An Essay on Method

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This is a purely theoretical intervention, focusing on the question of textual interpretation. Not only theoretical, it is also an unashamedly reflexive essay, which seeks to clarify and systematise what I actually do when I interpret texts. Ultimately, the exercise of interpretation operates by means of hunches that one then seeks to justify, either by means of a theoretical elaboration as I do here, or by means of a reading of the text that attempts to back up those hunches. What follows is an effort to provide some systematic coherence to the way my own hunches work. Such hunches are often triggered by a curious moment in a text, one that makes me pause and look away, allowing a train of thought to run its course. Then I return to the text with those stray thoughts in mind, waiting for yet another trigger to send my mind running. But hunches are not sufficient as a method, so I seek to verify these hunches by means of rigorous analysis. The following four points comprise the key elements of that analysis.

They may be summarised as follows. The first sets the scene, arguing that methods are triggered by efforts to deal with the anomalies produced and presented by texts. These methods include allegory; historical arguments concerning putative sources; poststructuralist solutions; questions of gender, ethnicity and sexuality; Marxist approaches; and so on. For the remaining aspects of the method preferred here, I draw on Marxist-inspired approaches, since they provide greater sophistication and enable different voices to speak. Thus, in the second point I seek to be methodologically explicit about the inevitable anachronism of any method we may use, especially with regard to ancient texts. Instead of throwing up our hands in despair or simply ignoring the problem, I suggest that a viable method needs to incorporate that necessary anachronism within the method itself by means of a narrative of difference. Third, against the assumption that texts reflect their contexts or that they express political and ideological agendas of their putative authors, this approach sees texts as metaphorically complex, unexpected and dialectical responses that attempt to overcome real political and economic contradictions. Finally, I seek to be explicit concerning the axiological moment of interpretation. In my approach, that moment engages in the practice of ideological suspicion, albeit with a particular emphasis. This is what may be called discernment, drawing from the initial sense of critical (κριτικός) as a need to discern what is beneficial and what is detrimental in any reading of a text. In the end, this
structured formulation is an attempt to systematise the way I explicate certain
hunches that arise when first reading a text. The following begins by situating
this method in light of the anomaly, from which I explain the reasons for opt-
ing for a Marxist-inspired approach.

Anomaly

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a
free woman. But the one from the slave was born according to the flesh,
the one from the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory
(συλληγορούμενα): these women are two covenants.

GAL. 4:22–24

I suggest that the problem of the anomaly underlies most, if not all, of the
bewildering array of methods and interpretations of texts. The anomaly is, obvi-
ously, what does not fit into a text in any known manner, what causes a dis-
turbance in the narrative or poetic scheme. Let me use the example of biblical
interpretation. The great precursors to modern biblical criticism, the medieval
allegorists, took the anomaly in one direction, passing through the figure of
Christ, into the inner life of the believer, and then out into the realm of uni-
versal history: the well-known literal (or historical), allegorical (or typological),
moral (or tropological) and anagogic levels of interpretation.1 The allegorists
seized upon one textual anomaly after another; these anomalies then became
the keys that unlocked whole new vistas of meaning. The anomaly in ques-
tion may be a hitch in the story-line, a word out of place, or perhaps a syn-
tactical blip, but it is the crucial signal that a deeper meaning lay hidden. The
possible examples are myriad, such as the interpretation of the escape of the
Israelites from Egypt as allegories of the life of Christ who moves from death
to life, of the individual believer who passes from sin to salvation, and of the

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1 As Honorius of Autun put it: "Sacred Scripture is interpreted and understood in four ways:
historically, allegorically, tropologically, anagogically. This is expressed by the table for the
presentation of bread in the ark (Exod. 25:29ff.), which is supported by four feet. The ark
represents the Church, in which service is rendered to Christ. The table is sacred Scripture,
upon which bread is presented, that is, the food of souls. The four feet are the four kinds of
meaning, that is to say: history when the thing referred to is narrated as it happened; allegory,
when the thing referred to is expounded with reference to Christ and the Church; tropol-
ogy, when it is applied to soul and spirit; anagogy when it is understood of the celestial life" (Norris 2003: xix).
people of God who are on the path to heaven from this vale of tears. Or the spiritual and ecclesiological interpretations of the Song of Songs as an allegory of Christ's love for Israel, the Church, or the individual believer, down to the breasts mentioned in Song 4:5 functioning as an allegory for the Old and New Testaments (Norris 2003). Or the interpretation of Jonah and the “big fish,” in which every moment of Jonah’s life becomes a signal of a comparable one in Jesus’s life (Sherwood 2000: 11–21). From here, Jonah and the great fish also become an allegory for the life of the individual believer, who was once dead in sin but through Christ has a new life. Interpretation then moves onto the grand scheme of history, where Jonah’s time of submarine transport (or at times the ship itself) becomes a sign of the collective of the faithful who, after the history of life on earth, enter into heaven at the close of that history.

