

Review of Roland Boer, *The Earthy Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity and Carnality*; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

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Have you ever asked yourselves: what can the holiday of a workaholic Calvinist be like? Here is one among many answers possible: he writes a book of “fleshly readings” of the Bible in order to explicate “how crude it really is and indeed can be.” Roland Boer’s “The Earthy Nature of the Bible” is research in a territory, into which a few writers have ventured thus far. It is an innovative, sometimes even shocking, display of unorthodox practices of biblical hermeneutics, such as: “discussion of terms for testicles, of the pervasive but futile spermatic spluttering pen(is) of the prophets; engagements with the sexuality of flora and fauna; hooker hermeneutics, fairy queens and anal dildos; Jeremiah the masturbator, Ezekiel the autofellating prophet; prophetic hygrophilia; and the bestial and necrophiliac practices of the Hittites” (1). The scandalous matter and the language of perversion conceal the fact that it is a case of a sound and conceptually holistic project whose very aim is to scandalize and provoke the inveterate traditions of biblical scholarship. It is accomplished in a broad interdisciplinary space where biblical, cultural and gender studies—just to name some of the main areas of knowledge—are crossing paths. The interpretation of biblical texts takes place along the methodological lines of three “materialist” theories: psychoanalysis, Marxism and ecocriticism (materialism of the psyche, materialism of history, materialism of nature). The landmarks of theoretical authority are Freud and Lacan, with the extension of Slavoj Žižek; Claude Lévy-Strauss and Louis Althusser, Antonio Negri and Antonio Gramsci. Yet the all-pervading methodological assumption is that of Marxism, a frame of knowledge, which “is ingrained so deeply in my thought,” Boer admits, “that it shows up in the fabric of almost every sentence” (2).

His words take me back to my experience as a high-school student in communist Bulgaria. Political activists of “The Party” were frequently visiting the universities in those years, retelling, with a mix of ridicule and repulsion, those episodes from the Bible which contained sex and violence. It is, indeed, so ironic that three decades later a Western Marxist should make use of biblical carnality in order to challenge the orthodoxy of the very biblical studies that were banned in Eastern Europe by the communists.

“The Earthy Nature of the Bible” is organized into three sections, consecutively dedicated to the Song of Songs, Masculinities, and Paraphilias. Despite the author’s statement that this structure was generated by “the straightforward but effective reason that each section has chapters dealing with these topics”, the structural canvas of the book seems to be more complex and elaborated. There are strings of associative references and semantic links between

the chapters of each part; the same idea might evolve into different thematic directions. The three parts of the book, on the other hand, are not completely independent from each other. This can be easily guessed by the circular composition of the book: the last chapter returns to, and elaborates some ideas of, the first one.

Other than interdisciplinarity, I would like to bring into focus two more specific features of the critical narrative. One is the unwaning dialogue with other books and authors, with films and mass-culture products, which seem to be a long way outside the field of biblical studies. The second one is the distinctive personal presence of the writer. He doesn't shy from speaking of his personal, even intimate, experience; the book abounds in his memories, letters received, pieces of conversation with friends and relatives. No clear boundary between the narrative genres (research, documentary, fiction) can be detected; this lends the discourse an additional aspect of transgressiveness. It is a writer's book, more so than a study in biblical hermeneutics.

It is not possible to summarize even half of the abundant ideas of the book's three parts within the frames of this review. I choose, therefore, to present one interesting and specific idea out of each section.

Reading the Song of Songs has always been an effort to decipher the symbolic meaning of its erotic metaphors. Boer, however, has a new and distinctive idea. What would happen if we reject the deciphering practice altogether? If we break the metaphoric connections and take the metaphors at face value, studying the images as they are, without assuming a complex web of symbolic connections? All of a sudden we would face an unknown reality, a "fecund, sensual and pulsating world, eager to get on with the job of sprouting, pollinating, mating, and reproducing." This makes me think of a myth Pliny the Elder tells in his *Naturalis Historia*. Two famous Greek artists of IV century BC, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, staged a contest to determine the greater artist. Zeuxis painted grapes so realistically that birds came down to peck at it. Then he went to see Parrhasius' work. Entering the studio he saw only a curtain, and tried to draw it aside in order to see the picture. But the curtain was itself the picture. Zeuxis yielded up the prize saying that whereas he had tricked the birds, Parrhasius deceived himself. Boer's approach seems to reenact Parrhasius' painting; he believes that the meaning of biblical metaphors can be grasped on the verbal surface.

The four chapters of Part II share a common agenda: they problematize biblical masculinity, mainly the "earthy masculinity of prophetic texts, which turns out to be a masturbatory fantasy of power and superiority." I would focus on the last chapter, "Skin Gods," which is a piece of cultural, as much as of biblical, studies. Transcending Freud's discussion of circumcision in *Moses and Monotheism*, Boer dexterously makes use of Lacan's famous concept of *objet petit a* in order to unveil the built male body as a substitute of the (un)built penis, which in turn is a substitute of that absolutely lost object, the foreskin. Following this line of argumentation the best lost object, or the "ultimate foreskin outside the system," is that of Christ, for it will never resurrect as a part of his whole body.

Part III, Paraphilias, as its title suggests, deals with the "side," or the strange types of love in the Bible. While the early chapters refer to more traditional

sexual practices like prostitution and pornography, the last one broaches “the vast realm of bestiality and necrophilia” as a point of contact between Hebrews and Hittites. Boer really writes on topics where “few critics dare to tread”; his manner of writing is daring, provocative, and witty. Even if one were to object to the interpretative extremes, one would inevitably have fun while reading. My choice here is the case of King Solomon meeting porn star and modern writer Annie Sprinkle playing the Queen of Sheba. This journey becomes possible by two Freudian mechanisms: the libidinal investment and the return of the repressed.

The Earthy Nature of the Bible is not Boer’s first book of “fleshly readings” of the Bible. Thirteen years earlier he published *Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door* (1999). Uncovering the carnality of the Bible seems a productive and enduring project of his; it is not unlikely that new books of the kind hover ahead—anytime the Calvinist in him needs to take a holiday.

Bibliography

- Boer, Roland. 1999. *Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door: The Bible in Popular Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1939. *Moses and Monotheism*. Translated by Katherine Jones. N.p. Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis.