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Genre and Scholarship on Sisera's Death Trans. Matthew Gumpert (Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1988) p. 6.

[4] Ibid. p. 138.

[5] The reference is to an unpublished paper by Daniel Patte, 'On Reading Mieke Bal's *Murder and Difference*'.

[6] *Murder and Difference*. p. 130.

[7] Patte, op. cit. p. 5.

[8] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*. 1790. Trans. Werner S. Plutar (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co., 1987) p. 72.

[9] Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, Chicago U.P., 1988) pp. 206–8.

[10] Schor, op. cit. p. 135.

[11] *Murder and Difference*, pp. 122–3.

[12] Jacques Derrida, 'The Parergon'. Trans. Craig Owens. *October*, 9 (1979) 18.

[13] Patricia Yaeger, 'Toward a Female Sublime', in Linda Kauffman, ed., *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989) p. 202.

[14] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Development and Women's Theory*. (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard U.P., 1982) p. 173.

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MURDER AND DIFFERENCE: UNCANNY SITES IN AN UNCANNY WORLD[1]

Mieke Bal

I WOULD like to start with a casual but for me, important remark by Robert Detweiler toward the end of his paper, where he points out the importance of my working on Biblical texts for my own intellectual and feminist development. I was astonished when I read this, and found it extremely insightful, pleasantly and rightly confident in the importance of this discipline in which I entered without even knocking on the door, and simply very right. This work on the Bible has been very important for me. In the first place, it allowed me to test my theoretical persuasions about narrative against a body of literature foreign to that theory. The Bible also attracted me because it was going to be difficult. I knew nothing about it, other than my childhood memories which proved invariably wrong. I was going to study texts that were resistent in any possible sense, not in the least because of the language with its foreign structure and different concepts, but also because of different literary and cultural habits, emerged from a society different from my own. I was attracted because it was going to require extremely detailed work; the project of *Murder and Difference* was bound to show just how detailed it was going to have to be. These texts were attractive because they were so radically other and so radically fractured, heterogeneous, resistent, plural. And so Robert is more right than he may know, for all these attractions were in fact the features that helped me develop my own thinking in a way that allowed me to insist on difference, on gender-difference in the first place, while resisting the essentialism that such a priority for difference could entail, as Alice Bach has keenly pointed out. It's true: my work as a whole could not have developed in the way it has without this long and serious and pleasurable excursion into the field of Biblical studies.

Six or seven years ago, when I ran into the Samson story—Cheryl Exum was the first Biblical scholar whose work I ever read—in search of a case that would challenge my own narratological theory, I had no idea I was going to become a participant in the field of Biblical studies. After a few more raids into the field, I had to acknowledge the obvious: I was going to be working on the Bible for at least a few years. I trembled at the

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prospect, fearing that those people who knew everything about Biblical Hebrew and about these old texts that for me shone with novelty, were never going to take me seriously. Little did I expect that, on the contrary, my work was going to meet with the kind of eagerness for true dialogue of which this meeting today is a token. In spite of my lack of modesty in not only invading and inhabiting the field but at the same time critizing its practices, like an Israelite tribe, I feel that in this country at least, the reception of my work is greatly encouraging, the openmindedness I encountered all along simply astounding, and the opportunities for learning and developing, for dialogue and friendship, unforgettable.

What can I say, then, but that I truly admire the brilliance of Robert's paper which expresses sympathy and concern, but before all engages with my book? It brings a set of concerns to the problem I posed and the treatment I gave it, and it gives me a mighty lot to think about. The learning in Biblical studies has been so terrific precisely because this kind of thoughtful responses have accompanied my struggle with the resistent material from the very start.

In the margins of this paper, with most of which I happily agree, I would like to address three theoretical issues: the importance of the detail as a strategy of feminist scholarship; the problem of relativism, and the issue of coherence. All three have been brought up in the paper, in very important ways, and all three pertain to more than just my work alone; they are central issues in any discussion on interpretation today.

I

I have mentioned the need to be detailed as one of the attractions of the Bible. Robert Detweiler has quoted Naomi Schor's book on the detail to examine, play with, and ultimately reject the claim that there would be an inherent relationship between women and details: 'there exists no reliable body of evidence to show that women's art is either more or less particularist than men's'. I agree with both Schor and Detweiler, and yet, with them I persist in focusing on 'details'. Why? But then, what is a detail? Alice Bach mentioned in her paper at the session as the privileged focus for feminist interpretation everything that is duplicitous, resistent, confounding. In those terms, details are weapons against coherence and the imperialism coherence tends to socialize with. Robert Detweiler takes one of my details on to resist my integration of it, to insist on its resistence, and I find his interpretation of the vignette on Sisera's mother wonderful, rich, dense, brilliant. His term—vignette—is very felicitous: it enhances the sense of the passage as isolated, somehow other, as what Barbara Johnson would call 'the difference within' the Song of Deborah. If the detail is what flourishes in resistance as this case suggests, then I know why I do and always will attend to details.

