

Roland BOER

**A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery Inside an Enigma:
Deception, Truth and Modernism**

Abstract

This article deals with the widespread assumption that a significant collection of texts known as the Bible is inherently ‘deceptive’. That is, the Bible does not – it is assumed – say what was ‘really’ going on in the ancient world. The truth, therefore, must be found by going behind or beneath the text (the spatial metaphors should be noted). Here the real story may be found, through archaeology or reading the text against itself. This approach may be described as a modernist ‘depth model’, in which the surface attempts to conceal the truth, while the truth itself must be found by going around the surface text. This remains a dominant approach in biblical criticism. However, it cannot be understood without earlier and indeed, in some quarters, current assumptions concerning the realist nature of the text. In this case, the text reflects in a reasonably trustworthy fashion the context of the text, if not the ideological assumptions and positions of the putative authors. Modernist ‘depth models’ may then be seen as attempts to respond to realist assumptions. A third moment is what could be called postmodern: in this case, the distance between surface and depth is challenged, so that the various possibilities become equal contestants for the dominant position. This entails a shift away from the assumption of a singular truth of the text, characteristic of both realist and modernist assumptions, to the understanding of multiple truth claims – not as relative but as absolutes that permit other absolutes. The argument emphasises that these approaches should be seen as dialectically related to one another, rather than mutually exclusive approaches.

Keywords: biblical criticism; deception; realism; modernism; postmodernism; depth model.

Резюме

Тази статия разглежда широко разпространеното убеждение, че значителната колекция от текстове, позната като Библия, е по своята същност „измамна“. Това означава, че Библията вероятно не казва какво „наистина“ се случва в древния свят. Истината, следователно, трябва да се търси зад или под повърхността на текста (трябва да се вземат предвид пространствените метафори). Истинската история тук може да бъде открита посредством археология или четене на текста срещу самия него. Този подход може да бъде характеризирен като модернистичен „дълбинен модел“, в който повърхността се опитва да скрие истината, докато истината сама по себе си трябва да бъде открита чрез заобикаляне на текстовата повърхност. Това остава доминиращ подход в библейската критика. Въпреки това той не може да бъде разбран без по-ранни, в някои източници, наистина актуални предположения, отнасящи се до реалистичната природа на текста. В този случай текстът отразява по сравнително достоверен начин контекста, ако не идеологическите убеждения и позиции на предполагаемите автори. Модернистични „дълбинни модели“ могат тогава да бъдат разглеждани като опити да се отговори на реалистичните предположения. Третият момент би могъл да се нарече „постмодерен“: в този случай дистанцията между повърхност и дълбочина е поставена под съмнение, така че различните възможности стават равнопоставени конкуренти за доминиращата позиция. Това води до изместване на идеята за единствена истинност на текста, характерна черта както за реалистичните, така и за модернистичните предположения, към разбирането за множество претенции за истинност – не като относителни, а като абсолютни, допускащи други абсолютни. Аргументът подчертава, че тези подходи трябва да се разглеждат по-скоро като диалектически свързани, отколкото като взаимно изключващи се.

Ключови думи: библейска критика; измама; реализъм; модернизъм; постмодернизъм; дълбинен модел.

The argument here is that biblical criticism is, by and large, beholden to a model of textual deception because its dominant approaches remain deeply imbued with modernist assumptions, mostly but not exclusively expressed in historical-critical terms. The remainder of my argument, which is unapologetically theoretical, unpacks that statement, placing the deceptive and even lying text within the context of, first, the depth model, and then the broader environment of modernist approaches to interpretation. However, any discussion of modernist interpretation is incomplete without a consideration of its realist forbear, to whose contradictions modernism provides a partial solution. In this context, the deceptive text of modernism turns out to be an attempted answer to realism's basic assumption of a trustworthy text. Only with both modernism and realism in the picture is it possible to bring to bear postmodern questions, which turn out to be an effort at dealing with the treacherous modernist text, not merely in a desperate attempt to recover the value of the text itself but to challenge the depth model upon which such an approach to the text relies. In case we should become too wrapped up in what is really a dialectical relation within the idealist context of literary interpretation, I close with a few comments that avoid the idealist reductionist move and situate such an interaction within its economic context.¹

