

Rhetoric, Class, and Christ

Vincent Lloyd

Georgia State University

Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, Edited by Creston Davis. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2009.

The Slovenian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek quips, “every true philosophical dialogue” is but “an interaction of two monologues” (235). Dialogue, for Žižek, is as tired as political correctness and multiculturalism. Not just tired: the desire for dialogue is a symptom of liberal false consciousness, the explicit commitment to open exchange that elides the presupposed rules and conditions governing that exchange. The liberal pluralist, the Catholic, the Jew, the Hindu, and the Muslim can sit around the campfire and sing songs that celebrate their differences, but they sing to the beat of the liberal pluralist. It is tempting to respond that the insidious hegemony of the liberal pluralist is evaded when the dialogue is goal-oriented, when the participants share a common political aim. The dialogue between Žižek, Judith Butler, and Ernesto Laclau, published as *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, was seemingly motivated by such an aim.¹ But might this pragmatic motivation for dialogue involve a second-order false consciousness? The official motivation is no longer celebrating difference, it is mobilizing for action, but the effect is the same: the desire for action that purports to unite all is the contagious desire of the pragmatist just as the supposedly shared celebration of difference is

¹ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000).

actually the contagious merriment of the liberal pluralist.

Neither Žižek nor his interlocutor in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, the Anglo-Catholic theologian John Milbank, want a dialogue (Milbank penned an article heralding “The End of Dialogue”²). Milbank and Žižek share a distaste for the liberal, the pluralist, the pragmatist, the secular, the tolerant – and the capitalist. They share a taste for orthodoxy, for socialism, for provocation, for avant-garde theory, and for Christianity. Milbank tends towards the Catholic, Žižek towards the Protestant; Milbank tends towards the aestheticist, Žižek towards the materialist. If Milbank and Žižek were to wallow in their similarities and differences, or were to consider how to attack similar goals from their different positions, *The Monstrosity of Christ* would be a dialogue. Žižek can plausibly claim that it is not a dialogue because, although its authors have substantive differences, their primary difference is not on matters of substance. It is, or at least it seems to be, the difference between the two authors’ stances towards matters of substance.

Both Žižek and Milbank understand themselves as rhetoricians. Milbank takes the role of the theologian to be that of “out-narrating” the partisans of modernity and post-modernity. Christianity offers a different picture of the world, a peaceful, beautiful picture opposed to both the cold, controlled violence of modernity and the joyous, effervescent violence of postmodernity. The theologian does not speak about this peaceful world; the theologian’s words constitute it. Or, more precisely, it is constituted by the words and actions of Christians, doing and saying what Christians say and do. The theologian describes the world and constitutes it at once by speaking true words about God. These true words, like the words of all Christians, constitute in their performance, but the performance of these words is a meta-performance: their content (about Christianity) describes their effects (constituting Christianity as an alternative

meta-narrative to modernity and postmodernity).

Milbank is also doing something subtler. He is staking out territory distinct from both the poststructuralist and the Hegelian. The territory he is staking out is the territory of theology, the territory of philosophy as theology, a territory that opens up when theology refuses to subordinate itself to “secular reason.” Milbank marks this territory with the term “paradox.” It is arrived at when we take the equation of the good, the true, *and the beautiful* seriously. Milbank describes this territory in ontological terms. It refuses both the univocal and the equivocal. He compares it to a misty landscape. On the one hand, the mist envelops everything, makes everything look the same. On the other hand, the mist brings forth each aspect of the landscape. A landscape that one looks at every day becomes as if it is all the same, each aspect forgotten. Enveloped in mist, each aspect appears anew, distinct. The more that is concealed by the mist the more that is revealed; this is what Milbank terms paradox. A dialectical reading of this scenario would stage a confrontation between obfuscating, univocal mist and clear, equivocal objects on the landscape, a confrontation that would result in “revealing the final, absolute truth to be the mere contingent diversity of the various shapes of things” (162-3). But this dialectical reading abolishes the significance of a misty landscape: that both mist and landscape exist at the same time, each obscuring and elucidating at once. Put another way, what the dialectical reading misses is beauty, the beauty that results from the paradox of concealing and revealing at once. This beauty cannot be expressed, it can only be experienced. In a sense the dialectical option suffers from a need to speak, to describe, to reason, and so it overlooks what is most important, beauty ineffable.

Milbank is fascinated by this image of paradox as mist because in it he finds an allegory for existence as such. Paradox (and so beauty) “saturates our everyday reality” (163). What

² Included in John Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

makes Christianity, and particularly Catholicism, philosophically unique is that it acknowledges this. It provides a way to understand transcendence in immanence that does not reduce immanence to “the mere contingent diversity of the various shapes of things” (162-3). The true cannot be understood without the beautiful, just as the objects in the landscape cannot be noticed without the mist. Directly opposing his view to Žižek’s, Milbank argues that it is “more radical and Christian” to say “that the infinite and the finite both coincide and do not coincide,” like the mist and the landscape, than to say, as Žižek does, “that the infinite ‘is only’ the absurdly self-grounding finite.” In short, “the tediously mysterious abolition of mystery” is opposed to “the fascinatingly mysterious exposition of mystery in all its simplicity” (169).

