

INTERESTING AND INTERESTED READINGS:

Deconstruction, the Bible, and the South African context

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Abstract

In this essay I discuss a crucial debate in biblical hermeneutics: the debate between interesting and interested readings of the Bible. I am aware that this discussion is only one aspect of a wider discussion and that I totter on the brink of that black hole which is modern and postmodern literary criticism.

I begin by briefly outlining some recent shifts within biblical and literary hermeneutics. My discussion then considers two types of response to the crisis in hermeneutics which emerges from this overview. Throughout this discussion I use aspects of the discussions taking place in literary hermeneutics around deconstruction to illuminate the issues in biblical hermeneutics. I then analyze David Tracy's approach to the interpretation of the Bible in the light of the hermeneutic crisis and in the light of the two types of response to this crisis. Finally, I conclude by drawing together what I see to be some of the implications of this discussion for a liberative reading of the Bible in South Africa.

1. Introduction

A dominant feature of recent developments in the field of hermeneutics is a shift towards an interest in the relationship between the text and the reader (Abrams 1958:8-29; Lategan 1984:4; Barton 1984:200-203; McKnight 1985:12,133; Eagleton 1986; Eagleton 1989:119). The reader is no longer seen as merely a passive acceptor of the text but as an active, even creative, contributor in the interpretive process. 'In a certain sense it was inevitable that reception would sooner or later become the object of methodological reflection. The cycle of understanding remains incomplete until communication reaches its "destination" - what Ricoeur ... calls "the culmination of reading in a concrete reader"' (Lategan 1984:4).

While Ricoeur comments on the aptness of this shift, and Lategan and McKnight demonstrate this shift, David Tracy, in his recent work *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, recognizes the uncomfortable consequences of this shift. 'The New Criticism of the forties and fifties, with its autonomous texts, its verbal icons, and its well-wrought urns, has found its models of autonomy shattered

by the interplay of text and reader in modern hermeneutics' (Tracy 1987:40). He elaborates on this when he says (Tracy 1987:12):

In recent years we have come a long way from the now old New Criticism's belief in the stability of an autonomous text. We are in the midst of a deconstructive drive designed to expose the radical instability of all texts and the inevitable intertextuality of all seemingly autonomous texts. The once stable author has been replaced by the unstable reader. Written texts seem, commonsensically, stable enough. But when we reflect on any effort to understand them by interpreting them, they begin to seem far more puzzling and unstable than we first might have imagined .

As the comments of Tracy suggest, there is something of crisis in literary hermeneutics, a crisis which is part of a wider hermeneutic crisis in the natural sciences, philosophy, historiography, the social sciences, and theology (West 1991:7-30). While I will allude to this wider hermeneutic crisis, my central concern is to consider two types of response to the crisis of unstable texts and unstable readers, responses which have particular relevance to the interpretation of the Bible in South Africa.

2. Interesting and interested readings

There have been two primary responses to a recognition of the instability of texts and of readers within biblical interpretation: what I call 'interesting' and 'interested' readings. I will discuss these briefly using the discussions of deconstruction within literary theory as an exemplary thread in the discussion.

As Tracy's comments suggest, the strongest challenge to the stable text (and the stable reader) is deconstruction. Jonathan Culler contrasts structuralism and deconstruction (a form of poststructuralism) in a concise and accessible way.

In simplest terms, structuralists take linguistics as a model and attempt to develop 'grammars' - systematic inventories of elements and their possibilities of combinations - that would account for the form and meaning of literary works; post-structuralists investigate the way in which this project is subverted by the workings of the texts themselves. Structuralists are convinced that systematic knowledge is possible; post-structuralists claim only to know the impossibility of this knowledge (cited in McKnight 1985:93).

