspects, which had thus far been excluded. As important as it still remains for Chakrabarty to write the best possible histories, he is very sensitive to the mechanisms of incorporation of the historicist discipline. For, by its nature, the historicist discourse necessarily has to exclude that which escapes its epistemological categories. Only if the story can be told on historicist terms and is allowed to be done so from a certain rationally defensible position can there be a successful inclusion of the previously excluded. This kind of strategy produces good but not subversive histories. The historicist discourse is not challenged in any meaningful way. While the epistemological limits are progressively expanded, these limits are not questioned as such. Furthermore, those who become part of revisioned histories are those who are arguably already in the process of being incorporated into the democratic body. Thus these histories are better seen as post-event inclusions. The oppositional stance seems to become redundant, once they have

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<sup>42</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Peter Fenves, "Derrida and history: some questions Derrida pursues in his early writings", *Jacques Derrida and the humanities: a critical reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge [a.o.]: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 271-295 for Derrida's deconstruction of "History".

been incorporated. And they are hardly politically subversive: "Successfully incorporated 'minority histories' may then be likened to yesterday's revolutionaries who become today's gentlemen. Their success helps routinize innovation."<sup>45</sup>

If historicism wants to participate in any politically subversive gesture, it needs to question its own epistemological borders. That this is a step, which puts at risk the interests invested into the academic discourse, is shown by the widespread resistance and criticism that such a proposal encounters.<sup>46</sup> The political aim of this aspect of the double strategy is a democracy to come, which cannot be yet envisaged and which, therefore, will not be yet recognised as a politically desirable aim. The reason for this is that the subaltern must be encountered without reducing her heterogeneity to any overarching master category.

Although this heterogeneity is encountered in archival material and is thus a constituent of the present *qua* archived other, it is almost immediately read as a fragment of the past. The relationship to this other is established and characterises the present of the historian, even though it is systemically silenced and can only be perceived as an interruption of time, as an anachronism. In Chakrabarty's view, this represents the relationship between the modern and the nonmodern, between that, which has been colonised, and that, which can never be completely colonised. It is the contemporaneity of the same and the other that precedes the historicist gesture and is only subsequently posited and assumed as the gap between the "there-and-then" and the "here-and-now".<sup>47</sup> What the historian assumes as dead past and pretends to bring "alive" through his work is, therefore, only a secondary phenomenon. It is this disjuncture that is intimated by this latter aspect of the double strategy.

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<sup>45</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 100.

<sup>46</sup> "Fears that such questioning will lead to an outbreak of irrationalism, that some kind of postmodern madness will spread through Historyland, seem extreme, for the discipline is still securely tied to the positivist impulses of modern bureaucracies, the judiciary, and to the instruments of governmentality." Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 107.

<sup>47</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 113.



### 13.5 Bringing alive the demoniacs, exorcising the present

If historicism indeed struggles with the religious, then few have been more systemically silenced than the many anonymous demoniacs populating the world of the (synoptic) gospels. How can we understand exorcism in such a paradigm? How do exorcisms fit in a historicist explanation of Jesus' public career?<sup>48</sup> Paul Hollenbach suggests a fresh approach via "a kind of social science of demoniacs".<sup>49</sup> Demoniacs, according to Hollenbach, are, in the first place, best understood within a general social formation that can be found in all cultures with relative variations.<sup>50</sup> They are people with a "radically divided self" who display "a strange and bizarre behavior [sic] which was often destructive either to [themselves] or others".<sup>51</sup> Social-psychological theories allow Hollenbach to understand the phenomenon as socially caused or exacerbated mental illness.<sup>52</sup>

In what is the most interesting aspect of his essay, Hollenbach engages in a dialogue with postcolonial critic Frantz Fanon,<sup>53</sup> giving his study a decidedly tricontinental twist. Fanon's study of mental illness, developed during the Algerian revolutionary war, allow Hollenbach to see the demoniacs as part of a group comparable to the colonised *Lumpenproletariat*. Unable to fit into the Manicheanism created by the colonial context — according to which one either conforms to the coloniser or one opposes him in revolutionary acts — the former apparently escape from this unbearable situation by containing their aggressiveness through drawing on native mythologies regarding the existence of demons. This mental pathology, as Fanon observed, was a direct product of

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<sup>48</sup> A historicist reading of Jesus is, of course, the quintessential traditional topic of modern New Testament studies. This is the reason why it would make such a fruitful metacritical focus for a genealogy of the discipline. Cf. Dieter Georgi, "The interest in life of Jesus theology as a paradigm for the social history of biblical criticism", *Harvard theological review* 85:1 (1992) 51-83. See Roger A. Arendse, "Shifting boundaries in historical Jesus research?: some critical reflections on paradigms and images of Jesus in current North American scholarship", *Scriptura* 63 (1997) 435-449 and Clive Marsh, "Quests of the historical Jesus in new historicist perspective", *Biblical interpretation* 5:4 (1997) 403-437 for more recent developments. Susan Lochrie Graham and Stephen D. Moore, "The quest of the new historicist Jesus", *Biblical interpretation* 5:4 (1997) 438-464 offer a New Historicist critique, while Kwok Pui-lan, "On color-coding Jesus: an interview with Kwok Pui-lan", *The postcolonial bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The bible and postcolonialism* 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 176-188 problematizes this project from a postcolonial perspective.

<sup>49</sup> Paul W. Hollenbach, "Jesus, demoniacs, and public authorities: a socio-historical study", *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49:4 (December 1981) 567-588; 568.

<sup>50</sup> Hollenbach, "Jesus, demoniacs, and public authorities", 570.

<sup>51</sup> Hollenbach, "Jesus, demoniacs, and public authorities", 570.

<sup>52</sup> Hollenbach, "Jesus, demoniacs, and public authorities", 572f.

<sup>53</sup> Postcolonial, that is, *avant la lettre*. See Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth*, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, tr. Constance Farrington (London [a.o.]: Penguin Books, 1967 [1965]).

the inhumanity of colonial oppression, which nourished this social illness to an extraordinary degree. Hollenbach can further this comparison by contextualising the gospels' demoniacs within the colonialist oppression in Roman-dominated Palestine, which erupted in the Roman-Jewish war of 66-70 CE.<sup>54</sup> Judaic demonology, on which the demoniacs described in the gospels drew, was anyhow only introduced around the third century BCE, at the time when the cultural disruptions of the Hellenistic period began to erode early traditional Jewish codes.<sup>55</sup>

But the really innovative nature of the dialogue between Hollenbach and Fanon becomes evident when demonic possession is begun to be interpreted as a form of oblique protest. While demoniacs are ostracised by the socially stronger members of society, they seek, through a redressive strategy, a way of uttering their resistance in the ambiguous and apparently unthreatening mode of "salvation by possession".<sup>56</sup> This phenomenon was ambiguous, for demoniacs handed over their agency to the demonic powers. It was a "strategy", however, that does not fit well into that category, for it lacks the necessary elements of agency, identity, subjectivity — it even presupposes the lack of it. In this position demoniacs were degraded by becoming sole objects of a marginalising classification. As such, they contributed to the stability of the colonised society by acting as marginalised scapegoats. But, on the other hand, they refused to take active part in the structures of oppression by rendering themselves useless.<sup>57</sup> Jesus, as exorcist, disrupts this resistant but socially accepted status by reintegrating the demoniacs into a reconstructed society and thus allowing the resistant energies to be released in the subversion of colonialism and the transformation of society. It was not that exorcism as such was subversive — this had its regulated place in society — but that Jesus broke the established rules by interpreting and practising exorcisms in a different way.

Hollenbach's study can thus be seen not only as a lucid socio-historical study, but also as a decidedly postcolonial one. In seeking the dialogue with a tricontinental thinker like Fanon, he sensitises the socio-historical categories in such a way that one begins to see the political agency of the subaltern who

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<sup>54</sup> Hollenbach, "Jesus, demoniacs, and public authorities", 575.

<sup>55</sup> Hollenbach, "Jesus, demoniacs, and public authorities", 580.

<sup>56</sup> Hollenbach, "Jesus, demoniacs, and public authorities", 576.

<sup>57</sup> Hollenbach, though, emphasizes this ambiguity the other way round: "[D]emon possession served not only as a means for the oppressed to express their degradation, but also (...) as a means for the nervous dominant classes to subdue those who protest against their oppressors." Hollenbach, "Jesus, demoniacs, and public authorities", 580.



exercises her resistant acts of survival within the cracks of the ostensibly totalising discourse of colonialism. The subaltern's alleged silence is redeemed as an oblique resistant discourse of survival with an inherent politically subversive potential. As such, Hollenbach's article can be seen, deliberately or unwittingly, as foreshadowing the recent emergence of postcolonial studies within the field of biblical studies. R. S. Sugirtharajah, currently the most prominent voice representing this approach,<sup>58</sup> has provided the guild with a "brief memorandum on postcolonial and biblical studies"<sup>59</sup>, in which he outlines a threefold task for a postcolonial biblical criticism: firstly, to contextualise the biblical text as emanating from a colonial encounter; secondly, informed by the experience of and theories on (neo)colonialism/postcolonialism, to reconstruct from the biblical text the subaltern voices; and thirdly, to disclose the implications of (past) biblical interpretations with colonial and neocolonial struggles.<sup>60</sup>

Sugirtharajah echoes the concern of a postcolonial tricontinental cultural critique to reconsider colonial history, especially in recuperating the subaltern perspectives and voices that were silenced or otherwise suffered the effects of colonialism. This project is emerging as a timely one, since this colonial history has shaped contemporary configurations and power structures in a crucial way. "This is why postcolonial theory always intermingles the past with the present, why it is directed towards the active transformation of the present from the clutches of the past (...)"<sup>61</sup>. Postcolonial historicism, then, represents a serious challenge to the strict separation of a historical approach from a secondary step that assesses the relevance of such a reading for contemporary concerns.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Sugirtharajah edited the highly influential *Interpreting the bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991) before this approach was labelled postcolonial in biblical studies. Recently he has published three monographs, which could be considered the most important postcolonial contribution to biblical studies thus far: *Asian biblical hermeneutics and postcolonialism: contesting the interpretations*, The bible & liberation series (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998) = The biblical seminar 64 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); *The bible and the Third World: precolonial, colonial and postcolonial encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and *Postcolonial criticism and biblical interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). In addition to his own monographs, Sugirtharajah has edited several important collections of essays — *The postcolonial bible*; *Vernacular hermeneutics*, The bible and postcolonialism 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); *Postcolonial perspectives on the New Testament and its interpretation*, Journal for the study of the New Testament 73 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). He also acts as editor of The bible and postcolonialism series from Sheffield Academic Press.

<sup>59</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, "A brief memorandum on postcolonialism and biblical studies", *Journal for the study of the New Testament* 73 (March 1999) 3-5.

<sup>60</sup> Sugirtharajah, "A brief memorandum on postcolonialism and biblical studies", 4f.

<sup>61</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism*, 4.

<sup>62</sup> See, e.g., Klaus Berger, *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus Gerd Mohn, 1988) for such a plea to separate *exegesis* from application. I single out Berger's *Hermeneutik*, not because it is a particularly bad case, but, on the contrary, because of his insistence on the priority of the application, despite its strict separation.

Historical readings are recovered as a resource in the tradition of a tricontinental anti-colonial political tradition. From this perspective, Hollenbach's study must be considered as an improvement upon a traditional historicist interpretation, by becoming more inclusive of a subaltern voice. It is thus an example of "good history", but is it responsible to the otherness of the phenomenon?

While using the concept of social pathology as a generalised middle term that makes first century Palestine comparable with colonial Algeria, there is enough uncanniness in Hollenbach's study to — perhaps unintentionally — at least put into question the totalising capability of a historicist approach. The politicised concept of social pathology does not fully succeed in translating the demonic possession into the historicist narrative. A liminal experience like demonic possession and its exorcism is reinterpreted in a way that opens it up for a contemporary reading, which recovers the text as a resource for the anticolonial struggle. But the altering aspect of this opening affects both the religious and the political. Hollenbach correlates the religious with the political and contributes to placing both in some sort of meaningful relationship. Religion ceases to be a politically conservative discourse, while politics acquires a religious dimension. Both are put into play, but which one retains the upper hand? In a historicist framework religion has to be submitted to an anthropologising interpretation. In this case, though, the exorcised demons could represent enough of an epistemological threat to cause the sensitised mind of the historicist critic to tremble. Will the political open up to the subaltern's spirit world? Studies like that of Hollenbach will only begin to open up and respond to the other if they not only succeed in politicising religion and theologising politics, but if they manage to encounter the mystical foundation of both. Such a historicist deconstruction would begin to sense the spectres that haunt history and contribute to political and religious practices that cannot be anticipated yet. To return to Dobbs-Allsopp's concern, biblical historicism will do well in taking serious its ethical motivation to "embrace the other". However, it will only do so if it opens up to the infinite and irreducible alterity of its historicised object. Only then will a space open up, which will allow for a responsibility that relinquishes any claim of totalising epistemological mastery. Biblical historicism will only be true to its ethical principle if it is prepared to accept its discursive limits and be altered by the heterogeneous character of the traces of the past.