Milbank here seems to be advancing his aesthetic argument for Christianity. Put crudely, the argument appears to be: Milbank's view is preferable to Žižek’s because it is more beautiful. The more beautiful it is, the truer it is: that is both the reason the Christian narrative is true and a reason that only makes sense within the Christian narrative. This reflexivity itself counts as a reason to prefer the Christian narrative, as a reason that the Christian narrative is more aesthetically pleasing (a subtler, more sophisticated flavor) than its modern and postmodern alternatives. For example, Derrida's textual parasitism flattens and loosens, treating a text as signifiers, each signifier a re-iteration, and, from Milbank’s perspective, leads to a less elegant aesthetic, a dance with one step. For Milbank, the use/mention distinction does not collapse into a liquid; it collapses into a gel, at once uniform and differentiated – like the mist. This is an aesthetic whose dividends do not stop, as the paradox between the univocal and the equivocal is constantly making new things visible.

There is another fold in Milbank's aesthetic. Between intellect and being, which, following Eckhart, Milbank takes to be equally primary, there can be imagination. Imagination

acts as the mist, the field in which intellect and being sharpen and fade; imagination, however, is often denied. What we do when we look at a misty landscape is participate in the “divine self-understanding.” This is the “infinite connection between being and understanding,” and we are able to access this connection through the senses (175). When we perceive rightly, we are participating in the connection between being and understanding that is the divine (the beautiful, the true, the good). It is only in children that the senses function in this way, properly; it is only in children that sensation and imagination remain bound together. In adults, sensation is merely the conduit between being and intellect, a processing mechanism that does not maintain the tension between the univocal and the equivocal, instead falling back onto one or the other, or a dialectical obliteration of the opposition. For adults, misty days are rare.

Now the full depth of Milbank's rhetoric comes into view. It is not merely that he is describing a beautiful picture. His goal is less to persuade of something new than to persuade of what is already present, but obscured. “Catholic metaphysics,” he writes, “is the guardian of the most ordinary, which includes the most poetic, experience” (176). The beauty that Milbank describes now seems to be less an alternative narrative than an enticement to return – to childhood, to the ordinary, and so to the Church. His narrative is not in direct competition with the narratives of modernity and postmodernity. Rather, those narratives obscure the ordinary; his narrative returns to the ordinary.

Read in this way, Milbank and Žižek are engaged in the same project, for persuading us to return to the ordinary is precisely what animates Žižek's ceaseless critical output. Žižek's conclusion is clear: he urges faith without God, which is the faith of the ordinary, the faith of a world no longer captive to fantasy. In characteristic Lacanian parlance, “[O]nly atheists can truly believe; the only true belief is belief without any support in the authority of some presupposed

figure of the ‘big Other’” (101). This is the third step in the Hegelian dance, neither religion nor atheism but a move beyond both to something that is their outgrowth and negation (Žižek compares the “unbelief” he urges to zombies, the “undead” who are neither dead nor living). How is this conclusion a return to the ordinary? Firstly, it rejects an ultimate authority, the role that is played by God. It also rejects God-substitutes, for example sets of inviolable “human rights.” With no ultimate authority, the postmodern (and New Age) conclusion is, in effect, that anything goes. We can make our own meanings, frolicking in a world that is appearances all the way down. The postmodern world is faithless, without sincerity, without commitment – without faith. Žižek wants to put together the faith of the theist and the rejection of authority of the postmodernist, but (unlike the pragmatist) he is not content with just asserting this. Rather, he argues that both views miss something. They both fail to acknowledge the tragic. Both theist and postmodernist share an absolute confidence in the authority of God or the unending play of images. Žižek acknowledges the Fall: we finite beings are always getting things wrong, our best efforts are always inadequate, there are always limits that surprise us. This is why Žižek's faith without God is necessary: there are no guarantees, but persistence once this is acknowledged takes faith. The love that Žižek commends exemplifies this secular faith. It is love that acknowledges the limits and weaknesses of the beloved, acknowledges that the beloved is not perfect, but still persists in love. In other words, “the one” is not “the one” because she is perfectly beautiful, or perfectly complementary; but this does not mean that you should not act as if she is “the one.”