The investigation by post-structuralists of the way that the project of the structuralists 'is subverted by the workings of the texts themselves' is responsible for the label 'deconstruction'. It must be noted in passing that deconstruction is not merely a mode of reading within literary criticism. It is also a philosophical (or perhaps more accurately, an anti-philosophical) position, a challenge by Jacques Derrida to 'logocentrism' or the 'metaphysics of presence' (McKnight 1985:84). My

concern here, however, is with deconstruction as a mode of reading within biblical and literary criticism.¹

2.1 Interesting readings

It is popular to read Derrida in particular and deconstruction in general as simply denying the role of the author's intention and the conventions of language in favour of a completely free play of meaning (McKnight 1985:87). For many literary critics deconstruction arrived very much on time, as a handy source of 'philosophical' grounding for their pluralistic practice. For example, Christopher Norris sees Geoffrey Hartmann as exemplifying much of 'what passes for American deconstructionist criticism', which is 'an open-ended free play of style and speculative thought' (cited in McKnight 1985:93). 'Against interpretation' has become something of a slogan among recent literary theorists. Susan Sonntag coined the phrase in the title of a much quoted essay forecasting the demise of interpretive criticism and calling for something more 'adventurous, pleasurable, polyperverse; an 'erotics of the text' such as Roland Barthes was later to suggest (Norris 1982:163).²

Having recognized that the text and the reader are unstable these interpreters go further and view the maintenance of this instability or plurality as a worthy end in itself. In fact, those who have argued most strongly against granting any particular interpretation epistemological privilege have generally supported the view that we should encourage a plurality of interpretations (Fowl 1989). As Jeffrey Stout urges (cited in Fowl 1989:389; Stout 1982):

Let us then celebrate the diversity of interpretations as a sign that our texts are interesting in more ways than one. The only alternative would be to have texts that weren't.

For such pluralists, Steven Fowl (1989:393) argues, their 'only desire is that they be free to pursue any interpretive task that interests them. For pluralists, the only criterion for pursuing an interpretive interest is that it is interesting to sufficient numbers of an interpretive community to enable a conversation to take place'. But, continues Fowl (390):

The one question that the pluralist community could never answer, on other than practical grounds, is whether its members should pursue one interest over another. In fact, the continued existence of a pluralist interpretive community may depend on this question never being asked.

Fowl concludes this discussion by saying (390):

I take it that most of the professional institutions to which biblical scholars belong ... are examples of bodies with the commitment to pluralism I just described.

1. See the discussion of these two strands of deconstruction in Norris 1983:163ff.

2. See also Eagleton's discussion of Roland Barthes in Eagleton 1983:134-145.

I would go further and argue that the dominant trend in Western biblical studies, certainly in South Africa, is towards the pursuit of interesting readings.

2.2 Interested readings

Derrida and deconstruction may be viewed in another way, however. The view of Derrida simply as a hedonist and deconstruction as an unqualified free play is, according to Frank Lentricchia, 'a skewing of Derrida'. In his *After the New Criticism* he faults the 'Yale Critics' (J Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartmann, and Paul de Man) not for their poststructuralism but for their formalism. According to Lentricchia the Yale Critics were correct in rejecting the structuralists, who sought to explain literature by reference to a logical code lying beneath the text. They were correct in affirming, with Derrida, that literature was never to be seen as a form of 'speaking', where 'speaking' is the act of giving voice to the presence of being as it shows through the text or the reader. They correctly followed Derrida in affirming that literature was a form of 'writing', where 'writing' is the interpretation of earlier 'writings', which are interpretations of still earlier 'writings'. In other words, Lentricchia accepts with the Yale Derrideans Derrida's picture of reality as 'a chain of texts'.