## 14 UNBINDING THE BOOK: INTERVENTIONS IN POPULAR CULTURE

Postcolonial theory and, particularly, cultural studies present biblical studies with the challenge of seriously dealing with ordinary and popular practices of reading the bible. As I have shown in the chapter on Gerald West, this area is a very neglected but also a very fruitful one. I might say that this may be the most innovative and politically meaningful development within the discipline. This development also has the potential to transform the discipline into a timely academic discourse for the twenty-first century. In this chapter I would like to delineate some of the genealogical impediments, social models, case studies, and challenges of this line of research for biblical studies.

### 14.1 Ordinary readings of the bible in the academy

Does biblical studies, as we know it, have any relevance outside the academy? Does this matter to the masses in whose lives the bible features in one way or another? Hardly. The reason for this is that biblical studies, conceived in its classical form as a historicist discipline, is shaped by what Tony Bennett labels the “metaphysic of origin”.<sup>1</sup> According to this ideology, it is the conditions of the production of a text at the moment of its origin that have specified for all time the “true” meaning, which can be reconstructed only *via* scientific historicist criteria and methods. The alleged relevance for contemporary life consists, consequently, of rescuing the text from its (history of) misreadings. At best, such misreadings find an appreciation as an instance of creative application. From the point of view of the vast majority of bible readers/hearers, however, this is scarcely of any interest. So different are the reading protocols of biblical scholars and non-academic bible readers/hearers that the two groups seem to reside in worlds apart. Their two worlds seem only to overlap in the rare cases of those

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Bennett, “Texts in history: the determinations of readings and their texts”, *Post-structuralism and the question of history*, eds. Derek Attridge, Geoffrey Bennington & Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 63-81; 69f.

non-academic reader/hearers who are susceptible to historicist rationality in their readings of the bible and, of course, in the person of the biblical scholar himself.

The stereotypical biography of a biblical scholar invariably contains a past, which was characterised by a faith-based approach to the bible. The academic formation usually involved a resocialisation away from the faith community into the disciplinary protocols of the liberal university: "The courses actually available, and the training of those actually available to teach them, are on the whole calculated to turn a fundamentalist into a liberal."<sup>2</sup> As I have already suggested in my discussion of Daniel Patte, this leads to an estrangement of the scholar from his past and results in an ambiguous relationship to "ordinary" readings, an ambiguity that the scholar experiences not only in relation to others, but also within him/herself. Patte portrays the transition from the ordinary to the critical as a bringing to full self-consciousness of the interpretive choices, a move, which he seeks to bring to perfection by seeking to include *all* interpretive choices. But how can a biblical scholar resocialised in the traditional academic way relate to the ordinary readings of the masses? And how can he, as a biblical scholar, become relevant to the masses?

Traditionally, ordinary readings have featured in biblical studies either as the subconscious presupposition of its scientific readings or as instances of popular misreadings of the bible. As such, these readings have not been the object of disciplinary attention. They have been more a focus of the sub-disciplines of practical theology, such as homiletics, pastoral care, and missiology. It was not until the emergence of liberation theology, that academics specialised in biblical studies turned their attention to ordinary readings. Particularly after its recognition of popular religion as a *sine qua non* of an effective empowerment of "the people", liberation theology overcame in part its dualistic relationship to this sphere.<sup>3</sup> But why has there been so little reception of this work in First World biblical studies?

Francis Watson has pointed to four reasons for this non-event: the "unscientific" assessment of western readings by traditional biblical scholars, the lack of familiarity of scholars with socio-political relevant ordinary readings, the privatisation of religion, and the public character of biblical studies.<sup>4</sup> All of these

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<sup>2</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The study of religion and the study of the bible", *Rethinking scripture: essays from a comparative perspective*, ed. Miriam Levering (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) 18-28, 19.

<sup>3</sup> See Segundo, "The shift within Latin American theology".

<sup>4</sup> Francis Watson, "Liberating the reader: exegetical study of the Parable of the Sheep and the



reasons make sense in the light of the genealogy and context of traditional biblical studies. In the first instance, it is the difference in target audience, which makes both discourses hard to commensurate. Biblical studies has the secularised educated bourgeois citizen as interlocutor, while liberation theology aims to reach, not without ambiguity, the uneducated masses in the Latin American context. The discourses of these groups are, of course, quite different. The former demands from scholarship attention to the protocols of serious scholarship — historicism, logical argumentation, documentation of secondary sources, etc. The latter is primarily interested in readings, which are politically relevant to the tricontinental context — those that facilitate survival and political change in oppressive contexts.

The other three reasons can be explained by a general development that succeeded in separating religion from public politics and relegated it to the private lives of European citizens. The pietistic-apologetic modes of popular readings of the bible in which scholars have usually been socialised have only aggravated this situation, which, in the end, has made socio-politically motivated readings of the bible almost inapplicable to private “devotional” reading scenarios. Consequently, biblical studies, conceived as a public discourse, had to separate, in its analysis, religion from its political dimensions and cleanse any socio-political relevant declaration from its religious motivation.

Two factors may, however, force biblical studies to take the sphere of popular culture, including religion, more seriously. The first factor that makes such an expansion necessary is of an economic nature. The funding crisis in which many theology and religious studies departments find themselves makes it imperative to generate “products” that are “marketable”. My choice of metaphors indicates that this development is related to the kind of contextual changes discussed above. The expansion of the field to include the popular role of the bible is, thus, an ambiguous one. Within the market-orientated university, the survival of the discipline will increasingly depend on how influential biblical studies will be in the “real” world, outside the academia. The dangers of this development, of course, are related to the commercialisation of the academic production of knowledge, in general.

The second factor is the realisation, by scholars who are inclined to be politically relevant, that the academic discourse of biblical studies is increasingly

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Goats (Matt. 25.31-46)”, *The open text: new directions for biblical studies?*, ed. Francis Watson (London: SCM Press, 1993) 57-84, here 58-60.

rendered politically insignificant, if it does not consider popular practices of reading the bible. Mary McClintock Fulkerson<sup>5</sup> — interestingly enough, *not* a biblical scholar, but a (systematic) theologian — is one of the few theologians who have recognised this lack of the study of ordinary readings of the bible, and the need to develop adequate models and discourses for their understanding. Tony Bennett puts the problematic in more general terms:

“[W]e scarcely have an adequate knowledge of the workings of ... hermeneutic activators of popular texts, and we know even less about the cultural resources that may be mobilized against such ‘triggers’ of *reading*. It is not an exaggeration to say that, in the absence of an adequate knowledge and theorization of these matters, any attempt to make a political intervention within the sphere of popular readings runs the risk of being radically inappropriate.”<sup>6</sup>

What Bennett writes about popular texts in general, is particularly true of arguably the most “popular” text of all, the bible.

How do popular texts work? How can we imagine their workings in everyday life? How do we alter our social epistemologies in order to open up the academic discourse to the heterogeneous character of the other?

## 14.2 Social models altered by the colonial experience

In his highly influential book *Discipline and punish*, Michel Foucault narrated the genealogy of modern (French) society as the development of disciplinary procedures, which had come to prominence in monastic, pedagogical, and military institutions and went on to colonise the whole of society as a pervasive apparatus. Taking the birth of the modern prison system as a model, Foucault showed how modern society became totally defined by anonymous, mechanistic disciplinary apparatus, which organised society through a panoply of discourses whose function it was to transform that society into a docile body. Of particular

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<sup>5</sup> See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Contesting feminist canons: discourse and the problem of sexist texts”, *Journal of feminist studies in religion* 7:2 (Fall 1991) 53-73; *Changing the subject*; and “Is there a non-sexist bible in this church?: a feminist case for interpretive communities”, *Modern theology* 14:2 (April 1998) 225-242.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Bennett, “Texts, readers, reading formations”, *Modern literary theory: a reader*, eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Edward Arnold, 1989) 220.



interest is the relationship these disciplinary apparatus established with the roughly contemporary emergence of the human sciences. According to Foucault, the nexus between power and knowledge was not merely a coincidental one, but, as in the case of the practice of imprisonment and such disciplines as criminology and social psychology, one of causality. He juxtaposes the way in which the insertion of “law-breakers” into the disciplinary network transformed them into “delinquents”, allegedly unable to lead a responsible life outside the institution, with the way criminal psychology traced delinquency back to some genetic predisposition. The human sciences, thus, unwittingly conspired with the new regime of power by providing an epistemological *dispositif* whereby society could be constructed as an object of knowledge in a way that perpetuated and reinforced the *status quo*. These disciplines, therefore, were part of a disciplinary machinery that constituted objects in a particular way.

Foucault’s genealogy introduced a fresh analysis of social dynamics and opened up a whole new perspective on discourses that, due to their anonymous and opaque character, had remained unperceived. His analysis, however, remains as bleak as it is lucid. In his analysis, the effects of the disciplinary discourses upon society are of such a magnitude that the entire social order appears to be colonised to the degree of a totalising homogeneity. The social space, organised into spaces that have been divided into neat grids and timetables and surveilled by insidious panoptic discourses, does not seem to leave any space for social alterity, which is not already homogenised by the disciplinary apparatus. It is this shortcoming that is precisely the point of departure for Michel de Certeau’s thought.

In contrast to Foucault, de Certeau’s analysis of everyday life is set into motion by an alertness to forms of alterity that break into and fissure the otherwise homogenised social body, and thereby alter social forms of identity. While not claiming to provide a framework of political action, de Certeau departs from an analysis of resistant practices which are read as the product of “techniques” that are meant to mask these by appearing to be incompetent or incoherent. Unlike the “strategies” of the subjects “with will and power”<sup>7</sup>, which de Certeau understands as “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships”, the subalterns use “tactics”. The defining difference consists in the relationship these two moves have towards social space. For while a “strategy” “postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from

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<sup>7</sup> De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, 59. These subjects could include “a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution”.

which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats can be managed”<sup>8</sup>, a “tactic” is “determined by the absence of a proper locus”<sup>9</sup>:

“A tactic has no place but that of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. ... It is a manoeuvre ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’, as von Bülow put it, and within enemy territory.”<sup>10</sup>

Within Foucault’s homogenised social space de Certeau manages to open up the temporary cracks, where heterogeneous resistant movements can take place. He does this by temporalising space, i.e. by drawing the attention to those disjointed moments where ambiguity facilitates the opening up of heterogeneous spaces that cannot feature within the mapped and timetabled space of the disciplinary apparatus. This space, which is not a place, and this time, which has no place on a timetable, are of fundamental importance for a social theory which is beginning to develop a certain sensitivity towards the other and her heterogeneous moves.

It seems easy, at this point, to draw a relationship to those theories that have been explicitly developed within a tricontinental context and that feature prominently in Gerald West’s work. While the line of encounter between coloniser and colonised seems, in principle, easier to be demarcated than the one between the masses and the elite, the work of the Comaroffs and Scott shows the more intricate, contested and dialectical encounter between the two diametrically opposed parties. The Comaroffs and Scott also point towards the need to, therefore, push the margins of representation and expand the field of resistance to include the tacit, silent, and hidden moves of the subaltern and the liminal space of the colonial encounter, which remains the object of partial recognition and inchoative awareness. The colonised can therefore be seen as the paradigmatically other of a contemporary social theory, which is challenged to open up, in a responsible way, to otherness.

That first world and tricontinental social theories overlap at this particular point is hardly a surprise. Anthropology and ethnology are two academic disciplines that remain genealogically related to the colonial encounter. As such, many of the findings and models developed in the former colonies found their way into the sociological analysis of First World societies. By turning the critical

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<sup>8</sup> De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, 60.

<sup>10</sup> De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, 60f.



ethnography and anthropology that had been developed for the analysis of non-western cultures onto the culture of the west itself, social theories have begun to understand the complexities of popular resistance in western societies too. This has, furthermore, helped to collapse the elitist distinction between higher and lower kinds of culture.<sup>11</sup> It is intriguing how West's critique of the two counter-productive attitudes to popular religion ("speaking for" and "listening to") mirror the problems of a more general attitude towards the "popular" in recent academic interactions.<sup>12</sup>

But how can the bible be imagined as popular text within such a modified conceptual net?