The crucial role of the anomaly is not restricted to allegorical interpretation, as a brief survey of more recent methods indicates. For historical critics, anomalies signal a vast history of the text that lay hidden but for the hints that those breaks provide. Thus we are presented with all manner of sources that came together in the text we now have. The anomalies become signs of the editorial seams, where the former texts have been chopped up, rearranged, and linked together. For example, with Genesis 1–3, a text on which historical criticism first cut its teeth, the initial anomaly of the differing names for God (Elohim in Gen. 1:1–2:3 and Yahweh Elohim in Gen. 2:4–3:24) led eventually to a fully articulated hypothesis of sources (Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly). Once one has “sources” (whether written or oral), one has to come up with a theory for their combination and editing, and so we find the full elaboration of a complex method called historical criticism with its various branches, especially source, form, and redaction (tradition-historical) criticism, as well as a few contributors such as archaeology and the social sciences. An extraordinary amount of energy has been and continues to be devoted to this over-arching method, but my point is that it arose and was elaborated in response to the anomaly—or rather, in response to a whole collection of anomalies that focused on the inconsistencies, breaks, overlaps, contradictions, different ideologies and various styles of the Hebrew Bible.

Despite its criticisms of historical criticism, feminist biblical analysis too trades in the anomaly. The difference is that the anomaly shifts ground. Many feminists continue to accept historical criticism as a base method, but the problem now becomes one of the overwhelming and multi-layered patriarchal nature of both text and interpretation. Often, the response to that anomaly, especially if one is committed to a religious institution, has been to seek other anomalies in the text where the myriad patriarchal structures show up their inconsistencies. In our example from Genesis 1–3, various anomalies have turned
up, but I would like to focus on Phyllis Trible’s argument (Trible 1978) here. She tried to reclaim the text for feminists by focusing on another anomaly: the first human being turns out to be an undifferentiated “earth creature,” Adam. Only when the woman is created from this creature’s side is there differentiation between man (וֹHonda) and woman (יְנוֹHonda). Much more has, of course, been written on Genesis 1–2, but my point is that feminist analysis in its increasingly diverse forms is an effort to deal with anomalies. Yet, note what has happened: the anomaly shifts ground depending on the assumptions of the method in question. If historical criticism seeks to account for breaks in the text by means of sources, redaction, communities, and scribal schools, then feminist analysis focuses on the inconsistencies and contradictions of the overarching patriarchal nature of the texts and their interpreters.

As for deconstruction, for all the challenges that it may have provided to the coherence of texts and their interpretations, it too draws its inspiration from the anomaly. It picks at the inconsistencies and incoherencies in texts, showing how they betray their various exclusions and blind spots. Let me use once again the example of the early chapters of Genesis, now in terms of the anomaly of paradise. Why, in a world in which human beings may freely eat of any tree without work and where they stroll with God and chat in the evenings, is there a central flaw? Simply put, if one were to create paradise, why place within it the mechanism for its own demise? It really is the anomaly with any “golden age,” as David Jobling demonstrates: rather than attempting to deal with this contradiction theoretically (it would not be a “golden age” if human beings did not have freewill), in terms of narrative necessity (we would not have a story if they didn’t get on with eating from the tree), or even existentially (it would be incredibly boring in such a paradise), a deconstructive approach points out that paradise could not exist without such a flaw (Jobling 1994).