Deception, Depth and Modernism

How is the text perceived as deceptive? It may be that the text is described as not narrating history (in our relatively modern sense of the term) but theology, or that it is problematic due to its contradictory patriarchal assumptions, or that it gives voice to the aspirations of that sub-class of the rulers, the scribes, or that it is a collection of myths, legends and so forth, or that it is a late work of imaginative fiction, or... The list in all its apparent variety may go on, but the assumption is that the text is unreliable for our modernist interpretations, that it will be a false friend if we rely on it too much in our search for the deeper truth, in which the text may or may not take part. Hence, we treat it with suspicion or quarantine it as theology, or as myth that expresses a deeper truth, or debate endlessly over whether it may be used for historical reconstruction or whether it needs to be ignored. A good number of the major debates within biblical studies today fall operate with these assumptions concerning the text: the 'maximalist' and 'minimalist' approaches to the histories of 'ancient' Israel; debates over the existence or not of Q; attacks and defences of the Society of Biblical Literature 'Context Group'; and so on.

The key to the idea that the text is not to be trusted is what may be called a depth model: beneath or behind or beyond (the metaphors are usually spatial) the surface of a slippery and

¹ This essay provides me with an opportunity to rethink some of the preliminary formulations of these issues from the last chapter of my *Novel Histories* (Boer 2006).

treacherous text may be found a hidden truth. The surface becomes a screen, or Censor, for that which lies beneath, whether that is the unconscious (Freud), or the signified (Saussure), or social and economic reality (history), or the actual history of the formation of the texts in question, or voices of post-colonial or feminist resistance to a dominant position. In each case, this truth must be prised from the text by sidestepping or overcoming its deceptive, fictional and ideologically problematic nature. The task of interpretation, as also of politics, is to devise means to outsmart that unreliable surface by means of a range of techniques which vary enormously yet seem to have one fundamental strategy – the use of items in the surface as a means of tricking it into revealing what the situation *really* is, into allowing the investigator into the hidden recesses.

The model may be represented as follows:

Textual surface

↓

Interpretation

↓

Truth

What, then, are the modernist assumptions that sustain both the perception of the text as unreliable and the depth model of interpretation?² To begin with, modernism is characterised by an awareness of the deeply mediatory role of language, indeed that language throws up as many obstacles to the perception of the world as it provides a means of enabling that perception. The link between, on the one hand, text, film, words, ideology and, on the other hand, reality has become far more tenuous, the line between signifier and signified stretched to a much greater extent. For this reason, the depth model becomes the favoured model of interpretation. Since the text no longer gives out to the world as it is (unlike realism, which I will discuss below), but functions now as a surface which conceals myriad and mostly unanticipated elements.

A further dimension of modernism is the *novum*; the drive, often desperate, to be different, to locate and execute that which has never been done before, or at least seen, read or heard by conventional consumers. This is the ‘modern’ element of ‘modernism’ – that which is modern is always new. Modernism insists on the importance of the individual creative impulse, on the autonomous artistic drive that severs the artist from this society and therefore enables the production

² On these matters I am indebted to Fredric Jameson’s *A Singular Modernity* (2002) and *The Modernist Papers* (2009).

of the new. For many, even on the left (Adorno at times, Brecht, even good old Habermas), this *novum* was also revolutionary. And some modernist art and cultural production was genuinely subversive (Brecht's theatre for example, or James Joyce's work in the context of revolutionary Ireland), but the signal that it had also been absorbed into the mainstream was the entry of modernist works into a revised canon of great western art and literature. They began to be studied in universities, literate or knowledgeable people could not be known, not to have read the great modernists, or not to have seen their art or film or theatre.

So we have three key elements of modernism (there are more, such as the prophetic role of modernist artist or the half-baked re-mystification of the artistic product, but these will do for our purposes): the profoundly mediatory role of language, which then produces a depth model of interpretation, and then the drive for the ever new (the 'original' reading). I would like to explore the implications of these features for biblical criticism, which will turn out to be most applicable to historical-critical approaches (although not exclusively).