### 14.3 The bible as ordinary popular text

Why does the bible seem to be a text with such a universal and lasting trans-historical importance? What is it that allowed it to pass the test of time and geographical displacement? Kathryn Tanner argues that it is neither an alleged eternal, timeless value of its contents, nor its ability to establish relations of pertinence with audiences from ever changing times and places that gives a satisfying answer to this question.<sup>13</sup> It is rather because the bible functions as a popular text and not as a high-culture classic that it manages to transcend spatiotemporal borders. Departing from John Fiske's distinction between writerly and producerly texts,<sup>14</sup> Tanner points out several characteristics that are associated with the bible and are in consonance with her picture of "a God of

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<sup>11</sup> John Fiske, "Popular culture", *Critical terms for literary studies*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, second edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995 [1990]) 321-335, 325.

<sup>12</sup> Fiske, "Popular culture", 324f., distinguishes three different sentiments towards popular culture in European thinking. The emergence of a new urban culture in the wake of industrialisation was met by the social elite with *anxious elitism*. Here, "the people" were seen as a cultureless gullible mass prone to anarchy and social disorder, the materialist and uncultured middle class, increasing in wealth and political influence — Arnold's "Philistines" — were involved in a culture war with the "properly cultured". From another point of view "the people" were seen with *patronising nostalgia* as they left behind a pastoral folk culture and were not able to produce a new urban culture of their own, succumbing thus to the machineries of the complex industrial society. A further position maintained a kind of *critical pessimism*. This stance, being a mixture between anxious elitism and patronising nostalgia and represented mainly by the Frankfurt School, saw a bleak future in which the industrialisation of culture would destroy both popular and high culture, the two sources of criticism towards the inhumanity of capitalist society.

<sup>13</sup> Kathryn Tanner, "Scripture as popular text", *Modern theology* 14:2 (April 1998) 279-298.

<sup>14</sup> John Fiske, *Understanding popular culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) 103-127, who again departs from Roland Barthes's distinction between writerly and readerly texts.

democratic power, patient persuasion, and far-reaching influence"<sup>15</sup>. Like producerly texts, the bible is not particularly demanding to its reader, it does not require any formal prerequisite, it appears as socially relevant, and it blurs the differences between the text world and the everyday life of the reader.

Tanner's description does not rely on any ontological and formalistic presupposition of the text, any statement about the character of the text itself. She can make this kind of assertion because she postulates a "plain sense" of the bible, which is a function of its communal use:

"it is the obvious or direct sense of the text according to a *usus loquendi* established by the community in question. ... In sum, the plain sense is the 'familiar, the traditional and hence authoritative meaning' of a text within a community whose conventions for the reading of it have therefore already become relatively sedimented."<sup>16</sup>

In Tanner's and similar approaches,<sup>17</sup> the more conventional conceptions of texts, readers and reading contexts as separable elements is questioned. Instead, they are seen as being inseparable within a larger constellation, one which Tony Bennett labels "reading formation":

"[A] set of discursive and inter-textual determinations which organise and animate the practice of reading, connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another in constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-read in particular ways"<sup>18</sup>.

But, in the case of the bible, how can its reading formation be imagined?

Mary McClintock Fulkerson has offered thus far one of the theoretically most sophisticated case studies and analytical models in this field. Her work was particularly motivated by an aporia in feminist theology, which culminates in the question of whether the bible is or is not an oppressive text. At the heart of this aporia lies a formalist and essentialist understanding of textual meaning. The problem with this approach, according to McClintock Fulkerson, is that "Feminist habits of ascribing agency and power to the text continue to occlude the way in

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<sup>15</sup> Tanner, "Scripture as popular text", 293.

<sup>16</sup> Kathryn E., Tanner, "Theology and the plain sense", *Scriptural authority and narrative interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 59-78; here 62f.

<sup>17</sup> For example, that of McClintock Fulkerson.

<sup>18</sup> Tony Bennett, "Texts in history: the determinations of readings and their texts", *Post-structuralism and the question of history*, eds. Derek Attridge, Geoffrey Bennington & Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 63-81; 70.



which the harm and beneficence [sic] of scripture is only intelligible through the conventions of a community."<sup>19</sup> What she was seeking was an approach, which made sense out of the intricate relationship between the biblical text and women's use of it, while at the same time bringing to light the complex discursive formation in which different women are embedded in different ways of resistance that certain biblical practices could generate.

In Stanley Fish's theory about the primacy of the interpretive community<sup>20</sup> McClintock Fulkerson found an approach that could overcome the problems of feminist essentialism. This theory has the advantage of "portray[ing] the instability of the biblical text, on the one hand, and its stabilizing by ways of a community of reading that is constrained by its own setting and history, on the other"<sup>21</sup>. Other reader response theories usually posit a "universal reader", a unitary subject, or an essentialised text, while other community-shaped hermeneutics neglect the larger discursive context, as well as duplicating the problems attached to the other reader response criticisms by simply replacing the reader with the community and thus positing an essentialist subject-object relationship. Expanding upon Fish's theory allowed McClintock Fulkerson to conceive of the reading of the bible as a discursive practice within a larger totality of semiotic processes. Following this line of thought, text (here: the bible) and interpretive community (here: women readers), traditionally juxtaposed in a subject-object relation, are constructed in co-dependence by a larger formation and lose most of their stability presupposed by essentialism. On the one hand,

"[t]here will be no monolithic and homogenous Christian community subject to control by a whole system or properly ordered scripture. 'Communities' are fractured. They are part of a social formation (intersecting economic, political and cultural processes) laden with hidden histories and occluded voices — a social landscape riven with power asymmetries."<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, lacking any notion of biblical essence, the bible that is construed by one community, or even in one occasion, will be different from other bibles, given the formation in which the reading practice happens: "continuing to assume that it is 'the same Bible' that 'we' read and failing to explore the multiple

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<sup>19</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, "Is there a non-sexist text?", 226.

<sup>20</sup> I will discuss Stanley Fish's theory in chapter 15.1.

<sup>21</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the subject*, 122.

<sup>22</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the subject*, 143.

constructions of the 'we' are two errors that can no longer be afforded"<sup>23</sup>.

In order to conceive of the reading formations of women readers of the bible, McClintock Fulkerson needed four different elements: (1) "a way to map the patterns of determinate meaning for Christian faith in a particular community"; (2) "a way to determine practices that are subordinated and potentially resisting to that dominant pattern"; (3) "a way to identify both resistances and compliance with the dominant patterns"; and (4) "a way to articulate the ... relation of the patterns of faith with the orderings of the social formation, patriarchal capitalism in its hegemonic and localized displays of power".<sup>24</sup> These elements seemed to be best represented within a conceptual net, which McClintock Fulkerson then went on to develop.

This net consisted, in the first place, of the *canonical system*. It comprised all the explicit and implicit rules and codes that construct a particular text as bible and a specific community as bible practitioners, including all systems of meaning and power in which the community is embedded. Out of this canonical system, a particular community forges a *reading regime*. Reading regimes usually exist as an ideal regime, which follows faithfully the communal rules for reading and practice, and a departure from it, which represents a subordinate regime within the canonical system and a discourse of resistance, while still interacting with the canonical meanings. This is an important aspect of McClintock Fulkerson's conceptual web, since the canonical system is seen as both limiting the practical possibilities of a community and providing "clues to the strategies that displace the rules"<sup>25</sup>. Reading regimes are, therefore, permitted to appear in their ambiguity, an ambiguity that generates a reading practice containing both resistance and conformity to the canonical system.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, and in accordance with the sociological models discussed above, it is the "lines of splicing, of avoidance and constraint" that have a particular heuristical value in McClintock Fulkerson's approach. These fissures within the seemingly homogenous practices of a particular community "direct our attention to the sites of conflict"<sup>27</sup>.

Reading practices also produce a typological constellation of meaning

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<sup>23</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the subject*, 143.

<sup>24</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the subject*, 167.

<sup>25</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the subject*, 174.

<sup>26</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, "Is there a non-sexist text?", 234.

<sup>27</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the subject*, 174.



around which certain social expectations have collected — what McClintock Fulkerson labels *register*. They serve to indicate that “*what* is said and *how* it is said are inseparable in discourse analysis”<sup>28</sup>. A register is created and made distinctive by three variables: A variable that denotes the content and ideas of a typical utterance (the field variable), a variable that sets up a relation between speaker and audience and denotes the form of address (the tenor variable), and a variable that denotes the medium of the utterance (the mode variable).<sup>29</sup>

This conceptual net assists McClintock Fulkerson in interpreting and assessing practices by women readers without having to fall back on an essentialist understanding of the text, and assessing their practice in terms of conformity or disconformity to an essential meaning. Instead, women readers are located within a wider reading formation and read as being both created and responding to that formation in practices that do both conform and resist. In the case of a Presbyterian women’s bible reading group,<sup>30</sup> McClintock Fulkerson can ask: “how can this particular construction of a subject ‘woman’ (white middle class) be transformed by the practices of a Christian community committed to a vision of God’s creatures as *imago Dei*?”<sup>31</sup>

The Reformed canonical system, which shapes the Presbyterian women’s biblical practices, is one that evolved out of John Calvin’s Geneva community in the sixteenth century and has undergone several developments by Scottish and New World Presbyterianism. By the mid-twentieth century, this canonical system had as its explicit aim the faithful performance of scripture under the application of certain rules.<sup>32</sup> But the canonical system also consisted of more implicit aspects, which include gender, class, and race. Access to official registers of authority, for example, was denied to women, who were confined to the private domestic sphere and excluded from public discourse.<sup>33</sup> This was perpetuated by the professionalism of the typically middle and upper-middle class Presbyterian church and the educational institutions — universities and seminaries — that

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<sup>28</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the subject*, 178.

<sup>29</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, “Is there a non-sexist text?”, 236.

<sup>30</sup> McClintock Fulkerson presents this case study extensively in *Changing the subject*, 183-238. “Is there a non-sexist text?”, 233-239 is a convenient summary. *Changing the subject*, 239-298 is an equally insightful study on women from rural Pentecostal folk communities.

<sup>31</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, “Is there a non-sexist text?”, 233.

<sup>32</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, “Is there a non-sexist text?”, 234: These rules include: “a) interpret the unclear by the clear, b) the rule of love, c) the centrality of Christ as Word over words, and d) application of historical criticism”.

<sup>33</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, “Is there a non-sexist text?”, 235: The cultural class discourse generated complementary genders. “(white) women were nurturing, emotional, and ‘private’ in ideal relation to rational, distanced, and ‘public’ (white) men”.

produced male leaders within a gender-exclusive system of authority. The wider social formation of racialised patriarchal capitalism, moreover, created a form of oppression that differentiates Presbyterian women — mostly middle-class housewives, from other constructions of women and positions them in

“an odd combination of vulnerability and privilege. On the one hand, they are unskilled and have been increasingly de-skilled by the takeover of domestic functions initiated with industrial capitalism. Often married to professionals, on the other, they are less likely to worry about survival issues and do not understand themselves to have race (whiteness). It is, in short, economic dependence that includes privilege.”<sup>34</sup>

In traditional feminist terms, Presbyterian women bible reading groups cannot be seen as generating a reading regime that successfully resists the oppressive nature of their canonical system. But, by interpreting their biblical practice as a register, McClintock Fulkerson can convincingly interpret it as a discourse that both conforms to the expectations of the canonical system and transgresses of the same. Focusing on the discursive mode of the periodical literature Presbyterian women use in face-to-face contexts within community care and project management, and considering the interpersonal, informal tenor, shows how the field characterised by traditional Presbyterian themes is organised around issues of domesticity, self-improvement and world mission to the needy.<sup>35</sup> According to McClintock Fulkerson, Presbyterian women ultimately stretch and even break the gendered discourse of privatisation and consumerism, which shaped women particularly during the 1940s and 1950s. The Christian calling for women is widened by the biblical practice of PW to transcend the domestic sphere and include the church community and even the whole world, and to respond to the damage done by war, poverty, racism, alcoholism, and communism.<sup>36</sup>

“They take their ‘place’, domesticity, but stretch it beyond the bounds that make it safe for a capitalist and patriarchal world. They create a register of authoritative competence for women and thereby refuse the limits of the gendered reading regime of the first half of 20th century American Presbyterianism. It is in this sense that a resisting or

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<sup>34</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, “Is there a non-sexist text?”, 236.

<sup>35</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, “Is there a non-sexist text?”, 237.

