John Milbank's Divina Commedia

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> Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell of that wood,
> savage and harsh and dense, the thought of
> which renews my fear!
>
> (*Inferno* Canto 1, 3–6) [1]

The journey towards Milbank's representation of Augustine's *Civitas Dei* calls for an epic heroism, as it passes through woods dense with philosophical thought and over chasms of vertiginous intellectual argument. Dante, then, provides a description of one's experience of reading *Theology and Social Theory*. But more significantly, he provides us with a key to its method. Milbank's polemic is aimed at modernity, the invention of the secular story and modern political theology's collusion with it. This modernity or secularity arose following late-mediaeval/Renaissance self-awareness. Assisted by postmodern strategies of reading, Milbank allegorizes secular discourses, deconstructs their secularism and reveals their dependence upon metaphysical and theological assumptions. By doing this he therefore embraces secular discourse (whose inception and invention 'began at least in the eleventh century' [p.432]) within a theological metanarrative. And *that* is why Dante is significant; John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* is a contemporary *Commedia*. This does not necessarily condemn it as a piece of late twentieth century nostalgia, a *fin de siècle* pre-Raphaelitism. But it means that the teleological goal of *Theology and Social Theory* is the recovery of a pre-modern (but not antique) theological perspective. Or, put in another (albeit Dantesque) way: this book provides a new allegorical depiction of the operation of charity [pp.425–6]. Such a reading of the book has several important corollaries, binding upon both John Milbank and his readers.

Analyses of individual secular thinkers and schools of thought only become meaningful within the movement of the whole book. They need to be read within the context of Milbank's overall design. Each analysis has its place in the grand narrative he is composing. Each analysis is subservient to this grand narrative. Because of this there emerges an element of distortion. The abstraction that homogenizes the postmodern projects of Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuzes and Foucault, for example, inevitably borders on over-simplification. There is an evident reduction

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of specificity as Aristotle is deconstructed [p.359] or the metaphysical and theological presuppositions of German sociology are exposed [p.76]. Dialectics become 'religious immanantism' [p.185], secular discourses are rhetorical strategies inventing myths (particularly the myth of the autonomous 'fact' [p.111]) and the State itself is 'the form of a perverted Church' [p.433]. There is, then, a necessary idealism, a necessary 'violence' one might say, as Milbank retells the history of ideas within the Christian superstory.

It is the corollory of claiming a discourse as foundational (or asserting the claims of a metadiscourse) that all other discourses (including putative metadiscourses) become allegories of this one discourse in their subordination to it. Milbank claims that this is what Hegel and Marx did to the text of history and what anthropological perspectives from Feuerbach to Girard have done with the text of religion. But then there is a question concerning the status of *Theology and Social Theory* itself and Milbank's own omniscience or stance as metanarrator. He employs none of techniques of dream, vision, or persona found in Dante. Theologically, there is no moment of revelation, no epiphany, no epistemological rupture. There is only mediation and mythologies, and his own omniscience is a rhetorical strategy too.

Milbank must accept that his own account, this archaeology of secularism, is just another story—another way of retelling and reappropriating the traditions. The truth cannot be verified, as he repeatedly informs us. An important aspect of Milbank's thesis is to argue that 'sociology cannot explain' [p.121], it can only invent. Metadiscourses are only myths; their axioms are not demonstrable. Thus *Theology and Social Theory* is not an *apologia* [p.117], for it is not and cannot be an argument *for* (although it *is* an argument *to* Christianity). No discourse of knowledge, to quote Jacques Lacan, is available. For Milbank, invention, poeisis, rhetoric, narrative become the foundational categories for knowledge. But then a tension emerges, for all metadiscourses (including the Christian one) do set out to explain, and do so by forgetting they are narratives. And so, not surprisingly, there are moments when John Milbank appears to stumble into a positivism whose tenets he undermines. For the claim is made that 'it is theology. . .which explains things' [p.217]; that 'Christianity...provides the key' [p.230].

