

The Eye of Flesh: Negri's *The Labor of Job*

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First of all, let me say that I learned much from this book of Negri's and the essays by Michael Hardt and Roland Boer included with it. I am no scholar of Marxism, and the series of books that Boer has offered us on the interactions of the Marxist and Christian traditions have been an education to me. Moreover, Negri's response to Job reinforces the observation that it is often those who write on biblical books without claiming to be biblical scholars who capture the excitement and the revolutionary vitality of these texts. He is clearly energised by his encounter with this text and that enthusiasm comes through. It encouraged me to read further in Negri's works and that has been edifying as well. Yet perhaps it is symptomatic that I found myself sharing Professor Boer's concern about the idealism of Negri's conclusions. Maybe we are both getting old; but let me return to that.

My own particular response to the work derives from the fact that I continue to be much influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida. That means that I am drawn to footnotes and to the excluded and so my eye fell on these words in Boer's first footnote on p. 109 where he explains what he is going to deal with and what he is not:

... I also leave aside two howlers — the resurrection of the flesh and the Messiah. The first simply does not appear in the belief structures at even the latest possible date of composition for the book and the second is a deeply theological argument that is difficult to locate in the text.

Now, these two dogmatic assertions may be howlers, though that is an academic's word, if ever there was one, but in terms of Negri's book, they are crucial. If they are howlers, then his reading is clearly up the creek in no uncertain terms. In the chapter entitled "The *Dispositif* of the Messiah", in itself a sign of the importance of the term "Messiah" for his analysis, Negri writes, "The resurrection of the flesh through the Messiah is the revolution that traverses real transumption. ... in the book of Job, the Messiah is the sign of the resurrection of the flesh, just as within communism the Messiah is the sign of the resurrection of labor" (p. 72). Now, this all needs unpacking, but Negri seems to be staking a lot on what might be a howler.

The source of the problem, not surprisingly, is the notoriously tricky passage in Job 19:25-29. This programmatic statement of Negri's follows directly on from his quotation of Job 19:26: "Then in my flesh I shall see God". The verse is crucial to Negri's reading. This verse, as he interprets it, not only unequivocally affirms the resurrection of the body, but it gives a central place to the idea of *seeing* God and links the two together.

This emphasis on vision relates thematically to another verse which is decisive for Negri, Job's confession in Job 42:5: "I had heard of you by the hearing of my ear, but now my eye sees you". Negri makes the genuinely interesting exegetical suggestion at this point that this proclamation marks a triumph on Job's part, in that he has induced the hidden and anonymous power of God to reveal himself and thus become part of Job's world of discourse and action. This summons into visibility is the resource for resistance that the book of Job offers to those who are the victims of naked power masquerading as justice, when the judge becomes the accuser.

This, of course, reflects something Negri has known only too well in his own life. His imprisonment by the Italian state seemed to him something that occurred outside law and represented naked power turned against him. He explicitly linked his decision to write on Job to this experience in the introduction to *The Labor of Job*. Negri expanded on the influence of his

imprisonment on his reading of Job in an interview with Anne Dufourmantelle (Negri and Dufourmantelle 2004):

One can survive being locked away in prison only if one has great passions; if one preserves the ability to create a powerful imagination on the basis of this empty *kairos*. For me this powerful and new imagination had to be reconquered from within the very heart of defeat. It's for this reason that I read a great deal of Leopardi and wound up devoting a book to him; also the story of Job, whom I want to write about as well.

Why Job?

Because the story of Job is marvelous! Job is really the theory of the vision of the inside of desire – a desire that contains its object: My God, I have seen you, therefore I possess you. It is this access to God, this suffering that is so terrible that paradoxically it makes it possible to possess the object of one's desire under incredible pressure, and with incredible passion (pp. 158-159).

Once again, the centrality of vision and of the flesh to his reading is clear. Yet is this central claim based on a howler? In this regard, it is intriguing how Negri justifies this tendentious reading of ch. 19 in *The Labor of Job*. On p. 70, he makes the following comment, the force of which is masked by the translation: "Let us take up again the passage in the most explicit *translation of the Vulgata*" (in Italian, "riprendiamo qui il passaggio nella *traduzione*, più *explicita*, *della Vulgata*" [Negri's emphasis]).