<sup>36</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, “Is there a non-sexist text?”, 237f.



contesting register is emergent.”<sup>37</sup>

McClintock Fulkerson, I would argue, succeeds in conceptualising the reading formation of specific biblical practices and showing the ambiguity of conformity and resistance such practices represent. By considering the wider formation, she manages to access aspects of biblical practices that had been hidden for an academic discourse that is wedded to textual essentialism. Her translation and expansion of Fish’s theory opens up a rich understanding of the workings of ordinary readings of the bible. Like West’s reading of the appropriation of the bible by African ordinary readers as re-membering, she can further this understanding by showing with more precision where these popular practices create moments of subversive resistance.

But how does such an understanding make a difference? How does it contribute, beyond a “better” understanding, to the resistance of oppression? How is it ethical, in the sense of being responsible to the other, and what kind of political potentials does it have? In order to answer these kinds of questions, I would like to put forward a key metaphor for understanding the politics of ordinary (and less ordinary) biblical practices.

#### **14.4 Property/propriety: the political economy of biblical practices**

Ownership of the bible, property over this powerful religious symbol, lies at the heart of the discussions and disputes about how to properly interpret this text. Conflicting and contesting ideologies, which determine what kind of book the bible is and what kind of practices it generates and should generate, are only disputes over who should own the bible.

“It is a function of ideology to identify ‘proper’ owners of the text and to serve as a protective fence around the textual property, in order to prevent its theft by others. Ideology makes this fence seem quite natural and normal — that the text *is supposed to* mean just what its owners say that it does.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> McClintock Fulkerson, “Is there a non-sexist text?”, 239.

<sup>38</sup> George Aichele, *Jesus framed*, Biblical limits (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 155.

Ideology, then, seeks to regulate the terms under which these property disputes are to be fought out, by relating propriety to property. This is a profoundly political move, since “[a]n investment in the ownership of central symbols is also an investment in the economic, political and other social interests that may revolve around those symbols.”<sup>39</sup>

Who, then, owns the bible? Everyone who owns a copy?<sup>40</sup> This liberal stance overlooks the asymmetric power relations with which symbolic property disputes are weighted. In an ideal world, this might be the case. But the world of quotidian experience is one where contesting communities are stealing back and forth this powerful symbol. And this stealing back and forth is performed within a social formation, which privileges some, underprivileges others, and totally overlooks yet others altogether. Imagining interpretative activities as property disputes in this scenario will allow me to point out several aspects of the political economy of ordinary readings.<sup>41</sup>

Firstly, every hegemonically maintained appeal to a “proper” interpretation of the bible hides the metaphysical violence of the canonical system, which occludes the interests of the privileged in stabilising the property rights and thus prevents the bible from being successfully read in a subversive way, thereby supporting the *status quo*. No discourse protects a symbolic property better than an ideology, which asserts that there is only one way of interpreting that property and that this interpretation is represented in the readings of its current owners who have a privileged access to the ideologically determined terms of negotiation, be these scholarly expertise, divine inspiration, or ecclesiastical tradition.

Secondly, any claim to ownership of the bible necessarily implies the existence, or at least the possibility, of a counter-reading. Wherever there is an owner there will be thieves. And in view of the dubious (mis)use of the bible in the history of its interpretation, such counter-readings or theft will be an ethical imperative.

Thirdly, such counter-readings will always have to be readings “against the grain”. Not a “grain” which is a characteristic of the essential meaning of the text, but a product of the reading formation, which privileges in some way its

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<sup>39</sup> David Chidester, “Stealing the sacred symbols: Biblical interpretation in the Peoples Temple and the Unification Church”, *Religion* 18 (April 1988) 137-162; 139.

<sup>40</sup> This seems to be David Clines’s opinion in David J. A. Clines, *The bible and the modern world* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) especially 55ff.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Aichele, *Jesus framed*, 156ff.



current owners. Yet counter-readings have to remain recognisable within the established codes and rules, if only as an abuse, a misreading, or an ambiguity.

This implies, fourthly, that the subaltern, the subjugated and systemically marginalised other, cannot own the bible. This seems to be *prima facie* a strong and fatalistic statement. But ownership is only possible within certain rules and the other is the one who, by definition, stands outside the system. Symbolic appropriations by the subaltern are only possible in tactical manoeuvres which remain unperceived: "They are manoeuvres accomplished in the dark, on alien territory, which do not seek to conquer the enemy or to take his land, but rather to seize opportunities to cross his borders on poaching missions."<sup>42</sup> These tactics depend on the cracks within the hegemonic ideologies, and the blind spots created by particular conjunctions of surveillance by the proprietary powers. But the interstitial spaces in which this can happen are not places in which the thus poached symbol can be consolidated as property.<sup>43</sup>

What are the options for the biblical scholar in this scenario? David Chidester has formulated three different modes of engagement in the complex symbolic processes of ownership negotiations over (sacred) symbols.<sup>44</sup> The first would be the strategic *appropriation* of symbols. This claim effectively declares to proprietary contenders: "You don't own them, we do."<sup>45</sup> Traditionally, this has been the characteristic discourse of the academy, which has often provided a resource of contending claims to ownership, often a counter-claim to the popular and ecclesiastical readers.<sup>46</sup> A second mode of engagement is the *alienation* of symbols, which effectively declares: "You own them, we don't."<sup>47</sup> Whether due to a strategic rejection ("we don't want them") or effective exclusion ("we can't have them"), this mode is merely the counter-side of the first. Both constitute the

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<sup>42</sup> Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "Michel de Certeau (1925-1986): introduction", *The postmodern god: a theological reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 137. Bauerschmidt summarises here de Certeau's theory developed in *The practice of everyday life*.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, 37: "What it wins it cannot keep".

<sup>44</sup> David Chidester, "Stealing the sacred symbols". He examines and juxtaposes in his article two peripheral US American movements — the Unification Church and the Peoples Temple — and their subversive claims to ownership of the bible.

<sup>45</sup> Chidester, "Stealing the sacred symbols", 158.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. L. C. Jonker's description in "Bridging the gap between bible readers and 'professional' exegetes", *Old Testament essays 10:1* (1997) 69-83; 69, which echoes a widely spread sentiment: "The widespread perception among many lay Bible readers (if not the majority) is that Biblical scholarship has taken the Bible away from them by employing numerous critical tools in the interpretation process." (My emphasis.) Jonker, however, wants to renegotiate the relationship between professional and lay bible readers on the ground of competence. This would, of course, secure the bid for ownership from biblical scholars.

<sup>47</sup> Chidester, "Stealing the sacred symbols", 158.

dialectic inherent in the processes of negotiations over ownership, and show in their dialectical ambiguity the instability of ownership: “no amount of payment can insure ownership against competing acts of appropriation in the cultural process of stealing back and forth sacred symbols”<sup>48</sup>.

Here Chidester adds a third mode of engagement, which he labels the *availability* of symbols. This mode — an ideal type, according to Chidester, for the academy — effectively declares: “You don’t own them, no one does.”<sup>49</sup> Succumbing neither to a theological universalism (“everyone owns them”) nor to the back and forth of appropriation and alienation, academic studies should not lay any claims of ownership on the sacred symbols it objectifies. Rather it is “the morphological patterns and historical processes that make these acts of appropriation possible”<sup>50</sup> that are explored in academia. According to Chidester, this activity does not constitute a contestation of ownership because, while symbols could be owned, the underlying morphology of symbolic forms cannot be owned.<sup>51</sup>

But one could object to this third mode of engagement: Does this practice not contest *every* claim to ownership and therefore constitute, at least, an act of expropriation, i.e. questioning an appropriation by any group, without claiming property for itself? And is not the recourse to a “deeper” truth, namely that interpretative disputes merely masquerade as renegotiations of power-relationships, not claiming the symbol by virtue of expertise? Could this not be the subtlest of claims to ownership, one that occludes its bid by remaining on a metalevel? It seems to me that, while this might be an ideal to be aspired to, academic practice cannot escape the messy business of property. But where does this leave the biblical scholar?

George Aichele suggests a more radical proposition. Departing from a similar scenario as Chidester, his proposal is more pertinent for the problematic of this thesis, since he addresses the ethical question in view of his hegemonic identity. His social assessment makes him see the necessity for a practice of counter-reading. This is Aichele’s conceptualisation:

“The counter-reading will always be that of those who are oppressed and marginalized, and the dominant reading, the reading of the

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<sup>48</sup> Chidester, “Stealing the sacred symbols”, 158.

<sup>49</sup> Chidester, “Stealing the sacred symbols”, 158.

<sup>50</sup> Chidester, “Stealing the sacred symbols”, 158.

<sup>51</sup> Chidester, “Stealing the sacred symbols”, 159.



owners, will inevitably be oppressive. The truly liberative reading will always be provisional, always shifting, on the run, and utopian: 'the wretched of the earth' will *never* own a text."<sup>52</sup>

His situation as a white male scholar, however, places him inevitably on the side of the oppressor, which leaves him with a conundrum: "I can't steal something that I already own. Any counter-reading that I might attempt would be rightfully suspect. I try to read in sympathy with 'the other,' whoever she may be, but I cannot read as the other."<sup>53</sup> He goes on to write:

"I want to turn the power of texts ... *against* my own ideology. This can only lead ... to a rewriting which destroys the owners' readings. Insofar as I read from the outside, it must be an impossible, utopian outside, not the very real outside of the oppressed counter-reader. ... I can neither steal the text nor do I wish do redeem it. What then shall I do? My desire is nothing less than self-destructive, and my reading will end only in my own obliteration."<sup>54</sup>

Aichele makes here an important point. His consuming desire to produce counter-readings is closely related to and made impossible by his hegemonic identity. Is, therefore, the only way out of this situation his own symbolic annihilation? This is the powerful dark counter to a discourse of identity that would retain its hegemonic status at all cost. There is, however, another possibility, a possibility, which implies a structural impossibility and concerns the role of the other.

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<sup>52</sup> Aichele, *Jesus framed*, 164.

<sup>53</sup> Aichele, *Jesus framed*, 164.

<sup>54</sup> Aichele, *Jesus framed*, 165.

## 14.5 Unordinary transactions: the other at the border

Gerald West's work at the interface between the socially engaged biblical scholar and the ordinary readers from poor and marginalised communities illustrates the intricate relations and transactions that characterise a space that opens up between the two groups. This space is a liminal space, "a zone of constant contestation"<sup>55</sup>. The practice of the socially engaged biblical scholar, who, following an invitation by the ordinary reading group, offers his resources to the group, consists mainly of facilitating the appropriation of the biblical text and, in so doing, "enabl[ing] what is incipient to be *owned* by the reading community"<sup>56</sup>. The ramifications of this transaction can be clarified by considering the characteristics of the two involved parties and of the space that opens up in the encounter.

On the one side stands the academic who produces knowledge according to the paradigms and codes recognised in the public sphere. On the other, are the ordinary readers from poor and marginalised communities who are stereotyped as "naive and pre-critical, unsystematic and scattered, and ... draw[ing] incong[r]uously on a range of symbols, rituals, readings and ideas"<sup>57</sup>. The academic comes from a privileged institutional place, an institution whose genealogy reveals the link with the modern nation state. His discourse is designed to play a privileged role in the appropriation of the objects analysed. The biblical scholar has the resources to produce hegemonic knowledge and make legitimate claims of ownership. The ordinary readers from poor and marginalised communities, on the other hand, can only own the bible in the private infrasphere of a marginalised community. In public they can only appropriate this symbol in hidden acts, meant to remain unperceived, taking advantage of ambiguity and contradictions. Socially engaged biblical scholars have a recognised place in the public sphere, ordinary readers from poor and marginalised communities can only move according to hidden transcripts — their appropriations are only temporary.

The space, which opens up in the interface between these two parties, is therefore one that is situated between the private and the public. As such, it is designed to facilitate the introduction of the ordinary reader into the public

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<sup>55</sup> West, "Contextual bible study", 55.

<sup>56</sup> West, "Contextual bible study", 57; my emphasis.

<sup>57</sup> West, "Contextual bible study", 57.



sphere, as one who will be capable of making a bid for the bible according to recognisable and already established discourses. Incipient ideologies, unsystematic and scattered, are here translated into more systematic ones. The interface has the potential of providing a passage for the marginalised to be included into a more democratic public sphere and thus participate legitimately in the open contestation of a proper biblical practice. It is therefore the (temporary) institution of a transformation of the marginalised into a citizen.

But if the mode of engagement of the ordinary readers from poor and marginalised communities is one of appropriation, what is the mode of engagement of socially engaged biblical scholars? It cannot really be one of appropriation, since he does not claim the bible for himself during his interaction with marginalised readers, he claims it for an other. Neither is it one of alienation, since he does not strategically reject it, nor does he exclude himself from the political economy of the biblical practice. And it is not one of pure availability, since he recognises, in fact facilitates, a legitimate appropriation of the bible by marginalised ordinary readers. The mode of engagement of the socially engaged biblical scholar is a rather a hybrid one. It includes elements of appropriation and expropriation. The bible remains appropriable, since it is recognised as a valuable commodity, which can be instrumental in the pursuit of justice. But, in a way, the socially engaged biblical scholar expropriates himself, since he suspends the bid that claims the bible in the interest of his hegemonic identity.

