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The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective

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The Postmodern Bible. The Bible and Culture Collective (George Aichele et al.). New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. Index, bibliography. xiii + 398 pages.

A book is its readings; beyond that, a book is like "reality," namely, that "which we cannot see when we are looking at it," to use an apt

expression by Niklas Luhmann. It is that which lays beyond our powers of calling into question or going beyond our most deeply rooted prejudices and beliefs. It is also, and perhaps most importantly, that which lies beyond our ability or inability to challenge certain "interpretative institutions/strategies." (Interpretation has a geography—cartography—that reveals where power is located; reality is that which is off limits—of course only to some.) Reality, thus, could be thought of as that which resists the cold gaze of the critical look that would like to undermine the fortress of bigotry, to paraphrase a character in Umberto Eco's recent novel. Reality, like the rest of a book, that which we think lies beyond its readings, is a dangerous supplement. This supplement, or surplus, is dangerous because it can be appealed to as an alibi or as a *quid pro quo*. Whoever, or whatever, abrogates for *himself* (and the fact is that historically, institutionally, etc., men have been the ones authorized to interpret, to abrogate for themselves the power to name the difference and the real) the authority to discriminate between the reading part, the part that is mere gloss or commentary, from the part that is "real," also abrogates for *himself* the authority to approve, allow, certain readings—after all, he/they are the last court of appeal about the "validity" of the reading in question, the reading under judgment (in *The Postmodern Bible*, see p. 207 on the "real" and "reality"). There is no book that is more its readings (and thus, its misreadings), and the institutions that authorize these readings, than the Bible. This is what I take *The Postmodern Bible* to be about.

The Postmodern Bible is an incredible (a further proliferation of superlatives would reverse the message that is being communicated, namely that this is an outstanding contribution to the field) work of committed scholarship. It will unquestionably become an indispensable resource to all persons who in one way or another are readers (as well as writers) of the Bible(s). Furthermore, this is a work that, in its execution does as it preaches. Among one of the many things that has been imputed to "postmodernity" is the death of the subject and the author (a profoundly misunderstood imputation). The different people involved in the "Bible and Culture Collective" have taken a very courageous and admirable step and have demonstrated in *actu* that the postmodern death of the subject and the author entails neither the obliteration of subjectivity, agency, and norms, nor the frivolous celebration of ludic and narcissistic arbitrariness (an accusation often leveled at Derrida, et al.). Most importantly, they have proven that a "reader" is always already a "writer" and that a "writer" creates, rather, calls forth its readers. *The Postmodern Bible* is, therefore, about how we are constituted as "readers" by certain strategies of interpretation, and thus, about how "spaces of subjectivity and agency" are either em-

powered or disempowered. This book is about, above all, how the Bible(s) is, has been, and will be; its readings and misreadings; and the practices, institutions, that authorize and/or legitimate certain reading strategies. Similarly, instead of engaging in fruitless and scholastic disputation about the meaning of postmodernism, the "collective," once again in *actu*, has demonstrated that postmodernism/postmodern is less a fiction of certain fashionable French intellectuals, and more an already existing condition not only in the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the humanities), but also in our society at large—the postmodern *is* a condition that reflects its hybrid, heterogenous, decentered character (not to say nature).

The Postmodern Bible is divided into seven chapters, plus an introduction, a postscript, and a lengthy bibliography. The chapters deal with seven different reading and/or interpretative strategies, practices, formats, etc.: reader-response, structuralist, post-structuralist, rhetorical, psychoanalytical, feminist and womanist, and ideological. Each chapter is, more or less, divided into an introduction of the main characteristics of the particular interpretative practices, the profiling of several of its representative figures, how they differ, critiques to this movement from other perspectives, or figures, the future of the particular movement, and an annotated bibliography of the main texts pertaining to this reading practice. However, notwithstanding this already excellent layout, the book becomes more useful when each chapter is introduced with a particular biblical passage and how it would be read by the reading strategy in question. This entwinement of the theoretical and the practical, in the sense of the theoretical underpinning of a literary perspective and its execution, make *The Postmodern Bible* an accessible, useful, fundamental work of reference, and, simultaneously, a work of intervention and debate in the discipline or field. To use an expression of William James, the "cash-value" or "pragmatic" import of these new (already not so new) interpretative paradigms is made evident in their being deployed and utilized in the reading/writing of particular passages of the Bible. With this comment in mind, I would like to both celebrate and thank the "collective" for providing us with such a wonderful feat of synthesis, translation, process, and exemplification (this disproves the claim that any kind of postmodern proposal must be an offer that cannot be understood, as the joke goes). From this stems, I believe, one of the most impressive characteristics of this work and what I would like to call its "hermeneutical generosity," a fundamental presupposition of all communication, so often, unfortunately, missing in real events of social interaction. Each and every interpretative strategy or practice is seriously considered and analyzed. The criticisms, precisely because they arise immanently, are the most