I am convinced of the relevance of his interpretation, especially by the part of it that deals with belatedness, displacement, the just-being-there, of this vignette. I am tempted to add to that, and recall a similar scene in the Illiad—the type-scene of the woman-at-the-window, recently analyzed by Michael Coogan, and then take this thought back to the wandering rock of women's languages inside men's texts, that I have speculated on in *Death and Dissymmetry*.[2] Not only am I convinced that he is right that this detail can go in different directions than the one I outlined within *my* project of resistance, but I believe so strongly in the productivity of resistance that Detweiler should take it as a compliment that I truly believe that he was able to come up with this brilliant alternative out of *his* resistance against what he later called the uncanny space of women's discourse—and about which I will wonder later whose discourse he meant to include in this spooky set: Deborah's, mine, feminist theory? and then realize how women students and scholars have experienced the whole world outside the tent as equally spooky, uncannily foreign to *their* experience/habit.[3]

There is nothing like resistance to turn me on. So I will resist Robert a little bit, and ask him why he needs to attend to this woman's motherhood more than, say, to her stupidity, harsness toward foreign women, class arrogance, ironic evocation by Deborah; her semiotic incompetence and her total powerlessness? I sympathize with his sympathy with her, and I am convinced he is right about the vignette's relative isolation, its just-being-there, which makes his sympathetic interpretation attractive. I really don't mean to contest or even discuss this interpretation, but I just mention this case because it strikes me as interesting that this detail stirs up feelings that have determined the roles available for women for so long, and because it thereby allows me to clarify a point that I find relevant. To be sure, motherhood is important, and should be more acknowledged socially, I have mothers among my best friends, including myself, and yet, I was trying to do something *different*, indeed, two things with this detail: keep it alien and, at the same time, make sense of it. To hate this woman for her contempt for Israeli 'girls' and see her own confinement in the prisonhouse of male-gendered language as a token of her imprisonment in a male-constructed motherhood[4], in her case, a golden cage. And he is right: the only thing she has is her motherhood, and she is before our very eyes deprived of it, and mocked in addition. But is Deborah, who is, even if she borrows from a different tradition here, the speaker of this vignette, then such a cruel monster? If for once we have a female voice, and a voice who refers to herself as a mother in a so blatantly different sense, a social role, rather than a familial one, I thought I'd try to make sense of it differently, assuming that this text bespeaks values different from our own; including a different view of motherhood.

I develop this further in *Murder and Difference*. I don't buy the argument, indeed, I get upset by it, that the narratorial phrase 'Then sang Deborah, and Barak, the son of Abinoam' should be given precedence over the lyric 'I' who claims *in the singular* to be Deborah, a mother in Israel. That argument is a thoroughly authoritarian one, privileging the alleged author/redactor over the *voice who speaks*. Since no historical author is known, and since we have agreed long ago that the Bible is multiple-authored, why not base the interpretation on the *subject of speech*? Whoever wants to take away this rare, exceptional female subject, will have to deal with me, Deborah's bodyguard. My weapon is literary theory and semiotic common-sense, and even speech-act theory: whoever speaks says 'I', and is the speaker of that utterance.