This is so because the socially engaged biblical scholar's engagement in this liminal space, which is the interface between the academy and the ordinary readers from poor and marginalised communities, partially reconstructs his identity. He is, at once, defined by the self-annihilating interests in favour of the subaltern and by his own interests of survival in a more just society. He is, therefore, obviously not a poor and marginalised person, but neither a person who defends the hegemonic *status quo*. His identity becomes undecidable and difficult to pin down. This, I claim, is because the limits of propriety/property are caused to shake, because the bible is pushed against the limits of the commodification of a capitalist political economy. This deconstruction is thus not one of nihilistic play, but one that transforms identity, reinvents players in responsibility to the suffering of the other, in the name of the justice. It allows for a space in which a profoundly ethical event can take place — an event that has the potential to transform a discipline.

There are, however, other limits that can be put to play under the work of deconstruction. If what Gerald West is doing could be described as the

articulation of incipient ideologies, there are other structures implied in oppression and marginalisation that are in need of disarticulation. This is what Tony Bennett has in mind when he describes the ethical imperative of a political discourse, which “should be conceived as a set of discursive interventions which seeks to interrupt, uncouple and disrupt the subject identities and forms of political alliance constructed by dominant ideological discourses so as to forge new ones.”<sup>58</sup> Following Bennett, biblical studies would contribute to deconstructing an oppressive bible by disarticulating it

“from the system of ideological connections in which [it is] inscribed via the functioning of bourgeois reading formations and ... order[ing its] ideological articulations differently - to make [it] mean differently - by re-organising the systems of inter-textual, ideological and cultural reference, the reading formations, within which [it is] constituted”<sup>59</sup>.

Being engaged in such disarticulations necessarily implies that biblical studies would not only have to analyse such reading formations in all their diversity and difference — i.e. in its contestation — but would also have to participate in those reading formations in a decisive way. Biblical scholars would have to acknowledge their own discursivity and thus already participating in the economy of biblical practices. Their intervention in the economy of biblical practices would consist in a double strategy, which consist of discourses that are recognisable within the canonical systems of specific communities, on the one hand, but at the same time consist of subversions of the canonical systems, where this system is deemed to support oppression and marginalisation.

New interfaces could be opened up, such as an interface between Christian groups that have been separated by oppressive ideologies, like apartheid, but share a common canonical system.<sup>60</sup> Such interfaces could open up and multiply, such as interfaces between groups who share sufficient common elements of a reading formation as to recognise each other’s scriptural practice as one that contests, via its difference, the other’s claim to read the bible “properly”. The focus on groups that cannot be characterised simply as

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<sup>58</sup> Bennett, “Texts in history”, 78f.

<sup>59</sup> Bennett, “Texts in history”, 79.

<sup>60</sup> This would apply, for example, to the institutional situation created by the union of formerly white and non-white strands of the Presbyterian tradition within the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa. Both share a common ideology and, by implication, biblical practice. But their biblical practices display enough dissimilarities to, through their difference, present each other with an otherness that could open up the limits of both strands and deconstruct oppressive structures by putting them into play.



oppressed is an important one, since it is necessary to extend the field of intervention beyond systemically oppressed groups. It will thus be important to undo a simplistic distribution of academic labour according to which the subaltern proves its usefulness as fieldwork and exotic case study, and leaves more affluent groups out of this picture. The same goes, of course, for the discovery of vernacular hermeneutics in tricontinental contexts and the elaboration of social theories in northern hemisphere universities.

But putting all these borderlines into play, and letting deconstruction do its work at the limits, would remain an unethical gesture, if the discourse of biblical studies and the identity of the biblical scholar would not be put at risk in each and every engagement. The discourse would not only be altered by recognising new blind spots in the analysis of the reading formation, but also by always recognising and altering the limits of such an endeavour. The identity of the scholar would be reinvented by always letting its hegemonic construction be questioned by the suffering of the other and be partially constructed by this engagement. The continually hybridised discourse and identity of the biblical scholar would be opened up at each border crossing. At the border. By the other.

## 15 DECONSTRUCTING THE BIBLE AND ITS INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

As I have shown in the chapter on Jeffrey Staley's work, it is in literary approaches to the bible that biblical studies has displayed its most progressive and bold modes of reading. But these are also the approaches that have generated the most conservative of readings. Why is this so? One of the reasons is surely the central role literature has played in the academic formulation of national identities in the Anglophone world. It is thus no surprise that it was within literary studies that the most radical theoretical discussions took place, and the political stakes of such a discussions came most prominently to the fore. Literary studies was also the academic discipline to open up the production of knowledge to subjectivism and, hence, to provide fruitful ground for the formulation of tricontinental thought.

Concerning biblical studies in particular, literary theory promised a more conservative bridging of the two alienated discourses of modern historicism and ecclesiastical piety. It allowed for academic readings to be performed that were closer to an ecclesiastical discourse than the traditional historical-critical readings. At the same time, though, engagement with literary theory opened a Pandora's box for the literary critics of the Bible, which released, in some cases, new ways of conceiving interpretation that were as timely as they were unsettling.

On the one side, literary approaches to the bible attempted to bridge the rift that had opened up between the institution of biblical studies as a discipline purely *e genero historico* and other ecclesiastical institutions. They could be seen as an attempt to mediate between the split allegiances of the biblical scholars — between Church and State — and their respective doctrinal and historicist logics. Narrative criticism, for example, as one formalist strand of literary approaches to the bible has become known,<sup>1</sup> with its focus on plot, character, and point of view, has experienced some success since the late 1980s. This story-centred approach has had the twin advantage of appealing to more ecclesiastically oriented scholars as well as preparing the student for more ideologically

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mark Alan Powell, *What is narrative criticism?*, Guides to biblical scholarship: New Testament series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).



challenging approaches within the historical-critical paradigm.

On the other hand, literary theory has been responsible for initiating some of the most interesting and timely theoretical discussions in biblical studies. These discussions have usually centred around the question of whether the (biblical) text is of an essential nature, of whether (or in how far) the reader creates the meaning of a text or whether the text's meaning resides in its formal traits. This issue has often been discussed by exegetes inclined to reader-response approaches in relation to the locus of the reader of the bible: Is the reader within the text? Or should it not at least be taken to be so? Is the real flesh-and-blood reader of the bible in full control of the reading process? Is it the interpretive community to which the reader belongs? Literary theorist Stanley Fish has developed here into a sort of identity marker in this matter. Depending upon the position taken in relation to his theory, biblical scholars situate themselves ideologically on either side of the formalist/antiformalist divide.

In the following I would like to discuss the ethico-political stakes of Fish's theory before I go on to do the same for deconstruction, and then juxtapose the latter as a more ethically responsible literary approach to the bible. Finally, I would like to indulge in outlining the prospect of some consequential alterations of the academic space inhabited by the biblical scholar and his student.

## 15.1 The vanishing text

For distinguished biblical scholar and hermeneutist Anthony Thiselton the crux of a biblical hermeneutics is of an ethical nature — namely, of how a hermeneutics can facilitate real change. Hermeneutics, according to Thiselton, shares a strong “concern for listening, openness, and dialogue”<sup>2</sup>. This is particularly important for reader-oriented theories, since

“[i]f all the weight in reader-oriented hermeneutics is placed on prior expectations, codes, conventions, horizons, out of which meaning is determined and constructed it is difficult to see how the text can transform or correct the horizons of reading communities ‘from

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *New horizons in hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) 546.

outside' ”<sup>3</sup>

Thiselton's statement is made in the context of a discussion of Stanley Fish's later reader-response theory. Since 1976 Fish has proposed and developed a theory, which radically questions the traditional roles assigned to text and readers in the production of meaning. While traditionally the text was attributed with innate formal and intentional qualities that could direct or otherwise influence the interpretive process, Fish asserted that those qualities were only subsequently created as an unconscious move from the codes and rules of the interpretive community of which the reader in question was a member. In an inversion of the traditional approach, Fish divested the text of any agency and attributed that solely to the interpretive community. In Fish's mature retrospective understanding of his past literary readings, he had read *out* of texts only what he previously had projected *into* them. "I did what critics always do: I 'saw' what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then turned around and attributed what I had 'seen' to a text and an intention"<sup>4</sup>. The two main objections against Fish's theory — how to explain both agreement and disagreement in interpretation, if these are preconditioned by the conventional constraints — were well rejoindered within Fish's master category, the interpretive community. The boundaries around these were stable enough to facilitate interpretive agreement, yet porous enough not to let interpretive disagreements settle for good.<sup>5</sup> The theoretical consequence was, of course, the dissolution of the text into an insubstantial entity, one that has "no status whatsoever independent of interpretive acts"<sup>6</sup>.

It is easy to understand why such a theory did not catch on in biblical studies.<sup>7</sup> The discourse of the academic discipline is one that strongly presupposes essential semantic properties inherent in the text and independent of any interpretive act. Crucial to this endeavour is therefore the strict separation of those essential properties and what the interpreter makes out of them. The aim of interpretation, and the aspect that validates or disallows any reading, is an *adequatio intellectus et rei*.<sup>8</sup> The loss of the foundational text as an

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<sup>3</sup> Thiselton, *New horizons in hermeneutics*, 537.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class?: the authority of interpretive communities* (Cambridge [Massachusetts] and London: Harvard University Press, 1989) 163.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Fish, *Is there a text in this class?*, 171f.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 117.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for a similar discussion Stanley E. Porter, "Why hasn't reader-response criticism caught on in New Testament studies", *Journal of literature and theology* 4 (1990) 278-292.

<sup>8</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 121.



extrainterpretive Archimedean point<sup>9</sup> would push the discipline into a foundational crisis — a crisis that would considerably endanger the way it asserts its identity. Any argumentation claiming to represent what the text “really” means would shed its mystifying cloud under a Fishian perspective and disclose its true nature as mere rhetoric.

There is, of course, a further undercurrent in the passionate rejection of a radical neopragmatism. Thiselton is forthright in disclosing his theological motivation for such a rejection:

“the notion that biblical texts do not transform readers ‘from beyond’, or that they merely evoke ‘constructions’ drawn from the hitherto undiscovered inner resources of the reading community does not cohere readily with Christian theology ... of grace and revelation into a phenomenology of religious self-discovery”<sup>10</sup>.

He is quick in evoking the apocalyptic scenario unleashed by the embrace of such a theory in five “disastrous entailments”.<sup>11</sup> A faith that bases itself on the hard foundation of a scripture with its innate message has to fear the prospect of having the ground pulled away from under its feet. But ecclesiastical faith rubs its shoulders here with its secular cousin in the apologetic line of defence against such a neopragmatic evil:

“In this perspective, biblical criticism itself takes on the aspect of faith, of belief in a prior and independent text that is the origin and end of all interpretation. ... This time it is the scholar, and not just the believer, who must leap into the epistemological abyss.”<sup>12</sup>

Would such a leap really be such a disastrous prospect?

One of the most perplexing aspects of Fish’s proposal is that its theory is as radical, challenging, and unfalsifiable as it is of no practical consequence whatsoever — at least, if we want to believe Fish himself.<sup>13</sup> At the heart of this

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Thiselton, *New horizons in hermeneutics*, 550.

<sup>11</sup> Thiselton, *New horizons in hermeneutics*, 549f.: (1) “If textual meaning is the product of a community of readers, as Fish concedes, texts cannot reform these readers ‘from outside’.” (2) “Prophetic address as that which comes ‘from beyond’ virtually against human will is either illusory or to be explained in terms of pre-conscious inner conflict.” (3) “Such notions as grace or revelation must (by pragmatic doctrine) be illusory, because ... there are no ‘givens’.” (4) “The message of the cross remains a linguistic construct of a tradition.” (5) “It would be impossible to determine what would count as a systematic mistake in the development of doctrine. ... Social pragmatism accepts only social winners as criteria of truth.”