To begin with, biblical scholars seek to develop techniques to outsmart this clever and deceptive surface – a surface that overlaps in so many complex ways with the various claims of religious institutions – in order to uncover whatever truths are lurking beneath the surface. In this light we can understand the growth of source, form and redaction criticism. With all these approaches, the text reveals evidence of something else at work, something that the text itself attempts to conceal (or so it seemed), whether written sources, oral traditions or the various seams and interventions of the redactors. Other approaches would soon come under the same methodological umbrella, such as comparative literature, archaeology, the collection of social scientific approaches, structuralism, feminist criticism, postcolonial approaches, some versions of Marxist criticism trapped in a modernist paradigm – in which the aim was to present an alternative account to that of the obvious narrative or the biblical text in question. But it was not merely an alternative, another story to contest those that are already in the scholarly marketplace, for it was far more than an alternative: again and again, the alternative account given in interpretation was assumed to be more truthful than the text itself. While one, the superficial text, may grudgingly be granted a limited truth – perhaps theological or mythical – the other is assumed to have far greater epistemological truth.

In my stripped down version of modernism, I did identify one other feature, a drive for the *novum*. How does this work in biblical criticism? At a basic level, this drive is found in the assumption that scholarship must be innovative and original and creative. A little ideological suspicion never goes astray, so it is worth asking what the origins and social circumstances are of

this assumption that scholarship is all about originality, the search for something new that shakes the field up and sets it on a new path – the post of gold for any genuine scholar. Think of the big names in the modernist tradition – Wellhausen, Gunkel and Noth, Bultmann, Schussler Fiorenza, to name but a few – each of them profoundly affecting biblical criticism with an agenda-setting originality.

At least two problems emerge with this model, apart from the distinct sense one gets, when perusing the latest batch of books or conference program or round of successful grant application, that it turns out to be business as usual. First, scholarship was and is not always this way: I need only mention the close study of and immersion in the tradition with a view to passing it on, an approach dominant for far longer – think of rabbinic scholarship, tribal practices of knowledge, the monastic centres of learning in the Europe of the Middle Ages or in China, spoon-feeding methods of education rampant today. Obvious at one level, but a useful reminder that the need to be innovative arose at a certain historical juncture and is not the universal feature of scholarship it is often taken to be. Second, we have the development of the highly problematic categories of plagiarism and copyright. Apart from the commodification of knowledge entailed in such categories and their associated laws, and apart from the challenge to the very idea of an original with computerisation and the internet, the arbitrary definition of plagiarism points to its own troubled status. What difference is there between the copying of an idea from a printed source, its derivation from a discussion or perhaps a bright student, or an idea that emerges in the rapid interaction of debate?

In a few moments I will argue that modernist approaches to the Bible cannot be thought without postmodern ones, and vice versa (on the way dispensing with some woeful misconceptions concerning postmodernism that have arisen in debate). But first let me mention a fourth feature of modernism that puts paid to the assumption that many of the newer methods in biblical criticism are ‘postmodern’ – reader response, structuralist approaches, narrative criticism and so on. I mean the autonomy of the work of art, text or cultural product more generally. One of the leitmotifs of modernist high art was the removal of references to history, society, culture and so much commercial trash. Or rather, they were pushed to a distance and then criticised from there – the signifying link was still there, but now it had become troubled and tenuous. So also with certain forms of modernist literary criticism, in which the author’s intention, historical and social situation, political implications and so on were all ruled out of court in the process of interpretation. All that counted was the text itself. This was, of course, the New Criticism, whose heyday in literary studies falls into the period from the 1930s to the 1970s. The catch-cry for New Criticism was the radical autonomy of the text from any referent apart from itself. New Critics and those inspired by them in biblical criticism (the Tel Aviv School, Robert Alter, Frank Kermode, various early proponents of what were called newer

literary methods in the 1970s and early 1980s (see especially Alter and Kermode 1987)) argued, with some justification, that they were reading the actual text and not seeking something extraneous to the text. Yet, New Critics were still beholden to a depth model, both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, they still assumed its existence in the very effort to deny the relevance of the world beyond the text; implicitly, it became apparent that the New Critics were sneaking all manner of psychological, historical, political and ideological material into their interpretation through the back door, not least through the criticism of the situation from which they sought release – modernist assumptions were alive and well, for the link was still there, however tenuous and challenged it might be.

At the same time, this high modernist claim to autonomy also heralds the arrival of postmodernism, while at the same reinforcing their dialectical relation to one another. How so? Thus far I have stressed the continuity between the depth model and the high modernist claim to autonomy, but it is not difficult to identify a tension as well: in their ideal forms, the depth model maintains a troubled and tenuous relation between deceptive surface and deeper truth, while the claim to autonomy attempts to break this relation. Such a situation, which was initially productive within modernism, could not be maintained; so we get the gradual break into postmodernism. Thus, while in high modernism signifier and signified still maintain intermittent contact, even in moments such as New Criticism, in postmodernism the contact is lost, the exile of the signified from the signifier becomes permanent, for any obvious connection with referent or signified has by now been broken. The problem is that this way of describing the situation still relies upon a modernist depth model.