Pursuing what I fear will enter gossip as my 'resistance to Robert': although I am fascinated by the strategic and pertinent use of Derrida's concept of the parergon, the detail that sticks and thus reverts the very hierarchy on which its own status is based, I get a little suspicious if, after all that brilliance, it is still Judges 4 that is called efficient, and 5 that is called, albeit positively, ornemental and metaphorical, and I wonder if Robert is really faithful to Derrida's parergon theory here. Before you know it, this admiration for the rhetorical power of Judges 5 will lead straight back into the golden cage of gender division. I resist characterization of these texts in relation to one another; although I grant Detweiler that I find his view of Judges 5 as somehow responding to 4, at this time as valid as my reversal of this order. Fokkelien van Dijk has recently published a brilliant analysis of Judges 4 and 5 where she also does this, taking 5 to be a midrash on 4, and I must say, it makes a lot of sense.[5] But this changes the relationship between the two texts. The possibility to do both is precisely evidence to the effect that these chronological orderings are reading devices, and if they work heuristically, they work, period. I also grant Detweiler that my interpretation of the detailed murder account in 5 is realistic in its own way; again, the problem is not *that* the text is realistic, but what *kind* of reality is at stake: defensiveness, not efficiency, in 4; celebration and joy, in 5, I suggest. I am also not quite sure that there is more detail in 5; the murder scene doesn't take significantly more space in either account. But where Deborah spends her 4 lines to evoke the experience of woman's power and agency, the epic poet spends his time apologizing. Realism, I argued, is in the service of masculine defensiveness. That causality, those explanations, are also *details*; for me, at least, they are. Obviously, there is one murder, narrated twice. I argue, in the course of discovering all the differences, that the differences between the two *texts* are so important for the production of meaning, in their reality-shaping effect that in the end one doesn't know any longer what is so similar in the event. The text

supersedes the event, restructuring it, and proposes a 'version' that makes us lose sight of the original.

Let me pick up Bach's terms once more: I am interested in the detail that is duplicitous, that will not be recuperated, the detail that is troublesome because it keeps confounding us; the detail that resists coherence and points up to its own marginality. With Detweiler we could say that this is so because the detail is supplement and hence, indispensible, and hence, no detail at all. Not marginal at all. Precisely; just like women.

Just between you and me: we all know that women are not marginal, not really, and the ambiguous attitudes toward motherhood, revered and feared, prove it. But Hegel's dialectic hardly comforts me: if the master needs the slave to assert and experience his identity as master, little does that help the slave. So the question is: who determines what the detail is, who the slave is, and how does he—for the time being, let's just assume it's a he—do that: a relation to some essence? a centre? a priority? Primacy? What, then, of the detail?

What I tried to do, among other things, in all three of my 'Bible books' is to make the so-called detail take over.[6] Start from *its* relation to the rest. Proposing counter-readings, counter-coherences, counter-marginalizations. Just to see what happens.

II

What happens? Do we get into an 'anything-goes' liberalism, called relativism, that many have thought to be the position of poststructuralism, especially deconstruction? I think not, and I think deconstruction does not imply such a position. In an earlier version of his paper to which Detweiler alluded, Daniel Patte expressed his concern about this issue. And although she sees it in a positive light, Bach mentioned 'acrobatic reading' and 'playful pluralism.'[7] I appreciate the poetic quality of Bach's language immensely, and as someone who got herself a tennis-elbow by merely planting twenty tulip bulbs with a kitchen spoon, I also appreciate the opportunity to be acrobatic in at least one domain. And I love play. And freedom. And we haven't had enough of those goodies for a long time. But these speakers were rightly concerned. Because liberalism is often only too easy to recuperate for the freedom to keep and appropriate power. The limit of freedom is thy neighbour's freedom. The same holds for language. Language is slippery, to be sure, and therefore, interpretation cannot be objective. But language is also embedded in power relations, and therefore, interpretation cannot be neutral. This locks us into an aporetic position: we are caught between pluralism and positivism, two ways of keeping power where it is. There is no innocence in freedom.

One thing we can do about that problem is to be explicit about the

preconceptions that direct our work and the interests that orient them. Not that making these explicit is enough; but once the cards are on the table, a rational argument about them can begin. And I trust that most of our colleagues are rational enough to listen to good arguments. The place of ideology, of ethics, of politics, can be assessed, and once that is happening, I trust there will be room enough for both genders in the academic playroom. This was one of the arguments of *Murder and Difference*: to show how interest-oriented assumptions do guide our work. That includes my own. It has been noted that I devote little attention to feminism in so many words, but that the book is in one way totally feminist. I am less and less inclined to spend much time on declaring my feminism; rarely do I hear men spend time declaring their own gender politics, and although I have to be and think I was explicit, I also think the feminism is somewhere else than in the declaration. It is in the strategies of attending to details and subverting their place; in resisting coherence, resisting the thematic centres set up for us long ago. An altogether different issue related to this freedom problem is, that once interests are explicit, any reason for not attending to a more equal distribution of power will be hard pressed to justify itself. As long as less than 50 percent of us are women, less than 20 black, and less than 50 of those women again, I am a bit sceptical about freedom. Power is inescapable, and there is nothing inherently wrong with it. What is wrong is its inequal distribution and its misuses. Women should have the courage to endorse power, and use it to change its uses. That is the ideological reason for my apparently contradictory behaviour: preaching the slipperiness of language, I privilege certain interpretations over others, the gender code over others, interdisciplinarity over disciplinarity. Not that I think disciplinarity is inherently wrong, but I do think we have obeyed the rules of that game too strictly, and disciplines, useful for their specialized methodology, are in danger of becoming inadequate in the face of current urgent tasks. I do this privileging of certains positions, not out of inconsistency but out of strategy.