A similar situation exists with psychoanalytic criticism, where the anomaly becomes the constitutive exception: that which is excluded is precisely what enables the story to exist in the first place. Thus, in Genesis 1–3 we find different versions of this constitutive exception: the paradox of loss, with paradise becoming possible only at the moment of its loss (you do not know what you have got until it is gone); the afterthought of the creation of woman that actually makes her crucial to the whole system; the empty gesture that the man and woman have a choice but actually do not; and the inherent transgression of eating the fruit that seems to be lamentable and undesirable but is built into

2 I provide only representative examples here.
3 See especially the response to Trible by Micke Bal in Bal 1987: 104–130.
the story itself (Boer 2006). Or, for queer criticism, the anomaly lies in the apparent heterosexism of a text (as much in its use for reading as in the text itself) that comes from a vastly different production of gender and sexuality. Thus, the androgyne lurks in the text that states "male and female God created them" (Gen. 1:27), as also in the undifferentiated "Adam" of Genesis 2 (queer criticism often overlaps with feminist criticism). Indeed, this image of "egalitarian" sexuality stands in stark contrast to the post-lapsarian world of patriarchal domination, with its utilitarian and hierarchical order (Carden 2006: 26–30).

For Marxist approaches, the anomaly takes yet another form. Thus, with our sample text of Genesis 1–3, Gale Yee argues that it exhibits a narrative tension that points to a deeper economic one (Yee 2003: 60–63). Thus, in the verse, "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24), we find an agenda that favours the nuclear family. Yee reads this text as an explicit agenda by the new kingship under Solomon to break the social, cultural, and economic allegiances to the older tribal structures and the paterfamilias. If one had primary loyalties to the clan, then the king would come a poor second. If the king was primary, then clan allegiances would start to break down. In this light, nuclear families would be far more likely to support the king. Deeper down, however, is a conflict of economic systems: if the clan embodied the "familial mode of production," in which "family household was the basic socioeconomic unit," then the king sought to impose a tributary mode of production, in which tribute and loyalty was due to the king (Yee 2003: 61). By now my point is expected: the anomaly may have shifted, but an anomaly it still is. The difference is that the anomaly in the text—why a nuclear family?—becomes a signal of a tension at a social and economic level. While they might differ on precisely how to read texts, Marxists share the assumption that the various anomalies in the text—whether in terms of form, the patterns of language, or indeed the content of conflicting ideologies—point to contradictions and tensions in the underlying economic systems.

Clearly, the anomaly in its varying forms is a crucial feature for each of the methods I have discussed. Yet, not all approaches are created equal. My preference is for a Marxist-inspired approach, for reasons I will explicate in a moment. Such an approach finds itself in the midst of multiple other methods of interpretation, among which it both realises its limits and provides a means for incorporating their insights. Indeed, this point leads to a preliminary reason for my preference, since the expansive nature of Marxism means that it provides a means for including the insights of other methods. Even more, the unashamedly totalising nature of Marxism is precisely the means for enabling other voices and approaches to have their say.
Anachronism

It is gross ethnocentrism to assume that the monk, the feudal lord, the Inca priest-king, the commissar, and the Trobriand islander are directed in their material lives to abide by the same market rules that drive the London stockbroker and the Iowa wheat farmer.

DALTON 1971: XXVIII; CF. DANILOVA 1971: 274

A crucial contribution of a Marxist-inspired approach is that it enables one to deal with the inescapable issue of methodological anachronism. In bibli- cal criticism, anachronism often turns up via an objection in the turf wars between historical-critical approaches and what are variously called “newer literary” approaches or even (with a profound misunderstanding of the term) “postmodern” approaches—these include a disparate collection running all the way from Marxist methods to postcolonial or queer analysis. In this context, traditional historical-critical scholars object that “newer” methods (although they now date from the 1970s) impose modern categories on an ancient text and are, therefore, invalid. The assumption behind this objection is that historical-critical or archaeological or even social scientific methods are not anachronistic, that they are approaches appropriate to the biblical texts, their histories, and their contexts.

This assumption relies on a curious blind spot, for the supposedly historically sensitive methods championed by those who make the charge of anachronism are equally anachronistic. In short, all the methods we use have an inbuilt or structural anachronism that is produced by our very different mode of production with its ideological assumptions. This structural anachronism occurs in the very act of studying the past in the various ways we do so, for that act and our assumptions about a “past” that must be studied in certain ways assume notions about the past that are produced by the condition from which we study. However, I would take this a step further and argue that precisely those approaches assumed to be historically sensitive to these ancient texts or economic conditions are the most anachronistic of all, since their practitioners do not see the structural anachronism at work in the methods they champion.