The usual step at this point would be to move onto postmodernism, as a natural binary over against modernism. But I refuse to do so, since the situation needs to be triangulated with an earlier cultural moment that is still very much with us – realism. Before turning to that analysis, a summary: the key item of the depth model, with its unreliable and deceptive text, is impossible to understand without a modernist framework, a framework that is also characterised by a tenuous relation between signifier and signified, as well the desire for the ever new and the autonomy of the work of art. That it was also constituted and perpetually threatened by a tension is the reason it eventually gave up its position of dominance. Through all this, the text maintains its status as untrustworthy, shifty, ready to hoodwink us should we let our diligence slip. The only exception is the autonomy of the work of art and thereby the text, for now the text itself becomes the focus of all attention and it begins to shed the assumption of guilt that it carried throughout most of modernism.

On Realism and the Mimetic Antinomy

Why realism? It forms the prior position against which modernism and its deceptive text reacts, so much so that it is not possible to understand both modernism and postmodernism without realism. An initial approach to realism locates it before modernism, but I will eventually argue that it has by no means left us, caught as it is in a dialectical relation with both modernism and postmodernism. Realism is that first response after the Enlightenment, marking the interpretive outcome of the desire to wipe out superstition and the hocus pocus at the centre of Christianity itself. Much of the appeal of realist art lies in this drive: if it is possible, through reason and science, to demystify religion, magic and superstition, then the real world would be allowed to show its face. Realist literature, therefore, attempts to cut away the mystification of religion and myth and to represent human beings in their social and natural situations. Through the presentation of nature, people and the mechanisms of society, producers of realist art (in its widest sense) worked hard at cutting away all the rubbish that interfered with an honest and truthful representation of the world as it is. Or in terms of the relation between signifier and signified I used earlier, realism in its ideal form works with a relatively untroubled relation between signifier and signified – what we say is the case is indeed the case, for our words mean what we say.

Any manner of realist works of art and literature might be presented as evidence, such as Soviet realism and Georg Lukács's (1983) championing of the historical novel, the assumptions still with us in some respects that photographs and documentary film and journalism present us unmediated and 'true' pictures of the world as it is, as well as the political attempts by those in opposition (Chomsky is but one example) to present the 'facts' over against the spin of Power. In sum, realism assumes a mimetic transparency, a claim to a privileged mode of knowing the world we inhabit. Realism, properly functioning, uncovers the 'real' situation, cutting away the obfuscation of religion, political spin and (for Lukács's) reification, for reification (the philosophical form of commodification) obscures of the inherently exploitative nature of class relations and economic activity.

A far as biblical criticism is concerned, realism has been a central feature of the earliest post-Enlightenment critical work on the Bible, continuing a subordinate, albeit vital, role today. Two key elements of such realist biblical interpretation concern the role (or not) of God in the narrative and the great energy devoted towards textual criticism. One still finds every now and then the assumption that those texts are more 'realistic' in which the deity draws back and where the narrator allows human elements to come to the fore: insight into human motivation and power play, eyewitness flavour, realistic and vivid depiction of people and events, a superb handling of narrative style, and

above all the way the text seems believable for today's readers. Some examples stood out in such arguments: the Song of Songs, where God is absent, is a realistic representation of human, sexual love; the succession from David to Solomon in Samuel-Kings (2 Samuel 6, 14-20; 2 Kings 1-2; first isolated and analysed by Rost (1926)); the challenge to God in Job is one on the verge of a post-Enlightenment world; the isolation of the 'authentic' letters of Paul, where we can assume that what he intends to say is what the text really means. Or rather (and to anticipate my point below), these texts provide not so much a window into reality, but they conform to expectations as what realistic writing might be. That is, to say they were and, in some cases, are seen as 'realistic' is first and foremost a literary claim.

