

The angst of waiting

A deconstructive reading of Luke 12:35-40

P.J. Hartin

Summary

This investigation aims at observing in what way more recent developments in literary theory and criticism (in particular that of deconstruction) can be applied to the reading of the texts of the New Testament. Rather than operate in general terms, one specific text was chosen, that of a parable (Lk 12:35-40). An example of a more traditional approach to the reading of this text was presented, namely that of C.H. Dodd, in order to contrast more clearly the approach adopted by deconstruction. The latter approach was shown to part company with Dodd on a number of essential elements. The focal point of this article is the presentation of a deconstructive reading of this parable. Finally, the problems posed by such an approach to the texts of the New Testament are assessed: A suggestion is made for a path between dogmatism and relativism.

Opsomming

In hierdie verhandeling word daarna gestreef om waar te neem hoe onlangse ontwikkelings in letterkundige teorie en kritiek veral in die geval van dekonstruksie, geld by die lees van die tekste van die Nuwe Testament. In plaas daarvan om 'n algemene weergawe aan te bied is een besondere teks gekies, naamlik 'n gelykenis (Lk 12:35-40). 'n Voorbeeld van 'n meer tradisionele benadering by die lees van die teks is voorgelê, nl. die van C.H. Dodd, om 'n duideliker kontras met die standpunt van dekonstruksie daar te stel. Daar word aangedui hoe laasgenoemde beskouing op 'n aantal wesenlike beginsels verskil van Dodd. Die brandpunt van hierdie artikel is om 'n dekonstruktiewe lees van die gelykenis voor te lê. Ten slotte is die vraagstukke wat die uitgangspunt oplewer, uiteengesit: Daar word voorgestel dat 'n deurgang tussen dogmatisme en relativisme kom.

1. Prelude

A pre-lude (Latin *pre* [before] + *ludus* [game] = before the game) is a necessary consideration introduced before the activity itself begins. At the outset one wishes to survey the ground and to see exactly where one is going. The question that preoccupies this investigation is to observe in what way more recent developments in literary theory and criticism can be applied to the reading of the texts of the New Testament. Rather than operate in general terms one specific text has been chosen to see if the deconstructive activity can be applied to New Testament texts, and if so what the outcome of that activity is.

We must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace ... has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be.

(Derrida 1976:162)

'We must begin *wherever we are* . . .' In New Testament studies dealing with the interpretation of its texts the question is rightly asked: But where exactly are we? Looking back over the past there has been a proliferation of approaches, rules advanced, keys and insights propagated, all claiming to offer the *true meaning* of the texts or at least giving a direction which the interpreter could follow to unlock the meaning of the text.

We are here: faced with these contending claims to a rightful interpretation. Contrasted to this approach deconstruction does not present itself as another method, another system to be adopted in the quest for meaning. In fact it distances itself from this logocentric way of thinking. 'An activity' would probably be the best way to describe deconstruction. As an activity it aims not at discovering the meaning in texts, but it wishes to see how meaning is in fact deferred.

We are here: the text under consideration is Lk 12:35-40. While it is generally admitted that certain types of approaches to literary texts depend to a large extent on the nature or type of text, in this instance a text is simply taken as given. No specific investigation is firstly conducted to see whether or not it is a suitable text for a deconstructive approach.

2. Previous interpretation of Luke 12:35-40

What the deconstructive activity is can best be appreciated by firstly looking at previous attempts to provide meaning to this parable. To this will be contrasted the approach adopted by deconstruction.

This parable has been read in numerous ways in the course of Christian tradition. Probably the most influential reading of this century is that adopted by the historical critical method whereby the attempt was made to establish the origin of this parable in the life of the historical Jesus. The aim then is to go, as it were, backwards in time from the accounts that one has in the gospels until one reaches the substrata in the ministry of Jesus. This then is proclaimed to be *the true meaning* of the parable to which attention must be devoted today.

I shall refer to Dodd's explanation (1980: 120-127) of this parable as an example of this method of the search for meaning by tracing backwards the development of the parable. In this analysis this parable is seen as the joining together of two parables: Lk 12:35-38 and Lk 12:39-40.

2.1 The first parable: Be prepared (Lk 12:35-38)

This parable in Luke finds its counter expression in Mk 13:35-37.