How do we escape the net? The best way to do so is to build an awareness of that anachronism into the theory one is using. The theory proposed should—in a scale of increasing intensity—at all times be aware that it is engaged in an anachronistic task, that such anachronism is a necessary feature of any analysis of ancient societies, and that one structures the theory in order to include such anachronism in its very workings. The first two items (awareness and
necessity) may be achieved easily enough, but the question of structure is a little more challenging.

I suggest that we approach it in the following manner: the theory in question should include a narrative of difference. Both terms are vital. By narrative, I mean an account of the vast distance travelled in time between the socio-economic and ideological context we are investigating and the one from which we undertake such investigation. That ever-present narrative, which is always contested, rewritten, and contested again, means we have perpetually before us the distance from those ancient societies and their texts. By difference, I mean precisely that the narrative produces a profound sense of the difference between our own social formation and that of the texts we seek to study. Through that persistent difference is the issue of anarchism inescapably foregrounded. Yet this narrative of difference is more dialectically complex than it at first seems, for we may, hypothetically, find elements that seem exceedingly familiar—from gender to economic forms and literary production—but the way they are structured, their relationships to one another, the patterns of dominance and subordination, and their determining forms of social relations, are unfamiliar. At this point, the narrative of difference has its most difficult task.

The approaches that embody such narratives of difference within their workings are mostly Marxist-inspired. Let me give two examples. The first is G. E. M. de Ste. Croix's *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981), which is significant for the wholesale deployment of Marxist class theory in order to make sense of the social and economic tensions in the millennium from the beginnings of Greek dominance to the end of the Eastern Roman Empire. Crucially, Ste. Croix develops his argument through an exhaustive analysis of ancient Greek texts. But his real value is that the theory upon which he bases his work includes precisely that structural presence of distance, difference, and anarchism that I seek. How so? Marxist theory makes use of a continually contested and reformulated narrative of modes of production, a narrative that emphasizes the vast distances and continuities between the different economic structures throughout history. By that means, a theoretical approach that was first developed in order to analyse the workings of capitalism is able to be aware of its own anarchisms as it is applied to ancient and very non-capitalist social formations. The secret is that through its account of the beginnings and then dominance of capitalism, it shows the way that capitalism differs from all that has gone before it. Thus, it is able to develop new categories of analysis that maintain structurally the awareness of difference.
A similar point applies to the Marxist-inspired régulation theory, which I and Christina Petterson have used extensively in our reconstruction of the economies of ancient Southwest Asia and the Mediterranean (Boyer and Saillard [eds.] 2002; Jessop and Sum 2006; Boer 2015; Boer and Petterson 2017). It too includes within its structure a narrative of difference. For the régulation theorists, each mode of production, if not each regime of régulation (a period of relative stability within a mode of production), is qualitatively different from the others, whether those that have existed before, those that exist side by side, or those that absorb others within itself. Thus, the distinct culture and set of institutions and relations established within a mode of production attempt to deal with a set of problems in a way that marks it off from others. Now it becomes interesting and thoroughly dialectical, for it is precisely through such qualitative changes that the system is reproduced. Thus, for Michel Aglietta, the study of régulation “is the study of the transformation of social relations as it creates new forms that are both economic and non-economic, that are organized in structures and themselves reproduce a determinant structure, the mode of production” (Aglietta 2000:16). In other words, not only are these qualitative differences constitutive of the system in question, but they mark the structural presence of the narrative of difference.

Responsive Metaphorisation

Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.