<sup>12</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 128.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Stanley Fish, *Doing what comes naturally: change, rhetoric, and the practice of theory in*

provocative stance lies Fish's deeply rooted and legitimate scepticism against a hope that theory, understood as the formulation of general and universal principles, could bring about any change by itself. If such principles do not exist and all there is is interpretation all the way, then interpretation will do its business as usual and change when the conventional context is predisposed to such a change and allows for such a transformation. This is, of course, an aspect that makes it easy for thus inclined biblical scholars to put Fish's theory aside as a more or less stimulating mental game, with the attitude: "So what?!"<sup>14</sup> But the contemporary intellectual climate allows drawing some consequences, even if Fish himself would rightly consider these consequences as a further construction that is equally predetermined by the codes of an interpretive community. That most of these consequences have been resisted for so long has to do with the vested interest the white male hegemony has in keeping the *status quo* (and those formerly disadvantaged scholars from consolidating and defending their new privileged position).

A discipline that accepts that its business is less demonstration and more persuasion, that its ethical mandate, determined by the search for truth and objective knowledge, is replaced by the political mandate of the critic's interpretive community,<sup>15</sup> will soon find the ideological mystifying mist in which it was previously covered, clearing, and its workings denaturalising. It will divert, if only temporarily, the critical focus towards its underlying codes, rules, and paradigms and uncover biblical studies as a thoroughly politicised discourse. This self-awareness and self-understanding would certainly be as epistemologically limited as its traditional interpretations, but it would be an awareness and understanding that could provide the first stepping stone towards a more than timely demythologising process.<sup>16</sup> Such a metacritical exercise could become an occasional supplement to its traditional discourse that would allow assessing the socio-political stakes involved in the enterprise. Having divested the interpreted text of any agency, scholars could begin to own up to their readings, or, put differently, their claim to ownership of the text could become more visible. The

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*literature and legal studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 141-160 and 315-341, as well as *Professional correctness: Literary Studies and political change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Moisés Mayordomo-Marín, *Den Anfang hören: leserorientierte Evangelienexegese am Beispiel von Matthäus 1-2*, *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 180 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 120. Mayordomo-Marín's excellent thesis introduced formalist and historical reader-response approaches to German biblical studies.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen D. Moore, "Negative hermeneutics, insubstantial texts: Stanley Fish and the biblical interpreter", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54:4 (Winter 1986) 707-719; 711f.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Moore, "Negative hermeneutics, insubstantial texts, 716f.



wider political consequence, of course, would be an academic discourse that would have to become more democratically inclusive. If no reading can claim any metaphysical privilege any more, any reading acceptable to the thus transforming biblical guild would have to be accepted. The pragmatism of the consequences of readings are developing into the new yardstick of ethical assessment. Oppressive readings could easily be questioned from a neopragmatic perspective.

One crucial ethical aspect, however, remains unanswered within this approach. It is related to my redefinition of ethics as responsibility to the other. At this point, I have to return to the concern expressed by Thiselton. If, following Fish, the biblical text loses its status as an entity that is exterior to the reading community, if the text's otherness is lost in the moment when it collapses into the conventions of the interpretive community, where and how is otherness to be found? How is transformation possible? These still remain the crucial questions concerning the ethics and politics of a reading theory. But are they formulated radically enough in Thiselton's own hermeneutics?

Thiselton posits an other that is exterior to the interpretive community and can facilitate change. What kind of otherness has Thiselton in mind? And what kind of change is thus facilitated? Obviously, following Thiselton's confession, the other is represented by God as revealed in Jesus Christ. But, if God has to remain exterior to the Christian community, how different can God be from Christian doctrine? Thiselton's stance towards Fish's theory betrays the answer to these questions. Unwilling to risk his ideological premises, how can he really be questioned "from the outside"? Can we still speak of change if one remains within the borders of one's ideological conviction? And would such an "outside" not demand that one risks transgressing such borders? As I have already discussed in relation to Derrida, radical otherness has to, by definition, remain beyond the epistemological grasp of metaphysics, even that of a Christian kind. The other always remains unrepresentable. And the positing of such an exteriority — of a transcendental signified — only betrays the will to presence of western logocentrism. Should Fish succeed in convincing that there is no such thing as an exteriority, Thiselton's urge to reach for such a place could at least lead us to touch upon a limit. A limit that could open up within the cracks and inconsistencies of the text that we posit as the object of our interpretation.

## 15.2 Deconstruction as misreading

According to theoretical gourmet Stephen Moore, “Fish is an excellent entrée to postmodernist ways of thinking about texts, but ultimately he leaves us at the threshold”<sup>17</sup>. Will deconstruction then provide the sought-after main meal that removes the Fishy taste in our mouths and satisfies our transgressive tastes? Trying to pin down deconstruction as a literary approach to texts proves to be extremely difficult. In one such attempt, biblical narrative critic Mark Powell charts down different literary “ways of reading” by relating the two entities, text and reader.<sup>18</sup> He makes the following remark about deconstruction:

“Some reader-response critics have emphasized the reader’s dominance *over* the text. Since meaning is largely subjective, readers are not ultimately constrained by literary dynamics or authorial intention in their interpretation of work. The movement known as *deconstruction* lends support to this idea. ... Deconstruction ... invites readers to approach texts creatively and to appreciate their ability to generate an unlimited plurality of meaningful effects.”<sup>19</sup>

Does the reader in deconstruction really hover in masterful bliss *over* the text? This is an assessment, which is hardly sustainable on the grounds of a reading of Derrida’s own texts, which, I must presume, Mark Powell has not yet had the pleasure to read. Like Fish’s neopragmatism, deconstruction denies the text any substantial presence.<sup>20</sup> But, unlike it, deconstruction resists settling on a definite metatheory that fully explains all aspects of the workings of interpretation. Deconstruction radically questions any notion of mastery. The reader, so to speak, is inescapably entangled in the constantly disseminating web of the text. This is necessarily so because, according to Derrida, “*There is nothing outside the text*”<sup>21</sup>, meaning that there is nothing — nothing that would be recognizable as something — that transcends the signifying web of textuality, which is here understood as reaching beyond the two covers of the book. Any simple notion of an exteriority of the text, a transcendental signified, is questioned in deconstruction as the western yearning for presence.

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<sup>17</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 131.

<sup>18</sup> Powell, *What is narrative criticism?*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Powell, *What is narrative criticism?*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 133.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Of grammatology*, 158; cf. 163.



How then could one proceed with a deconstructive reading? In one of Derrida's rare discussions of his critical methodology, he confirms that any absolute point of departure is discarded. Pragmatically, one has to start wherever one is: "We must begin *wherever we are* ... [I]t is impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Where we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be."<sup>22</sup> But the text is always already split into a double structure. A double structure, which Derrida juxtaposes to a critical double strategy. On the one hand, there is the *intentio auctoris*,<sup>23</sup> the will of the writer to say what he wants to say. But, on the other hand, in order to do so, the writer has to submit himself to the linguistic system, and this system is, as I already discussed, one that is infinitely disseminating. In this scenario a space opens up. This double structure fissures in the interpretive process and creates a signifying structure (*structure signifiante*), which has the potential to usher in deconstruction.

Two strategies present themselves in relation to this signifying structure. Firstly, there is the commentary, a respectful reproduction (and, therefore, a doubling) of the writer's conscious, voluntary, and intentional discourse. This would be a rather traditional approach to a text. But this approach is, according to Derrida, as necessary and ultimately inescapable, as it is desirable. Derrida firmly entrenches the place of such a reading strategy in deconstruction, which "respects all its classical exigencies ... and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism"<sup>24</sup>, within a deconstructive approach: "Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything."<sup>25</sup> The problem with this strategy, however, is that it poses no space for change, no openness towards an altering force: "this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading"<sup>26</sup>.

It is Derrida's ethical motivation that pushes him to look for such an otherness, which lies not, as already pointed out, in some exteriority of the text, but, as a supplementary structure, inside it, in the cracks, fissures, and logical contradictions of the text itself: "the reading must always aim at a certain

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<sup>22</sup> Derrida, *Of grammarology*, 162.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida situates himself — critically — within a traditional understanding of the task of interpretation as the formulation of the author's intention. Even while this problematic concept would be replaced by, say, an *intentio operis* or any other hegemonic concept, the general character of this double gesture would remain similar.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *Of grammarology*, 158.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, *Of grammarology*, 158.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Of grammarology*, 158.

relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses"<sup>27</sup>. This supplementary structure of the text is parasitical upon the first, it remains within the limits of its signifying structure, yet it opens up reading towards a space, which is other to the logocentric tradition, yet always remains somehow inseparable to it, "hatching its eggs within the flesh of the host"<sup>28</sup>.

Deconstruction's focus on the cracks, fissures, and logical contradictions within the text should not be totally foreign to biblical studies. The lookout for any such disruption of the coherence of the text was also the obsession of an older literary criticism that reigned in the discipline under the Germanic name of *Literarkritik*. Here it was the focus on disruptions of the literary context, the doubling and repetition of information within the text, as well as tensions and contradictions, which disrupted the literary coherence, that served as a heuristical guide in the critical readings of the biblical scholar. But unlike *Literarkritik*, deconstruction does not seek to close the gaps and fix the inconsistencies by attributing them to different intentionalities that can be reconstructed and attributed to successive and sometimes conflicting roles in the redactional history of the text. Instead, it would be precisely these textual faults that open up towards new readings, which emanate from these faults.<sup>29</sup>

Stephen Moore has offered a particularly lucid example of a deconstructive reading of a biblical text.<sup>30</sup> By focusing on the figurative and literal language of water in the Gospel of John, Moore is able to show how the hierarchical binary ironic structure established in 4:7-14 finally collapses in 19:28-30:

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<sup>27</sup> Derrida, *Of grammatology*, 158.

<sup>28</sup> Simon Critchley, "The chiasmus: Levinas, Derrida and the ethical demand for deconstruction", *Textual practice* 3:1 (1989) 91-106; 93.

<sup>29</sup> See Daniel B. Mathewson, "A critical binarism: source criticism and deconstructive criticism", *Journal for the study of the Old Testament* 98 (2002) 3-28 for a similar juxtaposition.

<sup>30</sup> Deconstruction has had a rather lukewarm reception by biblical critics. For some further examples of a deconstructive approach to the Gospel of John, with further bibliographical information see Gary A. Phillips, "The ethics of reading deconstructively: the Samaritan Woman meets Derrida at the well", *The new literary criticism and the New Testament*, eds. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. Knight, *Journal for the study of the New Testament supplement series* 109 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 283-325, David Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament*, *Biblical interpretation series* 5 (Leiden, New York and Cologne: E.J. Brill, 1994) 103-127 and Counet Chatelion, *John, a postmodern gospel: introduction to deconstructive exegesis applied to the Fourth Gospel*, *Biblical interpretation series* 44 (Leiden, New York and Cologne: E.J. Brill, 2000). For a discussion of biblical deconstruction in relation to liberation theology and feminism see: David Joblin, "Writing the wrongs of the world: the deconstruction of the biblical text in the context of liberation theologies", *Semeia* 51 (1990) 81-118 and David Rutledge, *Reading marginally: feminism, deconstruction and the bible*, *Biblical interpretation series* 21 (Leiden, New York and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996).



“[T]he initial, earthly water at the well was declared superseded by figural living water (4:13-14), which was interpreted as the Spirit (7:39) that has now been made available (19:30), and the making available of which is symbolized by water (19:34) that is neither simply literal nor yet fully figural — a ‘literal figure,’ so to speak. ... Irony — which depended on the clean separation of flesh and glory, earthly and heavenly, material and spiritual, literal and figural, water and ‘water’ — is now collapsed in paradox ...”<sup>31</sup>

But Moore’s reading is not merely an exercise in playful mastery or a vain display of his literary skills. Putting this reading in the political service of a feminist stance, for example, he is able to show, that

“[t]he critic, while appearing to grasp the meaning of the text from a position safely outside of above it,<sup>32</sup> has unknowingly been grasped by the text and pulled into it. He or she is unwittingly acting out an interpretive role that the text has scripted in advance.”<sup>33</sup>

Moore can thus show how numerous distinguished scholars have themselves fallen into this trap, without being aware of it. But he also shows how the Johannine text disturbs the gender dichotomy, which sets up the scene between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, firstly by inverting their interpretive roles and then by rendering them undecidable.

Why should a literary reading that stresses the fissures and faults of the textual web be preferred to one that stresses its coherence?

In the wake of Fish’s neopragmatism, both approaches should be seen as determined by conventional structures. But while a reading that stresses coherence will tend to preserve and secure the *status quo*, a reading that stresses textual incoherence will always tend to be a subversive disturbance. Text and reader/reading community relate in a metonymic dependence in which either is attributed, depending on the theory, a hierarchical superiority. The inversion of this relation in Fish’s neopragmatism, if taken seriously as a challenge, does enough to draw the attention towards the political investment that the different interpretive communities have in a particular reading. The

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<sup>31</sup> Moore, *Literary criticism and the gospels*, 162f.

