INTRODUCTION

Nearly a decade ago Lategan succinctly diagrammed three profound shifts in biblical interpretative strategy (1984:3), the last two of which have occurred since World War II. First, there was the historical shift, which focussed on questions of origin. This became the most widely accepted method of interpretation among scholars, though not in the church. Then came structuralism in the post-war period, which moved attention to the text itself. It was followed by a third major ‘paradigm switch’ which is still happening. I refer to the movement away from origins and text to the reader.1 ‘Reader-response’ criticism is the result of this second major ‘paradigm shift’ and the focus of my paper, whose central argument will take up Stephen Moore’s critique that biblical studies has not, in fact, moved to a ‘real-reader-response criticism’.2 My aim will be to provide a frame-

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1 Lategan’s diagram clearly shows that the three methodologies overlap and converge.
2 Jauss (1978) calls the real reader ‘the explicit reader’, distinguished from the textual-contrict, ‘implied reader’.

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work within which such a move might be possible.

I believe that the demands of a true reader-response criticism are undergirded by the notion of 'dialogue', as it is developed in Gadamer's work, so I will describe briefly, my understanding of Gadamer's 'dialogue'. In addition, however, I use the less well-known work of David Bleich which, without majoring on the term, 'dialogue', in fact is about nothing else. Most importantly, Bleich's radically different perspective is helpful in understanding why a move to a real reader-response criticism is necessary, as well as how it is possible. Then I draw their work into the ambit of two critiques of biblical studies' avoidance of a genuine move to the actual reader. I conclude by reading a text from the Book of Revelation in terms of the epistemological and hermeneutical framework I have described.

2 ‘DIALOGUE’ AS A HERMENEUTIC PRINCIPLE

The importance of Gadamer's work has been widely recognised and is rich and complex. Here I am interested in what I see as its central implication: human subjectivity is made by interpretation—the all-knowing, all-controlling subject is a myth. Although I do not have the time here to show this, it is important to recognise that this view is not an eccentric one. Rather, it is shared by all post-structuralists, in which company Derrida and Ricoeur are also prominent. For these two thinkers, as indeed for Gadamer, the reader is a maker of meaning in the act of reading. In the process, readers necessarily make a profound impact on the meanings of the texts they use—in fact, becoming part of these texts in the act of reading. This post-enlightenment view of subjectivity provides one theoretical basis for the approach to the biblical text I undertake in the final part of this paper.

The concept of dialogue is central to Gadamer's thought about interpretation. The word is so common as to carry a danger that the complexity and richness of Gadamer's conception may be replaced with some vague, generalised notion of communication. 'Dialogue', for Gadamer, has six essential components. First, it takes place always in relation to tradition, by which Gadamer refers not to some body of knowledge but to historical consciousness. In Truth and Method Gadamer uses a vivid metaphor to describe 'tradition': he says that it is as water to a

3 The narrator of David Lodge's novel, Nice Work (1988:40), expresses this essential postmodern insight with admirable clarity from a Derridean perspective: '...there is no such thing as the "self" on which capitalism and the classic novel are founded—that is to say, a finite, unique soul or essence that constitutes a person's identity; there is only a subject position in an infinite web of discourses...'

4 These three thinkers differ widely, of course, in their approach to and understanding of the relationship between reader and text in the act of reading. Hans (1980) is illuminating on how Gadamer and Derrida, starting from a similar position, move in opposite directions, on the central question of Being, especially.
fish—that is, the element in which we live, invisible yet all-pervasive. Expressed differently, it is 'not simply a process that experience teaches us to know and govern; it is language...a genuine partner in dialogue, and we belong to it, as does the I with a Thou' (1989:358). Historical existence is the 'horizon' of human existence, and no interpretation can transcend it. One of the major implications of this for biblical studies is that the history of the interpretation of any text is an essential part of present interpretative activity. Although for the purposes of my discussion I have subordinated 'tradition' to 'dialogue', in Gadamer's work 'tradition' is the base upon which everything is built. Following from it, is a necessary rejection of the Cartesian subject who, wholly constituted, interprets from a position outside experience.

Second, 'dialogue' 'rehabilitates' prejudice as a fundamental dimension of interpretation. Acknowledgement of the legitimacy of 'prejudice' guards against the constant temptation to objectify tradition (1989:358/9). Third, 'dialogue' is to the interpreter as a game is to sportswomen: it is play: 'The mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward play as if toward an object'. Applied to texts, this means that 'the work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it' (1989:102). Thus, understanding has the character of 'event'. Fourth, 'dialogue' necessitates goodwill: genuine dialogue precludes dogmatism and subjectivism, in two ways, essentially: first, by virtue of the stance of 'learned ignorance' (docta ignorantia) which the interpreter adopts and by which (s)he disclaims knowledge of the truth, and second, by attention to the sache or subject-matter of the text. 'Dialogue', in other words, exists only where there is a real respect for the otherness of the other. Such respect, born of awareness, is intrinsic to an historical understanding of human existence (1989:306). Goodwill, it is also important to note, does not deprive interpretation of criteria for judging between the good and the bad, as some critics have charged. Fifth, 'dialogue' creates a fusion of horizons: 'understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves...In a tradition this process of fusion is always going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other' (306).