Althusser 1971: 165

Beyond the structural presence of anachronism via a narrative of difference, a deeper insight provided by a Marxist approach concerns the relations between texts and their contexts. I suggest that texts may be understood as ideological answers to social and economic questions, which we do not always have or of which we are not necessarily aware. The catch is that the answers are rarely, if ever, direct, for the answers offered by texts attempt to resolve the socio-economic tensions in a way that leaves all manner of traces in the texts. The reason these traces survive is that an ideological response is never able to resolve a real, social tension. Obviously, this approach challenges two approaches common in biblical criticism: (1) texts reflect their contexts in a relatively unproblematic fashion; and (2) they express the political and religious agenda—pious propaganda—of their unknown authors. As for the first approach, little has changed for over a century. Since biblical texts reflect their contexts, they are
assumed to provide more or less reliable evidence of that context so that one may read evidence directly from them. The second, increasingly common, approach argues that biblical texts are politico-religious tracts produced to assert different political positions. Produced much later than the events they purport to describe, the texts tend to be historically unreliable since they are primarily ideological, although they may give indirect insights into the later contexts in which they were written. This latter approach is more characteristic of those who write of the political dimensions of biblical narrative, although it may be traced back in the modern era to Morton Smith’s *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (1972).

A more sophisticated approach to the issue of texts and contexts has three features. The first is the Marxist notion of the “relatively autonomous” character of the cultural-ideological instance with respect to the economic. As Louis Althusser famously observed, the economy may be the determinant of all others, but only “in the last instance.” In other words, the domains of life—politics, law, culture, ideology, religion, and so on—are sufficiently autonomous so that they are not pre-determined by the economic. Althusser continues:

> In History, these instances, the superstructures, etc.—are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes.

*Althusser 1977: 113*

Althusser offers a delicate dialectic of the relation between elements of the superstructure and the economic “last instance.” The economy is always present, always striding through history, but it never silences the voices of the superstructure. These voices may be related to the economic base, but the lonely hour of economic explanation never utters the last word. That is to say, while the various domains of a mode of production (in which the dynamic of base and superstructure operates) may be autonomous to some extent, they are never entirely autonomous, for they are part of a much larger whole. Hence, they are semi-autonomous, relating to one another in all manner of indirect fashions.

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4 This cure is particularly prevalent among archaeologists, see, for instance, Stager 1985; Dever 2001; Day (ed.) 2004; Ackerman 2008.

5 What follows is a summary of a fuller explication in Boer 2015.
The second feature explicated what Althusser's argument means for literature. It begins with the observation that texts metaphorise their situations. By this I mean the production of metaphorical relations—often contradictory—to the political and economic situation in which texts are produced. The basis of metaphorisation is straightforward: speaking, thinking, and writing are saturated by metaphors of the dominant socio-economic systems. Indeed, metaphorisation is a crucial signal of such dominance. For example, under capitalism human relations are often cast in terms of economic relations and the market—competition, survival of the fittest, individual entrepreneurship; in short, a metaphorisation of the market. In the Bible, by contrast, we find a different set of metaphors. The images of ideal gardens, fertility, merchant kings, bands of a patron's thugs, Sabbaths, and kinship function as complex metaphors of the social and economic situation.

How is this different from texts "reflecting" their contexts, albeit with a little more sophistication? It seems like perfect common sense. The possible range of our imagination is limited by the socio-economic context in which we live, along with the inherited metaphors that have found their place in this new context. Here another dimension of my approach enters into play, for one always operates with a healthy dose of ideological suspicion—deployed with devastating brilliance by Ernst Bloch and the Frankfurt School (Bloch 1995, 2009; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). That suspicion leads one to suspect that this process of metaphorisation is never direct, so that it becomes difficult to read images of the political and economic situation directly from texts. And it ensures that one is always suspicious of arguments that texts express the conscious politico-religious agenda of their authors. Here subconscious and unnoticed features play a larger role, as do structural and linguistic elements in the way written language is constructed. Most of the time, they know not what they do.

The reason that texts have little idea of what they are doing is that textual responses to their contexts are often unexpected, precisely because they are semi-autonomous. They may metaphorise their context, but they do so in unanticipated and indirect ways. For instance, a story of kinship or tribal conflict does not necessarily mean a text comes from a tribal situation. The text's tribal world may be an imaginary creation in a different context, perhaps to provide an alternate model of human relations or distribution of resources. Similarly, the detailed images of idyllic gardens, from Genesis to the Song of Songs, may seem to provide an alternative picture from life as it might be, a world in which exploitation, debt, and violence are absent. But they may also express the idealized image of palatine and temple estates, in which food is apparently produced without labour, thereby effacing the actual role of indentured labour.
in those estates. More significantly, contradictions embodied in narratives of disobedience and rebellion, or in structural breaks as in the story of Cain and Abel, may give voice not so much to arguments over different social formations as to impossible contradictions at a socio-economic level.