Lentricchia objects, however, to what he regards as their formalism and their consequent flight from history (Dean 1986:269-270). Lentricchia argues that their approach is a formalism because the text and the play with texts are made to be sufficient unto themselves, to have no significant connection to history. And so, Lentricchia continues, just as this irrelevance to history made the earlier New Critics unacceptable, so too in this respect the Yale Critics offer no important advance on just those critics they had hoped to supersede (Lentricchia 1980:180). Lentricchia also argues that the Yale Critics are ahistorical in a second way. Not only are they formalist but they are also subjectivists in that they give 'all power to the reader's solitary act of interpretation' and so fail to recognize how the reader, as well as the text, is contextual (Dean 1986:270; Lentricchia 1980:186).

Lentricchia himself chooses to emphasize the historicism rather than the formalism of Derrida. Derrida's task, says Lentricchia, is to follow 'the ineffaceable historicity of discourse', the 'trace-structure' of the chain of texts (where 'texts' are understood to include social artifacts as well as literary artifacts), showing how texts reinterpret earlier texts that reinterpret still earlier texts (Lentricchia 1980:177). The point of Derrida's deconstruction of the ontological presence of being, according to Lentricchia, is to reconstruct the historicity of texts.

In a later work Lentricchia develops the political dimension of this historicity (Lentricchia 1983). In this work he objects to deconstructionists' unwillingness, Paul de Man's in particular, to recognize the political dimension of society in their work (Lentricchia 1983:1; Dean 1986:273). In his discussion of Lentricchia's work, William Dean (1986:273) shows that Lentricchia 'argues for a practical, material, and social understanding of the historical sources and effects of knowledge. He wants, in effect, to add to the value-free programs of pragmatism and deconstructionism the social values of Antonio Gramsci, who has provided a noncoercive and cultural version of

Marxism'. In other words, Lentricchia is concerned to extend interpretation beyond the intellectual interpretation of the past to include the social interpretation of the past, 'a social interpretation accomplished in order to contribute to the social change of the future'(273).

Another literary critic who moves in a similar direction, but more starkly, is Terry Eagleton. In his conclusion to *Literary Theory: An Introduction* he argues that although his book has considered a number of problems of literary theory 'the most important question of all has as yet gone unanswered. What is the *point* of literary theory? Why bother with it in the first place? Are there not issues in the world more weighty than codes, signifiers and reading subjects?' (Eagleton 1983:194).³ For example, he argues that most literary critics would not regard literary theory as relevant to such matters as Western capitalism and this, he continues (Eagleton 1983:196), is exactly their problem:

The story of modern literary theory, paradoxically, is the narrative of a flight from such realities into a seemingly endless range of alternatives: the poem itself, the organic society, eternal verities, the imagination, the structure of the human mind, myth, language and so on ... (that is), ... a flight from real history.

But, and this is his main argument (Eagleton 1983:195):

There is, in fact, no need to drag politics into literary theory: as with South African sport, it has been there from the beginning.

In other words, 'literary theories are not to be upbraided for being political, but for being on the whole covertly or unconsciously so' (Eagleton 1983:195).⁴

Eagleton raises similar arguments against deconstruction. So as structuralism 'flees from history to language', so too post-structuralism, unable to break the structures of state power, subverts the structures of language (Eagleton 1983:141-142,142-147). Eagleton recognizes, however, that there is a left-wing and a right-wing of American deconstruction (Eagleton 1986:79;Eagleton 1983:147-150).

On the one hand, there are those who, to quote Michael Ryan in *Marxism and Deconstruction*, have translated a complex philosophy 'into an old-model new criticism from which the muffler has been removed, creating more noise without noticeably improving the speed'. On the other hand, there are those like Gayatri Spivak, Samuel Weber and Michael Ryan himself who seek to stay faithful to Derrida's remark (no doubt intended to put a degree of daylight between himself and the first set of acolytes) that 'it is by touching solid structures, "material"

3. Catherine Belsey makes a similar point when she argues that the literary institution fiddles while Ronald Reagan destroys the world (Belsey 1983:17ff).

4. He is then even more forthright: 'It is not the fact that literary theory is political which is objectionable, nor just the fact that its frequent obliviousness of this tends to mislead: what is really objectionable is the nature of its politics'.

institutions, and not merely discourses or significant representations, that deconstruction distinguishes itself from analysis or "criticism" (Eagleton 1986:79).