The sixth and final aspect to 'dialogue' is Gadamer's understanding of application as an integral part of the act of reading, rather than the third, separate stage assigned to it by an older hermeneutic. The significance of this insight for my topic is well expressed by Weinsheimer: 'Gadamer's affirmation of human finitude implies that understanding is always tied to a concrete historical situation, a

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5 As Kathleen Wright points out (1990:237-238) the text is a subject in the dialogue between text and reader, not merely subject-matter about which, or on behalf of which, the reader speaks.
particular case: it is always applied understanding, even when application is not
the interpreter's conscious purpose' (1985:187). Because the reader, in other
words, is embedded in history, as is the text, interpretation involves the appli­
cation of each to the other: 'Understanding makes the traditions of which it is made;
and since it is productive, understanding...adds itself to the whole that is to be
understood. For this reason self-understanding is always to be achieved' (1985:195). The real reader, in short, cannot be excluded or even side-lined if one
accepts Gadamer's notion of interpretation.

It is important to note that Gadamer is not naively positivistic in presenting
his hermeneutical theory. Rather, he is fully aware of difficulties which hinder
understanding. For example, he acknowledges 'the barrier of alienness, that our
understanding has to overcome' (342), and directs his hermeneutics at providing
an understanding of interpretation which will achieve precisely this victory over
this 'barrier of alienness': 'To be in a conversation...means to be beyond oneself,
to think with the other and to come back to oneself as if to another' (in
Michelfelder & Palmer 1989:110). It is clear—and Gadamer insists on this in his
paper, 'Hermeneutics and logocentrism' (Michelfelder & Palmer 1989:114-125)
—that his 'dialogue' is fully cognisant of differance. Conversation does not ex­
clude difference, either in the process or in the result. 'Difference exists within

It follows from Gadamer's notion of 'dialogue' that interpretation is insepa­
is helpful in showing us how this insight applies to reader-response criticism.
Bleich's major thrust has been to critique the individualistic, technological un­
derstanding of knowledge which he sees as a product of the 'objective paradigm'
we inherit from the Enlightenment. Some signs of these features, he argues, are
the competitiveness of our educational system, its exclusion of the emotions from
interpretation, its interest in ranking readings in terms of institutional definitions
of 'quality',7 its authoritarianism, and its tendency to paradox and abstraction.8

6 The importance of this is fundamental to my belief that Gadamer's dialogue is a post­
structural concept in which the subject is never a unified self. Another post-structural
thinker, Jacques Lacan, argues that the subject's self-alienation is a fundamental reality of
the human psyche (Benvenuto and Kennedy 1986:47-62).

7 Bleich (1975:22-33) shows a variety of readings of a poem. Significant is how Bleich
discusses each reading critically, while at the same time seeing each reading as a genuine
contributor to the meaning of the poem—that is, he avoids ranking the readings but does
not avoid critical distinctions among them.

8 Nowhere has this last feature been seen more clearly than in reader-response criticism as
currently practised: '[what dominates the concept of "reading" is] abstract concepts of
"the" reader and "the" text and models that would apply to all instances of reading. These
models presuppose the idea of a single person facing a single text as a reasonable or even
natural way of coping with the subjectivity of reading. But as this position is articulated,
the "reader" is more of a purely hypothetical being. In very few instances does the critic
actually study his or her own readings, much less the readings of others, while the great
Bleich describes the current educational system as 'technological' to distinguish the current pursuit of knowledge from the 'relational' approach he believes to derive from the fact that language is the instrument by which human beings live together in society.\(^9\) Being 'relational', knowledge is necessarily 'subjective', rather than technological and 'objective': 'Every linguistic act has cognitive, expressive, interpersonal, and ethical dimensions which render such acts subjective' (1976:326).\(^{10}\) Thus Bleich's work has come to bear the label, 'subjective criticism'.\(^{11}\)

Bleich's work complements Gadamer's: 'There is no way to separate the individual's capability for and use of language from the continuing situation of dialogue—the necessity to speak with someone else..."dialogue is the basic form of thought"...Intersubjectivity is the framework for the intermingling of the cognitive and the affective, and it makes it possible to conceptualize language as dialogic or interactional'(1988:73). If language and knowledge are interpersonal, then interpretation necessarily involves self-disclosure.

