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Bennett-Carpenter - Quoting Mieke Bal's Navel - JCRT 4.1
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I

Art and literary theorist Mieke Bal may be read in terms of a philosophy or theory of religion in a genealogy that begins with Kierkegaard, runs through Nietzsche and Heidegger and concludes in the vicinity of Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Derrida.¹ With Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, hers is a post-Christendom, post-Christian theory of religion that could be described at the outset as 'preposterous.' With Nietzsche and Heidegger, her critical and interpretive strategies *circulate*, not to attempt a circumvention of meaning, but to negotiate the limits of significant horizons. With Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, she follows a *bodied* phenomenology that can never extricate itself from the world and earth. With Derrida and Foucault, she is both deconstructive and post-structuralist as she moves amongst the play of signs and the rhetoric of resistance. Finally, she stands as an alternative to Baudrillard in a world of theory after Foucault and Derrida or, at least, in the midst of their traces.

3. This background becomes clearer if focus is drawn specifically to the *problem of representation*. Reading back through this genealogy, the question of what happens to meaning, truth, or reality through the process of representation has been a central, if not *the* central concern for these thinkers. Representation has no doubt become a complex term (and a term-complex) after these philosophers and theorists. But at the conclusion of their genealogy in the work of Mieke Bal we find a helpful way toward outlining various aspects of representation-in this case in terms of *quotation*. Unlike Baudrillard, she is less apt to be celebrated or condemned for proclaiming a triumph of simulacra but rather allows various facets of representation to be positioned together, leaving a dynamic complex of multiple meanings and non-meanings, common sense and play.
4. A quotation as articulated by Bal in her *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Bal 1999a: 10-11) operates on several levels. To begin, she takes quotation literally as reproducing the direct discourse of a speaker. Quotation also refers to a fictional, illusory, or effectual representation, a manipulation of reality that allows several realities to manifest in any given image. Quotation includes also the dense inter-referencing and indexing of not only words and images but also the very practices of other authors and artists. Finally, quotation means for Bal the basic matrix of narratological and semiotic space-time, out of which one can never remove oneself to access a literal, fundamental meaning.
5. My interest in quoting Bal shares in these various 'conflicting, overlapping, interacting, co-operative' senses of quotation. Firstly, I claim a certain amount of literal representation of her based on her texts such as *Quoting Caravaggio*, *Reading "Rembrandt"* (Bal 1991b), *Lethal Love* (Bal 1987a), and others as one finds them in the references. I literally quote: I crop and

¹At least it is in this 'tradition' that I have sought to represent her in the following project. And perhaps in this case Kant stands as a matrix for the whole genealogy. Of course it is also possible to trace other genealogies; for example in a semiotic 'tradition' of Saussure and Barthes, along with Culler and Eco. This is not to mention narratological, psychoanalytic, or feminist 'traditions' to which she is indebted as well, nor even, in a certain sense, her close position to art historical figures like Duchamp, which I mention later. Certainly one of Bal's strengths is her draw upon various 'traditions' or disciplines: she's a true interdisciplinarian. I try here to orient the reader by way of one genealogy to begin with and to touch on the various others as the article proceeds.

assemble, yet fragments are found here that directly reflect what appears on a page or screen elsewhere in texts by and in the thought of Mieke Bal. Secondly, as I have already alluded, I am obviously about the business of manipulating the texts. In part I create a fiction, an illusion of representing her and, in so doing, multiple realities emerge based on this singularity, "Mieke Bal." Thirdly, I position myself in the 'utter fragmentation of language itself', in the fact of the intertextuality of the present discourse, its myriad if not exponential number of pointers and linkages to other text(-ure)s. Representing "Bal" in this case becomes a process in which one can not but be entangled, feeling the density, the thickness of what is indicated by (the text(ure)s of) "Mieke Bal." Finally, I use quotation as 'all I've got.' I can not help but put quotation marks around the name because even if they were to be removed, we would not then find the real (")Mieke Bal("). The (re-)marks always remain. In this case, what else could we do but quote Mieke Bal.