While Eagleton is not fully persuaded by either Derrida or Ryan's reading of Derrida, his own approach shares similarities with Derrida's remark and Ryan's reading of Derrida.

Eagleton acknowledges that Ryan's reading, though it is not without its difficulties, 'seems to me a fertile, accurate (whatever that might mean) reading of Derrida' (81). What resonates in particular with his own approach and what emerges from Ryan's reading of Derrida 'is the inherently *historical* and *materialist* nature of deconstructive thought'. Ryan charts 'the remorselessly anti-idealist bias of deconstruction, its insistence that truth, presence, meaning and identity are "a product of numerous histories, institutions and processes of inscription which cannot be transcended by consciousness conceived as pure ideality"'.⁵

'Textuality' is to be understood not (as with the Yale rhetoricians) as a privileging of the discursive or 'literary', but as the resituating of otherwise idealistically perceived entities within the 'weave of differential relations, institutions, conventions, histories, practices' of which they are always the internally conflictual effects (80).

Ryan is also able convincingly to demonstrate, Eagleton argues, the parallels between this historical sense of textuality - the precise *antithesis* of the muddled proposition that Derrida ousts 'history' for 'the text' - and the classical Marxist reinscription of otherwise reified phenomena (labour, capital, the state, commodities and the rest) within the relational, differential social process itself. To 'deconstruct', then, is to reinscribe and resituate meanings, events and objects within broader movements and structures; it is, so to speak, to reverse the imposing tapestry in order to expose in all its unglamorously dishevelled tangle the threads constituting the well-heeled image it presents to the world (80).⁵

3. The dilemma of deconstruction

In the discussion so far I clearly lean towards those who advocate interested readings and their appropriations of deconstruction. However, I am not denigrating the important contribution of interesting, pluralist readings. Postmodern pluralist literary criticism is highly significant in that it has disclosed the unwarranted philosophical assumptions and unwarranted theoretical distinctions upon which much of earlier literary criticism rests. Yet I agree with Cornel West when he argues that postmodern philosophy, like postmodern literary criticism, has failed to project a new world view, a countermovement, 'a new gospel of the future'. ... These viewpoints do not constitute visions, world views or, to use Gilles Deleuze's phrase,

5. Eagleton himself argues, against 'right-wing' deconstruction, that Derrida 'is clearly out to do more than develop new techniques of reading: deconstruction is for him an ultimately *political* practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force' (Eagleton 1983:148).

'discourses as counter-philosophies' to the nihilism to which their positions seem to lead. Instead their viewpoints leave postmodern American philosophy [and literary criticism] hanging in limbo, as a philosophically critical yet culturally lifeless rhetoric mirroring a culture ... permeated by the scientific ethos, regulated by racist, patriarchal, capitalist norms, and pervaded by debris of decay (West 1981:265).

West recognizes that deconstruction can serve as a useful springboard for a more engaged, even subversive, philosophical perspective.

This is so primarily because it encourages the cultivation of critical attitudes toward all philosophical traditions. This crucial shift in the subject matter of philosophers from the grounding of beliefs to the scrutiny of groundless traditions - from epistemology to ethics, truth to practices, foundations to consequences - can lend itself to emancipatory ends in that it proposes the tenuous self-images and provisional vocabularies that undergird past and present social orders as central objects of criticism (West 1985:270).

And, West continues, this shift is particularly significant for 'those on the underside of history' because 'oppressed people have more at stake than others in focusing on the tenuous and provisional vocabularies which have had and do have hegemonic status in past and present societies' (West 1985:270-271). But, argues West, 'Rorty's critical advice to Michel Foucault applies equally to himself when he writes, "His obviously sincere attempt to make philosophical thinking be of some use, do some good, help people, is not going to get anywhere until he condescends to do a bit of dreaming about the future, rather than stopping dead after genealogising the present"' (West 1982:185; Rorty 1981:6).