Lk 12:35-38

Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once

Mk 13:33-37

Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with

when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes; truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have them sit at the table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those servants!

his work, and commands the door-keeper to be on the watch. Watch therefore – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight or at cockcrow, or in the morning – lest he comes suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch.

In Matthew all that appears of this pericope is the saying: ‘Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming’ (Mt 24:42).

In analysing the development of this parable, Dodd (1980: 120-127) argues that the central idea of the parable is ‘that of alertness and preparedness for any emergency’ (Dodd 1980:123). For him all the other details are there simply to create the atmosphere which would emphasise the need for this alertness. The emergency or crisis in the mind of Jesus was that brought about by His own coming and teaching. ‘We know that He saw in His own ministry the supreme crisis in history. There is nothing in the parable itself against the view that the emergency He contemplated was in fact the crisis created by His own coming, rather than an expected crisis in the more or less distant future’ (Dodd 1980: 123).

Consequently, the kernel in the ministry of Jesus from which this parable emerged was that of a call for alertness and being prepared for this crisis which Jesus brought through his person and ministry. This crisis is not simply one event or action, but it encompasses a developing process occasioned by his entire ministry and preaching. ‘Some such realistic reference to the immediate situation is most probably the clue to the meaning of the parable. It was not spoken to prepare the disciples for a long though indefinite period of waiting for the second advent, but to enforce the necessity for a crisis now upon them’ (Dodd 1980: 124).

2.2 The second parable: the thief at night (Lk 12:39-40)

This parable in Luke finds its counter expression in Matthew 24:43-44.

Lk 12:39-40

But know this, that if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Mt 24:43-44

But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

The original ‘Q’ form of this parable is seen to be: ‘You know that if the householder had known at what hour the thief would come, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into’ (Dodd 1980: 124-125).

From an early stage the application of this saying has been made to the eschatological advent of the return of Jesus. 'Be you also ready, because the Son of man is coming at a moment you do not think (He is coming)' (Dodd 1980: 125). But originally this parable of the thief at night did not have an eschatological relevance. Instead, it was seen to have application in the actual ministry of Jesus. The followers had been called upon to watch and be alert for the impending disaster within his own life-time. However, they were not.

The disaster began: the authorities made their attack upon Jesus and His disciples. The disciples, although warned to watch and pray lest they enter into temptation, were after all unprepared, and were swept off their feet. If they had been alert, they would not have collapsed, just as if the householder had known beforehand of the intended burglary, he would have forestalled it.

(Dodd 1980:127)

What, then, has happened is that the Gospel of Luke has joined the two parables together and in doing so has given them a specific direction. The two parables of the waiting servants originally aimed at exhorting the hearers of Jesus to remain alert for that crisis which Jesus' teaching and preaching had brought. However, after the death of Jesus the two parables were reapplied to new situations. They called upon the disciples to be ready and alert for the coming of Jesus, his return as the Son of man at the end of time. Dodd expresses the development of the two parables in this vein:

Both were originally intended to refer to a situation already existing, but subject to unexpected developments at any moment. They were both intended to warn the hearers to be prepared for such developments. When the immediate crisis passed, the parables were naturally reapplied to the situation in which the early Christians found themselves after the death of Jesus; and as the expectation of the second advent hardened into a dogma, the details of the parable of the Waiting Servants lent themselves to re-interpretation in the sense of that dogma, while the brief parable of the Thief at Night passed into a simple simile for the suddenness of the expected event, as we find it in Paul.

(Dodd 1980:127)

3. The deconstructive approach

A deconstructive reading of this parable would part company with Dodd's approach outlined above on a number of essential elements.

3.1 The re-interpretation of the text

Dodd has drawn attention to the development of the sayings of Jesus by which they have been developed and re-interpreted according to new contexts. By bringing together two separate parables in the Gospel of Luke these are given a new direction and interpretation in the context of the early church and now re-applied and re-interpreted in the expectation of the return of Jesus at his second coming. However, the aim of the historical critical method is to establish the original meaning in the context of the life of Jesus.

A deconstructive assessment of this development would be that what has taken place here is simply a natural process in the dissemination and evolving of a text. Every text is to be seen as a rewriting of a previous text. 'Writing, in deconstructive terms, is never purely original; it is *always* secondary and derivative . . . Writing does not express the individual intention of an original author. To the contrary, writing stages a play of repetition in which apparent production is actual reproduction. All writing, in other words, is rewriting' (Taylor 1984: 16).