What ratifies or legitimizes the Christian metanarrative, for Milbank, is not any correspondence between its description and reality. No such correspondence is adhered to—language creates all reality. But the Christian *mythos* 'explains' insofar as it simply 'offers a much better

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story' [p.330]. The Christian *mythos* is superior only in terms of 'the inner consistency of a discourse/practice' [p.330]. Its 'consistency is calibrated according to its capacity to resolve, by circumscribing the antinomies that characterise other *mythoi* and that enable them to be deconstructed. Deconstruction, as Milbank employs it, developing its practice from a post-modernism he will also wish to remythologize, unleashes the differences, the alternative meanings, that are suppressed in a discourse that claims to explain the nature of reality. But Christianity 'is *not* deconstructible to difference' [p.331], for it embraces differences. In fact, God is a God who differentiates and Christianity is the story of the infinite self-realisation of this differentiating God. Christianity, then, has greater persuasive power as a metanarrative, because it is not attempting to suppress. As a discourse claiming the ontological priority of peace it is non-mastering. *Theology and Social Theory* is both an argument for the greater persuasive power of the Christian mythos and an exercise in the creation of such persuasiveness. Milbank's hope is for a rhetorical victory over secular reasoning. Its appeal, therefore, is as much to the imagination as to the intellect.

Despite its rhetorical character, ultimately the Christian metanarrative is constituted and privileged above other perspectives by faith. One can point to the 'critical non-avoidability of the theological' [p.3], to language creating meaning and revealing reality to us [p.150], to a surplus of signification that forever escapes our readings of narrative and events. There are traces of transcendence, but a 'wager' is required [p.306] and it is faith that accepts this transcendentalism, which is the effect of a linguistic code [p.305]. It is very important here for Milbank's argument that faith is not understood as reason's antinomy, but as reason's all-pervasive context. If reality is always and only invented by language and encoded in narrative, then all reasoning must subscribe to faith. All reasoning is an act of faith within a particular mythos, a particular story that transcends reasoning.

Milbank subsumes the power of reasoning beneath the irreducibly metaphoric character of language [p.179]. He foregrounds the presence of rhetoric as the very texture of rational propositions [p.248]. Again, this is a postmodern move which he will eventually turn against postmodernism itself. For Milbank observes that the discourse of postmodernism recasts a prioritizing of violence and a vision of nihilism that is simply a contemporary form of antique paganism [p.376]. What results is a linguistic idealism whereby all understanding is aesthetic and there is only knowledge insofar as there is narrative: 'every action is "poetic"' [p.356]. Upon the basis of this idealism Milbank argues for a

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theological realism which does not presuppose that language represents things out there, but that language participates in an unfolding divine discourse whereby differences are related without being suppressed and the antinomies of object and subject, individual and corporate, are mediated by narration [p.71]. Reality is not a given, but a mediating action and a continuum—a creative realisation that responds to and promotes further mediations. This mediating activity, this poeisis, is ontologically rooted in the Trinity. For God is a God who differentiates and the Spirit relates the one and the many in an economy of love and the Son becomes 'a moment in the *mediation* between Father and Spirit' (p.424). Truth is participation in God's relationship to the world and God's relationship to the world is a rhetorical, narratological one [p.430].

No space is provided for Milbank's book to stand outside that participation. *Theology and Social Theory* itself invites that participation from its readers. It functions mimetically, as an exercise in the power of story-telling in the hope of changing cultural practice. The book cannot escape the injunction that '"communication" is merely a secondary phenomenon within language that has first "positioned" both things and people' [p.108]).

There is, then, an analogy composed between human action and divine which is inseparable from the inevitable process of analogizing, of writing the narrative. It is the ineradicable existence of this analogy within this narrative process that constitutes Milbank's ontology of peace, revealed 'through differential relation' [p.6]. For an overriding allegory, a metanarrative, negotiates a relationship between differences. Furthermore, likeness is only maintained through difference [p.289]; there can only be analogy because of differentiation. Allegory, therefore, (and all narrative is allegorical insofar as its meaning is irreducible to its telling), promotes and harmonizes difference, and inscribes 'the path of peaceful flight' [p.434].

The Church, which reads, retells, and reenacts the Christian mythos, promotes the process of this analogizing. It is constituted by and fosters allegory. It is a Christian social praxis, an aesthetic praxis that seeks to embrace and negotiate differences through self-denial and forgiveness and charity. Theology becomes the narrative of that praxis. And, once more, *Theology and Social Theory* is both a narrative of that 'socially aesthetic harmony' [p.422] and a concrete particularisation of its operation. It is theology as an ecclesiological act mediating Greek metaphysics, French positivism, German sociology, Scottish political economy, Enlightenment ethics postmodern nihilism through the Church's 'vision of a paradisal community' [p.433] of differences.