Applying this view of language to his own life as a University teacher of English, Bleich argues that effective teaching or learning cannot happen unless the teacher is ready to disclose herself in the same way as the student is required to do: 'Such pedagogical disclosure is not simply a signature but an attempt to enact regular cross-talk in the classroom by designating a space in which there are no privileged members. By virtue of individuality itself, each person brings into the classroom certain privileges, while the teacher brings the lion's share. While my privileges don't disappear, I do contribute my zones of unprivileged existence, and my psychosocial clothing starts to resemble that of the students' (1988:xiii). Reader self-disclosure is the move Bleich forces on interpretation-as-

\(^{9}\) The usual way of understanding language in the West is in terms of individual, biological development. However, Bleich argues cogently that language as a biologically developed tool is 'regulated by feelings of confidence, mastery, achievement, ambition, love, generosity, and so on. Such feelings mobilize memory and action and in this way prompt and inhibit the use of language. The feelings themselves are "about" the intrapersonal tasks, and they mark these tasks with social value' (1988:69). Similarly, Bleich argues that although the human mind has usually been understood biologically in its nature and origin, such an approach fails to take cognisance of the intersubjective factors which play an essential part in the constitution and development of mind.

\(^{10}\) Bleich's intention to foreground the communal nature of language acquisition and usage in no way denies the importance of the individual. Rather, one of Bleich's concerns is to recapture the dialectic between individual and social which, he argues, is intrinsic to language.

\(^{11}\) Clearly 'subjective' for Bleich describes the interpersonal dimension at the heart of all language use, including the emotional dimension of interpretation which is currently excluded from 'quality' interpretations, and is to be distinguished from 'subjectivism' which might describe a belief that all meanings are equally valid.
'dialogue'.

My mode of reading brings to the fore this interpersonal aspect to interpretation, which Bleich summarises in this way: 'To speak or use language in a certain way means not that there is a meaning "behind" the words, but that the presentation of the words themselves is the nucleus of social behavior. It is not the "intention" motivating the words but what the words are that matters. Contributing one's words to a conversation is an interpersonal act that counts. No matter how rapidly one's conversation is forgotten, it still marks a key moment of a social achievement, the establishment of an intersubjectivity, the reidentification of a human relationship' (1988:66). My project, then, is not to present a 'better' reading, but rather to share a reading which may spark other readings.\(^{12}\)

3 READER RESPONSE CRITICISM AND BIBLICAL STUDIES: A CRITIQUE

I have suggested that a range of contemporary thought reveals a subject-information, rather than a subject-constituted, and that it is more helpful to interpretation to think of language in relational, rather than technological terms. If this is so, then interpretation can be thought of no longer as a matter of finding what is 'there' in the text. However one conceives of what happens when an active reader engages with a text, meaning is a product of that engagement, transforming both partners in this dialogue.\(^{13}\) It is this recognition that has given birth to 'reader-response criticism', a glance at which reveals a plethora of 'readers': we have Fish's informed reader, Booth's mock reader, Culler's competent reader, Iser's implied reader, Eco's model reader, Riffaterre's average and super readers, Bloom's strong, or mistaking/mistaken reader, Derrida's deconstructing reader, Barthes's perverse reader, Hartman's feasting reader, Bleich's subjective reader, Holland's transactive reader, Hirsch's validating reader, Rogers's amazing/amazing reader, Fetterley's resisting reader etc.\(^{14}\) However, these readers, while very different, all have one important feature in common: none actually exists. All are textual constructs, 'fictive' readers.\(^{15}\) During the past few years, a few

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\(^{12}\) This does not mean that careful, competent reading is no longer necessary, and that 'anything goes'—the critique often made by 'scientific' biblical critics of anything different from their usual concerns. It does mean that the central hermeneutical principle is the communal engagement with texts we agree are significant.

\(^{13}\) Two useful introductions to a range of approaches in reader-response criticism are The Reader in the text edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (1980) and Reader-response criticism edited by Jane Tompkins (1980). Those interested in the 'left' of the spectrum may also like to read the work of Norman Holland (1975, 1976).

\(^{14}\) See Rogers 1982 for explanations of some of the names so far, Fetterley 1978 for an extended treatment of her resisting reader. Moore 1989, chapter 6 for more names and kinds of readers.

