the Law which severs us from Nature and wrests us into Culture, just as we may be able to find other ways of figuring Nature besides woman. (The African Oedipus complex, according to some researchers, figures the censorious power quite differently from the Western). Christians sometimes have a habit of reaching too quickly for their eschatology. But first we have to find out, as David Lodge might say, how far we can go, and since I take the only interesting Christian answer to Lodge to be 'never far enough', Angela West should not depress us *yet*.

Response to Tom Brown

Angela West

I am sorry if my Genesis and Patriarchy article 'Women and the End-Time' threatened to depress Tom Brown, especially since his response to it was most encouraging and quite cheered me up.

In the article, I made use of the work of Juliet Mitchell, in particular drawing attention to the major contradiction she confronts: that patriarchy has been a historically universal aspect of human society which is rooted in the constitution of the unconscious; but that political struggle to bring about change in the 'eternal' form of the unconscious is necessary – especially for feminists. My conclusion – that this contradiction is only eschatologically resolvable – is, according to Tom Brown, 'unduly pessimistic'.

Well, firstly, I agree to being pessimistic (at one level); but if Gramsci is to be believed, 'pessimism of the intellect' is entirely respectable for historical materialists. I'm suggesting that it is a similar prerequisite for Christian hope.

Secondly, the fact that Juliet Mitchell's case is presented (or at least can be understood) as being in the form of contradiction is precisely what makes it credible for me. What tends to depress me is the various attempts that are made to resolve this essential contradiction primarily, if not solely at the level of theoretical discourse, and the accompanying belief that this is possible. And this leads to the third point; namely the real difference between us seems to lie in the meaning we give to 'eschatologically resolvable'. But more of that in a minute.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1982.tb06253.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Tom Brown says that I am silent on the fact that the subjection of women in history has a material base . . . in the sexual division of labour. I am not sure that I fully understand what he means by this. The existence of the whole system of the sexual division of labour, in its material, historical and ideological aspects that constitutes patriarchy, was the subject of both articles – so I'm not sure how I was silent about it. If he means that I didn't attempt to analyse theoretically the relationship between patriarchy and say, the capitalist mode of production, yes clearly that's true. There are a number of feminist researchers engaged on such a project; the fact that I haven't undertaken it doesn't mean that I've denied its relevance, only that I'm not competent for that particular project – my own was somewhat different. His point is, perhaps, that I have not sufficiently stressed the *material* aspect of this system. However, my silence on this matter (if that's what it is) should not be taken to mean that its implications have somehow escaped my notice. When I pick up my child from school every day, maintain the physical aspects of my household (cook, clean etc) go out to work, speak to my neighbours and read about the lives of women in the papers etc the subject of the material basis of women's subordination through the sexual division of labour is not entirely absent from my consciousness. In fact it's probably true to say it informs my thought more than any other single factor. If it appears to be missing from my thinking, it may be due to some mechanism similar to that observed by Walter Benjamin when he said of his thinking in relation to theology: 'My thinking is related to theology as a blotter is to ink. It is totally saturated by it. But if it would then concern the blotter, nothing that was written would be left'. (See *New Left Review* 129 Susan Buck-Morss's article on Walter Benjamin, footnote 180 p 84.)

However, the particular aspect of this subject that concerns me is this: that it is the material effects of the sexual division of labour on women that can enable them to realise the necessity for breaking with the traditional forms of theoretical discourse; that is, we experience it as a practical necessity. When as women we begin to participate in public discourse of various sorts, we must write and speak in the interstices of the above-mentioned activities, and these impose major material constraints. Thus, when writing, one quotes what one happens to be reading (or have read) rather than the latest theoretical word on the subject. One reflects with reference to our own experience, which for the majority is nearer to the nursery class than the senior common room. And one cuts theoretical corners as a matter of course as one is always in a hurry. But cutting them also gives us the opportunity to forge – or rediscover – a different type of public discourse; one more suited to

the needs of those who don't have the leisure to go round all the theoretical corners at the proper speed, and aren't generally eligible for membership in the gentlemen's club (now by courtesy open to women). Its members are, on the whole, scrupulously fair to each other's elegant creations, but rather less worried about being fair to the 'silent' majority, without whose productive and reproductive labour they wouldn't be around to engage in such debates. Thus the sexual division of labour obliges women to challenge some of the conventions of theoretical discourse, and explore modes of public speech that do justice to the material constraints of their situation. Such speech will no doubt reflect 'the fragmentary status of the feminine epistemological model' as constructed under patriarchy (see Toril Moi's article "Representation of Patriarchy: sexuality and epistemology in Freud's Dora" in *Feminist Review* No 9). But this then has to be the starting point for women, since we can't wait for patriarchy to be abolished before we begin; and we can't abolish the effects of patriarchy on the lives of individual women except at the expense of the majority of women. To have access to any form of public discourse is a privilege justified only if we speak, and re-model speaking, on their behalf. This was an important part of what I was trying to say in "Genesis and Patriarchy". (Actually doing it, of course, is another matter . . .)

