Dread-Hermeneutics: Bob Marley, Paul Ricoeur, and the Productive Imagination

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of the digital age and new mediums of communication, it is becoming increasingly important for those interested in the interpretation of religious text to look beyond traditional ideas of text and textuality to find the sacred in unlikely places. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the productive imagination opens up an important dialogue between the interpreter, the world of the text, and the contemporary world in front of the text. This paper presents Ricoeur's hermeneutic of the productive imagination as a methodological tool that creatively contains interpretation while paradoxically remaining open to new possibilities. Conceptually framed by this hermeneutic, this paper explores Rastafari's hermeneutic of Word, Sound and Power, as proclaimed through the music and lyrics of Bob Marley and the Wailers, to illustrate the productive imagination's capacity to shift our gaze beyond the ordinary cannons of sacred texts so as to appreciate the neglected intertextuality of the canon within the canon which is the truth, the word made flesh, written on the other half of the heart.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents Ricoeur's hermeneutic of the productive imagination as a methodological tool for understanding the social function of texts that exceed their semantic meaning. Following this understanding of Ricoeur's metaphoric transfer from text to life this paper re-imagines the hermeneutics of sacred text. Using the reasoning of Rastafari elder Mortimo Planno's unpublished text, Rastafarian: The Earth's Most Strangest Man, and the religious and biblical signification from the music of his most famous postulate, Bob Marley, this paper applies Ricoeur's schema of the religious productive imagination to conceptualize the metaphoric transfer from text to life of verbal and iconic tropes of Rastafari's hermeneutic of Word, Sound and Power.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann identifies Rastafari as "one of the most interesting modern forms of expression of the 'religion of the oppressed.' In developing their "own underground culture, a counter-culture to the culture of the white rulers," Rastafari has transformed the dominant language of oppression into a counter language of liberation and converted the dominant religious symbols of Babylon into a subversive religion of Zion. (Moltmann 2000, 199)1 This hermeneutic of Word, Sound and Power is a paradigmatic example of the power of the religious productive imagination to proclaim hope through the metaphorization of meaning in the text to life in front of the text.

An important vehicle that Rastafari elders including Mortimo Planno consciously used to globally proclaim Word, Sound and Power is Reggae music, most famously by Rastafari superstar Bob Marley. With the release of Burnin' in late 1973 Marley assumed the mantle of prophet sent forth from Jamaica, whose music, performances and persona proclaimed his livity in Jah, Rastafari. Marley scholar Kwame Dawes Kwame Dawes notes that the inclusion of the Nyabingi Chants, 'Babylon You Throne Gone Down" and "Fly Away Home" Offered the world a clear sense of Marley and the Wailers, Rastafari faith, " – a faith that would ultimately guide everything

1 This is all the more remarkable given the efforts of the Jamaican government to subvert and coopt Rastafari in the 1960's

each would do from that point on. The inclusion of Nyabinghi drumming, the call and response pattern of the chant and the rhythmic swaying of Bob all indicate, as Dawes notes, "The song is not a dance number, and it was not recorded to be played for revelers in the dance clubs and parties. It is a sacred song and presented as such. Marley's voice is that of the leader—the chant director. . .It was a leadership that was musical but, more importantly, it was also a spiritual leadership."(76)"

Marley's prophetic potential was recognized and nurtured by his spiritual advisor, Mortimo Planno. It was he who introduced Marley to the profoundly sacramental knowledge of 'InI' as the manifestation of the indwelling of Jah, Rastafari, which Marley proclaimed through-out the world. Given Ricoeur's identification of the biblical polyphony of names for God, this paper concludes that Rastafari's semantic innovation is not the naming of God, but, rather the proclamation of 'InI' as "pieces of God."(Nettleford).

While never systematized in his published works, Ricoeur is explicit in his presentation of the role of the productive imagination in the historical dialectic of alienating distanciation. The productive imagination enables us to be receptive to the effects of history, to receive traditions, to know where we are coming from, where we are, and where we are going. Ricoeur's hermeneutic of the productive imagination interprets "cultural heritages received from the past and the interest in the futuristic projections of a liberated humanity" (1981, 100). The imagination sees and more importantly—knows—a world different from the one we experience. What is critical to understanding this capacity to imagine an alternative world is the movement from the reproductive to the productive imagination.

Ricoeur insists "Imagination is not at all an alternative to perception [as it is in Hume] but [is] an ingredient of perception. The false opposition between imagination and perception is the blind alley down which philosophical reflections on imagination have stumbled."

Theories of a reproductive imagination understand the image as referring to something that is absent and therefore the image is always a derivative and never original. The nothingness of absence annihilates the object imagined, replacing it with a quasi-object or a pretend object that is unreal.