6. Along these lines we may also note that "I" make "my" (re-)marks without the humbling reality (of sorts) of the quotation. Virtually everything said in terms of quoting Mieke Bal can be said for "me," "my," and "I". For the sake of ease, for the most part I drop the use of literal quotation marks around Mieke Bal with an understanding that even without the literal marks, the quotation(s) continue(s). Such is the case for Mieke Bal and me, not to mention "you," "us," and "we."
7. My title for this project quotes and alters Bal's *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Her subtitle rephrases Patricia Parker's "Preposterous Events" (Bal 1992),² while mine rephrases hers as *preposterous religion*, purposefully making a connection between religion, history, and event(s). For Bal 'preposterous history' brings together the 'pre' and the 'post' of history in hybrid, a recycling one upon the other and vice-versa that re-visions the past (in her case, the Baroque) (7). Reciprocity exists between what is before and what is after-not to mention what is inside and what is outside-both aspects affecting each other and making the other what it is and never could be without the other. The pre and the post mark one another and change each other's status as "history" fluxuates in the in-between.
8. To speak of 'preposterous religion' is to follow a similar vein. What comes before religion and what is after, inside and out, play off one another, altering each other so that neither is what it is without the other. We find an ambiguity and implication between pre-religion and post-religion that makes "religion" an uncertain product. In company with Bal's revisioning of history, I see the preposterous not as a liability, but as an illumination and an enrichment of religion. More specifically, drawing on Patricia Parker's term and in line with Bal, religion begins to be articulated performatively with the preposterous in terms of event(s).
9. Special attention is paid here to the *navel* in Bal's work. For Bal the navel is a performative metaphor operating on a number of levels, from the literal bellybutton on a painted nude to a Barthian *punctum* potentially in any image or scenario, from an indexical sign of gendered dependence to a simultaneously jokey and serious play upon the rhetoric of Freud's phallus and Derrida's hymen. My use of navel is one of many ways to enact these multiple senses, thereby mimicking, fabricating, indicating, and carefully exploiting what I take to be the odd detail that many do not notice or do not manifest or do not pay attention to in Mieke Bal's growing body of work: religion, or probably more accurately, her *religious* thought.

²Importantly Bal cites T.S. Eliot at the outset: "Whoever has approved this idea of order...will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (Bal 1975 [1919]).

10. Thus, toward a religious theory that involves a rhetoric of signs and stories, semiotics and narrative, I represent what I take to be the most crucial aspects of Bal's provocative and careful thought. And, as I have already indicated, I attempt to do this in a way that in part incorporates her multiple senses of representation. This should become clear by the time we round out Bal's handling of the navel in part IV of this article. In order to set up the navel, parts II and III introduce some basics to her thought. Specifically part II discusses her relationship to the early Derrida both in terms of her debt and their differences, and highlights particularly important points of Bal's thought such as the relationship of word and image. Part III describes in more detail how we may understand the term 'preposterous.' This section helps introduce part IV on the navel both in terms of description and its shift toward a performative rhetoric of the preposterous. Part IV seeks to play with this most explicitly especially at its close. Finally, part V moves toward making some concluding comments on implications and points of departure for representation and the study of religion, preposterous or otherwise.

II

11. We should note from the start that a basic interest for Bal, not unlike Derrida, is the critique of binary oppositions in philosophical thought. She nuances the relationships that often are set-up in overly distinguished ways, such as word and image, or language and visibility. Neither side of such distinctions is completely self-sufficient; both sides depend on the other. "Just as language cannot be reduced to words and syntax but needs visualization in order to function, so images are inseparable from language, *in their very visibility*" (Bal 1999a: 82). The question that lies at the heart of the matter: "What's a word, what's an image, and what difference does it make to identify a difference?" (84). This query is not to write off the question but is to ask it in such a way that avoids the collapse of the two terms, meanwhile resisting their opposition in favor of a carefully nuanced cooperation of the two.
12. This question is of primary concern especially in Bal's *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*. Here we find an example of her continual insistence on both sides of the "opposition" and the resistance toward collapse. In this case Bal asserts that moving beyond the word-image opposition is not a denial of difference between the verbal and the visual but a bracketing of the question as to precisely what that difference may be (8). At least we can say what the difference is not: it is not an opposition. We can highlight the fact of visual-textual density (14), and as Bal works her way through the "Rembrandt" project, the conjunctions and prepositions positioned between the two sides of what is often dichotomized in academic thought-practice begin to reveal just such a density. *In, on, as-not* to mention *and*-are placed between 'words' (and) 'images'. The often overlooked 'and' is given special attention as that tiny word-image that makes 'all the difference'. The 'and' placed between terms like word (and) image sets up, as Bal puts it, "a mutually necessary, existence-threatening suspension of mastery" (293). Each find the other resisting domination even as they connect and find themselves as the other; even while maintaining their identity, albeit an interactive, entangled identity rather than a static, monolithic, masterful one. Indeed, Bal asserts "the blindness of mastery and the insight of its renunciation" (289).
13. One may find Bal at a first reading to offer a less radical critique than Derrida despite the fact that we can clearly see she shares with him, and probably is indebted to him, for the critique of binary oppositions. If Derrida often abandons what is understood to be the dominant term in a specific opposition in favor of the *other* term, and at times seeks alternative terms (or non-terms), then Bal is more apt to play the 'and' piece to its maximum, so that even while she may begin with the neglected *other* she is quick to return to the "dominant" term.