The process that Dodd has described is the natural process of writing, in which texts are rewritten anew. Where, however, the post-structuralists would part company with Dodd would be in that Dodd betrays the traditional logocentric view of a text (Derrida 1976). By logocentrism Derrida would understand the attempt to give priority to speech over writing and in this way the attempt is made by readers to try to discover the very 'centre' of the text and to indicate this centre as the true meaning which is present in this text. Dodd does this by trying to go behind the text to the authority of the word of Jesus and to establish the true meaning, the true centre of the text, in that word originating from Jesus.

Instead, the post-structuralists see every text as the rewriting of a previous text. The text of Luke is a rewriting of the text of Q, using as inter-texts those of Mark as well as of his other source material. The approach of the deconstructionists is never to try to discover the logocentric meaning of the text. That way of viewing things is doomed to failure. Instead, deconstructionists wish to see how meaning is deferred, how it is disseminated from one text to another as the text is rewritten.

Dissemination is a power which is part and parcel of all writing. "To disseminate" (disseminare: dis + semen, gen. seminis, seed) is to scatter abroad, as in sowing seed. By extension, dissemination refers to the action of dispersing, diffusing, broadcasting or promulgating. . . ' (Taylor 1984: 119). Dissemination both perpetuates and at the same time disrupts every text. Every text is then seen as being incomplete in that meaning is not presented, but rather deferred.

Harty (1985: 6) summarises well some axioms of textuality as is observed in Barthes (1979: 155-164).

The text is not an object but a process; it exists only in the activity of production.

This is not to say that the reader creates the text (otherwise what function do these marks on the page have?) but that he realises it, or, rather, that he realises a multiplicity of texts as *différance* begins its inevitable progress through the textual web. Reading is an interactive process: while the reader exercises his freedom, the text imposes its constraints.

It follows that the text is incorrigibly plural, not unitary, 'architectonic', to borrow a word from Barthes. The text as *le pluriel* subverts classification, calling into question the monolithic system of genre which has descended to us from Aristotle.

The text is an organism: it may grow, change, evolve, decay, even multiply as it is rewritten in successive critical essays. . .

(Harty 1985: 6)

Both Dodd as well as the post-structuralists agree on the aspect that the text is an organism which has grown and evolved in successive rewritings. However, where they part company is in their attitude to meaning. For Dodd meaning is present in the very centre of the text and the aim is to discover this meaning. For the post-structuralists meaning is never present, it is always deferred: the text is a web of signifiers in which the sign points away from itself rather than being a point itself. In this regard the deconstructionists quote frequently from the essay of Nietzsche 'On truth and falsehood in an ultra-moral sense': 'truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms . . . truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions, . . . coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal . . .' (Derrida 1976: xxiii).

3.2 The disappearance of the author

In the deconstructive reading of a text no importance is given to the external aspects of the authorship of a particular text. The deconstructive reading begins where one is, with the text itself. In contrast to this the whole aim of Dodd, and of all historical criticism, has been to establish the author-ity of the author. As Gadamer expresses it : Interpretation 'is ultimately a divinatory process, a placing of oneself within the mind of the author, an apprehension of the "inner origin" of the composition of a work, a recreation of the creative act' (Gadamer 1975: 164).

The book is then seen to *mean* what the author intends, and the whole task of interpretation is to discover the meaning that the author gave to the text. In the context of the Bible, the aim is to discover what God, or Jesus intended. Against this background it is understandable to see the search of Dodd for what Jesus intended originally by the two parables.

For the deconstructionists the author is removed from the text. Once a text has been written the author no longer retains control over his text, the text becomes the property of every reader who can appropriate it in her/his own way. Consequently, the attempt to discover the meaning of a text is completely useless. 'To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing . . . when the Author has been found, the text is "explained" – victory to the critic' (Barthes 1979b: 147).

The death of the author makes possible the birth of the reader. The emphasis here is to allow the text itself to disseminate rather than to impose a meaning upon the text from outside, from some construction that one has made and declared that this is the author's intention.

Writing can be described as:

edgings and inching of final form,
 The swarming activities of the formulae
 Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at,
 Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,
 A philosopher practising scales on his piano,
 A woman writing a note and tearing it up.

It is not the premise that reality
 Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
 A dust, a force that traverses a shade.