Here I feel Negri's translator has been a bit at sea, with the transcription rather than translation of the word "Vulgata" being a symptom of this. Surely Negri is referring to the "more explicit" rather than the "most explicit" translation. The point, however, is that here he is consciously and openly moving away from the concerns of the Hebraically-trained scholar of the book of Job into reception history of a sort. After all, in cultural terms in the development of the political systems that he is challenging, the Vulgate is much more influential than the Hebrew.

By appealing to the translation rather than the original, is Negri committing a howler, or perpetuating Jerome's howler, or is he showing that his concern with the book is not with some original meaning, but with its cultural effect in the Western world? What book of Job are we reading and why? In any event, Negri's insistence on physical vision provokes interesting questions for the reading of Job. Although he does not explore these explicitly, he can encourage us to note the extent to which the eye is a recurring motif in the book. Seeing and being seen are a constant theme, as is the question of who can see whom. There is one particularly striking verse in this context on which, unfortunately, Negri does not seem to comment, although it would suit his case admirably.

In Job 10:4, Job explicitly challenges God on the grounds that he cannot see as men do: "Do you have the eyes of flesh? Is your vision that of mere men?" as the JPS translates the verse. This verse rather startlingly makes a virtue of the materiality and limitation of the human sense of sight instead of seeing it as a defect and indeed turns that into a criticism of the all-seeing God. Taken seriously, this verse has the potential to reorient us from philosophies of vision and enlightenment to a philosophy of the eye, of the frail miracle of the "vile jelly" that is ineluctably material and part of the body, rather than of the glorious disembodiment of light. God may be all-seeing, but he does not know what it is "only" to be able to see with the eye.

We might further note, from this perspective, that, given the number of stories of God inflicting blindness on people in the Bible, that is one disability that does not seem to have been visited on Job. His problem is not his physical inability to see God, but God's hiddenness; if he were blind, God's hiding would be neither here nor there. He sees, and indeed God insists on exposing him to ever more bewildering visual experiences, but cannot interpret. Total blindness is the negative

counterpart to the impossibility of being all-seeing, however. What God, lacking eyes of flesh, does not know is what most of us suffer at some point: the dimming of the eye or defective vision, whether hereditary, accidental, or the result of natural processes of aging. The phenomenology of myopia is a much-neglected element in philosophy, but more truly reflects the condition of the average human.

One exception to this neglect that has both a biblical resonance and a bearing on the themes of Job is to be found in Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, where she rehearses the familiar contrast between the senses of sight and hearing as standing removed from the object of perception and in contrast to the bodily contact that characterizes the other senses. The act of touching, for instance, lays itself open to an immediate transformation into pain, if what we touch is burning or sharp, for instance. But, she reminds us, any of our senses can move along the spectrum from imagination, focused on the perceived, to pain, where the body of the perceiver becomes the overwhelming object of concern.

Vision is the sense most closely associated with the involvement with the object rather than the subject which she characterizes as imagination, but the eye is an organ too: "If one experiences one's eyes or ears themselves, if the woman working looks up at the sun too suddenly and her eyes fill with blinding light, then vision falls back to the neighborhood of pain" (Scarry 1985, 165-166). This experience is not confined to such blinding visions; the effects of time on the eye have the same result. As sight declines, she "no longer experiences the images of grain, persons and trees without also experiencing her own body in the mode of aversiveness and deprivation". The eye of flesh reminds us of our fleshliness and our failing vision is a symptom and metonym of mortality.

This resonates with the way in which, for Negri, the phrase "For in my flesh I shall see God" is crucial in bringing together the idea of a redeemer (again *pace* Roland's understandable hesitation in reading this into Job), the resurrection of the flesh, and the idea of seeing God with one's own eyes. What Job has is an eye of flesh; only an eye of flesh, but that is the only kind of eye that we know.

This materialism of sight is a key part of Negri's approach here, for reasons which he explained in his interview with Anne Dufourmantelle. The idea of the separation of body and soul with the body obedient to the soul was, he says, a "stroke of genius" on the part of the powerful to impose a similar hierarchy on the political realm. Paradoxically, however, their appeal to Christianity flew in the face of the materiality of the resurrection of the body. The passage is worth quoting as it also bears on the topic of his particular interest in Job:

... what the separation of body and soul really signifies is that the spirit dominates the body. Society was therefore structured in this way as well: the soul commanded and the body obeyed. This was the order and the measure of social hierarchy and production. If, however, one reverses these terms and says that production is made not by the soul, but by the body (which is not a new idea, since reproduction has always been a function of the body), if the re-appropriation of intellectual form is situated in the body, then the body becomes the unit of production and reproduction. The whole separation between the corporeal and the spiritual, this whole religious view that the body must be made to disappear - all that vanishes.