\(^{15}\) This does not mean, of course, that they are not 'readers'. See Gerhart (1992:168), whose notion of 'generic reader' subtly incorporates these textual-construct readers and real
scholars in literature and biblical studies have begun to express dissatisfaction with this fictive reader, on the ground that it brings us no closer to the actual experience of 'real', flesh-and-blood readers. What such critics are saying is that reading has remained rooted in the text, and has failed to move to Lategan's reader-pole (1984:3), despite pretending or imagining that it has moved there. In brief, there has been no self-disclosure.16

In Literary criticism and the Gospels (1989), Stephen Moore makes just this criticism, among others. His all-embracing criticism of this 'reader' is that it is an unfeeling reader, lacking the emotional responses real readers bring to stories (96). Moore comments on an attempt by James Resseguie to explore a 'real', contemporary reading of Mark, but judges it a failure, privileging the text and offering no new perspective. The reason he identifies is that biblical studies, as a discipline, has no place for real readers: 'The factors inducing us to remain author-oriented critics in readers' clothing are powerful ones....Symptomatically, projects in secular literary criticism [that] vigorously affirm the rights of the reader have run counter to the organizing principles of the discipline and been duly relegated to the margins' (105).17

Moore suggests that this may reflect a fear of the 'individualistic' (subjective) nature of the actual reader.18 This leads him to conclude: 'For biblical studies the moral is plain: criticism is an institution to which real readers need not apply' (106). Thus, Moore characterises real readers of the Bible as repressed readers.

While Moore puts his finger on the problem, he offers no solution. There is a reason for this, I believe: I do not think Moore had any clearer an idea of what to do with the real reader than any of the scholars he critiqued. This is where Bleich's contribution is most significant. However, Moore's analysis, which focussed on the institutional barriers to a shift to reader-response criticism in biblical studies, is developed by Temma Berg (1989) who, working from a deconstructionist perspective, argues that the prison of Christian dogmatism is primarily responsible for that failure. While Berg reveals herself to be as deeply embed-

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16 Scholars are beginning to experiment with self-disclosure—see Staley (1992), Moore (1991). In the field of Christian ethics, Mary D Pellhauer (1993) uses her own experience of sexual orgasm to discuss a Christian ethics of sexuality.

17 Bleich’s most recent book, The double perspective: Language, literacy, and social relations, is an extended and searching critique of the 'objectivist' ideology of knowledge operative in the Academy and its classrooms. I have already offered its essential argument, but Bleich attributes the fundamental characteristics of current practice to the masculine obsession with control. He sees the significance of feminism as lying in the possibility its approach to language offers of recovering interpersonality and mutuality as the functioning hermeneutic principle.

18 This is somewhat ironic! Bleich’s argument is precisely the opposite: the ideological attachment to individualism in the Academy is responsible for the repression of the real reader.
A REAL READER READING REVELATION

4 A REAL-READER READING OF REVELATION 2:1-7

I spoke earlier of ‘self-disclosure’ as the central act the reader must commit to be a reader-response critic in the sense of that term as I have defined it. Apart from the discovery that I am more than one reader in reading Revelation, the crucial act of self-disclosure I must make is that there is tension and opposition among the readers I am, which I understand but find difficult to cope with sometimes. Here, then, are the readers I am, presented randomly, with no attempt to prioritise them, nor with any claim that these describe the complete range of ‘readers’ I am.

First, I am a South African political/reader, participating in a struggle for justice, which leads me to foreground the political polemic of Revelation in a variety of ways, as well as to read the book with an emphasis on what it tells us about living as Christians now, rather than on the eschatological End. In this reader-persona I am also consciously and deliberately intent on presenting an alternative to the readings of the North American Right, which have also been influential in the church in SA.

Second, I am a priest/reader and a pray-er/reader, deeply moved by the liturgical worship which plays such a large part in the narrative, and by its passionate faith. In this respect, my reading is accepting, uncritical.

Third, I am a suspicious/reader, especially suspicious of claims to unmediated divine knowledge, which means that I want to deconstruct the narrator’s claim to possess that knowledge. I have this suspicion because of Christianity’s record of failure in SA to know and speak the mind of God, as well as secular authority’s claims to divine knowledge, enforced by censorship, detention, house arrests, and murders. This affects my reading of the ‘letters’, for example, in which my suspicion leads me to find aporias in the text which justify my suspicions of the narr-

19 Moore comments patronisingly on Berg’s article: ‘The many faux pas that ensue [from her “nonspecialist” reading of Mark] bespeak the gulf separating even radical biblical critics such as Phillips [1985] from nonspecialist Bible readers such as Berg’ (1989:104).

20 Lacan’s revisionary analysis of Freud provides a psychological understanding of fractured human subjectivity. Lacan argued that the aim of psychoanalysis was not to help the analysand to mastery of her environment because such mastery was illusory in its search for unity and stability Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986). Staley (1992) dramatises three readers-he-is and has them debate interpretations of a text in John.
rator's integrity and his claims. I find an intense conflict between this 'reader', who effectively denies the motivating drive behind the text (the narrative as divine = revelation-beyond-criticism) and my previous reader who wants to respond to the text by joining the worship.\(^{21}\) My suspicion takes other aspects, too—for example, the privileged position accorded the Christian community vis à vis the End-time catastrophes of the seal, trumpets and bowls. This privilege seems to me to deconstruct the narrative's demand for political justice.