14. As she makes this move the dominant term is upset just as it is in Derrida. But by more willingly reincorporating the dominant, she differs with Derrida, emphasizing the fact that the dominant may not be as dominant as many have wanted to think. For example, she would concur with Derrida's critique of logocentrism even as she continues to think logos in relationship to imago, to not only destabilize logos but to resist positioning imago over logos. We might say that Bal maintains traditional terms in order to reclaim and revitalize them especially in the in-between space of the *and*.³
15. On the other hand, Bal is clearly no traditionalist in fact the very opposition between tradition and scandal is one that Bal disrupts and nuances. Discussing the work of Andres Serrano, who is widely known for his *Piss Christ* cibachrome photograph, Bal writes, "scandal and tradition are one and the same thing" (Bal 1999a: 57).⁴ Bal discusses Serrano's work in terms of an ongoing celebration of the object that he is simultaneously criticizing. She puts it more precisely: "It is the continued celebration of the object in the very act of critiquing the traditions that surround it that generates the scandal; and it is precisely because of this duplicity that Serrano's work *cannot* be dismissed as iconoclastic and sacrilegious" (57). It is *both* scandalous *and* traditional, both depending upon and intermingling with the other such that either side of what was an opposition become implicated in one another. Dismissal of the *other* becomes impossible without a simultaneous dismissal of what becomes the other's other. The positioning of iconoclasm or sacrilege "outside" of the domain of icons and the sacred becomes an impossible task. Inside and outside no longer hold their borders. Again, the 'and' is perhaps the most telling, especially now as we turn to the preposterous.

III

16. What then is meant by this term 'preposterous' slipped into the subtitle of *Quoting Caravaggio* and operating in Bal's work? One way to begin to think the preposterous would be to associate the pre and post of the term with linear time. Common sense tells us that history, as a matter of time, progresses from what was before, to what is, and to what will come. Time is in this common sense rather straightforward. Narrative also may be linked here: an account is commonly understood as having beginning, middle, and end. But of course time (and narrative) can be understood as circular as well, as in the rotation of the natural seasons or the turning, repetitious hands of the wall clock. 16. Whereas in linear time pre and post are before and after, in circular time the two become conflated. As one may speak of either fall coming before spring or spring before fall, the post may come "before" the pre and the pre "after" the post. Of course what is winter in North America is summer in South America, and likewise what may be pre in one case may be post in another depending on one's location.
17. Now we begin to see the spatial aspect of the preposterous. Even when we speak of time as linear, we cannot separate this discourse from the imagination of locations within space such

³In "The Spirit as Parasite" (Bal 1999b), Bal offers several ways in which the ambiguous three lettered conjunction can be read. Firstly, it can be read as an opposition such as 'body and spirit', 'spirit and matter', 'word and image', or 'art and popular culture.' In this case one is positioned *against* the other. *And* can also be read in terms of a metaphorical relationship. In this case, where *and* is we may read as: 'text as body.' Thirdly, the conjunction can be understood as an equivalence or as Bal puts it, an "almost identity." Here, *and* occurs in phrases like 'home and hearth' or 'sound and music'. Finally (yet not quite), *and* may indicate narrative sequence: this happened *and then* this happened *and so forth* (316-317).

⁴The positioning of these terms together is also reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's statement, "Genuine blasphemy, genuine in spirit and not purely verbal, is the product of partial belief, and is as impossible to the complete atheist as to the perfect Christian. It is a way of affirming belief" (Eliot, 1951).

as near and far. But beyond this rather flat conception of time and space, we see more clearly how what is “before” and “after” is dependent upon our location in space. Whether it is *time* for winter or summer depends upon whether we find ourselves in North or South America, or wherever.