(Stevens 1981: 488-489)

3.3 Intertextuality

Already in the bringing together of the two parables Dodd has in fact drawn attention to what has become an important aspect of deconstructive thought: intertextuality. This is an anglicism of a French expression: *intertextualité* (Latin: *intertexo* = is to interweave). Intertextuality amounts to the concept whereby all texts are seen to intermingle. No text is to be seen as a completely closed body of writing with a neatly constructed beginning and a rounded off ending. Instead it is open both at the beginning and at the end. It is an interweaving of traces which are always open, referring to something other than itself. (Derrida 1979: 83).

In this way the borders around the text disappear and texts can melt one into another. At the same time the strictly constructed borders between different kinds of texts (such as the historical, scientific, mythological) are also seen to disappear. When Derrida says: 'There is nothing outside the text' (1976: 158) he in fact implies that everything that is needed to read is to be found within the intertext.

With regard to the intertext Harty (1985: 11) introduces a very interesting insight which has a value, I feel, particularly with regard to the reading of biblical texts:

As far as context is concerned, I stand firmly by the view that a text's historicity (both fictional and real) must be absorbed into the intertext (le texte générale) if it is to exercise its necessary function in either interpretation or deconstruction. Far from minimising the historical factors in textual scholarship, deconstruction provides sensitive and powerful techniques for accommodating the historical perspective without inhibiting the function of *différance* in reading.

(Harty 1985: 11)

Thus the question about what the author knew and intended when he wrote the text is not seen as a dogmatic restriction upon the text placing it within a straightjacket. Instead, knowledge of the author can function as a part of the intertext, and one can merge the text with the textuality of the author just in the way in which one merges any text with another text.

3.4 Metaphor – parable

Metaphorical language lends itself to the deconstructive activity. Deconstruction aims at following the trace that appears and disappears within the text. Taylor (1982a: 119) defines a metaphor in this sense: 'Metaphor is the language of the frontiersman, the path-finder, who seeks the trail, searches the traces which lead from this world to the next'. In this sense metaphorical

language is seen to reveal and to conceal at the same time – it reveals the trace even while concealing it.

The parables of Jesus are to be viewed within this perspective of metaphorical language. By means of the details of the parable one is drawn along to the horizon towards which the parable is tending. The parable draws the attention of the reader along bringing into focus and then the focus disappears. The details themselves do not have significance in themselves, but they become signifiers pointing to the horizon. The details never point to themselves, but beyond themselves to the horizon of the passage.

Taylor expresses Jesus' parabolic use of language well and what he says is worth quoting at length:

The parables of Jesus are circumspections of the horizon or horizons of things. This is the reason the details of the narrative picture, though set out with intensive realism, cannot be pressed: they invite attention, not to themselves, but to the horizon, just as the painting leads our eye unflinching to the vanishing point [i.e. the *bindu*]. Of the painting, for instance, of the animals painted on the walls of Lascaux, Merleau-Ponty writes: 'It is more accurate to say that I see a calling to it, or with it, than that I see it'. The parable and the painting draw the eye, by means of a skilfully arranged soft focus on objects in the foreground, to the horizon by virtue of which these objects gain their places and faces. Thus, the objects in the foreground previously released again become the object of attention, but within a new horizon and undergirded and protected by fresh integrity.

(Taylor 1982a: 118)

Where deconstruction would part company with Dodd, and nearly all other interpreters of the parables of recent times, is to give up the search for attaining the archimedes point of the parable. The meaning of the parable is seen to unfold at that point where the comparison and all the details tend to come together.

Instead of searching for that one final meaning which unravels the secret of the parable, the deconstructive approach sees the meaning of the parable continually being deferred. A new perception of the parable is constantly gained at each re-reading of the text. The details of the figurative story point towards an horizon which in turn is absorbed into the text and a new horizon of meaning is seen only to disappear again.

4. A deconstructive reading of Luke 12:35-40

In order to facilitate a deconstructive reading of this text a textual analysis of this passage would be appropriate. "(T)extual" is used with reference to the contemporary theory of *the text*, this being understood as production of *significance*, and not as philological object, custodian of the Letter' (Barthes 1979: 126).