Fourth, I am a \textit{pastor/reader}, intent on examining how a church leader deals with his people. In this 'reader-persona', I find much evidence for a deep pastoral concern in the narrative, which is more important to me than the End. But I also find this pastoral concern to be ambiguous in the all-important letters, as well as in the dismissal by Judgement of all outside the Christian community.

Fifth, I am an \textit{institutional-church/reader}, conscious of the fact that institutional religion and apocalyptic religion live in different thought-worlds. As Bryan Wilson has expressed it: 'The sectarian sense of time differs radically from that of traditional church religion. The Church is engaged in offering an opportune truth, not an importunate truth....It continues to offer its ministrations and to perform its rituals recurrently and repetitively for successive generations, and it continues to state, albeit sotto voce, its ideological commitments, but it abandons any hope it had of sudden or early prospect of change' (Wilson 1981:223-224). In this 'reader-persona', I wonder what Revelation can say to the now-institutional church in South Africa.

Sixth, I am a \textit{middle-class-white/reader}, living in a context in which 60\% of the population is poverty-stricken. In this aspect, I find myself confronted by an absolute assault on wealth, which confronts me also as a preacher and pastor of a largely middle-class white congregation. Yet I am also intrigued by the fact that paradise is narrativised in Revelation in images of opulent wealth, so I find myself confronted by the evil of wealth while at the same time seduced by its association with the central hope offered in the narrative.

Seventh, I am a \textit{male reader}, embedded in a still-patriarchal Bible and Church, though I am encouraged by and seek to influence my Church's struggle to grow past its patriarchy. In this aspect of my reader-presence I am confronted by the powerful inclination of the gender imagery of this book towards patriarchy. Eighth, I am a \textit{trained-literary-critic/reader}, attracted by the artistry of the narrative, and concerned to relate the formal aspects of the narrative to its im-

\(^{21}\) Gerhart (1992:176-177) reflects the reality of struggle between the real reader and the text in terms of a struggle between Booth's mock reader, the reader the text wants to make the real reader, and the real reader, who resists the text's pressures. She sees 'generic competence' as the tool the real reader has to develop in order to be able to co-operate with and resist the text: 'the reader has to become experienced in the business of accepting and rejecting her own mock readers'.
pact/meanings. Ninth, I am a (post)modern/reader, for whom the images and
techniques of apocalyptic are strange in themselves, and made more so by the
distance of history, culture and language. Finally, I am a church/Academy reader.
By this I mean that I have three feet (as it were) in the church and one foot in the
Academy. My belonging to the church encourages me to read through the eyes of
faith, while the Academy teaches me to practise reading the Bible apart from
faith. I find this dual membership a source of some tension, quite easily adopting
the cynicism about faith which underlies much academic work (rather than disin­
erestedness), while remaining committed to the relationship of faith I entered
into some twenty years ago.

Thus, my self-disclosure reveals a complex, often contradictory, web of social
and structural relations in which I find myself (like everyone) embedded. A
glance back at my listing will indicate that contentment with, and struggle
against, are distributed through the network of embeddedness which I disclose in
my reading of the text of Revelation. These contradictions especially are often
painful to acknowledge to myself, let alone share with anyone else, but they will
have definite effects on the way I enter the text and my engagement with it. In
short, the ‘world’ I-as-reader bring to Revelation is a world of struggle: faith
struggles with doubt and scepticism; church with Academy; past experience
struggles with the ‘world’ of the text and with the demands of building a new
society; male interests struggle with female ones; contemporaneity with antiquity,
and so on.

I now move to a reading of Revelation, confining myself for reasons of time
to one short text, 2:1-7. My interest lies with the encounter between the
narrator, the Christian community addressed in these verses, and myself as the actual
reader. Without having the time to argue the point, I would understand the
narrator in this text to refer to the risen Christ and to his human messenger, not as two
separate individuals, but as one voice emerging from two figures. Further, I have
an eye on the question of how my actual-reader presence ‘in’ the text affects
the narrative, so that a Christian praxis is born in this engagement, rather than
found through the reception of something discovered in the text and picked out
for application in my context.

First, however, a brief background discussion is in order to lay the ground­
work for my reading of 2:1-7. There is an important narrative movement or ten-