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Violence is allowed no ontological purchase [p.432], for the Christian metanarrative, issuing from the nature and operation of the Trinity, reproduces itself as love and friendship [p.416]. Dante's final vision of *la luce eterna* is reinstated (in all the connotations of that word):

> In its depths I saw that it contained,
> bound by love in one volume, that which is
> scattered in leaves through the universe.
>
> *Paradiso* Canto XXXIII, [85-90].

In an article published after *Theology and Social Theory*, John Milbank entitles his theological approach a 'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism'[2]. He subsequently sets out his position in forty two concise 'responses' which outline his presuppositions and their theological corollaries. A clarification process has begun. It is clarification that is required, for if we accept (as I would) Milbank's claim that theology must return to its rhetorical roots, that theology is the praxis of re-narrating the original story—then I do not see upon what grounds John Milbank's book can be refuted. That does not mean we cannot quibble about his interpretations of certain thinkers or cultural phenomena. Nor does it mean we cannot question aspects of the plotting. The move from a malignant to a benign postmodernism in two sentences [p.326] evades a paradox of postmodernism that surely needs unpacking. But if we accept the correlation between our knowledge and our stories and that this book is a story, an invention, then there is no position available from which to claim that this story is right or wrong. We can only tell the story differently. *Theology and Social Theory* does not offer itself as an argument for refutation, only as theology in performance, as a continuing tradition, a socio-linguistic practice. It is not, then refutation, but clarification that is necessary. Clarification is required of those parts of Milbank's story which perhaps do not display adequate 'consistency', those parts which raise questions, suggest tensions, provoke antinomies that better descriptions might resolve. For this writer there are four such areas, which issue out of and relate back to Milbank's understanding of 'violence'. With an ever-increasing sense of *hubris*, they can be outlined as follows:

There is a tension, even an antinomy, between Milbank's idealism, his depiction of 'the concealed text of an original peaceful creation' [p.417] and 'the persistence of the second text' [p.417], the distortion of *dominium*. This is the distinction, at the level of discourse between *meta*narratives and what Lyotard calls the '*genre de discours*', the Word and human words. There is a difference between telling us (through

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slim accounts of Baroque poetics and the work of Hamann and Herder) that the Word informs words, and describing the economy of such isomorphism. Is there not a need to give a more adequate account of the relationship between the economy of discourse and the Trinitarian economy of salvation? It would necessitate a clearer account of Christ as Mediator and the process of mediation; it would be an account of mimesis or representation. But without such a clarification does Milbank's project not stand on a philosophical foundation (linguistic idealism), and therefore does it not come perilously close to presenting a liberalism (with its haunting prospect of a 'natural' theology) that Milbank would wish to deconstruct [pp.92–3]?

It is at this point that the question of faith requires some clarification. What is faith for Milbank and from whence does it arise (if it arises at all)? As I understand it, it is not a leap of reasoning, a Pascalian 'wager'. For with such a violence, a will to power, we return to the Enlightenment's autonomous subject. So is faith intrinsic to the use of language itself and we cannot but suspend our disbelief in the narratives we weave? In which case, what enables us to change our narrative strategies, what enables us to be open to the persuasiveness of the Christian story, to repent and to believe? What are the workings of faith within reason for Milbank? Faith and narrative practice play axiomatic roles in *Theology and Social Theory*. But the relation between the dynamic of faith, and the production and promotion of desire in narrative needs to be explored further. Similarly, the three-fold relation between the event of Jesus Christ, the narrative representations of that event and the reading of those representations as foundational for the Christian life as it continues to be lived historically, needs to be more thoroughly described. These clarifications are fundamental if any narrative is to be accorded ontological rather than arbitrary status.

Such an account might help to clarify a further question raised by *Theology and Social Theory*. That is: is there only *one* Christian story? If all differences are to be accorded a place within the unfolding creativity of the Godhead, then there can only be *one* metanarrative; for there is only one metanarrator. But how does the Christian story relate to this one metanarrative? Does John Milbank not too readily assume that they are the same? This question closely relates to a second point: what is the Church? What is the relationship between the Church and the self-realising Godhead? How does the image and idea of the Church relate to contingency of churches and sects and even other faiths? And how does the soteriological dynamic of the Godhead relate to the *imperium* of the Church and the various power-structures within particular churches? Without clarification is there not a danger that the historicism Milbank

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wishes to endorse becomes metaphorized and vacuous, and his theological realism becomes another form of gnosticism? Without further clarification might not Milbank's Christian story become a Christian imperialism that polices the sublime?

