

○ DOSSIER ON THE SEMINAR

In the first issue of this journal I wrote of the journal's immediate context, the Bible and Critical Theory Seminar. Although one might think, on first attending such a gathering, that the seminar is merely a poor excuse for a pub crawl, the seminar has been and continues to be crucial for the intellectual life of quite a number of us in Australia and New Zealand. This year we meet for the tenth time, in a pub, in Melbourne, at roughly the same time as this issue of the journal goes live. Last time in Melbourne it was the Rainbow Hotel, the home of live music in Melbourne, but some of the other pubs have included the Settlers Arms near Sydney, the Captain Stirling in Perth and the Ramsgate in Adelaide. And the beers varied as much as the pubs – from Tooheys Old Ale at the Settlers Arms to Dogbolters at the Captain, from Coopers Sparkling at the Ramsgate to a VB at the Rainbow. So also the papers, which have ranged over high theory, the intricacies of Hebrew and Greek, to politics and the new world disorder, to name but a few of our interests.

Above all the agenda has been to cover the full extent of the engagement between biblical studies and the developments in literary criticism and philosophy. That biblical studies has always interacted with its sibling disciplines is as obvious as it needs to be said again. That biblical studies also tries all too often to seal itself off from such interaction is equally as obvious as it needs to be said, again. I must admit that for a time, not so long ago, I thought the seminar might have run its course, that its task was done and that it was time to fold it up and store it somewhere. But the enthusiasm and vibrancy that surrounds the seminar convinced me it was well worth continuing, in fact that it is one of the more important things in which I am involved.

The papers gathered in this issue, *Dossier on the Seminar*, attest to that vibrancy. Each is a sample of a longer project, a passionate engagement with the intersections between critical theory and the Bible. Each paper was presented initially at a gathering of the seminar over the last two years, one in Melbourne and one in Perth. They give us a sample of what we have been studying, writing, presenting and discussing at the seminar. We dive straight in with James Harding's sombre assessment of the extent of what is called 'porno-prophetics'. Engaging a hermeneutics of suspicion, he argues that some of more pernicious texts are not the ones that explicitly parade and abuse Israel-as-a-woman (such as Hosea 1-3). Rather, they are the rousing, beautiful texts such as Isaiah 40:1-2. Traditionally taken as the first words of Deutero-Isaiah with their call for comfort to a troubled Israel, Harding argues that its inspiring language is precisely the abusive trap.

The bulk of the essays focus on the New Testament, marking a shift from the earlier days of a heavy focus on the Hebrew Bible for innovative biblical studies. Here we find essays circling around the gospels of Luke and John, and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This is where the similarity stops, for while Anne Elvey makes use of eco-feminism, Christina Petterson draws upon postcolonial and autobiographical theory, while Gillian Townsley touches base with Judith Butler's queer theory. Anne Elvey's essay on Luke assumes an eco-feminist base to engage with Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy on the question of touch and death. If we look at the gospel in that light, what happens?

Christina Petterson found herself in the situation of being dissatisfied with her initial paper at the seminar, so here she sets about investigating what that sense of dissatisfaction implied. It

takes her in the direction of critiquing Musa Dube's influential postcolonial feminist reading of the gospel of John as a text of empire. She does so by means of a comparison with the Greenlandic shaman Manguaq Berthelsen, raising complex questions about identity, autobiography, authority, and calls for a recognition of the entwined and hybrid nature of anti-colonial and post-colonial critique.

Gillian Townsley's concern is the troubled passage in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 on hair, heads and coverings during worship. Making use of Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender identities, especially when the established or normative identities are disrupted through collective dissenting performance, Townsley reads the Corinthian situation as precisely such a dissent. Taking the 'one in Christ' slogan in their own direction, the Corinthians sought to blur established gender distinctions in the performative zone of worship. This Paul cannot have, and so he must respond in some way to stabilise dissolving gender distinctions. The Corinthians, it would seem, show up as an intriguingly deviant group.

Finally, Matt Chrulew looks at Derrida's reading of Genesis 2:19-20, Adam's naming of the animals. Though Derrida finds that here and elsewhere Genesis privileges the human over the animal, elaborating a sacrificial schema of the human subject that in fact runs throughout Western thought, he nonetheless chooses to connect this particular prelapsarian scene to his own experience of being watched in his bathroom by his cat. Chrulew elaborates the alterations to the human schema that Derrida thereby pursues, but goes further to identify in Derrida's work a deeper, more radical and somewhat Edenic possibility for human-animal relations that undermines, from the first, what is an essentially domesticated scene.

The book reviews are a fascinating collection, clustering around issues of the body, gender, sexuality and domestic politics for the first four, and then a couple on French theory, notably feminism and Derrida, and finally a review on popular music. A good sample, it seems to me.

Let me make a couple of comments in closing. Firstly, I am pleased to point out that two of the five papers come from people who work and live in Aotearoa/New Zealand, a mark of the importance of their involvement in the seminar. Lastly, many thanks are due to Matt Chrulew, a research assistant and PhD student at Monash University, who did most of the editorial work for this issue.

Roland Boer, Editor, March 2006