All of this brings me to the third feature, which may be described as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. The idea derives from Lévi-Strauss (1989: 249–56), although he formulated it through the inspiration of Marx. The key is that problematic and irresolveable socio-economic tensions show up indirectly in the cultural products of a society, whether art, literature, festivals, and, in our day, film, television, internet, and so on. These cultural products set out to resolve the tensions in many different ways. To give a few examples, a story may appear to concern family struggles, the recovery of a long-lost brother, subsequent enslavement and liberation, but it does so by means of a structural tension between estates and subsistence agriculture (Joseph versus Moses). Or a text—Job—may lift cries up to God for undeserved suffering, but its formal structure (prologue-epilogue versus poetry) speaks of the cyclical destruction and recovery of landlord estates and the laments of a landlord at his unfortunate lot. Or, the ethical oppositions in Proverbs may speak of the higher calling of wisdom, humility, and righteousness, but the ethical oppositions that structure the text are actually saturated with class assumptions. Clearly, textual and thereby cultural responses are myriad rather than singular.

Suspicion and Discernment

Blithely ignorant of the gunpowder they are handling (ohne Ahnung solchen Sprengpulvers).

Bloch 2009: 29

Thus far I have explored the structural presence of anachronism, and the unexpected nature of metaphorisation in response to socio-economic contradictions. There remains the unavoidable axiological moment of interpretation, in which ideological suspicion and discernment are crucial. However, before I explain how they work, some preliminary ground-clearing is needed. Such an

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6 It was subsequently framed in Althusserian language and mediated by Fredric Jameson (Althusser 1971: 127–86; Jameson 1988: 77–80). Lévi-Strauss's famous example concerns the conflicting axes of facial art among the Caduveo tribe in Brazil. This was, he argues, an effort to overcome the social tensions generated by the lack of moieties, which would otherwise have mitigated the caste system among that tribe.
The axiological dimension assumes that one never reads a text from a neutral political position—a point that, sadly, still needs to be reiterated. The argument that one should not be political or "ideological"—in the name of "scholarly" or "scientific" research—is a default option for the status quo. As Wallerstein puts it so well, the claim by academic disciplines to eschew any ideological or—God forbid—partisan features is really a process by which the Western world studies itself, explains its own functioning, the better to control what is happening (Wallerstein 2011: 264). This initial point is, of course, an exercise in ideological suspicion and discernment; to understand how they work more fully in relation to interpretation, I draw on the insights of Ernst Bloch (Bloch 1988: 163–85, 1995, 2009).

Literary interpretation is in many respects an exercise in ideological detective work. Once again, I take the example of the Bible, in which texts can be revolutionary and reactionary at the very same time. I mean not only the variety of texts, gathered over centuries, which compete with one another for political dominance. Even more, I mean that revolution and reaction, utopia and dystopia, are entwined within the very same text that one analyses. This requires a deeply dialectical approach to the task of literary detective work, an approach that comes to the fore in the treatment of myth.

Myth is neither pure false consciousness that needs to be unmasked nor a positive force without qualification. No matter how repressive, all myths, like ideology, have an emancipatory, if not utopian, dimension about them that cannot be separated so easily from deception and illusion. In the very process of manipulation and domination, one finds a utopian residue that has not been entirely incinerated in the white heat of reaction, an element that opens up other possibilities at the very point of failure (Kellner 1997). Although we need to be "wary of the mythical sphere in its entirety" (Bloch 1998: 296), particularly due to its abuse in terms of the Volk and the exclusive universal of liberalism (Losurdo 2011), myths also contain stories of murmuring, subversion, and rebellion, that is, the possibility for human beings to assert themselves with dignity against oppressors. If the Bible is not always folly to the rich, it is also the Church's bad conscience.

