

Masculinity, Femininity, the Bible and the Critical I. Reflecting on our Erasmus Intensive Course

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The critical 'I' present in the title of this nightly written text intended initially to be a 'brief lecture', refers of course to the book of N. Holland,¹ one of the pioneering figures in the reader-response theory, who emphasised the fact that we are always inclined to read a text according to our identity-theme. We read selectively, choosing often the books we like and putting the others away and reading what we decide to read in consonance with our expectations. Reading should not challenge to much the experience of remaining identical with oneself. Thus the ambiguity of the word 'I' (or 'eye') refers to the fact that our eye, our sense supposed to check the objectivity of the external reality, complies with the 'I' and that even our criticism - or, perhaps: especially our criticism - aims the preservation of our ego.

As a conclusion of our work during those two weeks, I would like to draw a few schematic lines in order to summarise where we are. It is just an attempt, a provisional scheme, just meant as a rest before we go deeper in the material and become puzzled again next year. In start by reminding you the idea of the hermeneutical circle, present in the lecture of A. Bosch. Then I will try to show how the different layers of our personality structure according to psychoanalysis fits into that scheme.

The hermeneutical circle and the Freudian 'I'

The hermeneutical circle starts with the awareness that we are not neutral when we read a text and try to grasp its meaning for us. The 'I' that reads a text has its past, its habits, its expectations, and that 'I' belongs to a given culture, with its past, its traditions, its values and its miseries. The very idea of hermeneutics stems from the awareness that there is no Archimedean point whereto we can escape to see the reality from a purely objective point of view. So we cannot but have preconceptions and look to the text with our spectacles. But this reading of the text is not something static. While reading,

1. N. Holland, *The Critical I*, New York (Columbia University Press), 1992. See also his previous publications: *5 Readers Reading*, New Haven (Yale University Press), 1975; *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, New York (Norton), 1975.

we change, as the text does not always fit into our preconceptions. Thus if the ego changed the text according to its preconception in a first moment, the ego itself is changed in turn. Thus, when reading a text for a second time, something new can happen: the ego has new preconceptions, and the text reacts in a new way to these preconceptions. This process can go on, sometimes for a long time, as long as a text can mobilise our attention and does not become boring, and as long as we feel the urge to find new preconceptions to keep our reading alive. I leave here in the middle if this process is directed in an asymptotic way to a final complete agreement between the text and the reader, or if the game goes on in various directions without any central pivot.

The reading we dealt with these two weeks, was the reading of two different texts, or, more precisely, two different sets of texts. We read the Bible, with our preconceptions, but despite of this, we are changed by this reading, we interpret the Bible and we receive new preconceptions. We read Freud and psychoanalysis, also with our preconceptions, and as a result, we are changed, we become more or less involved in the discussions within psychoanalysis, and here also we become equipped with new preconceptions. The two readings start with preconceptions but influence nevertheless the reader who is changed in his or her mind, that is clear. Our problem here is in which way our reading of psychoanalysis and the ongoing hermeneutic circle involved in that reading interferes or influences the hermeneutic circle involved in the reading of the bible.

My answer is very clear: the reading of Freud and psychoanalysis (and I should add: especially the practice of psychoanalysis) influences our preconception concerning our own ego. And it is precisely the changes psychoanalysis performs in the way we apprehend our 'self' that influences the hermeneutical circle going on in the reading of the Bible.

Let me now try to describe this more in detail by distinguishing the several layers of structures of this ego according to the insights of the various psychoanalytical schools. I start with the most elaborated and highest structures to come down then, gradually, to the more deeper layers of our 'I'.