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22 Unfortunately, the brevity of the text seriously limits my ability to show how the read­
ers I have shown myself to be interact with the text and with one another.
23 See Boring (1992) for a detailed analysis of the complexity of narrative voices in
Revelation. I use ‘narrator’ here to refer to θεποννας (1:1). Boring argues that this nar­
native voice encapsulates the entire narrative. I will refer to any other narrative voices as
my topic necessitates.
24 I haven’t theorised about this, owing to the constraints of time; but my perspective at
this point is deeply influenced by Derrida’s work in problematising ‘borders’. 
sion in the encounter between narrator(s) and reader(s) in Revelation: a movement from a single, compliant readership (1:9) to the diverse, seemingly troublesome, and complex readership of chapters 2-3, and back to a single-community readership from chapter 4 onwards. I suggest, without having the time here to explore the point, that this movement may be a strategy of control on the narrator's part, an attempt to bring under greater control the diverse and troublesome relationship with the Christian communities of 2-3.\textsuperscript{25} The narrator(s)'s narrative method is to sweep aside the diversity, complexity, and differentiation he encounters initially by creating a single, textual community which is utterly compliant to his will. Already, readers/hearers of this will have picked up the element of alienation I have already pointed to, from established modes of approach to this text, and from an accepted 'believer's' interpretative standpoint. However, such 'manipulations' are deeply embedded in all attempts to hear God's speech to us—as is evident, for example, from the biblical support given to racism in S.A. which made the apartheid ideology of white Christians inevitable.

The place to begin this exploration of reader-relationships in/outside the text is with 1:9, in which the narrator, 'John', addresses his reader(s) as ὁ ἀδελφός ὑμῶν καὶ συγκοινωνός ἐν τῇ θλίψει... In this way he establishes a wholly compliant reader who shares completely his faith and situation. The narrator and the Christian community are one family, wholly-united in relationship, commitment, and situation. This actual reader, by virtue of being a Christian, is able to share this point of entry into the narrative with the readers in the text.\textsuperscript{26}

From this beginning to the relationship among the readers in/outside the text, the narrative moves to the seven churches of chapters 2-3. All sorts of questions arise as to whether they are the actual, historical readers or intra-textual constructs, but I bypass these to locate my interest in the diversity of these readers. In social location they range from poverty (Smyrna, possibly Philadelphia) to wealth (Laodicea), with some whose social location is indeterminate (Ephesus, Philadelphia, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis). In attitude to their situation they range from a

\textsuperscript{25} Notice that I carefully phrase this assertion to acknowledge that I am talking about a motive which I can only assert the narrator may have. Had I the time, I would present evidence to mustify this assertion, but it is important to recognise the difference between attributing motives (to a character in a narrative) and to reading the intentions of the narrative (or character). Here I am using Brett’s distinction between the ‘communicative intention’ of a text (i.e., what is said) and its ‘motive’ (i.e., why it is being said). See Brett (1991), whose argument is that interpreters constantly confuse ‘communicative intentions’ with ‘motives’.

\textsuperscript{26} A non-Christian reader like Temma Berg could not share this moment of entry. Berg poses the question: ‘Can a Jew who lacks Christian faith become the (implied, model, ideal) reader in a New Testament text and master what the book tells her? Likewise, can a Christian who has faith not be the ideal reader and fail to master what the Bible tells her?’ (190) Nothing highlights the truth of Bleich’s argument so deeply as the relational issues Berg raises from her position of perceived exclusion from a Christian text.
living faith that embraces suffering (Smyrna, some in Pergamum, where there has been an experience of martyrdom, and Philadelphia) to the hypocrisy and complacency, subtly differentiated, of Sardis and Laodicea. Further, there are different attitudes within particular communities, with some who are ready to accommodate themselves to the surrounding culture, including its religious practices and beliefs, while others resist in exemplary fashion (Pergamum, Thyatira. Ephesus possibly falls into this group, too, though for very different reasons). In addition, as we shall see, they vary in attitude and relationship to the narrator.

Even this picture of the diversity of readers in 2-3 is a simplification, for the narrative subtly differentiates even where there are similarities. Thus, for example, although Smyrna and Pergamum both share the narrator's commitment to suffering, only Pergamum, it seems, has experienced actual martyrdom among its ranks. To take another example of a similar subtly (only one among many): Sardis and Laodicea share a clear hypocrisy and complacency, as I have indicated; yet where Sardis seems to have worked hard to appear alive: óνομα ἔχεις ὁπί ζής (3:1), Laodicea has been contentedly οὐτε ψυχρός ἐλ οὐτε ζεστός (3:15).

On the generalised level of a shared faith, these readers share the compliance of the 'ideal' reader of 1:9, but as this actual reader ponders the narrative, he sees that there are numerous gaps between the narrator and these readers, some of them downright troublesome, and some of those apparently almost uncontrollable. The weave of the text, then, presented at 1:9 as perfectly unified, with narrator and audience of one mind, heart and purpose, begins to stretch and tear very early in the narrative.

I now move to examine only one of these ruptures in detail, Ephesus (2:1-7). The first striking thing about Ephesus is the wealth of qualities she has. In verses 2-3, καὶ recurs nine times, separating positive qualities on each occasion. This is very powerful, but added to the power of this repetition is the fact that this Church has the critical qualities, ἔργα, κόσμος, and ὑπομονή, as well as discernment (2:2). ἔργα seems to be a general term for the church's life and quality, defined less by any intrinsic meaning than by immediate context (see also 2:19; 3:1, 15). One of its defining terms is ὑπομονή, added to which is Ephesus' discernment, her watchfulness against threats of evil and especially her ability to discern false leadership (2:2, 6). Clearly Ephesus possesses qualities of ultimate

27 Smyrna and Pergamum have καὶ 3x each in the parallel parts of the letters; Thyatira has it 5x, Sardis has no positive qualities, Philadelphia has καὶ twice, and Laodicea, of course, also has no positive qualities.