In order to see how this approach to literature is developed, I turn to Bloch's debate in with Rudolf Bultmann, the biblical scholar and theologian who proposed a program of demythologization of the Bible and theology (Bultmann 1952–55). For Bultmann, the Bible inescapably contains the forms of thought, language, and belief of the time in which its various parts were composed. Indeed, the dominant mode of expression was myth. Thus, for the gospel, the kerygma, to be meaningful in our situation, this mythological structure must be excised from the Church’s message. Bultmann had in mind not the accretions
to the central message: he urged that the basic components of Christianity derived from the New Testament—such as a three-tiered cosmos with heaven above and hell below, the miracles of Jesus (especially the empty tomb and the resurrection), the coming of the Holy Spirit and the return of Christ on the clouds at the end of history—should all be discarded as unworkable and unbelievable myths. This is only a basic list, but once the demythologizing task was complete, Bultmann called for a remythologization in terms of the contemporary patterns of thought, specifically the understanding of existentialism that had swept through European philosophy.

Bloch replies by arguing for both a dialectical reading of myth and a strategy of discernment. To begin with, myths should not all be lumped together as some “imbecility of the primeval forest” that human beings have now left in their sober maturity (Bloch 1998: 297). Some myths may well be discarded, since they speak of fear, ignorance, and superstition. But others should be treasured, such as the myths, legends, sagas, and fairy tales that give expression to the quality and wonder of nature. Above all, the myths that need to be retained are those that speak of transformation and liberation, of cunning heroes who win through a ruse, even of moments of rebellion. Indeed, a characteristic of mythology is that it attempts to negotiate potential threats to the established order. Are myths then full of liberation, a lost treasure of the revolutionary imagination that has been sadly neglected?

The answer is not so simple. Myths may contain myriad moments of challenge to and rebellion against the status quo, or at least the order that seeks to establish itself. But these stories almost always try to show how alternatives are not viable, how rebellion against the rulers will end up in punishment, torture, and cruel death. The story of Prometheus in Greek mythology is a good example, as is the account of the “Fall” in the Bible. Many others may be added to the list: the fatal conflict of Cain and Abel, where Cain is simultaneously banished and protected with the well-known mark; Jacob’s wrestling with God in Genesis 32; the rebellion of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11; the murmuring of the people in the wilderness against the oppressive deity of Moses and Aaron; the insurrections of Miriam, Moses’s sister, and Korah against that authority; the protests of Job against his inhuman treatment by this same Yahweh; the prophetic denunciations of economic maltreatment and religious hypocrisy; Jesus’s stringent criticisms of the quislings who would accommodate the Roman colonizers; and the fiery revolutionary protests of the Apocalypse against empire and its gods.

How are we to read these stories? I prefer to read them dialectically, “destroying and saving” them “in a single dialectical process” (Bloch 2009: 27). Simply put, we would not have these moments of insurrection without the
reactionary stories in which they are located. The accounts of control and suppression preserve and, indeed, encourage insurrection. For all their efforts to cast such rebellion as sin, as a challenge to the deity, and for all the dire punishments that might be meted out—expulsion from the garden, swallowing up by the earth or a collection of plagues, diseases and sheer divine destruction—these stories also maintain the very possibility of subversion in their very structure. Thus, we need to keep both the conformist and nonconformist elements of such stories, since their banishment discards their “joyful message,” the “deepest utopian theme” along with all that is oppressive (Bloch 1998: 300).

Yet at some point one must take sides. Here the discernment of texts appears once again, when one must exercise a “particularly sober and discerning mind” that does not take such texts at face value, without shades of difference (Bloch 2009: 27). This discernment is an effort to sort the wheat from the weeds, to find the moments of insurrection in the midst of reactionary oppression. All the same, it is easier than it appears to be. We cannot simply compile a list—progressive accounts in the “pro” column and reactionary ones in the “con” column. So often both are entwined with the very same account. Further, not all revolutions are the same: a “palace” revolution where one part of the ruling elite replaces another hardly makes a difference. And then revolutions have a knack of turning sour, for those who championed freedom turn with dismaying alacrity into oppressors themselves. What I seek, therefore, are the moments of insurrection that come from the proverbial “bottom up,” from those who are themselves downtrodden and represented as the rabble, the mob, the uneducated, and the poor. Only then can we make a start in clearly taking sides.

The Future?