Psychoanalysis influences the Super-Ego and this in turn influences our reading of the Bible

In a classical psychoanalytical therapy, one usually starts with the analysis of the Super-Ego. That means, feelings of obligations or of defence that impose themselves with an irrational force to the patient are consciously brought in

connection with the authority figures from the past, especially with those from early childhood. Think of example the case - not so far away in history - of a boy and a girlfriend having the intention to go together on holiday with only one tent. They feel very uncomfortable that the parents would know it - and they feel still less uncomfortably when they decide to announce to the parents that they decided to share an apartment. Even after having made time and again reasonings in their head why they would not do it, something irrational can remain and regularly show up as a hinderance. E.g., they decide to invite the parents for a meal in the new apartment but they are very nervous: a too brusque movement throws the paella-pan on the flour, and the cork of the bottle of champaign nearly blinds the might-be mother-in-law. The Super-ego structure is hard to be defeated. Thus it often happens that people, instead of analyzing and working through their Super-Ego, decide to keep that structure firmly established, and just look for new authority figure who can give them the permission to do what they want to do - or to keep them far away from temptations.

The Bible is typical a book addressing the Super-Ego in many people's mind. For some it is even the Word of God, and thereby they understand: supreme authority. But what do you have to do if you want to say no to Paul's statements that women have to keep silent in the Church, or if you want to eat frog-legs even if it is not kosher? You can look for an other authority in the Bible or in its vicinity, e.g. you can insist on Roman 14 or on the Gospel of Thomas, or sacralise some Gnostic writings. In doing so, the Super-Ego structure of authority is often kept upright. The content of what has been forbidden or imposed has changed, but the intra-psychoic experience of submitting oneself to authority is kept alive, and this is for many people the essential thing. Sometimes I have they impression that some types of feminist or materialistic reading of the Bible still operate according to the Super-Ego structure. An interpretation-technique is used to have the Bible saying what is more in consonance with the own wishes, but the Bible should remain a book that says the truths and dictates to our conscience. A question I had in relation with previous lecture is how much the attempt of acceding to a text as if it were only a text and thus not a text referring to authority of a speaker is not still dependent of Super-Ego structures, in this way that one tries to escape from it without having to fight it.

Is the Super-Ego so important that it is difficult to have it analyzed and thus to accept its contingent nature? It seems to be a given fact. Many people's attachment to the Super-Ego structure has often been confirmed by the experiments of social psychologists, even when they are ignorant of psychoanalysis. You know perhaps the famous experiments of Milgram, where

people are asked to give electric shocks to other people: the more they are from an obedient and respectful nature and experience inner struggle about doing it, the more they actually give they most severe and even deadly voltages. People with a good developed conscience and accustomed to have a radical control over their drives are the most dangerous ones to be met. When they are asked by the authority to torture other people, the dutiful obey. The attachment to the Super-Ego can also be recognized in a quite different situation, when rather fragile persons break their relations with their parents and enter in sects where every detail of everyday's life is regulated. From the outside it looks like as if they would have protested against their parents, but actually the super-Ego structure has just been devolved from one authority to the other.

What is now the effect of reading or undergoing psychoanalysis and the subsequent hermeneutic circle concerning the experience of the own 'I'? That this tyrannical force of the Super-Ego is questioned and that the analysis of its functioning and of its origin undermines its dominance. How does the analysis perform this mission? By inducing into the patient the capacity to identify with those to whose authority one submits in an irrational way. So one can try to imagine how the parents haven been brought up themselves, so that one understands why they cannot accept that their children have a sexual life without being married. In the attempt to represent the whole situation from the parent's point of view and, thus, in identifying in fantasy with themselves, it often appears that the parents were actually not so condemning nor demanding as one thought, and that it was actually a need of idealisation that created around their real persons a authoritarian imago.

As I come now to the level of identification, and the daring that is needed to identify with the authority figures in order to gain access to autonomy, I come to the next stage in the structure of our identity I wish to discuss: that of identity. But before this, a few words on how the recognition of the Super-Ego structure in the psychoanalytic hermeneutic circle works, and how it influences the hermeneutic circle of the Bible reading. Within the own psychoanalytical realm, the recognition of the Super-Ego structure should undermine the absolute authority of Freud. For someone who goes through the way of Freudian analysis, the creed 'It is true, for Freud said it' should be undermined. As for the interference of this insight stemming from the psychoanalytical hermeneutic circle in the biblical hermeneutic circle, it is clear what it brings about. A blind submission to 'it is true for it is in the Bible' is questioned, as you have learned to unmask the underlying Super-Ego functioning of the 'I'. Your attention is aroused by passages in the Bible - or

in other religious texts - that stress this Super-Ego structure. So I became very angry with the Didachè, not so much for the content of it, as for the insistence of the repeated sentences that begin with 'my son, ...'. For I knew, whatever the content might be, that such a stressing of the Super-Ego could not but end in the contrary of conscious morality and real concern for the other.