I did promise another example and that is the new impetus to textual criticism. The drive to find, as far as possible, the most original text (in the case of the New Testament) or at least understand the workings behind the development of the received text (for the Hebrew Bible) is not only a drive for origins but also a desire for that which most closely resembles the purported text produced by the respective authors. Here also the mimetic assumption is strong, although it describes a relation between texts – the critical text and the original text – rather than between text and extra-textual referent. Yet, the seeds of modernism lie in the contradictions embedded in the realist activity of textual criticism, since the *textus receptus* is no longer regarded as the best text: a gap opens up between this received text and the reconstructed original text, a gap which points towards modernism.

The relation between realism and modernism hinted at in textual criticism is exacerbated if we move into the realm of historical-criticism proper. The purpose of the historical-critical task maintains significant links with realism; namely, the need, after all the sifting and realigning of texts has been done, to write a history of Israel or of the early church. Yet this is an exercise that owes much to realism, for biblical historians assumed that their reconstructions had and continue to have a greater claim to truth than ever the biblical text itself might have. But a shift has taken place, for now realist assumptions in biblical criticism have been enveloped within and thereby made subordinate to a more comprehensive modernism.

The moment of the collapse of realist dominance comes with the problem of mimesis: if the artistic product – say, a map of the world – really did its job properly and provided a thoroughly realistic representation, then the map would be as large and as detailed as the world itself. The examples may be multiplied endlessly: now realistic is a statue, a photograph, a description of what happened? So also with the effort to recover in textual criticism the original and earliest text: is it really a text that mirrors the actual text written by the mythical author? If it did, it would become that

original text. These examples signal the reasons for the increasing dissatisfaction with the realist floor-plan and its claim to mimetic representation. And this is where the modernist critique of realism gained some traction, for modernism was able to show that realism too was an ideology, a system of producing literature and criticism on the basis of a preconceived and ‘common-sense’ understanding that the world is easily accessible and knowable.

What has happened to our deceptive text? By and large, realism knows no slippery and treacherous text, for the text in its ideal realist shape speaks directly about the world, without guile. Or rather, where one does find deception is with all that superstition, religion, spin and reification that realism challenges; they have distorted the true, original text and it is our task to restore it proper sense. When it is put that way, we can immediately see how realism still functions within biblical criticism, for who has not argued at some point or another that they have discovered the true meaning of a text that has been distorted through subsequent interpretation?

Postmodernism in the Fray

Thus far we have the unreliable text of modernism, with its depth model and tenuous link between signifier and signified, and the ideal realist and usually original text that is by no means deceptive but desires a text as signifier that has a robust and strong relation with its signified. Neither, I should stress, has entirely disappeared, although they may have become subordinate to another reality. Usually postmodernism in biblical studies is taken to designate a collection of supposedly ‘newer’ methods that first began to appear in the 1970s: post-structuralism and deconstruction, ideological and political criticism, the various feminisms, narratology, post-Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, intertextuality and reader-response, all of which turned up in *The Postmodern Bible* (1994). Apart from the fact that some of these are far more modernist than postmodern, I prefer a different approach, namely, that the postmodern moment should be understood, as Fredric Jameson (1991, 1998) and Perry Anderson (Anderson 1998)³ have tirelessly pointed out, not as a fashion one adopts or opposes at will, a jacket that is ‘in’ now but will be ‘out’ next season. You do not simply pick up a postmodern approach if it suits you or deride it if you find it silly (as we find, for instance, in the recent debate between Aichele, Miscall, Walsh (2009) and van Seters (2009)). Rather, we are all postmoderns and those debates are signs of that situation.

How? To begin with, postmodernism is – as the term ‘post’ suggests – that cultural phase after modernism (usually dated from roughly the 1960s). But that is only the beginning, for the crunch comes with the awareness that modernism is now a topic for critical reassessment, that

³ Following Jameson’s influential Marxist intervention, the subsequent key contributions may be seen as refinements of his initial proposal, especially David Harvey (1990) and Terry Eagleton (1996).

something has shifted in our – that is, capitalist – cultural zeitgeist. So postmodernism is the critical reappraisal of modernism itself – witness the ongoing debates over the viability or otherwise of historical-criticism, as both an academic exercise and as an ecclesiastical operation. This very debate is a sign of our postmodern situation, for the hegemony of such an approach is no longer assumed. But what of postmodernism itself? Does it not have a critical self-awareness of its own role? Yes and no, for the perpetual debates over postmodernism, concerning whether it has already passed (many funeral notices have been given, somewhat prematurely) or is alive and well, function as signals of such a self-awareness. But I would suggest that its presence is far stronger when not noticed, especially when one argues that postmodernism has had its day or that it involves ‘feeble thought’ (Badiou) and should thereby be disdained. That is ideology at its purest.