Ricoeur rejects this nihilistic "negativity of nothingness, alongside the non-existence of the fictional object" (Ricoeur 2009) in favour of a formation of nothing as the utopic Epochĕ of/from reality. This utopic nowhere is not a duplicate of an original reality but rather, it is "the possibility of nowhere in relation to social condition. ..[it]. . .is not only an escape from reality, but it points to a new kind of reality" (2006, 96). This concept of no place liberates the imagination from the referent of the image or the original, giving it capacity to imagine something truly new. Quoting Ricoeur,

> …it's the function of productive imagination—of the fictional—to open and change reality. Productive imagination may enlarge and even produce new worldviews, new ways of looking at things. It may finally change even our way of being in the world." End quote. (2009, chap. 16)2

For Ricoeur utopia is the Epochĕ of/from now out of which the productive imagination imagines a future hope of the unfulfilled past. This hermeneutic of imagining rises above not only the particular of texts, but also "the particularity of the rules and recipes into which the art of understanding is dispersed" (Ricoeur 1981, 45). "The metaphors, symbols, or narratives produced by imagination" philosopher Richard Kearney argues, "all provide us with 'imaginative

2 Ricoeur cautions that the epistemic status of Utopia is not as simple as suggested here noting that

There is a moment of madness in utopia which is irreducible to mere repetition. Utopia claims to be imagination of the new, of a pure beginning. But the opposition is not so simple. No historical period ever exhausted its own dreams. What happened in the past is only a partial realization of what had been projected. . .The promise of an historical event is always more than what was actually realized. There is more in the past than what happened. And so we have to find the future of the past, the unfulfilled potential of the past. (Kearney 2004a).

variations' of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in other ways and to undertake forms of action, which might lead to its transformation. Semantic innovation can thus point towards social transformation. The possible worlds of imagination can be made real by actions." (42).

In Ricoeur's schema of the productive imagination, the parable is to the religious imagination what the metaphor is to the poetic imagination3. In the case of poetic imagination metaphorization4 suspends ordinary reference enabling the projection of new possibilities. With the religious imagination parabolization serves this function. Parabolization is the metaphorization of text by the religious productive imagination through intertextuality. Ricoeur maintains that parabolization and metaphorization are thus interchangeable so long as it is understood,

> that a metaphor can occur not only between words but between whole sequences of sentences. . .Parabolization is the metaphorization of discourse. In the case of the narrative-parables, it consists of the metaphorization of a narrative taken as a whole (Ricoeur 1995, 161).

Parabolization is the hermeneutic frame that guides the religious productive imagination of Rastafari's hermeneutic of word, sound and power. The metaphoric transfer from the work of the imagination in the text to the world of imagination about the text is illustrated by the reasoning of Rastafari elder Mortimo Planno from his text, Rastafarian the World's Most Strangest Man. Planno begins, "A Text is taken to draw a conclusion which can be counted upon as a test. I an I take up a Bible and opened it. So I an I began in Genesis I. Question asked who spoke? Answer given God spoke! Understand! Words are life!! I an I accept the word is God! Here. but where will we go from here?"(Planno, 2006, 12).

The proclamation of the text is linked to the manifestation of creation: "God spoke!" through the declaration "Words are life!! I an I accept the word is God." This parabolization schematized as creation and recognizes the similarities between the words written, (word) spoken (sound), seeing and creating (power)." Planno's assertion that "I an I accept that God is the word the word made flesh and God become a man to finish creation as a man," is an affirmation of a new type of assimilation between the nearness and farness of the metaphoric statement that sees similarities between God and humanity which is illustrated by the use of I-talk and the concept of citing-up text, in life, which is characteristic of Rastafari discourse.

I-talk is a primary example of an odd predicate that Planno, Marley and more generally, Rastafari, uses to re-imagine and re-create, through language, the world. I-talk sees the incarnation of the word as a split-reference, between the first person singular, the third person plural, and the incarnation of God signifying the divine principle (Edmonds. 1998, 33)

Citing-up captures the essence of Rastafari hermeneutic of word, sound and power and typifies the phenomenon of parabolization through intertextuality. Citing refers to the citing of biblical narratives and to the sighting, that is seeing, the metaphoric truth between the text and the world. It refers to the re-citing of the word of God in praise to Jah Rastafari, and the sighting of, that is 'seeing' Jah Rastafari in the text and context of word, sound and power.

Ras Planno summarizes this profoundly suspicious hermeneutic as a faith that is ". . . unbroken regardless of propaganda," "The Bible" he continues, "was given finally, to our ancestors not before it was fully interpreted by Parson. But faith show I an I that words used can expound truth. WORD is Power and Power is God. The first Father in any Language I an I want to give to the

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3 however, as was the case with de-regionalizing hermeneutics, Ricoeur de-regionalizes the productive imagination by demarcating it into four domains; 1) the socio-cultural imagination, 2) the poetic imagination, 3) the epistemological imagination, and 4) the religious imagination. Each of these domains shares the capacity to use language to re-create reality imaginatively. What distinguishes these domains is the language they use to augment reality. (2009, chap. 16). In Ricoeur's schema of the productive imagination, the model is to the epistemological imagination what the metaphor is to the poetic imagination and the parable is to the religious imagination.

4 Insert definition

world what is owed to them through the Mercy of I an I God." And Bob Marely was the one chosen by Planno and other elders to expound this truth, globally proclaiming the 'news' that Babylon power gone down as Zion, stretches forth her hands.