To come at the same point from a different angle, I think Tom Brown's question about my silence on the material basis of the sexual division of labour is also a question about language i.e. why do you use the ideologically suspect language of theology, instead of say the scientific language of Marxism. Well, to borrow the language of Lacan for use as common ground, as he says: 'the symbolic system, as it is imposed on the human subject in its construction in history and ideological formations, is a principal determinant'. In historical terms, theology has been a key area of the symbolic system and thus a major aspect of the 'principal determinant'. I do not believe that it is sufficient simply to describe the ideological operation of theology and religious belief, no matter how sophisticated or 'scientific' our analytical tools; what is required is that we enter the symbolic system (where we are already entered, whatever the formal state of our belief) and act upon it subversively *from within its own terms of reference.*

But the real crux of our difference seems to lie in the meaning given to eschatology. For Tom Brown, it appears to mean a further and final instalment of the moral law, which has as its base the repression of sexuality. There is probably a substantial measure of agreement between us as to the nature of the operation of morality; thus, what has passed for Christian sexual ethics has on the whole had vastly more to do with male property rights and

tribal pollution taboos concerning women than it has to do with Christ; David Lodge's book-title question, *How far can you go?* serves as a classic paradigm of phallocentric ethics. For women, the 'moral' aspect of this question obscures the underlying reality of sexual politics; for them the real significance of the question is; by which course of action am I least likely to forfeit male protection? Under patriarchy, male protection is necessary for women's survival. Patriarchal morality while being absolutely premissed on the repression of women, nevertheless holds out to them the illusion of protection through conformity. In this way, it reproduces the fundamental character of morality for all groups that lack political autonomy. The question of morality for them is never separable from the question of survival. A matter can only be a 'purely moral' matter if you belong to the strata of politically privileged in whose interests morality operates to legitimate and maintain control over the politically powerless.

I do not think that the eschaton is a guarantee of morality in this sense. I think it's clear that the religious morality of the Jewish law in first century Palestine functioned in ways not unrecognisably different to those of contemporary patriarchal morality. Jesus, the apocalyptic preacher, by announcing the eschaton, the coming of God's rule, undermined the whole system of morality, and demystified moral questions by making them manifestly questions about human survival. God's rule, as preached by Christ, was the precise antithesis of the rule of the religious and secular authorities. The good news of the Kingdom was bad news for the rich and mighty, for the politically secure. It took away the basis for their security and offered hope instead to those who had no grounds for hope in moral or political terms under the existing arrangements.

The imminence of nuclear war in our own times restores for us the possibility of appreciating the fundamentally eschatological character of Jesus' preaching. His message is that the only 'moral' matters that matter are those that concern survival, ultimate security . . . salvation; and this is true not only for those who are on the underside of the class struggle, but for everyone. But of course, it is precisely those who have least to gain from the existing order who are most likely to realise the urgency of this message before the rest. For them, the question of salvation has always been a thoroughly materialist one – an urgent practical matter. This is strongly reflected in the parables of Jesus.

For me then, eschatology has very little to do with the moral law as the basis of sexually approved behaviour, and everything to do with the ultimate fate of the human race, the living, the dead and the unborn; and more especially to do with the resolution of

the historically universal conflict between the just and the unjust, the oppressor and the oppressed; about which side you will be found on at the final barricade. . . . In this sense, I think one can say that Marx too was an eschatologist; and that the Day of Judgment is the day of justice – the vision of the ultimate triumph of the just (classless) society. It's been said that the future that Marx speaks of is not to be understood as a utopian model to which the present must be conformed. And this is precisely true of the Christian eschaton; for what utopian vision would take as the symbol of its hope the figure of the political victim, of suffering bleeding humanity, dying by torture? And what religion would take this figure and give to it the name of Deity, the name reserved for that ultimate symbol of power – social, political, moral and epistemological?