The key elements of postmodernism are well known: depthlessness, loss of affect, the apparent free play of signifiers, the dialectic of fragmentation and globalisation and so on. I prefer to characterise it as the moment when the relation of signifier to signified is not merely broken, but simply does not work any longer. In other words, the depth model ceases to have validity. This does not mean that postmodernism signals the end of history or the real world, for that is to allow the continued existence of an obsolete depth model – real history is out there, behind the surface play of postmodern life. No, for within postmodernism reality hits us all the time; it is far more tangible and overwhelming. And this is because all those former deceptive surfaces of the depth model in modernism have become just as real as the supposed reality to which they pointed. It is not that nothing is real anymore, but that everything is real. All of which is to challenge the modernist deprecation of the deceptive surface that must be outsmarted before one is able to achieve any real interpretation. Instead, everything lies before us (witness Wikileaks as I write), more or less deceptive, more or less reliable, since those terms are not pertinent anymore for they deploy a depth model.

A useful approach, it seems to me, although it has its limits (see below). Let me take the example of the histories of Israel, early Christianity or even the search for the historical Jesus. On a predominantly realist approach, all one need to do is provide what Niels Peter Lemche (1988: 7; 1998: 163) calls a ‘rationalistic paraphrase’ of the text, since that text provides us with reasonably reliable information (the limits of realism already show up in the need to start the text up a little). A modernist, largely historical-critical set of assumptions assumes that the written work of history provides a far better analysis of what really happened than ever that treacherous text might be able. But even here a nervousness appears, since the search for the historical Jesus goes ever on, as does the writing of histories of Israel or early Christianity, given to perpetual searches for the pot of

historical gold. A postmodern context replies to that nervousness by pointing out that the written histories so produced merely model the text they try to outsmart, for these histories too are texts with their own set of multiple truth claims. So either one is suspicious of even these texts in a process that leaves us with turtles all the way down, or one recognises that in form at least these histories no different from the biblical texts themselves.

Let me close with a biblical example of how the postmodern debate has played out, one that reveals the workings of all three moments at once. This argument was by and large – at least on the postmodern point – deployed infamously by Iain Provan et al (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003) in a relatively recent history of Israel. They argued that all narratives of history, whether texts or historiographic works, are ultimately competitors on a level playing field; so they opted for the biblical text itself. The first step is a standard awareness of our postmodern moment, but the second is pure sleight of hand, for they reverted to a realist approach, albeit now tamed and put out to pasture with the conservatives. But the argument raised the ire of Lemche, who suggested not that postmodern approaches were really a conservative turn, but that conservative scholars could deploy those waffly postmodern approaches to gain some publishing credentials and then turn their minds to the real work of (modernist) biblical scholarship (Lemche 2007; see also Lemche 2003; Long 2005). Lemche did succeed in calling their bluff, but for all the wrong reasons, since from his modernist perspective, all the realist and postmodern cows had the same colour in the night of irrational criticism.

Conclusion

So our untrustworthy text has now found itself in a much wider discussion, challenged on the one side by the realist assumption of a largely reliable and honest text and, on the other side, by the postmodern dispensing of the depth in which the deceptive text was able to thrive. It seems to me that biblical criticism is desperately trying to hold onto a modernist framework, a drawing of the wagons in a circle against the whooping postmodern ‘injuns’ circling about. Yet I would like to finish with three brief questions, concerning deception and truth, dialectics and economics.

Close by deception is the issue of truth. Realist interpreters feel that the text provided it, or that the text was close enough. Modernist interpreters vow that truth is anything but the lying text. And the dominant postmodern context indicates not, as many have mistakenly (!) understood it, that truth is no longer relevant, but that truth is multiple. As Alain Badiou has shown so well (2006, 1988), albeit with badly aimed polemic at the toilet of postmodernism, absolute and universal truths are not singular and eternal, but multiple and contingent. All one need do is ponder the set theory of

Cantor and then Zermelo, Fraenkel, von Neumann and Gödel to see that a multiplicity of universal truth claims is easily possible.