In West's analysis, then, deconstruction offers a powerful negative hermeneutic but seldom provides a prophetic and positive hermeneutic. However, the historicized readings of deconstruction by Lentricchia, Ryan, and Eagleton do provide a basis for a positive hermeneutic.

I will return to this positive possibility, but first we must consider the impact of deconstruction on biblical studies.

4. Plurality and ambiguity in biblical interpretation

Biblical interpretation, of course, has not been bypassed by these postmodern manifestations of plurality and ambiguity. There is something of a crisis in biblical interpretation. And, as David Tracy (1987:8) points out:

A crisis of interpretation within any tradition eventually becomes a demand to interpret this very process of interpretation.

That we face such a crisis in biblical interpretation Tracy is in no doubt.

We find ourselves historically distanced from the classics of our traditions. We find ourselves culturally distanced from those 'others' we have chosen both to ignore and oppress. We find ourselves distanced even from ourselves,

suspicious of all our former ways of understanding, interpreting, and acting (Tracy 1987:8).⁶

Tracy's response to this crisis is instructive and useful, particularly as he too recognizes the dilemma posed by deconstruction. Tracy, like Cornel West, recognizes and uses the negative moment of deconstruction. Like Lentricchia, Ryan, and Eagleton, he also recognizes the positive potential of deconstruction, which he builds upon in constructing a positive hermeneutic.

Tracy recognizes that one of the major 'interruptions' of interpretation is the radical plurality of language, particularly as it is exemplified in deconstruction. He charts the history of this linguistic turn through Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and de Saussure. He sees three major alternatives in post-Saussurean hermeneutics, each highlighting a particular aspect of de Saussure's kernel formulation: 'In the linguistic system, there are only differences'. First, there are the structuralists and semioticians who attempt to uncover the basic units of various sign systems (e.g. Lévi-Strauss). They highlight 'system' in de Saussure's formulation. These approaches, argues Tracy, challenge amongst other humanistic concepts 'their grounding of all reality in the human' (Tracy 1987:55). Second, there are the deconstructionists who emphasize 'difference' in de Saussure's formulation.

Deconstructionists challenge all claims to uncovering the fully systemic character of any language by insisting upon the implications of the fact that no system can adequately account for its own ineradicably differential nature (56).

Tracy adds that:

Above all, Derrida joins Lévi-Strauss and all structuralists in exposing the illusory character of the self portrayed as a self-present user of language as instrument, the self as a reality-founding ego (58).

Tracy sums up his understanding of this position succinctly:

Our knowledge of reality is irrevocably linked to our use of language. Our use of language is possible because of the differential relations that constitute the words of the particular language. Any claims to full presence, especially claims to full self-presence in conscious thought, are illusions that cannot survive a study of language as a system of differential relations (59).

But, Tracy asks, and here he feels the pull of scepticism and nihilism, if all is difference, can any genuine interpretation occur? (59). Tracy wants to affirm that interpretation is still possible, albeit carefully reconsidered. He uses two arguments to return to his notion of interpretation as conversation. First, he argues that deconstructive analyses are not put forward to ground a situation but rather to function as linguistic therapy. And secondly, he argues that Derrida's 'typical

6. In focusing on the interpretation of texts he points out that 'when literate cultures are in crisis, the crisis is most evident in the question of what they do with their exemplary written texts' (11).

strategy, and his contribution, seems less directed at texts than at individual words' (60).⁷

This brings Tracy to the third option in post-Saussurean hermeneutics, language as neither system alone, nor use alone, but as discourse.

To discover discourse is to explore language as a reality beyond individual words in the dictionary, beyond both synchronic codes (*langue*) and individual use of words (*parole*); it is to rediscover society and history.