In his afterword to the paperback edition of *Limited Inc.*, Jacques Derrida pursues his ongoing quarrel with John Searle, and both partners in that debate are amusingly emotional, thereby betraying the implicit stakes: for Searle, his right as a philosopher to formulate formal theories, even if these theories require the exclusion of everything marginal, non-serious, insincere, inadequate, incompetent, ironic, playful, theoretical, etc. For Derrida, his right to pursue his philosophical critique without losing his political persuasions. Of course, deconstruction is not a- or antipolitical; it demonstrates the politics in the positivism, the emotions in the logic, the exclusions in the formalism. But denying that one can positively and objectively argue for the current exclusions, is itself a very political act to which I wholeheartedly subscribe; it is certainly not a denial of political and ethical agency. This is why I tried to show, as all three papers have so gracefully emphasized, that the disciplinary codes I have analyzed can, although they need not, be used for exclusion and the blurring of difference.

III

This leads to my third point: coherence. I think it is fair to say that I have devoted virtually all my academic energy to a single combat against the politics of coherence, and feminism itself is not exempted from this combat. I share the feminist concern that a unified and essentialist feminism repeats the exclusions against which it fights: under the heading of mankind, women have been marginalized; under the heading of sisterhood, white women have dominated. Under the heading of a work ethics, the poor are doubly dumped on, and in the name of liberalism and enterpreneurship, they are blamed for their own state. And I repeat, women are not innocent of these exclusions under essentialist and coherent headings. The history of humanity has long been seen as a military history of conquest and war; with a good deal of politics and a cloud of economics. With such an idea in mind, one only needs to add the religious ingredient to have the entire book of Judges be devoted to the establishment in the land, getting rid of the original inhabitants, and in the religion—both singular, unified, and unproblematically metaphorizing each other with gender-stereotypes as the handy mediator. Yet, criticizing this compulsion to establish coherence is not enough. For we need coherence to survive. Language and other forms of semiosis are means to grapple with the chaotic world around us. If we deny ourselves the right to some sort of order, we move right into collective psychosis. Another aporia. To quote good old Lenin: what's to be done?

Coherence is as dangerous and as indispensible as ideology, power, or politics. If we feel oppressed by somebody's coherence, the most efficient answer is to oppose another coherence, demonstrate that it is as plausible or more plausible, and we are all set. But this only *appears* to be a repetition of the same error. It is not an imposed coherence, like the one where God must always be right, but a working arrangement. If my feminist argument was somehow present from the start, I think that nevertheless I have taken the trouble to argue with established scholarship, taking their claims seriously but as no more than that, claims: and examining their arguments, I often had to reject the claims. That is the difference between this 'working arrangement' of coherence and a coherence based on essentialism or on biased assumptions advanced as givens. When Robert Detweiler claims that my argument about the slipperiness of language is slippery, he is stating the obvious: my argument has to be slippery or it will be inconsistent.

So, coherence is not escapable; it is to be used combatively, and if we

manage to play the game according to a few rules, like explicit spelling out of interests orienting the coherence we project, it is more than inescapable; it will be useful.

Coherences are not always thematic, like the bias for military history, or for attention to victimized women. There are also rhetorical coherences. I use the coherence of metonymy in *Death and Dissymmetry* when I blow up the relationship between fatherhood and the sacrifice of young women. Traditional Biblical scholarship uses the coherence of metaphor when assuming that *zanah* always means sexual promiscuity and therefore expresses the relationship between God and Israel as similarly sexual.[8] Allegory is another tool for coherence.[9]