What a clever idea it was, just the same, to say that the soul is eternal and the body mortal! From the point of view of power, it was a stroke of genius. The paradox is that Christianity never said this: the great dogma of the resurrection of the body runs completely contrary to it. It's not only the eschatological aspect that interests me, even though this is a very important element of the story, but it is also the rediscovery of a materialist religion. ... The resurrection of the body is obviously the most important thing from the point of view of physical materialism. Perhaps I will wind up one day working on this problem. (Negri and Dufourmantelle 2004, 181-182)

What Negri then seeks in Job is affirmation of this materialist view of the resurrection in the form of the body and reproduction. Just as Job keeps his eyes, he also retains his potency despite all his sufferings. It is in his children that he finds hope. The book of Job, after all, although it is full of death, is a book where the hero is desperate to die and cannot. His problem is the problem of survival but in the process he becomes the source of strategies for survival for those who are the victims of power.

But Job is a survivor, not the beneficiary of resurrection. Negri's resurrection of the flesh also turns out to be a matter of survival, not resurrection. His Messiah turns out to be the child. His account of the imprisonment during which he wrote *The Labor of Job*, published as the *Diary of an Escape*, ends, as does the book of Job, with the birth of a child and a number of reflections on this: "My mother used to tell me that only children stop the inexorable Time of death. Children and revolution. These very clear and simple things which we need in order to confirm an ethical meaning for life". Negri writes of the news that his partner is pregnant: "The strength to undertake a new cycle of revolution is a strength that we shall find by merging with the strength which the human collectivity puts forth every day in reproducing its own life, with love and with desire ... What strength there is in the birth of a child" (Negri 2010, 245).

Furthermore, in an interview with Rainer Ganahl, he made this rather remarkable statement:

I believe that anytime a white woman has a child with a black man, every black woman who has a child with a Chinese, all these children are Christs.

RG: What do you mean?

AN: They renew the human being.

RG: Christ, like Jesus Christ?

AN: Yes, the symbol of a new generation, of the resurrection. This is fundamental to me.

The Messianic hope and the resurrection of the flesh meet in the birth of a child. Yet at this particular crisis point in the history of Europe, if not of the global economic order, there is a particular poignancy in the idea of hope in children. When youth unemployment in Greece has reached 49 per cent, we have borne in on us a paradox that the Hebrew Bible deals with constantly. The older generation need the younger generation to ensure a future, but they are a present cost. The child that may feed and keep you in old age needs itself to be fed and tended in the present and when things are scarce, hard choices must be made and the future sacrificed to the present.

The Deuteronomists knew this in their picture of coming disaster. The mark of that, says Deut 28:54, is that "The man who is the most tender and delicately bred among you" will grudge "the flesh of his children whom he is eating" even to his nearest and dearest when the time of reckoning comes; "the most tender and delicately bred woman among you will eat her children and her afterbirth in secret" (Deut. 28:56-57).

That is a verse that has haunted me, as has the song that recently took the students of Portugal by storm as they came to realize what the economic problems of their country meant for their futures. The song is entitled "Que parve que eu sou" ("What a fool I am"), with its haunting refrain: "What a foolish world, where in order to be a slave you have to study". In its response to the failure of a system that has been built on cashing in today on an as yet unrealized promise of future wealth, the world is in danger of devouring its children.

Job may have hope in his children in the end, but what about the hopes of the young Job, and the expression of joy on his face and his wife's when the first of the seven sons he has in chapter one was born? That child's hopes, and those of his brothers and sisters, were wiped out so that Job, or God, or Satan, or we readers, could learn a lesson. We keep ourselves alive on hope but can only do this by consuming the future, and we of the privileged intellectual classes bear a particular

responsibility. If the children are the Messiah, and thus the hope of resurrection in Negri's terms, then the Empire, and we among it, are still in the self-destructive business of the massacre of the innocents.

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