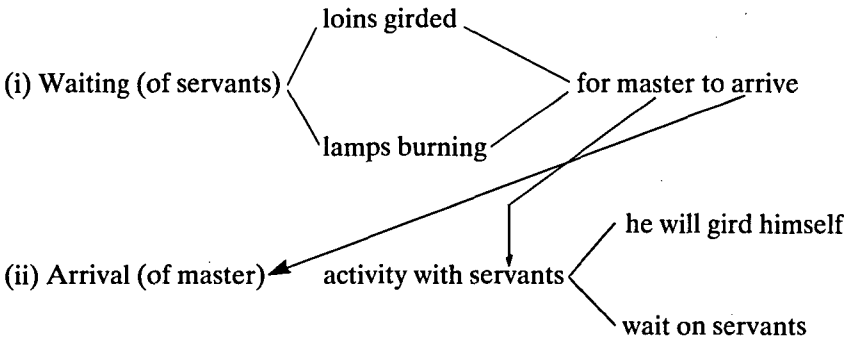
This demonstrates that the text is an open production, woven together by codes that are well known and very familiar. The aim is not to discuss *from where* the text originates (this is *historical criticism*), nor is it concerned with discussing and analysing *how* it is made (this is *structural analysis*). Instead, it

aims at discovering how the text actually disseminates, explodes, spreads itself (Barthes 1979b: 126-127).

The text can be seen to lend itself to a *sequential analysis* (Barthes 1979b: 127). The text evolves through the emphasis on action, on verbs which focus upon a sequence of actions. One can in fact note two distinct sequences within the text, namely (i) the waiting (Lk 12:35-38), (ii) the arrival (Lk 12:39-40). Each of these will be examined in turn.

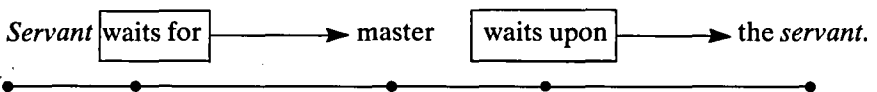
4.1 The waiting (Lk 12:35-38)

The schema of the sequences of this aspect of the text develops in a twofold stage:



The text begins with a call to the servants to be prepared *in their waiting* for the arrival of the master. One reads it without any prior beginning. It commences with the *feeling of expectation* and the call to be ready. Contrasted to this activity of waiting, is the presentation of what will happen when the master does arrive. The roles of master and (faithful) servant will be reversed. Instead of the servant waiting upon the master, the master will be the one who will wait upon the servant. Like the faithful servant he will gird himself for action, and he will wait upon the servant. This *waiting* is not, as in the case of the servant, an expectation of the arrival of the master, instead it becomes a *waiting upon* the needs of the servant and a fulfilment of the needs.

Whereas the servants are *waiting* for the *arrival* of the master, the master in his turn *waits upon* the needs of the servant. In the one sense the *waiting for* involves the intense expectation of the arrival of the master. This arrival is seen to bring about the fulfilment of the needs of the servant.



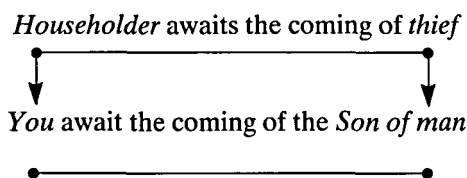
In the reversal of roles of master-servant one sees that the fulfilment of the expectation of the servants occurs in a different way from that which they were awaiting. Their expectation lay in the direction of the coming of the master, of fulfilling their duty according to which as loyal servants they are to

be ready for his coming. On his arrival, the master does not praise the servants, instead by his actions he reverses roles and in the role of servant to his servants he fulfils their needs by waiting on them.

Paradoxically, the master is also seen in the role of bridegroom. He is returning from the marriage feast where he has been feasting and celebrating. In reversing his roles the bridegroom is the one who prepares a feast for his faithful servants. The meal becomes something of a special significance: it is a meal waited on by the bridegroom himself.

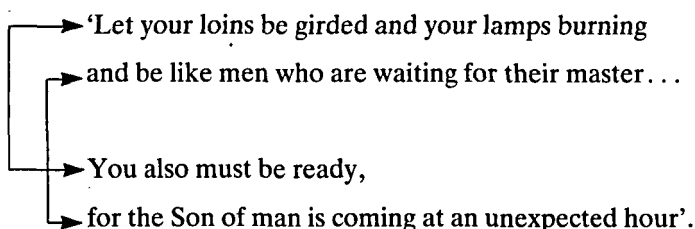
4.2 The arrival (Lk 12:39-40)

This second sequence of the text focuses upon the aspect of arrival. Now the theme of master-servant has disappeared into the background and the master is seen as the one who is waiting.