<sup>32</sup> This was, incidentally, how Powell classified deconstruction itself, while deconstruction is precisely at pains to show that this is an impossibility! Cf. Powell, *What is narrative criticism?*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen D. Moore, “Are there impurities in the living water that the Johannine Jesus dispenses?: deconstruction, feminism, and the Samaritan Woman”, *Biblical interpretation* 1:2 (1993) 207-227; 211f.

assertion of a coherent text provides an allegedly solid foundation for the implicit assertion of group identity. Few things disturb this assertion more than the counter-claim that the text in mind has considerable “tears in [its] fabric or ... inconsistencies in its pattern”<sup>34</sup>. These tears and inconsistencies, I put forward, present the hegemonic discourse of the white male biblical scholar with the opportunity — though not the guarantee — to open up towards the altering effects of the otherness flowing from the rifts of the text.

The double strategy of juxtaposing a misreading to an established reading, as one instance of a deconstructive approach, opens interpretation up to the text’s heterogeneity. It cannot comprehend the other. It can merely be an attempt to prevent the text from being encountered in a systemic closure and thus prevent the exclusion of alterity — this otherness not being understood as mere difference, but as infinite, absolute, and irreducible. The outcome of such a double reading, if it is in fact a deconstruction, cannot be calculated beforehand. This means that deconstruction can never be reduced to a set of discursive procedures, which, once applied to any text, provide a disclosure of its otherness. Rather, such an approach would provide only the negative condition for a deconstruction — no responsibility towards the other without opening up the established discourse. It would always have to cause the limits of a particular discourse to appear, while recognising the impossibility of transgressing such a limit without establishing a new one, in other words: the impossibility of transgressing the limit, in general. Deconstruction would, therefore, not represent a methodological reform of biblical interpretation that reassures the academic institution, though it would certainly always usher some methodological innovations. It would neither represent the establishment of a methodological anarchy that seeks to destroy the critical discourse by promoting methodological irresponsibility. It would certainly have profound institutional consequences for biblical studies. To these I would like to now turn.

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<sup>34</sup> Moore’s description of deconstruction’s main focus in “Rifts in (a reading of) the fourth gospel, or: does Johannine irony still collapse in a reading that draws attention to itself?”, *Neotestamentica* 23 (1989) 5-17; 13.

### 15.3 The liminal institution and its mystical foundation

To critique a previous reading by showing that it really is a misreading is common practice in academic discussions. This strategic move is usually followed by the presentation of the author's own reading, meant to now supersede the previous misreading. Fishian neopragmatism understands this as the quintessential rhetoric of a will to impose one's own interests or that of a particular interpretive community. Deconstruction would resist the presentation of a *proper* reading, not because it is performed by critics who do not believe in a will to power. Politically speaking — that is, politically in the conventional sense — will to power via the assertion of a true or proper interpretation is all there is. This would be a point on which both neopragmatism and deconstruction would agree. But deconstruction can be seen here as the yearning to break out of the political economy that characterises biblical studies, a political economy that is deeply rooted in the capitalist ideology and has led to a commodification of the bible.

By ultimately showing that every reading is a misreading, deconstruction relinquishes any claim to epistemological mastery — except, one could rejoinder, for this assessment itself. But it goes one step further. It asserts that the text's heteronomy always resists a reading that claims to have grasped its meaning.<sup>35</sup> This is, of course, what keeps the political economy of claim and counter-claim alive, since, if the text's alterity is experienced as the greasy film on the palm of the hand that does not succeed in fully grasping the text, there will be somebody else attempting to grasp it. But this is also why neopragmatism only proves to be neoliberalism in a literary theoretical gown. For having recognised that the infinite and irreducible other is, metaphysically speaking, non-existent, it declares the game begun, under the usual rules. Deconstruction, however, sees this otherness beyond essence not only as the oil that fuels the game, but also as the moment of responsibility and transformation. In other words, while neopragmatism declares that everything approved by the interpretive community goes, it also says that nothing changes. Deconstruction, on the other hand, declares that while everything goes on as usual, in repeating the moves of the interpretive game in a radical way, something may also be displaced. By following the rules in the most meticulous of ways, deconstruction opens up the text's heteronomy from within the game's incoherencies and contradictions. What would this mean for the institution of biblical studies?

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<sup>35</sup> This is an aspect which is particularly well discussed in Aichele, *Jesus framed*, 121-145.



Precisely “because deconstruction is never concerned only with signified content but especially with the conditions and assumptions of discourse, with frameworks of enquiry, it engages the institutional structures governing our practices, competencies, performances”<sup>36</sup>. Following neopragmatism, deconstruction would supplement the traditional critical discourse with a metadiscourse. Unlike it, this metadiscourse would always have to contribute to change by opening up the academic reading formations to its other and to the other. In a general reading formation that is characterised by the hegemony of patriarchal capitalism and neoliberalism, the academy does not escape the politics of appropriation and the rhetorics of propriety. The proprietary character of authorship, which declares the critic the legitimate owner of his reading, is a relatively modern phenomenon<sup>37</sup> that is still reigning supreme in the academic institution. Deconstruction would challenge the coherence of such a concept and such a practice.

The author owns (the rewriting of) the text via his own interpretation by demonstrating his mastery of a particular method that is alleged to be appropriate to the text. A deconstructive metadiscourse would show that such a claim to ownership rests upon a questionable ideological foundation. It would also challenge the individualised character of authorship<sup>38</sup> by bringing to light how individualised authorship relies on a differential relationship within a more complex formation of institutions, schools of thought, ideologies, etc. Individual ownership, furthermore, owes as much to those who have provided knowledge supporting a certain reading as it does to those who differ. Deconstruction would point to those elements within this practice that have been systemically excluded. It would show how any appropriatory claim is doomed to fail, since no reading can offer a totalising explanation of the text. It would always seek to open the game of interpretation up, without destroying it. It would not do this basing its practice in a deeper insight, but always in the name of another reading, in the name of the other. Simplified, one could say that it is the text — in the case of biblical studies, the bible — that is protected by the deconstructed academic

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<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On deconstruction: theory and criticism after structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1983) 156.

<sup>37</sup> Emerging from the Middle Ages as a mixture between English empiricism, French rationalism and the Reformed emphasis on personal faith, in the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century a system of ownership was established which regulated the rights of the author in relation to the publication of his work. Cf. Moore, *Mark and Luke in poststructuralist perspectives*, 146f.

<sup>38</sup> The Bible and Culture Collective, author of *The postmodern bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), has contributed to show how such an individualised concept can be successfully transformed into a concept that transcends the individual boundaries.

texts but also with regard to readers, with a view of all readings as proceeding from, dependent upon, and addressing a particular social location or matrix, however defined.”<sup>43</sup>

And this practice, I would argue, begins with its pedagogy.

Since, as I have shown, deconstruction cannot justify a starting point absolutely and advises, therefore, to begin from wherever one is, a deconstruction of the lecturer-student relationship would suggest beginning with the experience of the student. It would ask for and teach the understanding of the reading formations that have shaped the biblical readings of each student.<sup>44</sup> The traditional conversion of the student from a confession-based believer (or even a fundamentalist) into a liberal would remain in place, though only to a certain extent.<sup>45</sup> Liberalism would serve to establish a democratic context that would demand respect for differing interpretive discourses. But deconstruction could not stop at establishing diversity based on the different identities of the students. Establishing and understanding diversity cannot provide a transformative context. It would only support the *status quo* by putting a liberal public face to otherness and allowing the rejection of it in privatised biblical practices. The multiculturalist invitation to self-identity may establish diversity, but it does not challenge the constellation of power relations between the diverse positions. All interpretations being equal, some would still remain more equal. Only by juxtaposing the different non-academic biblical practices and showing the contestatory nature and interrelation between them, would a pedagogical practice challenge the respective positions enough to open them up to one another. It would show how disputes over the proper ecclesiastical reading of a biblical text are closely related to the expropriation of alternative ecclesiastical or quasi-ecclesiastical groups, which therefore invariably participate in oppressive and marginalising practices. But it would also show how the borderlines established between contesting groups and interests are permeable enough to create hybrid spaces that open up these borderlines in the name of justice.

Stephen Fowl has argued that neopragmatism can help to reformulate

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<sup>43</sup> Segovia, “The text as other”, 285.

<sup>44</sup> Gottwald’s questionnaire would be a good heuristic starting point for mapping some of the core elements of such a reading formation. See Norman K. Gottwald, “Framing biblical interpretation at New York Theological Seminary: a student self-inventory on biblical hermeneutics”, *Reading from this place*, vol. 1: *Social location and biblical interpretation in the United States*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 251-261.

<sup>45</sup> Some confession-based institutions, of course, have rather the aim to immunise the student against liberalism. Their emphasis is more on the acquisition of an apologetic interpretive discourse that is supposed to guard the confessional reading from any danger of ideological deviation.

disagreements about meaning “by indicating that they are not really disagreements about the same thing”<sup>46</sup>, but rather disagreements about interpretative interests. He also asserts that in the pluralist context of a liberal university there will be two separate ways of arguing for the adoption of one (or several) interest(s) over others. One would argue for one on the ethico-political grounds of social responsibility,<sup>47</sup> and for the other on the grounds of the interests and values of particular historical communities.<sup>48</sup> Fowl’s main problem with the former stance is that it depends on the double acceptance of “something like a global *polis*”<sup>49</sup>, on the one hand, and “a Rawlsian view of justice as an ahistorical trans-cultural virtue recognizable by all rational people”<sup>50</sup>, on the other.<sup>51</sup> A concept of justice would still ground the practices of the second stance. It would, however, no longer be an abstract non-historical concept, but one that “would receive specification and embodiment in concrete discussions and practices within the community”<sup>52</sup>.

A deconstruction of the concept of justice could however reinvent justice as an important ethico-political moment, without having to rely on a particular interpretive community within a multicultural pluralism. I would argue, against Fowl, that there are more than ever compelling reasons to posit “something like a global *polis*” on the grounds of the globalisation of an economico-cultural system that connects all the fragmented micro and macro-communities. Furthermore, justice does not have to be either the specific and embodied concept of a particular community — a concept that would serve mainly the community’s self-interests — or a Rawlsian transhistorical concept — the construction of a particular community in any case. Deconstructive justice would appear in both the concepts of justice that particular communities assert in contestation against others and in the generalised transhistorical concept that is renegotiated as more and more communities gain a public voice. It would also appear, however, in neither of them. Rather, deconstructive justice would be a justice that intervenes,

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<sup>46</sup> Stephen Fowl, “The ethics of interpretation or What’s left over after the elimination of meaning”, *The bible in three dimensions: essays in celebration of forty years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, eds. David J. A. Clines, Stephen Fowl, and Stanley E. Porter, Journal for the study of the Old Testament supplements series 87, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990, 379-398, 385.

<sup>47</sup> See Fowl, “The ethics of interpretation”, 391-395.

<sup>48</sup> See Fowl, “The ethics of interpretation”, 395f.

<sup>49</sup> Fowl, “The ethics of interpretation”, 393.

<sup>50</sup> Fowl, “The ethics of interpretation”, 394. For Rawl’s concept of justice, see John Rawls, *A theory of justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>51</sup> This would be Fowl’s main objection to Schüssler Fiorenza’s classic 1987 SBL presidential address of the same title.

<sup>52</sup> Fowl, “The ethics of interpretation”, 396.



limits, and splits our obligations towards our own identifying community in response to the suffering of other communities. It would be, in a Levinasian substitution, the other.

Connecting Fowl's argument to the pedagogical juxtaposition of the multiple identity positions of all the students (and the professor), the metadiscourse cultivated, problematised and taught in the university would precisely not serve to confirm any given identity position, but, on the contrary, it would serve to trouble them, expose them to otherness, call them to justice. Justice would not demand the abolition of traditional interpretive discourses, but rather it would demand their limitation and transformation.

In spite of all the fears to the contrary, then, deconstruction would also emphasise the teaching and practice of traditional interpretive "methods". It would not do this, however, without drawing attention to their genealogy, to their role in the greater general reading formation, to their discursive limits, in other words, by undergoing the same demythologising process to which every student was submitted in the first place. Deconstruction would teach and encourage the mastery of such discourses in the most rigorous of ways, applying the highest of standards. There is no essential reason why any interpretive discourse should be dispensed of and there are plenty of political reasons why some should be maintained despite, or even because of, their history of political misappropriation. Since these discourses have a high cash-value in the public sphere, they serve to promote political aims. Some of them, particularly historicist approaches are still, as we have seen, discursive prerequisites to having access to the public sphere and the democratic bureaucratic institutions. But deconstruction would also encourage innovative ways of reading the bible, by hybridising established discourses and thus creating new ones. Unlike the neopragmatic metadiscourse, which urges us to return to our traditional game of interpreting without worrying too much about the underlying conditions, deconstruction would make such a metadiscourse a permanent element of academic practice. It would be here to stay, forging hybrid genres that are both interpretation and meta-interpretation and, in a way, neither any more. If ideology can be seen as the mechanism that joins one text (in this case, the bible) to other texts in an intertextual web, while forbidding joining that text to certain other texts,<sup>53</sup> deconstruction would also promote the transgression of such ideological borderlines.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See Aichele, *Jesus framed*, 149ff. for such a view.