This example suggests how Žižek is urging a return to the ordinary. We have a tendency to distort the ordinary, to attribute more value to some things than they deserve. We don't see things as they are. This happens on the personal level, in love, and on the social level, in the

capitalist creation and manipulation of material objects of desire. Žižek's therapy is aimed at loosening the hold of these distortions (not to return us to things as they "really are," for that would again refuse the tragic). His tools are the machineries of Hegel and Lacan, which he takes to both have the same effect. His technique is cultural criticism. He applies his tools to film, literature, popular culture, philosophy, science, and theology. These are the raw materials to be processed by his machinery. Neither the raw material nor the processed, finished product is of any significance. It is the effect that matters, the effect that the spectacle has on its witnesses. Žižek is a pedagogue, offering a gushing stream of examples that teach not through what they say but through what they do. Their effect is to return the witness to the ordinary, to loosen the hold of ultimate authorities and to loosen the appeal of the "anything goes" alternative. The dialectical alternative that Žižek commends cannot be said, it can only be shown.

Žižek call this technique "short circuit." By juxtaposing canonical and marginal texts, he attempts to confound expectations, calling into question the otherwise transparent force of a network – of ideology. The obvious is suspended to reveal the ordinary. If the technique were not uncomfortable, it would not work. Science makes humanities scholars uncomfortable, so Žižek has recently been writing about science (*The Monstrosity of Christ* includes a brief discussion of theories of consciousness). Hollywood films are supposed to be relegated to cultural studies scholars; they make serious theorists uncomfortable – so Žižek writes about Hollywood films. This, one suspects, was the origin of Žižek's interest in theology. It made people (secular academics) uncomfortable, and so brought with it a disruptive potential. In this context, the exchange between Milbank and Žižek is especially peculiar. The moment when religion was marginal in the humanities has passed, and Žižek himself has generally moved on to more fertile pastures for provocation. Moreover, those who inhabit the other disciplines from which Žižek

borrowed examples have been content to either dismiss Žižek's interest in their fields, or to accept it as a curiosity. It is hard to imagine a theorist of consciousness, like David Chalmers, taking Žižek as a serious interlocutor in the way that Milbank does. In short, Žižek mentions theology as he mentions film, literature, science, and philosophy – it is mention rather than use that we find in his works, and everyone but theologians can recognize this.

But, of course, Milbank's interest is not so easy to dismiss. The affinity between Žižek and Milbank runs deeper. Milbank, too, is interested in a logic, the logic of paradox. If paradox and dialectic are competing logics, then is the content of Milbank's presentation as instrumental as the content of Žižek's presentation? Is Milbank's text trying to show rather than say something, trying to show the logic of paradox? The short answer, clearly, is no, but to understand the asymmetry we must think through the orthodoxy that Milbank and Žižek both commend. It is tempting to place Milbank and Žižek's stances with respect to orthodoxy on opposite sides of the use/mention distinction. Where Milbank commends, and performs, orthodoxy, Žižek, it seems, just admires those who call themselves orthodox. This cannot be quite right, since Žižek commends orthodoxy as part of the package of practices he likes (it complements faith without God), and Milbank is much more excited about advocating orthodoxy than he is about practicing it (standing between the Churches of England and Rome, he picks the authority of one or the other as it is more convenient). In a sense, the orthodoxy commended by Žižek is orthodoxy without content, just as the faith he commends is faith without God. Milbank commends orthodoxy generically, for apparently similar reasons as Žižek, but also commends a specific content for that orthodoxy, Christian content. For Milbank these two claims cannot be detached. This, again, is the difference between paradox and dialectic. Dialectic is a form without content; paradox is, in a sense, the inescapable paradox of form and content (mist and

landscape, being and intellect). Orthodoxy is simply commitment to the paradox; heterodoxy is resolving the paradox. The content of Milbank's writing is not instrumental because, in its fidelity to paradox, it is never negated; Žižek's essay is filled with examples which self-destruct once they are used up.

Milbank and Žižek present two versions of what remains when the problematic philosophical machineries of modernity and postmodernity have been set aside (two versions of what Jean-Luc Marion calls "last philosophy" as opposed to traditional "first philosophy"³). In Milbank's version what remains is the ordinary supersaturated with the extraordinary; in Žižek's version what remains is the tragic ordinary, the ordinary stripped of the extraordinary. Stating the disagreement this way does a disservice to both positions, but it is a disservice that speaks to unresolved internal tensions in their positions. There always remains, on Milbank's view, a gap between the philosophical structure he advances, one that generically offers a peaceful alternative to modern and postmodern meta-narratives and that embraces aesthetics and paradox, and the specific content he advances, the specific propositions of Christian theology. No matter how hard Milbank tries to make it so, it is never clear why the Christian story should be the unique solution to the philosophical problem he identifies. Dismissing this tension as itself a paradox is an inelegant solution which would compromise both the generic structure (it no longer fully embraces the aesthetic) and the specific content (the content is smushed into the generic form of the aesthetic). This, I suspect, is a tension without a resolution.