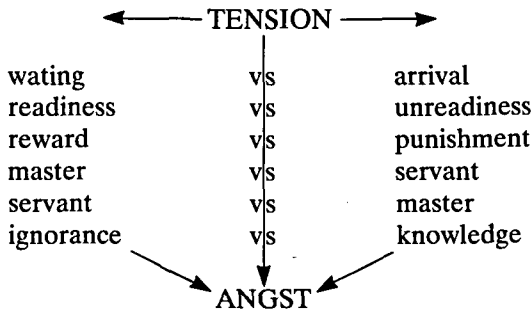
The contrast is drawn between the *waiting* of the householder and the *waiting* of those to whom the text is being addressed. Just as the householder is called upon to be *ready* for the *coming* of the thief, so the reader is called upon to be ready for the coming of the Son of man. The contrast of the thief to the Son of man is not developed: it is intended to be presented as two opposites. The importance here lies in *the readiness* by which they await the arrival. On the one level the readiness of the householder is there to prevent the thief from gaining entrance. On the other level the readiness of the reader is to welcome the coming of the Son of man. However, this opposition between prevention and welcome is not clearly evolved, and with the emphasis upon the thief, the feeling engendered by the coming of the Son of man is not one of welcome relief, but rather of a certain Angst and fear. Just as one does not know when the thief is coming, so one does not know when the Son of man is coming. It is this *ignorance* of the time of the coming that produces the feeling of anxiety and fear.

These two sequences are united by the return of verse 40 to the opening verse of the first sequence.



The thought of this text returns once again to where it commenced: the thought of being ready and waiting for an unexpected coming. In this way there is *the trace* of a thought that keeps appearing and disappearing. Two threads are very much in evidence: the thread of waiting commences this text: the arrival of the master is presented as a possibility, but there the sequence of the text returns to the thought of the waiting of the householder and the reader. The absence is reflected in the visualised hope which becomes presence but once more returns to absence. A second trace can be observed which constantly appears and disappears. This emerges from the binary opposites that are evidenced throughout the text.

4.3 Binary oppositions



All these binary oppositions exist in tension. There is the hope of their fulfilment, which is a hope based on Angst or anxiety. In fact it is the feeling of anxiety/Angst which is seen to appear, disappear and then reappear. In the waiting of the servants for the arrival of the master, the feeling of Angst is in evidence for they are called upon to keep themselves forever ready. The text returns with the feeling of Angst which is far more evident in the image of the householder awaiting the thief. The ignorance of the time of the arrival of the thief produces the feeling of Angst, just as ignorance of the coming of the Son of man also produces Angst. Consequently, it is this trace of Angst which is seen to appear and disappear throughout.

4.4 Deferment of meaning

The waiting shows clearly how the fulfilment is constantly being *deferred*. In this way the meaning of the text is also deferred. The waiting of the servants appears to be rewarded in the arrival of the master, but then it returns to their waiting not knowing whether the coming is in the first watch, or whether it is deferred to the second watch, or even deferred to the third watch. Ultimately the deferral is placed in cosmic dimensions in reference to the coming of the Son of man. The deferment of the coming has been expanded from the normal sequence of the Jewish measurement of time (three watches into which the night is divided) to that of universal cosmic dimensions. Seen in this perspective the Angst becomes greater.

4.5 Conclusion

Throughout this text the binary opposition of presence – absence is played out. The waiting for, expectation of, an ~~arrival~~ is one of the threads that unravels itself. In doing so it produces a deeper and deeper Angst in the expectation of the ~~coming~~. Progressively this ~~arrival~~ is deferred in further remote categories which heighten the feeling of Angst. The waiting is above all directed to the ~~coming~~ of the Son of man. Although it is a ~~coming~~ which inspires Angst, the remembrance of the reward promised of the bridegroom waiting upon the needs of the servants is recalled and helps alleviate the Angst that the ignorance of the time of this ~~arrival~~ inspires. Although the meaning and fulfilment of the ~~coming~~ is constantly deferred, it is nevertheless promised.