Babylon5, "the first-person, gut-level experiences of alienation and frustration under slavery, colonialism and their legacies," is overcome through repatriation to Ethiopia, reimagined as Zion, the true home of Africans everywhere and the heavenly kingdom. Under the pressure of limit-expression 'Zion,' Ethiopia stretches out her hands as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord God, Jah Rastafari has commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." (Hales 2000)

These images of Babylon and Zion infuses Marley and the Wailers, lyrics, and rhythms, within individual songs and 'intertextuality' between songs. For instances, Johnny was. . . from Marley's 1976 album, Rastaman Vibrations is a narrative-parable that recounts the violence of Babylon through a "son's death being so stark as to be brutal." The story is that of a Jamaican ghetto rudie who is shot in the street, leaving his mum wondering where she went wrong." Marley sings

Woman hold her head and cry,
'Cause her son had been shot down in the street and died
From a stray bullet.

…

Wondering how can she work it out,
Now she knows that the wages of sin is death, yeah!
Gift of Jah is life. (life)

Some commentators have interpreted this lyric as a clear indication that Marley believed had Johnny been brought up Rastafari none of this would have happened."(Mcann & Hawke, 74) Textually, Dawes notes that the lyrical structure is more complicated arguing that terms like 'stray bullet' and 'shot by the system' indicate that it is Babylon and nothing else that is responsible for the death and violence that were a daily occurrence in the streets of Kingston in the '70s and '80's. However, one interprets it, the song concludes with Marley as the narrator "beside the women. He tries to comfort her, and then she begins to repeat 'Johnny was a good man' . . . 'I know, I know, I know' He joins her in the lamentation." The grace in the song lies in Marley's determination to humanize the men who were being killed each day on the streets of Kingston." The final lyrics, "can a woman tender care/Cease towards the child she bear? Is a direct allusion to Isaiah 49:15 "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee." Dawes concludes that with this proclamation, Marley "stands as a prophet looking at the hardships experienced by his people in Babylon, exemplified by this moment in which the system destroys a man and prophecies that Jah will not forget. The allusion complicates the song, turning it into a remarkable expression of faith and hope in the midst of tragedy." (163-164). Johnny does not die because of his personal sins, but as a result of the corporate sin of Babylon.

Dawes interpretation is intertextually supported by the 1978 song, No women, no cry, which I believe is a direct illusion to Johnny was. . ., In this song, Marley reminisces about life in Trenchtown and the, Good friends we have, oh, good friends we've lost/Along the way (way)." After warning against forgetting the past, the song moves into the 'great future,' as the tempo switch to match the lyrics, "Everything's gonna be all right! Everything's gonna be all right!"

With the repetition, Everything's gonna be alright, Marley proclaims hope that despite or rather

5 Babylon, "is the first-person, gut-level experiences of alienation and frustration under slavery, colonialism and their legacies," It is not an imposed concept, but one that has grown out of the gut feelings and experiences of "souls on ice," and of dismembered beings. Babylon is the psychic image sustained by real life experiences, busted hopes, broken dreams, the blues of broken homes and of disjointed tribes of people trapped by history. It is an image of fire and blood, of being on the edge, in limbo, in the wilderness, in concrete jungles . . . It is a desolation in which man feels disjointed and out of line with the plans of creation.

in spite of the suffering and lamentation of friends lost, wailed in Johnny Was. . .everything is going to be alright as we push on through to Zion. This hope in Zion despite the suffering in Babylon, is expressed through faith in the righteousness of Jah Rastafari, grounded in the chant, Babylon, Your Throne Gone Down, Fly Away Home.6

As a prophet of Rastafari, Marley's music and lyrics exemplifies Rastafari's consistent hermeneutic method of parabolization through word, sound and power. By citing-up the historical, social, political, and economic context of slavery, colonialism, racism, and oppression interpreted through the lens of Biblical text, in dialogue with the narrative and images of extra-biblical texts7 Marley employs word, sound and power to chant down the evil of Babylon while projecting hope in Zion. The movement between the figurative and the literal, past and current, personalities and events in scripture, and personalities and events in the world today, are all inventions of the concept of metaphoric truth, a truth that Ricoeur concludes is inescapably paradoxical. This paradox, Ricoeur maintains, "consists in the fact there is no other way to do justice to the notion of metaphorical truth other than to include the critical incision of the (literal) 'is not' within the ontological vehemence of the (metaphorical) 'is.'" Johnny is a good man. . .

Rastafari's hermeneutic of word, sound and power, conceptually framed by the religious productive imagination, enlarges our hermeneutic horizon as it enriches are understanding of text and textuality. This hermeneutic has the potential to shift, for those who have eyes to see, our gaze beyond the ordinary and for some, suspect, canons of sacred texts to appreciate the erstwhile neglected intertextuality of the canon within the canon which is the truth, the word made flesh, written on the other half of the heart.

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6 Slowly bring up Babylon Your Throne. . .

7 See A Southard "Modern Ethiopia," National Geographic 59 (1931): 679-738; Robert W Moore, "Coronation Days in Addis Ababa," National Geographic 59 (1931): 738-46.