I suggested earlier that a Marxist approach is unashamedly totalising, but this raises a question with ramifications for the future of biblical criticism. Does not such an approach, through its very totalising, close down other potential approaches? The issue is one of diversity, which has been a characteristic of biblical criticism since the 1970s. This diversity is not merely one of method, but also of location. As the collection called The Future of the Biblical Past (Boer and Segovia | eds.] 2012) noted, the North Atlantic dominance of biblical criticism is fading. One may use the terminology of “globalisation” to speak of such developments, but a sharper analysis indicates that it is precisely the period following the anti-colonial movements of the 1930s to the 1960s that generated
the conditions for this development. I will have more to say on this matter in a moment, but first let me examine the question of diversity.

We may opt for a liberal form of tolerance or diversity, in which individual voices are championed. These may be in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, psychoanalysis, and so on. The danger here is twofold. The first concerns the championing of “choice.” One may choose a particular identity, thereby freeing oneself from some form of determinism or essentialism. Freedom to choose is, of course, a leitmotiv of liberal ideology, in which the private individual is sacrosanct. Second, liberal ideology may argue that all are created free, but the category of “all” undergoes a crucial restriction, for not everyone is included. More specifically, liberal freedom is not so much limited in extent (entailing the need for extension of this freedom) but requires structurally geared exclusions to constitute “freedom.” So we find John Stuart Mill in On Liberty suggesting that “despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians,” since liberty is reserved for “human beings in the maturity of their faculties” (1859: 23, 22). Or when Thomas Jefferson opined in The Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” he did so as a slave owner—as also were the others involved in the declaration or indeed the Constitution of the United States. The examples could be multiplied many times, as Domenico Losurdo does very well in his Liberalism: A Counter-History (2011). But my point is that the liberal notion of “free choice”—which underlies a good number of moves in literary theory, cultural studies and biblical criticism—implicitly operates with a similar agenda.

The answer may well lie elsewhere, with what may be called the production of diversity out of unity. To gain a sense of this more dialectical approach, I turn to the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s. Here we find the development of the world’s first and most comprehensive “affirmative action” or—better—“positive action” program. This was focused on the many minority nationalities (or what would now be called “ethnic minorities”), fostering languages, cultural traditions, literature, education, economics, and governance (Martin 2001). The result was an extraordinary program, costing millions of roubles, that even brought some groups out of near oblivion to develop a clear identity. But I am interested in the way this program—obviously totalising and undertaken by a socialist state—generated hitherto unexpected diversity. Let me quote none other than Stalin on the question of language and nationalities:

Until now what has happened has been that the socialist revolution has not diminished but rather increased the number of languages; for, by stirring up the lowest sections of humanity and pushing them on to the
political arena, it awakens to new life a number of hitherto unknown or
little-known nationalities. Who could have imagined that the old, tsarist
Russia consisted of not less than fifty nations and national groups? The
October Revolution, however, by breaking the old chains and bringing a
number of forgotten peoples and nationalities on to the scene, gave them
new life and a new development.

Stalin 1954: 141

This development was unexpected (as were many other features, some of them
being significant problems that needed new solutions). Even more was the
anti-colonial struggle that grew out of the affirmative action program. By the
1930s, it became clear that the question of national (or ethnic) diversity was
not merely a matter for the Soviet Union itself: this was a global concern. So
we find a gradual realisation of the implications for struggles against European
imperialism in all parts of the world. This led to active support of anti-colonial
struggles, from Asia through Africa to South America, indeed wherever such
struggles began to take place. And the Soviet Union matched words with ac-
tions, providing arms, logistics, training, and technology to assist with strug-
gles. Not only did this action feed into the myth of communist aggression and
world dominance, but it also provided the conditions for what became post-
colonialism, in terms of both a period after colonialism and the theoretical
elaboration—the latter of which could begin only after 1989 and by effacing
this history (Peterson forthcoming).

Where does this leave us in thinking about the future of biblical criticism?
I am not, of course, suggesting that Marxist criticism should dominate around
the globe, since I prefer the Chinese approach in which each region has its
own specific historical features, generating conditions for different socio-econo-
ic, political, and cultural forms today. Instead, I would like to suggest that
one way forward may well be the emergence of an over-arching method to
biblical criticism that structurally generates diversity in a way that we have not
yet seen. As for what such an approach may be, it may be better to leave the
answer to history.

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