He elaborates on this when he says:

To acknowledge that language is discourse is to admit the need for ethical and political criticism of the hidden, even repressed, social and historical ideologies in all texts, in all languages as discourse, and, above all, in all interpretations (61).

Tracy continues:

If we are not to retreat from what the early stages of the linguistic turn taught us - the inevitability of the realities of history and society in all language - then we must, at some point, turn from an interpretation of language-as-object back to an interpretation of language-as-use. We must turn from the deconstruction of words to a chastened interpretation of texts (62).⁸

Tracy continues his analysis of the unstable text and the unstable reader by looking at another related 'interruption' of interpretation, the radical ambiguity of history. He argues that no text comes to us without 'the plural and ambiguous history of effects of its own production and its former receptions'. For Tracy this means that we have 'to face the actuality of the ideologies in ourselves and even in our most beloved classics' (69);⁹ and that we have to 'learn to listen to the narratives of

7. For a similar argument see Hoy 1982:3-5. David Hoy offers a witty and incisive 'sense-making reading' of Derrida. He argues that 'Dissemination and hermeneutics need not be contrasted so extremely. They are more plausibly seen not as irreconcilable theories of meaning, but as practical interpretive strategies, as facets of any good reading. So regarded, disseminative practice ensures that the text's complexity is not underestimated, while the hermeneutical sense-making activity keeps the dissemination from wandering off infinitely' (5). He also characterizes Derrida as 'an anti-realist and post-empiricist who is less interested in advancing a positive doctrine than in debunking the metaphysical strains he finds not only in Plato but also in moderns like de Saussure and Lévi-Strauss' (5).

8. Tracy sees the following using this kind of discourse approach: Paul Ricoeur, Jaques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, Edward Said, and Julia Kristeva. He adds in a footnote: 'The point, in sum, is not to claim the unity of a position but of a set of issues and a basically hermeneutical set of concerns that pervades the different methods and conclusions of those otherwise very different and sometimes mutually contradictory "discourse analysts"' (129, n 44). While Tracy does not draw explicitly on Derrida here, his argument is in line with Lentricchia's, Ryan's, and Eagleton's readings of Derrida.

9. He develops this more fully: 'Ideologies are unconscious but systematically functioning attitudes, values, and beliefs produced by and in the material conditions of all uses of language, all analyses of truth, and all claims to knowledge'. 'Ideologies are carried in and by the very language we use to know

others, especially those "others" who have had to suffer our otherness imposed upon their interpretations of their own history and classics' (72; see also 96,100-104,141 n 56). And of course, these two recognitions are linked: 'To hear the readings of the oppressed means that the rest of us need to acknowledge the ambiguity of the relationships of power and knowledge in our own discourse'. But of course, he continues, 'that imperative to listen cannot be the final word. If criticism and suspicion stop there, what really has been accomplished? Something, perhaps: a correct religious sense of our guilt and our need for repentance - but not a critical response or an active solidarity' (106). In particular he rejects a pluralism that masks 'a genial confusion in which one tries to enjoy the pleasures of difference without ever committing oneself to any particular vision of resistance and hope' (90).

Having briefly outlined the radical plurality of language and the radical ambiguity of history Tracy argues that such postmodern positions on language and history intensify 'the central insight that has guided us throughout these reflections: all experience and all understanding is hermeneutical' (77). Consequently, to interpret must now mean that we attend to and use the hermeneutics of both retrieval and suspicion, and often retrieval through suspicion (77,112). Tracy is here advocating both a 'hermeneutics of trust' and a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', recognizing, however, that we can only trust ourselves to a conversation with the classics if we admit that everything, ourselves, our texts, and the conversation itself, is deeply affected by the ambiguity and plurality that touch all. Retrieval now demands both critique and suspicion. Indeed, retrieval can now often come best through critique and suspicion (79).¹⁰

There is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text (79).