18. And of course narrative is circular as well. There would be no narrative if there were “beginning” but no “end”, or “end” but no “beginning.” They wrap around upon one another as a “whole.” Pre and post, then, indicate not only time but space and are dependent upon locations within this time-space. Further, what becomes more interesting is the way we may begin to talk about time-space not just in terms of linearity or even circularity, but also in terms of curvature, warp, layer, and fold.
19. The preposterous is an invitation into a kind of labyrinth. Bal calls this “Space, Inc.”-that is, *space incorporated*. This can help us in thinking-moving in and with the preposterous, for it can not be done without relationship to the body. To begin with, a labyrinth is shaped like the body’s interior, the intestines for example. Further, a labyrinth requires bodily engagement and is both spatial and temporal-a “spatiotemporal continuum” (Bal 1999a: 129). Bal highlights this sense of continuum found in Pierce’s semiotics (a sense which does not appear in Saussure). She reworks Pierce’s description of the sign, ‘something which stands to somebody for something’, as “some thing-stands for-some thing-to some body” (129-130). Here she first opts for *incorporating* the spatiotemporal in favor of the abstract space of Saussurian signifier-signified. This is a move from an abstract semiotic space to a semiotic space oriented and referenced to the body in time. The first is a move from Saussure to Pierce and the second from Pierce to, in part, Merleau-Ponty. This incorporation works both inside out and outside in. Think of the labyrinth: we find it both as a time-space in which the body moves and as a meandering continuum within the space of the body.
20. Of course it would be neglectful to overlook that the preposterous is also about the absurd and ridiculous. It stands contrary to “common sense” logic, “rationality,” or the “nature of things.” In the course of art history, Duchamp is probably a most obvious candidate for being hero of the preposterous. Duchamp’s Dada questions the basic assumptions about the nature and definition of art. Its absurdity is thoughtful, its ridiculousness, serious. Likewise, Bal’s positioning of art history with the preposterous is one of taking seriously Dadaist critique of the established. Like Duchamp who should not be understood simply as anti-art, Bal is certainly not anti-history.⁵ Like Duchamp, though in a more muted and compromising way, her effort calls into question and complexifies the given borders of (art) history. Let me be clear: her work is not about Dada, nor is it Dadaist in its mode of discourse. However, an element of careful strategy vis-a-vis the establishment communities, whether artistic or academic, is common to both. It is not difficult to imagine Bal joining Duchamp and pouring over a chessboard for an afternoon of serious play.
21. The *dada* (with lower-case in order to soften its feel) is important in thinking about Bal’s use of the preposterous because of its performative aspect. Thinking in terms of theatricality is helpful: word and image, so distinguished, are united; the visual and verbal become one composite sign. Theater students, Bal notes, have no trouble with this conception. For them

⁵Bal addresses criticisms of her alleged “ahistoricism” in her early collection of essays, *On Story-Telling: Essays in Narratology* (Bal 1991a: 14-23).

the opposition between image and word is meaningless (Bal 1991b: 57).⁶ Her performative rhetoric, then, is a semiotic one. It moves from strict and static dichotomies of word and image to that of the fluctuating category of the sign. The theater analogy reveals the narrative aspect of her rhetoric: it is story, drama, and event. The narrative aspect of her rhetoric is one that eludes fact-fiction dichotomies in favor of an account that is truer than static 'fact' or strict 'fiction' can allow so conceived. The semiotic dimension of her rhetoric is one that avoids the oppositions of traditional meaning-categories such as image and word in favor of the logic of the significant. In both cases, semiotic and narrative, her effort is both the recognition and the enactment of the performative.

IV

22. Performatively, then, taking up a bodily phenomenology not unlike Merleau-Ponty and playing up Derrida's metaphor (or metonym) of the hymen, Bal insightfully (and incite-fully) introduces a rhetoric of the *navel* (Bal 1991b: 20-24, 104, 313; 1999a: 31-36; 2001: 347-348). Not only a part of the curved, warped, layered, folded body, it is itself a curvature, a warp, a layer, a fold-or, better yet, multiple curvatures, warps, layers, folds. It is the kind of "meaningless" detail that Bal loves to call to our attention (Bal 1987a: 4). The navel of a text is "the place of the strange mis-fit that allows entrance into *the other story*" (Bal 1991b: 104; emphasis added).
23. What might it mean to quote Bal's navel? At the least it would attempt to move along the surfaces, folds, and layers of the metaphor. It would try to do justice to the complexity of Bal's mutli-layered conception of quotation. The trick would be to do justice to the *event* of quotation as a dynamic, inter-related process, and meanwhile not fall completely into a literalist conception of representing Bal'all this even as we move toward an intelligible performance of quoting Bal's navel.
24. Of course we have to start somewhere, and that which is most obvious, or literal, is not always a bad place to start. As such we identify the four ways in which Bal articulates quotation: 1) as literal, mimetic; 2) as effectual, fictive, illusory; 3) as fragmented, thick, plural, ambiguous; 4) as 'all we've got', copy with no original. Each implies an epistemology, a concept of representation, and an aesthetic (Bal 1999a: 10-11, 14). In its first sense, following classical narrative theory, quotation is the "direct discourse, or 'literal' quotation of the words of characters." It is a reinforcement of mimesis, a reflected fragment of "real speech"-that is, the "real speech" as authentication of the fiction.
25. The second sense of quotation is that of being a fragment of reality that has been manipulated. Following Roland Barthes, Bal explains, "Rather than serving reality, they serve a reality *effect*, which is, in fact, the opposite-a fiction of realism." Quotation here is an illusion, a deceptive shifting of reality that allows multiple "realities" to appear within a single image. What is represented in this case is an effect without substance or facticity; an untruth become truth by alteration and effect.
26. In its third sense, quotation can "stand for the utter fragmentation of language itself." This is a Bakhtinian dialogism where quotations point toward other sources from which the words have come, and thereby thicken, rather than undermine, the processes of mimesis. "This conception of quotation," writes Bal, "turns the precise quotation of utterances into the borrowing of