<sup>54</sup> See Gregory Ulmer, *Applied grammarology: post(e)-pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph*

The academy would, then, develop into a liminal space. A space in which the borderlines marked by differing and contesting biblical practices can be crossed, if even only experimentally, without the immediate repercussions such a borderline crossing would have in the non-academic world. In this sense, the academy would create a demilitarised space. Biblical studies would thus take cognisance of the postmodern condition that has taken the intellectual down from the pedestal of legislation and relegated him to the more humbling roles of interpreter-translator. Unsure of the firm ground that allowed the biblical scholar to profess the “true” reading that constructs the “true” bible in contestation to many ecclesiastical interpretations, he will provide his services to the different interpretive communities. But it will not do so without an element of subversion. Responding to the disruptive force of the other, the biblical scholar will respond to the violence and suffering created by biblical practices. In other words, biblical scholars will engage less in saying *how to* read (though they will do so in the lower keys of a suggestive inventiveness) and more in suggesting *why* one reads the way one does and *how not to* read the bible.

Travelling between the diverse biblical practices, the biblical scholar will leave the secure ground of his native land — the modern university — whose landscape is now being reshaped by quakes and tremors — the university in ruins — and travel towards a promised land he cannot yet call his own. On his way he is a emigrant (*emigré*), visiting and offering his working force as a immigrant guest worker (*Gastarbeiter*) for the interests of the oppressed, marginalised, and voiceless, but knowing that what he earns he will not be able to invest. What he guards, what he responds to, what he aims to reach is, in the end, the justice and democracy to come, in other words, the other. On his way, he is continually (partially) reconstituted without being able to shed the stigmata of the systemic and complicit oppressor.

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*Beuys* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) for a more general discussion of the impact of deconstruction on pedagogical practise.

## 16 CONCLUSION: RE-INVENTING OURSELVES?

“... I am not pretending that I have reached it already ...”

Philippians 3:13

“[T]he first step to eternal life is you have to die”<sup>1</sup>

Chuck Palahniuk

What does it mean to be a biblical scholar today? What does it mean to practice biblical studies as a white male? What does it mean in view of the worldwide contextual changes and ethico-political challenges? If biblical studies wants to confront the contemporary challenges in a responsible way it will have to open up to innovation. But this does not mean that it will have to reject its traditional practices altogether. It does, however, mean that biblical scholars will have to deconstruct these traditional practices — they will have to rigorously analyse their genealogy, their political implications, and their ontological foundations, and they will have to stretch those practices to their very limits. New academic practices will emerge in the liminal spaces, where biblical scholars interface with different and differing readers — academic and popular — giving way to hybridity, transformation, and subversion. Only if these liminal spaces open up will responsibility towards the other — the impossible — become possible. The reinvention of the white male biblical scholar is therefore *not* the initiative of the scholar himself, who wants to change, but a response to a call. This call comes from the other. I have mentioned many others — women, poor, marginalised, subaltern, ordinary, colonised — and these are elemental in the transformation of a dominant identity. Their suffering disrupts, from time to time, the well-oiled machinery that secures the hegemonic identity of the white male. But, ultimately, the call cannot come from these others, as they have been constructed as the binary opposition to the dominant. The call comes rather from the unknowable, irreducible other.

I began my argumentation as a critical discussion of three white male biblical scholars. From Daniel Patte I learned the necessary first step of owning

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<sup>1</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight club*, 11.



up to one's identity by making fully explicit *all* the interpretative moves in the business of biblical interpretation. This step, however, is as essential as, in the end, unsatisfactory by itself, since the Enlightenment discourse is not seriously challenged, but merely stretched to its conclusion. Patte, I argued, remains still within the metaphysical borders of his understanding of professional vocation. The circular turn of his critical gaze towards himself is not yet opened up at the discursive borders within which he frames his practice. Patte's encounter with the other, who provoked his theoretical rethinking to begin with, still remains excluded<sup>2</sup> from this gesture.

Jeffrey Staley brings this self-conscious approach one step further not only by revealing the close relationship between his scholarly practice and his biography, but also by pushing the autobiographical discourse until the liminal space was reached where — again to use his allegorical reading of Lazarus's raising — the ethically responsible passage towards a reinvention leads through death, a passage whose impossibility, insecurity and risk is so well captured in this image. Staley succeeds in conceptualising the necessary change of his identity as white male biblical scholar who wishes to be responsible to the other. But he is not yet able to formulate the results of this transformation with a clear enough strategic agenda that involves the other.

Gerald West offers an even bolder strategy, one that is committed to justice and to the cause of his concrete marginalised and poor other in postcolonial South Africa. Situating his work right at the liminal space of the interface between the academic and the ordinary reader of the bible, he constructs this practice as one that partially reconstitutes his white male identity. At the encounter between two interpretational discourses, the tension and play generated is used to reinvent a practice and an identity that are significantly shaped by a responsibility towards the other.

The central metaphors and gestures distilled from the three proposals discussed in the first part of the thesis were further scrutinised, contextualised and problematised within the western metaphysical tradition. Deconstruction, I sought to argue, can be seen as offering the strategic tricontinental effort of opening up the occidental obsession with presence, which closes the self off from the possibility of engaging with and not appropriating the other. This (non)philosophy, associated with Jacques Derrida's writings, can, furthermore, help to understand the transcendental character of an essential ethical move that

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<sup>2</sup> This assessment can only be made in relation to his already published work.

is understood as responsibility towards the other. The crucial encounter with and response to the other, in other words, cannot be totally captured within the metaphysical categories we have at our disposal, even though these may be the only existing categories. This insight necessitates a double strategy, one which commits itself to particular discourses of liberation and is, at the same time, open to renegotiate those discourses in unforeseeable ways.

In order to translate this double strategy into the field of biblical studies, I went on to consider the contemporary contextual determinations that frame this academic practice. These determinations show that the context in which the traditional discourse of biblical studies was forged, has been considerably decomposed by the forces of global capitalism. The intellectual is no longer the cultural legislator of society but an interpreter/translator between the multiple communities of the postmodern liberal societies. The university no longer produces the cultured citizen and subject of the nation-state but rather the employees of multinationals who are equipped with marketable skills. The predicament created by this contextual change is that, while the discursive language and institutional setting of biblical studies appear as hopelessly outdated and inefficient, this tradition has to be renovated in order to survive in the new environment. Four liminal spaces within and at the borders of biblical studies are singled out for such a renovation.

The first area that I critically discussed was the historicist approach in biblical studies. This approach is especially relevant since it is not only the single most important approach in the emergence of biblical studies as a modern academic discourse, but because historicist rationality is still the hegemonic language in the public sphere of the modernised nation-state — hence a *sine qua non* of political intelligibility — and because historicism defines itself precisely as a discourse that grounds itself on the respect of the other as an ethical imperative. I went on to show that the latter imperative was dreadfully betrayed and shown to be merely a pretence when historicism developed a complicity with modern colonialism. The historiographical project of the Subaltern Studies group, however, proved to be a viable attempt to redeem historicism as an ethico-politically valuable discourse within a more general postcolonial project. As reconceived by Subaltern Studies, historicism would not only privilege the subaltern as a meaningful agent of its historicist narratives, but would also ultimately push this approach to its limits in order to open it up to the irreducible other. But can such historicism still retain its dominant position within biblical studies?

Ordinary and popular readings of the bible are practiced in a sphere which is not only emerging as important to the survival of biblical studies, but also as a desirable field of influence. The relationship of the discipline with this sphere, however, has traditionally been problematic. This is because the classical mode of intervention in this sphere has been to dismiss most — if not all — of these ordinary and popular readings as misreadings, and propagate the allegedly only “true” reading as its own historicist interpretation. It will be difficult to deny that the contemporary functioning of the bible in society at large is influenced by the contemporary determinations that shape and configure the bible as a specific text, rather than the contextual determinations at the time when the biblical texts came into being.

Consequently, it is the contemporary determinations that are in need of modification and should, therefore, gain a position of theoretical and critical priority over against more traditional concerns with the text’s historical meaning. I have discussed such a theoretical model, informed by poststructuralism and postcolonial analyses of the colonial encounter, in dialogue with Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Gerald West. Subsequently, I suggested understanding the discourse of interpretation as the political economy of bids and counter-bids for the ownership of the bible as powerful symbol. The role of the biblical scholar would not only be to understand this economy, but also to intervene through a double strategy that participates in these ordinary practices and, at the same time, disrupts and subverts them when they are deemed to be supporting oppressive structures. Again, the poor and marginalised other is strategically privileged. The role of the biblical scholar here is to facilitate the ownership of the bible by these communities through providing the expertise that makes it possible for the disenfranchised to begin participating. More importantly though, the interfaces between the biblical scholar and the subaltern have the potential to open up a space where irreducible heterogeneity may be encountered and therefore the identity of the hegemonic scholar may be transformed.

I pointed out a further liminal space in the literary approaches to the bible. Understanding the search for the proper *locus* of the reader — in or outside the text — as the search for the transformative potential of the text, I went on to juxtapose the radical neopragmatic approach of Stanley Fish with Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction. The former, I argued, demystifies the notion of the essential text-in-itself and thus opens up the discourse of biblical studies to issues of communal constructions and interests. The problem, however, would be that while attention is drawn to the socio-political stakes of interpretation, this



theory does not provide any critical strategy for change. Deconstruction, by contrast, retains a strong interest in the socio-political stakes of interpretation, but offers a double strategy that is able to relate to the more traditional disciplinary concern of a close reading of the bible. Alterity is no longer sought in some exteriority of the text, but in the fissures and cracks, which are discovered in a close reading. These fissures and cracks provide the liminal space in which hegemonic reading formations can be subverted.

Finally, I focused on the institutional consequences that a deconstructive double strategy would call for. They would affect, first of all, the relationship between the professor/lecturer and the student, but also the relations among the scholars, and the negotiation of the discipline's aims, focus, and ethos. Students would no longer be the passive recipients of methodical skills, which would transform them into ideal scientific readers of the bible. Rather, students would learn to begin to critically understand their own reading formation and the reading formations of fellow students. The plurality of identity and reading formations that characterise contemporary classrooms would provide the space where differing approaches could contest and challenge one another, and thereby expose one another to an alterity, which has the potential to transform. In discussing a proposal by Stephen Fowl, I argue that "justice" could still function as a guiding concept for the future of the profession, though this justice would have to be a justice-to-come, an eschatological event that has to disrupt the horizon of expectation. This justice would be, again in a Levinasian substitution, the other.

It will have become clear by now that what is proposed in this thesis cannot be an ethics or politics in the traditional understanding of these concepts. No ethico-political programme, however radical in design, can guarantee the transformation of a hegemonic identity discourse. I have, however, aimed at being radical in the aforementioned double sense — in interacting with the ontological roots of the hegemonic western discourse (radical as *radix*) and in pushing traditional practices to their extreme. This thesis can merely provide a gesture, which fights against any totalising closure, even if such a totalisation be put forward in the name of a liberative ethics or politics itself.

At the root of my argumentation lies a deeply felt passion for the impossible, which is also, at the same time, a passion for the necessary. However, one aspect of the reinvention of the white male biblical scholar has had to remain outside the scope of this thesis, even though it has been present, so to speak, as an undercurrent. There are significant elements in Derrida's conceptualisation that stand in a (only recently acknowledged) dialogue with or

relation to a more mystical strand of Judeo-Christian theology.<sup>3</sup> This is the result of a passion for the other as truly transcendent and unrepresentable. It is a relation that is not irreconcilable with my own Anabaptist and Reformed background. I am left, however, with the need to think through this alliance more thoroughly. Even if deconstruction urges for more caution in the naming of the justice to come as “God”, for fear of submitting this justice to Hellenistic essentialism, there is a passion with which this justice is sought, a messianic hope, an eschatological prayer that puts much of my argument in a particularly succinct manner: Come! *Nai, erchomai tachy. Amēn, erchou...*

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<sup>3</sup> This “alliance” — and one will not be able to push this relationship further — is powerfully argued by Caputo, *The prayers and tears*.

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