At the same time, I learned to differentiate the biblical books and evaluate them differently. I put Leviticus aside and dared to identify with Jesus Sirah, the wisdom of Solomon and Qohelet. I love the last verses of the last book, even when I am now writing late in the night an English text instead of enjoying *cerveza* and *Magno*. Some parts of the Bible became akin to me as I could imagine how certain writers tried to do something intelligent, philosophical and humane with the material they had found. I started to smile when seeing the very humane jealousy and the rivalry between the writers of the gospel of Matthew and Luke e.g., or the gospel of Matthew and John.

Did psychoanalysis change my faith? Surely it did. I criticised myself in so far as I had been subjected to the irrational tyranny of a superego, and I refused to respond to the messages issued by some biblical passages that were tempting to maintain this Super-Ego. At the same time my attention was stimulated for other parts of the Bible, that went in the opposite direction and invited me to take a seat at the same height next to the authors of other biblical texts and to think together with them. I lost authority figures and I got companions who allowed me to identify with them.

Daring to identify

I have insisted so much on the Super-Ego as guilt has been often the main topic when religion and psychoanalysis meet. But let us now make a new step and proceed to the next stage, actually the deeper stage, as psychoanalytic practice usually goes from the latest and more elaborated structures of the 'I' to the deeper, most ancient and more primitive ones. Here we come to the region that deals with narcissism, identification and the erection of the 'I'. As I said in the introductory course of psychoanalysis, we are here at a level where different schools have different opinions, and thus I will skip technical terms in order to avoid quarrels between Schools. The only thing I ask from you is *not* to think about the Super-Ego, the Ego and the Id, for this could be very confusing when I speak on the 'I'.

In the process of analysis and deconstruction of the Super-Ego, anxiety comes up when this structure tends to disappear. Obviously, the structure does not contain only bad elements, and it is an illusion (that has been often

fostered during the sixties) that once the iron strait-jacket of the Super-Ego has been taken off, the unfrustrated, 'natural' man or woman would appear, innocent and ready to enjoy life, as in paradise. No: if the Super-Ego was so powerful, it was for it contained not only repressing elements, but also a vital structure, i.e. the Ego-Ideal that has given us our feeling of being 'some-one'. This Ego-Ideal is not the fruit of natural maturation, but it stems from identification with other people. We are not born with an inner 'self' that, as it were a seed, just needs warmth and humidity to develop into a plant. We become ourself by identification, by representing ourself as if we were someone else, thus by alienation. However, we cherish that alienation and thus we learn to love one-self just as the other and the other just as one-self. This view seems to me essential for Freudian thought, and many clinical phenomena become not understandable if we dismiss the identification theory. In this identification process, the body and the erotic character of the body plays an important part, and also sexual difference, something that is lived first on the level of the bodily experience and only subsequently on the level of the various fillings cultures give to gender.

You see, there is a lot that is still to discuss on a psychoanalytic level here. But I confine myself to some ideas how this ongoing psychoanalytic hermeneutic of the identity of the 'I' can influence the hermeneutic of the reading of biblical texts.

What happens at the psychoanalytical side when you are working through that level of your identity? Many things, and a lot were already mentioned when we were dealing with the Super-Ego, namely the fact that you become conscious of your different and often conflicting identifications. The fact that these identifications become conscious does not mean that they disappear. You become aware of them and a new dynamics is introduced in them. For the hermeneutic circle at the biblical side, the effect is twofold. At the one hand, you become interested in recognizing in the biblical text models and personality patterns that you have learn to distinguish in psychoanalysis. Does the bible contain hysteric, psychotic, obsessional, depressed, people, do you find there feminists and gays (or: proto-feminists and proto-gays), are there other strange people like us in the Bible, how are they presented there, are they understood in the same way as we understand them today, what is the message the bible delivers about them and would this message become different if the biblical write would have known better or differently about them? So you come to questions how to understand the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (has it to do with homosexuality or just with a sexualisation of aggression in a context of hospitality), how you could interpret the sentence

‘Woman, see there your son’, or how you could say that the symbol of the androgyne has the same meaning in the gnosis and in New Age.