⁶Here Bal is addressing more specifically "visual poetics" rather than "rhetoric" but I think provides a helpful way to visualize her understanding of rhetoric. And, as she writes later quite clearly, "rhetoric is as visual as it is verbal," (69).

discursive habits, and as a result, intertextuality merges into interdiscursivity." The pluralizing and ambiguity of meanings, and the assurance that meaning cannot be reduced to artist's intention, are accounted for by this interdiscursivity.

27. Finally, Bal uses quotation in a deconstructionist or poststructuralist sense of being 'all we've got.' No access to the word is possible except by way of quotation and once it finds this word, it finds that it too is quotation. In contrast to Bakhtin where "the word never forgets where it has been before it was quoted, for Derrida it never returns there without the burden of the excursion through the quotation." In this case quotation never offers a literal meaning to which one may eventually return (Bal 1999a: 11).
28. But now let us look at a quotation-literally-of Bal. "The metaphor of the navel," she writes, "is more satisfying than that of the hymen [as in Derrida] for the deconstructed image; diluted into a multiple textuality, it is a false center attracting the attention to its void of semes - to its dis-semination." Derrida's dissemination, she argues, and his invocation of the hymen metaphor, do not go far enough; or perhaps it is that they come too close - "dangerously close to an overwhelming dispersion of semen; coming all over the text..." and to the violence of "the moment when the virgin bride is torn open...." The navel reads as "both a trace of the mother [dependence], and the token of autonomy of the subject, male and female alike; a center without meaning, it is yet a meaningful pointer that allows plurality and mobility, that allows the viewer [and/or reader] to propose new readings [and/or views]" without falling into the totally arbitrary. Of course the navel metaphor is a displacement of the phallus, which "refers to gender in terms of haves and have-nots." By contrast, while the navel "is fundamentally gender specific - the navel is the scar of dependence on the mother - 'it is also democratic in that both men and women have it. And unlike the phallus and its iconic representations disseminated throughout post-Freudian culture, the navel is starkly indexical." Simply put, the navel is "the little detail that doesn't fit the 'official' interpretation"; it is a trigger of "textual diffusion, variation, and mobility of reading [and/or viewing]" (Bal 1991b: 20-24). It is the odd detail, often overlooked or resisted, "that takes over the representation" and "sets in motion the process or performance of the painting [and/or text] that entangles viewers [and/or readers] across time; a process, moreover, that itself takes time, thus foregrounding the *double temporality* of the image [and/or text] that takes hold over it" (Bal 1999a: 31; emphasis added). (That is, the navel is preposterous.)⁷
29. Of course Bal's navel is not simply literal. And as we quote it we can do so not only literally, but effectually, intertexturedly, and alternatively. It is effectual in a Barthian sense of being not literally real. The navel is a fiction, an illusion with an effect of the real. It is provocative and performative; it plays against and with dominant metaphors of psychoanalytic and deconstructionist traditions. It draws not only upon the text(ure)s of painted nude navels as in Bredius' *Danae* (1636) (Bal 1991b:20) but upon the inter-texture/textuality of all bellybuttons everywhere! The navel diffuses into the plurality of every particular bellybutton that has ever found itself as such, whether an innie or an outie. The navel is a curiosity and a mystery. It invites inquiry at a scarred site, a seal of surplus meaning, both past and future.
30. But discoursing on the navel is also nonsensical. The navel is not about reality, nor is it about bellybuttons. The navel is a simple conceptual or metaphoric, or perhaps more precisely,

⁷For more on 'navel' and its evolution in Bal's thought, see her recent "Enfolding Feminism," which appeared after the time of writing of this article, especially for its relation to the metaphor of the 'fold' (347-348).

a graphic alteration of what Derrida did with Freud's phallus by making it a hymen. Bal copy-cats Derrida in her own way to come up with her own graphic alteration.