Second, it is far too easy to rest with the rough periodisation that usually goes with realism, modernism and postmodernism. On this account, the period of dominance for realism seems to have run from the mid-eighteenth century to somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth, the beginning of its decline being marked by the European revolutions of 1848, in which the bourgeoisie spectacularly lost touch with its own history and emergence and assumed universal status, along with the argument that we have always been capitalist (perhaps a little more primitive at times). At this moment, modernism comes to the fore, lasting until the 1960s, when a new series of revolutions – mostly in the form of anti-colonial struggles that then had ripple effects in the colonial centres (the 60s and so on) – opened us up to the postmodern period in which we live now. By now it should be obvious that this clunky effort at producing periods of history, which we all do to some extent, is by no means complex enough. For, as I have argued already, each of the three moments co-exist with one another, one perhaps being more dominant for a time, another emergent and yet another residual (Williams 1977: 121-7) but none of them having come to an end and none able to operate without the others (that paragraph concerned, for the unwary, the dialectical point (see especially Jameson 1990)).

Thirdly, economics, for any analysis that fails to make such a connection is reductive. I am no great fan of any of the three moments of realism, modernism or postmodernism, or even their inter-relation, since they are all cultural moments of capitalism. At this point, I would like to go beyond Jameson and Anderson and pick up a profound insight of Toni Negri (2008 [2003]), namely, that the postmodern turn was not the main game in town. Rather, it was actually a symptom of its context, marking a profound shift in the nature of capitalism itself – the volatilisation and financialisation of the market, globalisation and its dialectical other in fragmentation. For this wonderfully enthusiastic Marxist philosopher and lifelong activist, such a shift requires a rethinking of all the major Marxist categories. We may agree or disagree with some of his moves, but what it does is relativise intellectual debates that we – as idealists, the default position petit-bourgeois intellectuals – tend to mistake as being central.

I do have one properly final point: once we become aware of this wider economic context of interpretation, then we can begin to see that the whole debate between not merely modernism and postmodernism, but with realism thrown in, is but a struggle in the largely Atlantic fishpond. What is outside the pond? A slight look back in time or indeed sideways into literary criticism will reveal the vaster realm of allegory, for which neither a deceptive, reliable and superficial text is an issue. Instead, it is the anomaly, but that is another argument (see Boer 2012).

References

- Aichele, George, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh. 2009. An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128:383-404.
- Alter, Robert, and Frank Kermode, eds. 1987. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Anderson, Perry. 1998. *The Origins of Postmodernity*. London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain. 1988. *L'être et l'événement*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- . 2006. *Being and Event*. Translated by O. Feltham. London: Continuum Press.
- Boer, Roland. 2006. *Novel Histories: The Fiction of Biblical Criticism*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- . 2012. The Anomaly of Interpretation. *The One Who Reads May Run: Essays in Honor of Edgar W. Conrad*. Eds. R. Boer, M. Carden and J. Kelso. London: T. & T. Clark, pp. 80-95.
- Collective, Bible and Culture. 1994. *The Postmodern Bible*. Hew Haven: Yale University Press.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1996. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, David. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1990. *Signatures of the Visible*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1991. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- . 1998. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London: Verso.
- . 2002. *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso.
- . 2009. *The Modernist Papers*. London: Verso.
- Lemche, Niels Peter. 1988. *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- . 1998. *The Israelites in History and Tradition*. London: SPCK.
- . 2003. Conservative Scholarship-Critical Scholarship: Or How Did We Get Caught by This Bogus Discussion. *Bible and Interpretation*, http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Conservative_Scholarship.shtml.
- . 2007. Conservative Scholarship on the Move. *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19:203-52.
- Long, V. Phillips. 2005. Conservative Scholarship-Critical Scholarship: Can We Talk? *Bible and Interpretation*, http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Long_Conservate_Critical_Scholarship.shtml.
- Lukács, Georg. 1983. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by H. Mitchell and S. Mitchell. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

Negri, Antonio. 2008 [2003]. *The Porcelain Workshop: For a New Grammar of Politics*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Provan, Iain, V. Phillips Long, and Tremper Longman. 2003. *A Biblical History of Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

Rost, L. 1926. *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.

Van Seters, John. 2009. A Response to G. Aichele, P. Miscall, and R. Walsh, 'An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible'. *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9: 1-13.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Roland Boer is research professor at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and Xin Ao Professor of Literary Theory at Renmin University of China, Beijing. Among numerous publications, the most recent are *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (Westminster John Knox, 2015) and *Idols of Nations* (Fortress, 2014).