28 Thyatira (2:19) also has this quality, as does Philadelphia (3:10). In the latter case, this quality is of ultimate importance, guaranteeing the Philadelphia church protection from ἡκ τῆς ὄρας τοῦ πειρασμοῦ τῆς μελλούσης ἐργοθα πο ὑπὸ τῆς οἰκουμένης (3:10).

29 The very opposite absence of this adherence to the truth characterises the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira, where these churches' inability to discern correctly will be, the prophet warns, the cause of judgement falling upon them (2:16, 22-23).
importance in terms of the values of the narrative. How surprising it is, then, to find that such a Church faces an imminent threat of destruction: εἰ δὲ μὴ ἐρχομαι σου καὶ κινήσω τὴν λυχνίαν σου ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτῆς, ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσῃς (2:5). The reason for this threat is τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην ἀφήκες (2:4). Apparently this fault overrules all the virtues for which the Ephesian Church has been praised. The strength of the narrator’s feelings at this point is underlined by the repetition of the verb μετανοεῖω in v5.

But there is a double surprise in this letter. The first we have seen, that ultimate sanctions should threaten a Church which seems to have so many vital qualities. The second surprise is the vagueness of the fault which overrules all these positive qualities. What is this τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην (2:4) which the community has forsaken? Is it love for God, for one another, for the prophet? In the context of the Christian gospel a failure in love is obviously serious, but the threat seems out of all proportion here.

Furthermore, would the Ephesians have known what the narrator was talking about? The fact that the narrator knows that μυσεῖς τὸ ἔργα τῶν Νικολαίτων (2:6) suggests that the reader is to imagine a prior relationship between John and the Church, which makes the supposition that they would know what he is talking about plausible. On the other hand, the fact that the accusation is so vague, while the comment on their hatred of the Nicolaitans is so specific, might suggest that we are not necessarily to imagine that the Ephesians possess knowledge which would enable them to know exactly what they are being accused of. What is certain is that, in the text as it stands, we have a devastating criticism made of this Church couched in, it seems reasonable to argue in view of the narrator’s proven ability to be specific when he wants to be, deliberately vague terms.

This ‘double surprise’ creates a ‘gap’ which readers may fill in a variety of ways. Narratively, however, the vagueness of the threat, and its ultimate character are perhaps strategems of control. Remembering that Revelation was read aloud, and that the first-time hearer/reader is extremely vulnerable to the emotional controls of the narrative, it is probable that the narrator’s intended effect would strike home with great force. The Ephesians would be flattered by the praises lavished upon them, and nervous of the hugely serious, but undefined, crime of which they are accused. Add to this the context of the identification of the narrator’s voice with the Divine voice (in the τάδε λέγει formula) and what has been created is a community securely under the narrator/seer’s control.

30 When compared with the other cities in chapters 2-3.
31 An historical critic such as Adela Yarbro Collins (1984), for example, has filled it by reconstructing a situation of struggle behind the text, in which John is pictured as being engaged in a battle for control of the communities in which the Nicolaitans, Balaamites and followers of Jezebel appear. The leaders of these groups in Collins’ reconstruction are rival prophets.
Furthermore, a question mark has been raised by this way of dealing with the Ephesian community about the identification of the narrator’s voice with God’s: is this the way God deals with his people? So the illusion the narrator has fostered that his calling has delivered him from being human has already begun to dissolve. The ‘gap’ exists to cast an ironic eye on the narrator’s performance, and to enable the knowledgeable reader this time to share in the irony. In other words, the narrative functions as a critique of the very claims it makes. The ‘gap’, then, does two things: it highlights the helplessness of the first-time hearers who are unable to perceive the irony (or are at least unlikely to), at the same time as it highlights the need for the community to have the opportunity for reflection, so that they can share in the irony and free themselves from being so helpless.

As the first letter in the sequence, the Letter to Ephesus creates a situation of crisis in which beliefs and actions have ultimate consequences. Both the rewards offered (2:7, the promise of a return to Eden) and the sanctions applied (2:5, destruction of the church) are final. In addition, knowledge of human success or failure in the call to obedience is beyond rational comprehension, known only to God and the narrator. The crisis about which so much has been written is rhetorical from a literary point of view, the device, in other words, by means of which the narrator/seer’s ‘world’ imposes itself on the ‘world’ of his receptors. Put differently, the narrator/seer creates crisis by means of the narrative. We must also remember that the book’s first-time listeners from other Churches heard this message first, and so would have fallen under the narrator/seer’s influence before their own situations were presented to them.