The only thing that Marx's eschaton fails to envision is how the human future, which is the 'antithesis of the nothingness of the capitalist future' (Miranda) will be the human future for the dead – all those who have already died in the poverty and misery of class and patriarchal society. This point is brilliantly made by José Miranda in his book *Marx and the Bible*. As he says,

> "For the real and concrete man, this nothingness – the true opiate of the people – continues to be nothingness if he is promised only an altar in the heart of the working class . . . (and as for real and concrete woman, she probably doesn't even get an altar. A. W.) . . . The negation of the resurrection of the dead is an ideology defensive of the status quo: it is the silencing of the sense of justice that history objectively stirs up; it is to kill the nerve of the real hope of changing this world. The authentically dialectical Marxist and the Christian who remains faithful to the Bible are the last who will be able to renounce the resurrection of the dead."

The question of the resurrection of the dead, like the question of the configuration of the unconscious and whether the historically universal is the same as the eternal, has profound epistemological consequences. You could say that what Paul discovered on the road to Damascus was that "the reality principle is (not) eternally fated to assume the specific ideological formation of the patriarchal, castrating and domineering father of the Oedipus complex" – but of course, you might say *that's* going too far! However, it seems correct to say that Paul had found a new way of figuring the law, because after having been its greatest advocate he then went round saying that the law was death, and Christ had overcome the law. Paul's vision here has the status of revelation precisely because it goes beyond symbolising what is historically universal; and it results in a revolutionary epistemology, in which

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1982.tb06253.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the patriarchal morality based on the Father as figure of the Law is superseded. Under the Law, one is subject to the censorious power implicit in the Oedipus complex, but as Paul says, 'Christ has overcome the law'. By participating in his death and resurrection we are liberated to live towards the future, the eschaton that is the space of the not-yet. The crippling power of guilt has become irrelevant; one can no longer be punished by guilt because one is no longer under its jurisdiction. Instead we are called to participate in the death of the Lord – an altogether more unpleasant affair.

This then is what it means to 'preach Christ crucified'. Paul's conversion results in a radical discontinuity of discourse; preaching is a mode of activity that is epistemologically quite different from theoretical discourse, and marks a radical break from it, as it does from morality. Paul's preaching is polemical, fragmentary and flagrantly unfair to a proper understanding of the subtleties of contemporary Judaism. To preach Christ crucified was to preach identification with the fate of the political victim. To the theorists of the ruling ideology of the contemporary world it certainly could make no sense; the Cross is the crossing out, the cancellation of their phallocentric epistemology; and if it was 'folly to the Greeks' it was no less unacceptatble to the Jews. To a people who were without the political means to prevent themselves from becoming victims to Rome, the fate of the victim as symbol of deliverance was a nonsense; indeed it was scandal to those who had turned for refuge to the security of the Jewish moral law. To preach Christ crucified remains as foolish as ever to the inheritors of Greek thought (which includes Christians and theologians). It's a scandal to all ideologues of patriarchy – and phallusy! And it's no less scandalous to the inheritors of passionate Judaic moralism – which includes Marxists – and feminists.

Eschatological belief is not a matter of obtaining one's personal passport to heavenly salvation; it has everything to do with 'thy will be done *on earth'* and 'give us this day our daily bread'. I don't 'reach out for my eschatology' – it is rather that the eschaton reaches out for me – with promise or with menace, according to my faith or my lack of it, but definitely without any guarantee of moral security, and no cause whatever for political complacency. It reaches me like a summons, putting everything at stake. Who knows what will happen when we get to court?

To reflect on how patriarchy and class society had a beginning (genesis) in human society is a way of expressing the conviction that it must have an end. Thus if it is not merely a simple illusion, it requires a considerable act of faith to be able to see, as Juliet Mitchell does, the incipient 'death throes' of capitalism and patri-

archy, when to ordinary sight they seem everywhere to be triumphant. And in this sense, she appears to share something of the extraordinary sight of Paul who could speak of the 'whole creation groaning together in travail' – a creation that 'will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom 8:19). Like him, she seems to be looking forward to a 'new heaven (a new symbolic order) and a new earth (a new economic order)'. It is not a utopian model to which the present must be conformed; the glorious liberty of the children of God means that we are set free for the future. Only the Incarnation makes it possible to 'reject the tyrannies of parental authority, displacing the myth of origins for the practice of beginning'. Or as John says:

'Beloved, we are God's children now.
It does not yet appear what we shall be . . .' (1 John 3:2)

Is that so depressing?

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1982.tb06253.x Published online by Cambridge University Press