31. So much for the navel in general. What then, what of Bal's navel? If I have been speaking as straightforwardly as I can about Bal's conception of the navel, I now ask about *her* navel in light of what has been said earlier in terms of the four senses of quotation. To begin with I take feminism, effectively, to be that navel. Is this to state the obvious? Is the navel obvious? More specifically, her feminist critique of biblical texts and the dominant interpretive traditions surrounding them as we find in *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* is that de-centered center, the odd, obvious focal point that I resist, but find it offering a resistance to my resistance. It keeps calling for attention.⁸
32. The basic argument of *Lethal Love* is stunning. One should not expect a humdrum ideological reading of patriarchal biblical texts. Of course she does make conventional feminist arguments. She asks rhetorically for example, "Is there a relation between ideological dominance and specific forms of representation?" She associates dominance, authority, and an overdetermined sense of coherence with sexism and misogyny (Bal 1987a: 3). But her 'lethal love,' for instance in her reading of the Sampson and Delilah story, is not about man's-destruction-because-of-his-falling-for-a-woman that we find "inherently" in the biblical text (in an essentialist sense). Rather she reads this *interpretation* (and those like it) as what is lethal, and not necessarily anything in the "text itself." As she plainly states, "there is no overall ideology of the [biblical] text" (131).
33. She also focuses attention on how an interpretive shift in understanding subjectivity when we read biblical texts can offer a reading in which patriarchal-even more: murderous-consequences result because of the understandings of particular powerful and male figures within the stories. If one reads on the basis of other subjectivities (women, for example), one finds an internal critique of the patriarchal regime in the text itself. In Bal's reading, the text itself in this case makes the dominant interpretive tradition problematic. Her title then becomes a reversal: "Love is not lethal, but there is a problem for some people who think it is" (131).
34. In *Lethal Love*, we find Bal drawing upon not only her own work in narratology and semiotics (Bal 1980; 1986; 1987b; 1988b), and not only on the likes of Barthes (especially the processes of S/Z), Bettelheim, Jonathan Culler, Derrida, Eco, Genette, Greimas, Iser, Jameson, Lacan, Levi-Strauss, Levinas, Pierce, Ricoeur, Schor, and Victor Turner; but upon her "real" unidentified dialogical partner, Michel Foucault. Constructively speaking, they are thick with one another: poststructuralists who have not forgotten the structure part of the title; they are systematic in their own deviously insightful visions of identities, coherences, and formalities alternative to the dominant ones that instigate a slippage, a real possible space for resistance and reinvention.

⁸*Lethal Love* is chronologically the first in a trilogy that also includes *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Bal 1988a) and *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bal 1988b). See David Jobling's helpful review of the trilogy, "Mieke Bal on Biblical Narrative" (Jobling 1991). See also Bal's "Literature and Its Insistent Other," a review essay of *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Alter and Kermode (Bal 1989); Bal's review of Carol L Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Bal 1990); Janice Capel Anderson's review of *Lethal Love*; Timothy K Beal, "Ideology and Intertextuality: Surplus of Meaning and Controlling the Means of Production" (Capel 32-35); Alice Bach's review of *Murder and Difference* and of *Death and Dissymmetry*; Robert Detweiler, "Parerga: Homely Details, Secret Intentions, Veiled Threats"; Danna Nolan Fewel and David M Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4-5"; Frederick Greenspahn's review of *Murder and Difference*; Jobling, "Feminism and 'Mode of Production' in Ancient Israel." Jobling calls *Death and Dissymmetry* "stunning" and "the most 'achieved' of Bal's trilogy." Yet, "*Lethal Love* fell like a bombshell into our playground and at once extended the boundaries of our discipline [of biblical studies]" (Jobling 1991: 6, 9).

Like Foucault's strategic feminism, Bal's is a feminism *redoubled*, feminism to the second power. This is Bal's real navel, effectively.

35. Further, however, into that displaced little surface heart of darkness we are calling the navel we find none other than what some have called, in various ways, religion, or perhaps more precisely, the religious. This is the entangled, de-centered center of Bal's *corpus*.⁹ We find her texts utterly involved with religious concerns about tradition and reformation, opposing dualisms and totalitarian powers, drawing attention to signs, visions, word become flesh, image-word, the option for the other, renunciation (of mastery [domination]), blindness as insight, concern for the body (particular and structural), and a conception of time and space not simply as linear or even circular, but enfolding-where "bodies" are brought *into the fold*. One could say that she is fundamentally concerned with *enfolding sign-event(s)*.
36. The religious is the overlooked detail in Bal's body of work, the one that many might rather not see. Is this because of the oddity or intimacy or sometimes ridiculous quality to a navel such as this? Is it because of the irrefutable trace of the mother-source? Is it because the paralogic of the navel is an investment of a lack and sign of interdependency that alters the host-body? Is it because of the ambiguity and mystery of the spirit-paraclete hovering at the surface of the waters (at the navel) before the birth-creation? Is it because of this text(-ure)-with-spirit?
37. It is no mistake that in this context of bodily metaphor, Bal discusses 'spirit.' Neither is it a mistake that when discussing spirit she cites Michel Serres' *parasite*. If we can suspend to some extent the viscous sounding quality of 'parasite' that comes through in ordinary parlance, we may begin to see what Bal is after.¹⁰ Spirit, to begin with, for Bal has to do with the logic of *para*.¹¹ *Para* is a coming alongside, upon, and at the same time a going beyond. And *site* of para-site of course has to do with location, position, and situation-with body. With Serres, Bal describes "spirit as parasite" because spirit, like a parasite "builds a new logic, invents a host that did not exist before the parasite came to live in and on him." In this case, we may say at first that the host does not receive benefit from its "guest." The parasite simply "mooches" with no apparent contribution to the host. On the other hand, this mooching, this *investment of a lack*, alters the make-up of the host. The configuration of its identity becomes one that cannot but include this difference that has taken up residence within and upon. The logic of