Many of the questions and tensions perhaps focus around what Milbank understands by 'difference'. For can difference be difference if differences can be related and constitute analogies? There must be some form of analogy if there is to be theological realism at all, but does Milbank's description of analogy think difference radically enough? What constitutes difference for postmodernist thinkers like Derrida is its very resistence to analogy (where analogy is equated with the order of the same). Is there not a need for a clarification of analogy? If all narrative creates analogies and is a process of analogizing (bringing differences into correspondence) what is the relationship between this analogizing, the Christian story and God as metanarrator? Is it, can it be, a relationship that allows differences to be different while subsuming them within an ontology of peace? Lyotard draws attention to the holism of narration, a holism that suppresses difference[3]. In Milbank's work does the analogizing process of narration really allow for the *Gelassenheit* rather than the suppression of difference? If it does how would we be able to know? What enables Milbank to know? What authorizes John Milbank to assert that differences can remain different in an ontology of peace; what enables him to write this Christian metanarrative from God's perspective?

These are areas that seem in need of further clarification. They cluster around the question of 'violence'. Milbank's recognition of a 'tragic dimension' [p.6 and pp.419–422] sits uneasily within the Church's promotion of a socially aesthetic harmony. Like Dante's mute Satan, half visible and half-buried in the ice of Cocytus, always half in and half out of the narrative, this tragic reality too exists 'insofar as *imperium* lies outside *ecclesia*' [p.419]. But where is this 'outside' if narrative invents our reality and the *ecclesia* participates in the Godhead's metanarrating? And what is the relation of 'some measures of coercion' [p.418] to the violence that has no ontological purchase in the Christian story, that lies, somehow, outside it, somewhere? Is there no violence in the Christian story that is ontological? Could not the incarnation, the resurrection, and Christ's miracles be described as violences ? How is violence to be understood ? Within Milbank's thesis, its meaning could cover the physical and instinctive will to power, the rhetorical power of a metanarrative and/or the hermeneutical violence of misrepresentation. Is there a link between these forms of violence? What constitutes the link between physical, rhetorical and hermeneutic

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'violence'? Are they the same? What is the relation between violence and difference? These questions are important, because in a way they are asking, what is the relation between John Milbank's *divina commedia* and the Christian metanarrative? For every act of persuasion is an act of violence [p.398] and Milbank too is engaged in an act of persuasion; an act which must perpetrate acts of hermeneutical violence in order to reduce all forms of secular thinking to mythological analogues. If the tragic flaw is *necessary* from whence does this necessity arise?

Finally, is not this present essay also an act of violence? Is it possible to read without misreading (or is John Milbank's reading of the Christian story the true reading, *the* reading?) Is it possible to read *Theology and Social Theory*, or any narrative, without reading by the light of a supplement to the book which, by reading, is being installed? Reading is negotiation and misrepresentation is inevitable. In paying tribute, as we must, to the brilliance, the courage, the audacity and the sheer hard work that produced the writing of this book, is there not also a betrayal, a reading in favour of our own work, our own questions ? Intratextuality demands that narratives engender further narratives. The presence of this special issue is testimony to the fecundity of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* to inscribe itself within the theologies of tomorrow. This is all this present essay too is doing – allowing the book to spawn another narrative, a different narrative, one that, in being different, misreads and misrepresents and will call for clarifications of its own. Perhaps Heidegger was wrong and thanks and praise are not an ontological homology. Perhaps there is always a violence and the presence of this violence will remain. It is the question of that violence that must be more adequately accounted for in John Milbank's Christian ontology of peace.

1 Both quotations are taken from the dual-text edition of *The Divine Comedy*, tr. John D. Sinclair, O.U.P., 1946.

2 '"Postmodern Critical Augustinianism": A Short *Summa* in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions, *Modern Theology*, Vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 225–237, April 1991.

3 C.f. 'The Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge', *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester University Press, 1986, pp.18–23.

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