Much more should be said about this aspect: how we confront our own identity problems in identifying us with particular characters in a text and questioning the text if it would really understand us if we were in the positions of those characters. But there is a second element. In the psychoanalytical hermeneutical circle, we should not forget the element of psychoanalytical practice, and how we can relate the technique introduced by this practice with the hermeneutics involved in exegetical practice. This is the point where psychoanalysis is as much interested in what it could learn from the hermeneutics as it has been tried out for centuries in Western Culture’s reading of the Bible. Biblical scholars have developed several particular techniques in dealing with their texts. They have e.g. developed source criticism, and they usually lay a heavy emphasis on dating things. For the psychoanalysts, this technique is not surprising, for it is very similar to things what he or she does. Did psychoanalysis learn it from biblical scholars? Just as patients have the impression that they have got a clearer mind once they have learned to distinguish their different and conflicting identifications, also the biblical scholars too find relief when they have neatly isolated the Jahwist, the Elohist and the Priestly Codex (at least as long as the Elohist seems to be an autonomous entity, for thereafter you have to start again, but such things also happen in psychoanalysis). And as a psychoanalyst you are neither surprised by the way dating things back is important for biblical scholars. For them, this seems a passion without any limits. Even when they have become convinced that Jewish monotheism does exist only from the third century, and even if they would become convinced that the Pentateuch has been written after the prophetic books, they still would continue their excavations and study another tell from the second millennium. Why this passion from the historical fact? The psychoanalyst thinks back of his patients, who are also continually digging in their past, even when they become aware that they have come at a point that no guarantee can be offered that the uncovered memories point to real facts, and that they are constructing their story but not reconstructing it.

So the question is if as well the psychoanalytical hermeneutic as the biblical one is not operating with some same instruments, and if you should not further investigate this similarity of procedure.

A common aim: distance?

In the logic of this lecture I should continue with the pre-genital (or, according to other Schools: the pre-oedipal) stages, and show how the psychoanalytical hermeneutic dealing with this aspect interferes with the biblical hermeneutic. As it had become late at the moment I wrote those lines down, and the Tommy Bar was probably closed so that I could only sacrifice some lemon-sprite to my libido, I say to myself that Nel Jongsma and Raguse spoke well about the topic, and I finish with what seems to me an essential element in both forms of hermeneutics: distance.

What happens in a psychoanalysis, finally, after years and years? That you have acquired a certain distance from what is breeding inside you, that you can enjoy the stream of your associations and that you can put into perspective with a smile what goes on in your inner - and outer - world. A psychoanalyst is, according to me, a happy sceptic. Remark: I said a sceptic, not a cynic, what would mean something completely different. A sceptic is someone who trains him- or herself to the *epochè*, someone who consciously avoids to judge things too early, and who tries to understand and to contemplate with liberality and kindness all different sides of life.

The effect of what I conceive as an (always provisional) point of rest of the psychoanalytical hermeneutical circle is of course not without effect on the Biblical hermeneutical circle. In the area of religion, a mild sceptic position is one of the existing possibilities, and I think a psychoanalytical approach predisposes the human 'I' to this. I know, many people love different religious positions. It is more common to identify religion with ethics, with a better world, with the mystique of love, the drive of a Hadewych or a Tauler, or with law and order, a clean and well organized society, a president who thinks only of neatly bombing Iraq, but not of his sexual drive. Let me say from my position: I can understand the value of all this, and I will gently but firmly try to perform the *epochè* in order not to judge the limits of those types of religion too early. But, please, give some room for the sceptical religious position, the one of he or she who enjoys being just a creature, and let them also say: Deo gratias.