5. Continuity and accountability

Whether one agrees with every detail in the discussion or not, the shape of the discussion is clear. Through our discussion of interesting and interested readings we have been able to recognize both the critical contribution and the constructive limits of deconstruction. Tracy has also given us some clues as to how we are to proceed with the constructive task. In the remainder of this essay I will briefly develop some of Tracy's constructive clues in order to move tentatively towards a 'chastened interpretation of texts' in the South African context.

any reality at all. The critique of ideologies insists that all interpretations of every culture and every classic should include an analysis of the material conditions that underlie both its production and its reception'(77; see also 73-77).

10.Later he adds, 'To interpret the religious classics is to allow them to challenge what we presently consider possible. To interpret them is also to allow ourselves to challenge them through every hermeneutic of critique, retrieval, and suspicion we possess' (84), which would included historical-critical methods, social-scientific methods, semiotic and structuralist methods, poststructuralist methods, and hermeneutical discourse analysis (97-98).

I begin, with Tracy, by affirming on the one hand that there is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text, and on the other hand that interpretation is still possible. The conjunction of these two sentences leads me, and Tracy, to recognize (at least) two moments in the interpretive task. The interpretive task requires a hermeneutic of suspicion through which we have to face the actuality of the ideologies in ourselves and even in the Bible itself. The interpretive task requires a hermeneutic of trust which includes both conversation and solidarity (113), conversation and solidarity with the voices of the poor and oppressed in the text and community.

Tracy and others who have made these two related recognitions seem to have adopted two key commitments in moving from these crucial recognitions into the creative and constructive task of reading the Bible in contexts of crisis like our own. First, biblical interpreters like Tracy,¹¹ Itumeleng Mosala (Mosala 1989), Norman Gottwald (Gottwald 1979), Carol Meyers (Meyers 1988), Cain Hope Felder (Felder 1989), Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983), Phyllis Trible (Trible 1978; Trible 1984), J. Severino Croatto (Croatto 1987), and Sandra Schneiders (Schneiders 1989) all adopt and advocate *critical modes of reading* the Bible. Whether their focus is behind the text, on the text, or in front of the text, they are in agreement in their concern for a critical mode of reading (West 1991:104-141). The second distinctive commitment of the hermeneutics of Tracy and these others is that they actively and overtly advocate a commitment to the poor and oppressed in the text and in their own contexts.¹²

The first of these commitments is important because these interpreters are concerned that readers recognize the ideological nature of the text and that readers develop the critical skills to analyze the text (and society) which will enable them to

11. Tracy here cites the work of Foucault in support of his argument. 'What these analyses show is that every discourse bears within itself the anonymous and repressed actuality of highly particular arrangements of power and knowledge. Every discourse, by operating under certain assumptions, necessarily excludes other assumptions. Above all, our discourses exclude those others who might disrupt the established hierarchies or challenge the prevailing hegemony of power'. 'And yet the voices of the others multiply: the hysterics and mystics speaking through Lacan; the mad and the criminals allowed to speak by Foucault; the primal peoples, once misnamed the primitives, defended and interpreted by Eliade; the dead whose story the victors still presume to tell; the repressed suffering of peoples cheated of their own experience by modern mass media; the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized - all those considered "nonpersons" by the powerful but declared by the great prophets to be God's own privileged ones. All the victims of our discourses and our history have begun to discover their own discourses in ways that our discourse finds difficult to hear, much less listen to. Their voices can seem strident and uncivil - in a word, other. And they are. We have all just begun to sense the terror of that otherness. But only by beginning to listen to those other voices may we also begin to hear the otherness within our own discourse and within ourselves. What we might then begin to hear, above our own chatter, are possibilities we have never dared to dream' (79).

12. Although this commitment is qualified in the hermeneutics of Tracy it is nevertheless present.

arrive at this recognition. There is also a concern that such critical skills and analysis be theoretically well-grounded (Mosala 1989:41; West 1991:112).