⁹Until recently Bal has not *explicitly* addressed 'religion' or 'the religious'. In her plenary address to the Society for Literature and Religion in September 2000, she describes her "significant negligence of religion." Even with her work on fragments of the Bible and the Quran, she discussed them "as if they had nothing to do with religion." Furthermore, although she acknowledges the "presence and cultural significance" of the so-called 'turn to religion', she states that she does "not share in this movement." "I am not religious," she states unequivocally; "I am not even sure I understand what religion is, outside of the institutional religions of which I want no part" (2000). Much could be said of these remarks, but what is important to note for our purposes at this particular point is that we are discussing the religious not in terms of Bal's literal representation of herself but in terms of the interdiscursivity of a detail of Bal's corpus. At this point, the meaning of her work cannot be reduced to her own explicit authorial intentions. Furthermore, Bal is now recognizing the explicit significance for 'religion' or 'the religious' of her work. This is precisely what this article is attempting to begin to articulate. Finally, her question of 'what religion is, outside of the institutional religions' is at the heart of what this article is asking by 'quoting' her 'navel'.

¹⁰It may be thought, for example, that a symbiotic relationship rather than a parasitical one might be a more suitable organic metaphor in relationship to the navel, especially as one thinks of the mother-child link signed by the navel. But my guess is that this may be too 'homey' for Bal, especially as she insists upon *autonomy* with dependence. This, however, remains for me an open question and problem.

¹¹"'Paralogy,'" writes Stephen Happel, citing Lyotard, "can be understood to mean 'a move played in the pragmatics of knowledge', in which overlapping identities and differences are juxtaposed in such a fashion that all comparative elements are illuminated" (Happel 91, 115n). Also see Victor Taylor, *Para-Inquiry: Postmodern Religion and Culture*; and Raschke, "Para/theology: The Study of Religion and the Science of the Negative" (Raschke 2000).

the host is reinvented, its identity transformed by the “addition” (by lack and dependency) and alteration of the parasite. The logic of the navel is similar in its para-situation: its quality as a bodily decentered center, simultaneous sign of dependency *and* autonomy, mark of an organism that has been altered or made otherwise, and investment of a lack that is also an indication of a surplus, an excessive other.

38. And now to conclude this section of the body, hers and ours, we might ask what it would be to quote the navel in terms of a Derridean copy-cat. “I will speak therefore of a letter,” writes Derrida. Perhaps in this case, to quote ‘navel’ is to represent it as *novel*. This is an alteration of an ‘a’ to an ‘o’: the ‘o’ is an investment of a lack, a circulation of emptiness, circumvention of nothing which is inserted into n-o-vel to make something new, something fictional but true, something exchanged over counters of archivers and sellers, something given to be read by a friend, a student, a lover, or a stranger.
39. But it is crucial to remember that most literally we are speaking only of a letter, a graphic alteration and nothing more. And if this is the case then there is no reason we can not play, in all seriousness, with our terms and make a move that alters the ‘n’ of ‘navel’ for an ‘m’, and while we’re at it, why not capitalize it: Mavel. Not a word, not a concept, and not a name; on the other hand - *Mavel* - we could imagine somebody with such a “name,” could we not?