Žižek, too, often appears to embrace content incongruous with the form that he advocates (of course, in the case of dialectic, any content at all would be incongruous with the form). Žižek's Marxist commitment to the proletariat often appears to have equal status with his embrace of Lacanian and Hegelian philosophical machinery. But a commitment to the proletariat

is not a philosophical machinery, like Žižek's understanding of his Lacanian and Hegelian commitments. Rather, as Žižek puts it, "'proletariat' is the subject-agent of revolutionary Truth" (93). Here he follows Alain Badiou, and it is tempting to associate Žižek's Marxist moments with Badiou's thought concerning fidelity to the event, and to associate both with the positive complement of the negative project of dialectics. In other words, dialectics is the way to clear away the clutter of philosophy and fantasy (by means of Hegelian and Lacanian machinery); what one does in the resulting opening is to commit oneself to a truth-event, whether it be political, scientific, artistic, or amorous (these categories are Badiou's). Each truth-event involves an orthodoxy, and to be faithful to the event – which is to be religious without God – is to be orthodox. When Žižek writes about the proletariat, he is being orthodox, being faithful to Marxist doctrine in the same way that a man in love would write dotingly about his beloved. But this explanation is not fully satisfactory. Žižek's tone when discussing love and class struggle are strikingly different: examples of the former are used pedagogically, to commend an embrace of the ordinary, while the latter is treated with the firmness displayed by Milbank discussing Christian doctrine.

Perhaps this impasse in Žižek's thought, and perhaps even the impasse in Milbank's thought, arises for reasons concerning the intersection of class and rhetoric. There is a class curiously forgotten in the vestigial allure of the proletariat: the petty bourgeoisie. The culture of the petty bourgeoisie has ascended and descended, infecting all of the expansive Western "middle class." Perhaps the tension in Žižek's work concerning the status of Marxism would be resolved if he made a frontal assault on the petty bourgeoisie rather than positioning himself as a champion of the proletariat. Of course, the petty bourgeoisie is, in fact, the target of both Milbank and Žižek, even though it is absent from both of their texts. It is the petty bourgeoisie

³ Jean-Luc Marion, "The Other First Philosophy," *Critical Inquiry* 25:4 (Summer 1999), 784-800.

that takes things too seriously, that needs a “big Other” (accusations of Freud's cultural particularity are not wholly misguided). It is the petty bourgeoisie that needs the assurance of authoritative rules and guidelines. The lessons Žižek teaches are irrelevant for the proletariat and the aristocracy, neither of which has ever been mystified by a “big Other,” both of which are accustomed to taking the language of the “big Other” as rhetoric. The gusto with which Milbank preaches paradox can just as easily be diagnosed as a reaction to the growing hegemony of the petty bourgeoisie, suffocating the proletarian (childish) pleasures of the imagination as well as the obverse, the aristocratic pleasures of the aesthetic. Moreover, are the meta-narratives of modernity and postmodernity against which Milbank reacts taken seriously by anyone except the petty bourgeoisie?

The defining feature of the petty bourgeoisie, let us posit, is a tone-deafness to rhetoric. Everything is taken seriously, classified, systematically adjudicated, and, if deemed worthy, imitated. For the petty bourgeoisie the use/mention distinction is crucial because the commitments of an author must be discovered, even when the commitment in question is, say, the “death of the author.” The work of both Milbank and Žižek has given rise to legions of classifiers and imitators, increasingly visible because of the developing “blogosphere.” Milbank has spawned a movement, “Radical Orthodoxy,” while Žižek’s work has been the subject of academic monographs and even a periodical, the *International Journal of Žižek Studies*. Enthusiasts of Milbank and Žižek turn rhetoric into propositions, heuristic into ontology (Creston Davis’s introduction to *The Monstrosity of Christ* starkly exemplifies this stance).

Both Milbank and Žižek commend orthodoxy, and are creating orthodoxy, but the orthodoxy they are creating is not the kind of orthodoxy they commend. They are creating an orthodoxy of the petty bourgeoisie, a pseudo-orthodoxy – better, the fantasy of orthodoxy. It is

the opposite of “radical.” Žižek concludes his contribution to *The Monstrosity of Christ* by commending child sacrifice as a paradigm of “excessive” – and so praise-worthy – ethical action. This is precisely the sort of claim that exacerbates the fantasy of orthodoxy. Modern Language Association conference attendees can applaud it loudly, then drive home in their SUV’s, soy lattes in hand. Perhaps today Leo Strauss’s point must be turned upside down. The danger to philosophy is not persecution but popularity. The proper response, however, remains the same: an art of writing attuned to its audience that conceals and reveals. Such an art would finally succeed in making dialogue impossible.