What I have acknowledged is myself as-reader entering the drama of the narrator’s relationship with the Christian communities in the text, showing how the narrator’s initial presentation of himself in secure authority over, and unity with, these communities has crumbled under the pressure of the concrete relationships as they have revealed themselves in the narrative. In addition to the ‘suspicious’ and ‘political’ readers I have described, my reading also reflects a gulf between my own ‘institutional faith’ and features of the apocalyptic genre to which Revelation is usually assigned.

Furthermore, because of my self-understanding as a reader, I fear the powerlessness which the narrator attempts to structure into his relationship with the Christian communities. Narrative, there is a rupture between the narrator’s stated pastoral intention and the way he carries it out, which echoes ruptures of a similar sort in my experience between the Gospel and praxis. In such a context, reading Revelation does not involve accepting the authority of the prophet in an unquestioning way, but rather engaging with his ‘performance’ critically, in

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which way a disempowered community may discover that faith grows with its questions. Ephesus becomes an image of every disempowered community, bowing its head under an all controlling authority. Faith for such communities surely involves engagement with the disempowerment inherent in their situation, rather than a meek and ready acceptance of the structural position they are told is God's will for them. God's 'word' is partly the discovery that a 'suspicious' stance towards authority has been proved to have been entirely justified.

Having said all this, the 'pray-er reader' in me asks: 'How can you separate what Revelation and previous readings have placed together, namely the voice of God and the voice of the human narrator?' I have no resolution to this conflict; I merely have to acknowledge its presence and effects on my reading. However, it is possible, though I have no opportunity here to explore this, that the different readers I am play different 'language-games', to use Wittgenstein's formulation.

Had I space, I would demonstrate that four other letters, namely, to Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia, reveal surprising ruptures between the narrator and the communities of a similar order to the rupture I have examined in the letter to Ephesus. Broadly speaking, though, these ruptures, which show themselves in the Greek text more clearly than in English translations, are of two kinds: in the first place, a profound lack of clarity about precisely who is being addressed. On the one hand, each church is addressed as a singular unit; on the other, some churches appear also to contain different groups. In those letters in which praise and blame are apportioned, it is often difficult to understand who is being praised and who blamed and for what, in each case. For example, in Thyatira (2:18-29) the same group (apparently), addressed by the singular, σου, which has been praised for its ἔργα is also damned ὁτι ἀφεῖς τὴν γυναῖκα Ἰεζάβελ (2:20), presumably being numbered among her tέκνα who will be killed. Thus, the same people who are praised for their faithfulness to the highest values of the narrative are accused also of adhering to idolatry, the narrative's most profane value. It is important to emphasise at this point that I am not arguing for some failure of communication in the text: rather, I am arguing that the frequent incomprehensibility and apparent-irrationality of the narrator's attitudes are integral to the narrative and part of its meaning. In the second place, it is

33 Gerhart argues that the very act of reading a text signals some interest or acceptance, and is a powerful compulsion to take on board the viewpoint of the text (1992:177). Munro (1988:30) points to the potential for new readings, even in canonical texts: 'Canon is a shared body of texts that preserves for a community its past which it can still interact. Canon is a text we are to quarrel with, laugh with and at, as well as respond to with yea and amen'.

34 'Contradiction, the interpreter's purposeful speaking against that which has gone before, is the driving force of thought' (Rosmarin 1985:20, quoting Hans Vaihinger).

35 Most of the English translations find ways to evade the ambiguities of the Greek.
clear—in the letter to Sardis, for example—that the narrator has a very different perception of the church’s spirituality from that held by the church itself. This would be true also of a fifth letter—to Laodicea. The significance of this lies in the suspicion the narrator’s pastoring ‘style’ occasions that he is seeking to leave the relevant communities with little choice but to accept his perceptions.

5 CONCLUSIONS

On one level, what I have done in this paper is nothing new—it is a commonplace today that readers make or contribute to the making of the meaning of their texts. However, I have suggested that this is denied in the practice of interpretation, and have sought to provide an adequate theoretical foundation upon which to insist that ‘reader-response’ must mean no less than real-reader response. Thus I have sought to disclose my presence in the reading and note the impact of the reader-I-am on the meaning I find in the text, giving flesh to Bleich’s belief in the mutuality of language use. I hope I have illustrated, in the process, how reader-disclosure makes application integral to exegesis, rather than a subsequent step. One of my further hopes is that the step of reader-disclosure is seen to be no less a serious and careful an engagement with the text as in conventional criticism. Gadamer and Bleich, in their different ways of insisting that all interpretation is dialogical, both insist on attention to all the voices present in every interpersonal encounter. To date, in biblical studies, the voice of the text is immensely privileged and that of the real reader dispossessed.

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