The second of these commitments is important because such a commitment also requires that trained readers recognize and expose the ideological nature of the text. They must do so because the Bible and its interpretations have continually been used both to oppress ordinary people and to legitimate oppression of and among ordinary people (Mofokeng 1988). Such a commitment also requires that trained readers continue to appropriate the Bible in spite of their recognition of its conflicting ideological interests. They must do so because the Bible plays a significant role among the poor and oppressed (West 1991:63-79, 142-173), and they must do so because of the need to stand in continuity with the 'dangerous memories' (Metz 1980) and the 'subjugated knowledges' (Welch 1990) within or behind the biblical text (Ruether 1983:18; West 1991:100).

This last contribution is particularly important if liberative readings of the Bible are to take seriously their commitment to ordinary women and men. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is right when she argues that a *postbiblical* feminist position is in danger of becoming ahistorical and apolitical because it 'too quickly concedes that women have no authentic history within biblical religion and too easily relinquishes women's feminist biblical heritage. Nor can such a stance do justice to the positive experiences of contemporary women within biblical religion'. Insofar as the Bible is still influential today and insofar as it forms a part of many women's personal, cultural, or religious Christian history, a cultural and social feminist transformation of society must take into account the biblical story and the historical impact of the biblical tradition. 'We will either transform it into a new liberating future or continue to be subject to its tyranny whether we recognize its power or not' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:xix; see also Cady 1986).

6. Deconstruction and liberative readings of the Bible in South Africa

In this essay I am suggesting that the constructive interpretive task in South Africa must draw on the critical dimension of deconstruction (and other postmodern manifestations), but that it must not stop there. The constructive interpretive task in South Africa must also draw on the historicized readings of deconstruction and in so doing go beyond interesting readings and take the risk of interested readings. In the South African context deconstruction not only challenges us to become critical of our texts and readings, it also challenges us to root our texts and readings in history.

The above discussion is particularly relevant to the South African context because of the significant role the Bible has played and continues to play in all sectors of our society. Not only has the South African past been shaped by readings of the Bible, but our future too will be shaped by interpretations of the Bible.

The negative moment of deconstruction is liberative in that it deconstructs dominant and hegemonic interpretations and exposes their tenuous nature. And as I have already argued, poor and oppressed people have more at stake than others in

focusing on the tenuous and provisional interpretations which have had and do have hegemonic status in past and present South African society. The negative moment also functions to facilitate the development of a critical consciousness towards text and context; a critical consciousness which Mosala argues is necessary if the poor and oppressed are to be agents and subjects of their history.

The positive moment of deconstruction is liberative in that it empowers the poor and oppressed, and those who interpret the Bible in solidarity with them, to read the Bible from their contexts and so to construct their own visions of South African society in continuity with their liberative interpretations of the Bible. Deconstruction demonstrates that there is nothing fixed and foundational about dominant and hegemonic interpretations. The positive moment of deconstruction potentially destroys the 'culture of silence' of the poor and oppressed (Frostin 1988:10), and empowers the voices from the margins of South African history and society to participate in the discourse that will shape our future.

Both the negative and positive moments of deconstruction therefore have a crucial contribution to make to the process of remembrance and reconstruction in South Africa.¹³

7. Conclusion

From the discussion above it should be clear that in advocating interested or historicized readings of biblical texts in the South African context (and other contexts) I am not advocating a simple instrumentalist position. Solidarity with the poor and the oppressed implies both accountability to present communities of the poor and oppressed, and also continuity with past communities of the poor and oppressed. Solidarity implies not only that our readings be shaped by accountability to present communities of faith and struggle, but also that our readings be shaped by continuity with past communities of faith and struggle in (and behind) our biblical traditions. Within this framework of accountability and continuity deconstruction can play a creative and constructive role in our readings of the Bible in our struggle to reconstruct South African society.

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13. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between remembrance and reconstruction see West 1992.

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