V

40. Bal’s fourfold complex of *quotation* offers a great deal to consider in relation to what is called religion and the problem of representation that lies at its very heart. In this final section I would like to make some general comments on how Bal’s contribution could fit into a larger context of contemporary theoretical and religious thought. Bal’s theory helps to articulate a configuration of thinkers and movements together that may not have been done otherwise due to her insistence upon a definitional multiplex of representation. In this case, as diverse a range as Baudrillard, David Tracy, Freud, and fundamentalists find themselves together.
41. Firstly, working backwards from what we have just seen above, religion is *about* (concerned with, entangled with, enfolded within, *para*) what Derrida has articulated in terms of *différance*. Clearly religion can be thought of as a *semiotic field*, not least in the spatial sense of “field.” This is a semiotics that is not only concerned with codes or structures, but also with the transgression of them; it is deconstructionist and poststructuralist. This is a semiotics no longer simply of Saussure’s signifier-signified, but rather of Baudrillard’s simulacra. The conventional, representational order of the “real” becomes a sub-set, dependent upon that which is ‘more real than real.’
42. In light of Bal’s quotation complex, religion may also be said to be about the kind of density and interwovenness described by Bakhtin as intertextuality. Religion here is about the ‘plurality and ambiguity’, as David Tracy has put it, of discourse. In other words, religion is about the narratological, allowing for multiple senses of something being “storied.” Religion is about narrative entangled in the complexities of other narratives. It is ambiguous and mysterious. As the story unfolds, one finds it rolling into another fold: enfolding. And this narrative is not limited to the strictly verbal-whether written or oral-but, as Bal makes clear, is itself also about the business of images and performance. Religion then can be said to be about the business of a semiotic narratology.

43. Thirdly, religion can be said to be about the effectual, the fictive, or the illusory. Not unlike what we find in Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*, religion as illusion-and not necessarily delusion-is about the kind of persuasion and trope that does not fall into the facile categories of the objective or scientifically 'real' (or 'not real'). Religion performs, enacts, theatrically moves. It is true as a fiction is true. Religion does something; it has an effect; and more than this, it is itself effectual. Simply put, religion is about rhetoric - not *merely* so, but in the best possible sense of the word. This rhetoric would include what we have already described in terms of semiotics and narratology.
44. Religion, finally, is about the literal. Fundamentalists of various sorts have proclaimed the literal as all that matters for religion. It has been said by Carl A. Raschke that actually fundamentalists were the first postmodernists. This (preposterous statement) begins to make some sense if fundamentalism is taken seriously. If fundamentalism is defined roughly as being about the business of the 'literal,' the 'obvious,' or the 'straightforward,' then perhaps we could see that its rigorous literalism opens upon surfaces that never cease to enfold. To put the matter baldly, the rhetorical, narratological, and semiotic 'realities' into which a serious fundamentalism can not help but venture lies at the heart of preposterous religion.
45. Take again the positioning of Bal's *quotation* together with the *navel*. If we were really serious about literally representing Mieke Bal, and in this case quoting her navel, then would it not mean to present, say, a photograph of Bal's actual navel? Or rather, if we were *really* serious, might it mean to bring Bal "here" (wherever we are) and to unconceal her bellybutton? Yet already we begin to see that as we take what is "literal" or most "fundamental" in this our fundamentalism, various obvious focal points emerge. Is Bal's navel a photograph or an actual bellybutton? Or is it *obviously* a metaphor? Or is it none of these options? – I mean come on! Is this not all rather straightforward? – Is it *obviously* a ploy by a tricky academic that means absolutely nothing?
46. Simply put, the more rigorous a literalist attempts to be in straightforwardness and in a commitment to the obvious, even more rigor becomes required. This can be taken several ways. First, there is nothing that guarantees that what seems to be most immediate and obvious actually is so, and this leaves the literalist always asking the question whether something really is or is only 'merely' or seemingly the case. Which *really* is Bal's navel, after all: bellybutton, photograph, metaphor, ploy? Which is "obvious"? "Obviously" all four, or "obviously" one or the other?
47. Secondly, discrete representations abound for the serious literalist. The microscopic, as well as the macro, multiply exponentially. Where is the end to the "literalist" project? How, for example, in order to locate the literal, can one keep out the rest-the effectual, intertextual, "copied," etc? *The literalist finds no rest!* There is no end to the process of "purifying" representation to get at the unadulterated re-present-ed. In the end, there is no end. *This is the thing:* the literalist concludes with nothing.
48. As we begin to see now, the literalist gets folded into the multi-layered senses of *quotation*. Bal upsets a facile notion of representation by drawing the literal into a complex. By doing so, she alters the way one may think about "the literal" - that whatever it is (if it even "is"; or if it is, then how) - it is implicated, wrapped up, entangled with the other senses of quotation in her outline. For Bal, the "obvious", or the literal, unfolds and refolds. There is nothing "straightforward" about it, unless one means that as the process of moving straightforward progresses, it finds itself involved in a curvature, a warp, an enfolding.

49. Thus, we can see an obvious starting point to theorize religion is to theorize as a fundamentalist. This is not a social scientific observational study with abstract “theoretical” conclusions. Neither is it a complete immersion, neither baptism nor conversion, in order to articulate a confessional theology from “within” (Raschke: 1999). Rather, navelgazings and confessions find themselves caught up into a significant movement of the utterly preposterous’once called (old time) religion, now the ridiculous, and, then again, religion?

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Notes

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