Detweiler allegorizes women's discourse as the uncanny space of Yael's tent—or was it the other way around? Precisely, Yael's tent is frightening in this allegory, uncanny; full of veiled threats. So is, then, women's discourse. Allegory is an escape from, and at the same time appropriation of, the 'real' of the text; the literal description, the experience it evokes. It may strike some readers as a reversal, when the woman's tent becomes the realm of the uncanny, of threat, while the entire world around it has proved unsafe for women; to be sure, this uncanniness is gendered, and establishes the reader experiencing it as male. Fine, as long as that restriction is declared and endorsed. Being a person of the female persuasion,[10] hence both attentive to women's experiences and trained to share male experiences, I can see, though, that the evocation of Judges 5 is not really reassuring for an imaginative man. This threatening quality of the evocation has been noticed only too often, albeit less gracefully and interestingly than in Detweiler's paper. What I tried to do in *Murder and Difference* was to reverse the standard situation, and temporarily declare the feelings of male readers and male participants in the scene irrelevant. Simply because that had less often been done. And because I was interested in this other voice. Detweiler's own insistence on the dual voicedness of Judges 5 à propos of Sisera's mother is quite right. But we are not done yet with granting Deborah her own voice; before we know it, Deborah's pleasure in Yael's glory is overwritten, again, by male anguish, allegorical or not. I will take the liberty to resist that.

Let me wind up. Feminism as supplement? In a truly Derridian perspective, I would, for a while go along with that. As long as the 'main body' of Biblical studies understands that it cannot survive without this supplement; no more than the statue without its clothing. And as long as the consequence of that situation is accepted: that is, as long as 'you' are willing to be 'our' supplement as well. That is, as long as 'you' accept that feminism cannot survive without its other, and hence, that even a more sophisticated version of Carol Gilligan's beautiful world is not yet possible. I repeat my

offer, as soon as 50% of us are women, 20% black, and 50% of those women again, I will stop reacting to the male power game. I will be delighted.

REFERENCES

Robert Detweiler composed a limerick dur-
Robert Detweiler composed a limerick during the Society for Biblical Literature session that should not get lost, as it conveys the spirit of the session rather well:

There once was a critic named Bal,
Who wrote about women in thrall.
Her treatment of Sisera,
Who lost all his viscera,
Is more fun than reading Saint Paul.

[1] This response was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature, Anaheim 1989, in a session devoted to my book *Murder and Difference* (1988). Three papers were presented at the session, by Alice Bach, Robert Detweiler, and Daniel Patte. At the request of this journal, but with ambivalent feelings, I have edited out the allusions to the other two papers (with one exception). I am very grateful to the three speakers and all those who honoured me with their presence at the session.

[2] Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: the Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, Chicago U.P., 1988).

[3] The concept of experience is problematic; see Teresa de Lauretis's concluding chapter in *Alice Doesn't* for a brilliant 'working through' of the concept. (Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1983).

[4] This is an allusion to Frederic Jameson's book *The Prisonhouse of Language* (1972), another brilliant text which 'forgets' that other prison.

[5] Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, 'Interpetaties van de relaties tussen Richteren 4 en 5'. in *Proeven van feministische theologie*, (Utrecht, OMI, 1989).

[6] The first one was *Lethal Love: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Love-Stories* (Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1988). A longer version of this book appeared in French in 1986 as *Femmes imaginaires: L'ancien testament au risque d'une narratologie critique* (Montréal, HMH/Paris, Nizet). In the French version, I offer an extended account of the critical potential of so-called formalist narratology, trying to tie it up with psychoanalysis and with Haberman's critical theory of communication. This extention will appear in English in *On Story-Telling*, (Sonoma, Polebridge).

[7] In the version she read, this phrase was changed into 'playful différance', which is probably more adequate but less poetic.

[8] I argue in *Death and Dissymmetry* that *zanah* needs to be thoroughly reconsidered and historicized. I relate the word to a different organisation of kinship, a kind of nomadic marriage in which the daughter remains in her father's house, and her children are her father's property, not the husband's. *Pilegesh* in Judges 19 is a synonym, and the hypothesis that that story is about the violent transition between the two systems explains details that have hitherto remained enigmatic.

[9] In my forthcoming book *Reading 'Rembrandt'* (Cambridge, CUP, 1991) I argue in the chapter on rape and representation, that stories about rape have been a privileged case for allegorization, which is a case of *the scandal of the speaking body*, to use Shoshana Felman's wonderful title (*Le scandale du corps parlant* (Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1980), boringly translated as *Literary Speech-acts*, (Cornell University Press, 1984). I use Felman's phrase to refer to cases where (1) women's bodies are used for semiosis and (2) the misuse is explained away, usually by allegorical interpretations.

[10] The phrase is Griselda Pollock's in a discussion at the university of Rochester. It is meant to enhance the roots of femininity in socialization. See her *Vision and Difference* (London, Routledge, 1988).