effective and thus positive; that is, criticism is brought to bear in order to further the reading, and not to knock it down. Throughout the entire text there is an incredible, if this comparison is allowed, sense of urgency and danger, but also of gentleness and calmness. Once again, *The Postmodern Bible* has demonstrated in *actu* that every reading (and misreading) calls for and presupposes an ethics of reading (or its fracture and violation). Reading, as well as the writing that flows from it, is an eminently ethical act. For, at the root of it, there is the imperative to communicate about something that was, is, and will be, and which has consequences for how we call each other to engagement with our times, with ourselves, with our traditions, with our faiths, with a message that continues to move and inspire. This book begins with the truism that "the Bible has exerted more cultural influence on the West than any other single document" (1), but goes on to show that its power resides in its readings (or misreadings): who, how, when, and for whom is this "book" read as the "bible" are fundamental ethical-political-economic matters. In the "collective's" words: "reading and interpretative strategies are socially, politically, and institutionally situated and they draw their energy and force from the subject positions of readers and interpreters" (267). I would add that reading strategies and practices entail cartographies, mappings, of power and gerrymandering; they gentrify, they exclude and include while relegating others to the periphery, to the borders of authority and legitimacy. For this reason (glossing R. Barthes), "there are no neutral, innocent readings; every reading is an ethical and ultimately political act" (p. 135). And, less innocent and more complicit are those readings that would like us to believe in the illusion of the dangerous supplement, i.e., the real book, the "real."

I would like to conclude with a series of remarks that are to be taken less as criticisms and more as friendly amendments or suggestions. With respect to the contributions of semiotics to biblical studies: the important work of Karl-Otto Apel in the area of 'transcendental semiotics' ought to be taken into consideration, especially if one recognizes that Apel's marriage of hermeneutics, semiotics (in the tradition of Peirce and Morris), and ordinary language philosophy (late Wittgenstein, Searle, and Austin) stands behind the development of one of the most suggestive proposals in contemporary moral theory, namely discourse ethics (generally associated with Habermas without acknowledgement of Apel's creative and original contribution). A student of Apel, Habermas, and Helmut Peukert, Edmund Arens has already done extensive work on the consequences of transcendental semiotics (Apel) and universal pragmatics (Habermas) for systematic theology. Arens has been able to do this type of translation from phi-

losophy into theology while keeping in mind the important contributions of Latin American and African liberation theologies (see especially his *Bezeugen und Bekennen: Elementare Handlungen des Glaubens. Beiträge zur Theologie und Religionswissenschaft* [Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1989] and *Christopraxis* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995]). With respect to the contributions of psychoanalytic theory, one of the fundamental insights not only of Freud but also, and especially, of women psychoanalysts is that of the imbrication of the constitution and/or construction of self with a "sacrificial logics." However, the sacrificial logics presupposed by the founding of pseudo-autonomous, solipsistic cognitive machines is not only grounded in the sacrifice of the Other as women, but also of the Other as the colonized, the despised savage, the coveted Amerindian, African, Asian women, who is the object of the "I Conquer" behind Pizarro's and Cortes' war of colonization. The works of Franz Hinkelammert, Enrique Dussel, Tzvetan Todorov, Richard C. Drexler, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, and others are points of reference in this regard. Finally, with regard to the relationship between Freud and "critical theory," in fact, as a localizing gesture, the members of the collective seemed to have been more influenced by the French than any other group: while Freud has had a very fruitful reception in France (Lacan, Deleuze and Guatarri, Irigaray, etc.), there has been an equally important reception of Freud in Germany (Fromm, Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, and more recently Habermas, who has brought together Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg [see the excellent work by Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists* (New York: Blackwell, 1994)]. Their U.S. students include Joel Whitebook, Jessica Benjamin, Seyla Benhabib, and Thomas McCarthy). Indeed, had I been part of the "collective" I would have argued for an "eighth" chapter on "Frankfurt Critical Theory," with discussions of Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Bloch, Habermas, and some members of the third generation (Benhabib and Honneth).

Eduardo Mendieta