The importance of this deconstructive reading of the text has been the discovery not of the truth of the text, but rather of the *dissemination* of its meaning. ‘The problem, the problem at least posed to me, is exactly to manage not to reduce the Text to a signified, whatever it may be (historical, economic, folkloristic or kerygmatic) but to hold its significance fully open’ (Barthes 1979b: 141).

5. Postscript: An assessment of the deconstructive activity

The deconstructive activity has been presented as a modern form of demythologisation (Altizer 1982: 147). This is a very true insight. Whereas demythologisation aimed at unmasking the thoughtworld of the New Testament and liberating the kerygma from a mythological world view, deconstruction aims at undermining the emphasis that structuralism had placed upon the structures inherent in a text which are seen as conveying meaning. Its greatest contribution lies in questioning the over-emphasis and near dogmatic authority that had been given to the structures inherent in texts by previous literary critics particularly in more recent decades.

Every text is a ré-interpretation of a previous text. The aim of the deconstructive activity is not to acquire a fixed meaning, but rather to offer a re-interpretation of the text. No one reading of a text will be identical with that of another.

This approach has both its merits and its demerits. Among its merits is the fact that it undermines a static near dogmatic approach to the reading of the text. Structuralism aimed at deciphering the text by discovering above all its structures. Once deciphered the text is seen to yield one and only one meaning which is accepted as the dogmatic truth to be defended against all inquiry. To this deconstruction is opposed. Deconstruction undermines the ideology of one meaning evident in the text.

One of the greatest disadvantages of the deconstructive activity is that it tends to lead to a relativism of interpretation. The challenge presented by the deconstructive activity to the student of the New Testament is clearly that of trying to find a path that avoids the relativism of deconstruction while at the

same time not degenerating once more into the pole of authoritarianism with regard to interpretation.

A way forward is proposed by Max A Myers (1982: 109-146) whereby on the one hand one is called upon in one's interpretation to destroy every form of idol that is set up. On the other hand one is to see that in every re-reading and re-interpretation that is offered, one is on the way to meaning, rather than resting upon an actual archimedes point which has been attained. Here, one keeps oneself open in a dialogical relationship to read what others have discovered within the text. Operating in this way religious thinking is seen to avoid the twofold polarities of authoritarianism and relativism with regard to meaning.

It (religious thinking) is destructive of every idol, every work, or symbol which claims to be the centre of a structure of meaning, for the sake of this reconstruction. It is also destructive of every reconstruction which is only a repetition of the earlier event, for it knows that time is the way that being reveals itself and that no one can step into the stream twice. Therefore, it is equally destructive of conventionalism and of that sort of traditionalism which longs for the eternal return of the same. Yet it is traditionalist in a broader sense, since it knows that in its acts of reconstruction the same is present to it. And it is modern in a deeper sense, since it knows that every now is full of its own meaning in a new way. It must take up the task of clearing the path for its fellow selves in order to be open itself, for it is only in dialogue that meaning can appear and thinking become thanking.

(Myers 1982: 142)

Deconstruction demands that each person deconstructs his or her religious tradition and at the same time one enters into dialogue with another who is also in the process of deconstructing her/his tradition. In this way one remains open to the other to hear what s/he sees within her/his own tradition as well as what s/he hears within her/his own.

It is when meaning is not seen as being deferred that the danger of absolutism and the creation of ideologies result. Consequently, a mentality that strives to acquire meaning totally within its grasp shows itself as preoccupied with self-justification and certainty (Myers 1982: 141). Opposed to this is the always open-ended view which sees meaning as deferred: an inkling of the meaning appears, only then to disappear. 'The meaning of a text, therefore, is never fully present. Meaning is always in the process of forming, deforming, and reforming' (Taylor 1984: 179). This has been clearly observed in the deconstructive reading of Luke 12:35-40. The theme of expectation of an arrival appears and disappears which constantly deepens the feeling of Angst at the impending arrival.

In some senses Jesus' teaching concerning the kingdom is seen to represent well this aspect of meaning that is deferred. On the one level the kingdom is present in the preaching and activity of Jesus, but this kingdom is not fully seen, not fully grasped. Its full meaning is only glimpsed, to disappear and reappear at times, and finally being deferred totally until the end of time. The deferral of the kingdom to the future is what in essence is the notion of deconstruction's deferral of meaning.

... is not writing that language which has renounced producing *the last word*, which lives and breathes by yielding itself up to others?

(Barthes 1977: 170)

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