AICHELE AND I

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> Once I produce, once I write, it is the Text itself which (fortunately) dispossesses me of my narrative continuity. The Text can recount nothing … (Barthes 1977: 4).

Many years ago, Jorge Luis Borges wrote a very short essay titled 'Borges and I', in which someone who refers to himself as 'I' puzzles over the relationship between himself and the one called 'Borges', who writes and is a scholar, and who is 'the one things happen to' (1964, 246). 'I' concludes this essay by writing, 'I do not know which one of us has written this page' (1964, 247). When David Odell-Scott first approached me about an SBL session on George Aichele, I confess to feeling something of the weirdness that runs through Borges's essay, and now, having read these intriguing statements from my friends, I feel it even more strongly. I am deeply grateful to each of the contributors to this collection for their careful and critical readings of my writings, but at the same time I find myself astonished at this mysterious being called 'George Aichele'. As the 'I' of 'Borges and I' says, 'my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him' (1964, 247). And hence 'he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him' (1964, 246). I write this knowing that even this text stands in my place, speaking not simply for me but instead of me, interrupting my story, separating me from that story.

　　I'm intrigued by Gary Phillips's descriptions of me – that is, of 'Aichele' – as 'postmodern psychopomp' and 'Charon of critical theory'. While the idea of being a 'ferryman' to 'foreboding shores' certainly has its appeal, I hope that any insinuation of the death (of postmodernism or critical theory) is as the famous saying goes, premature. It is true, though, that as these once-foreboding terms increasingly spread throughout the discursive formations of our world, and are especially used by fundamentalists and others who are anything but postmodernists or critical theorists, their semantic value has been diluted, and I at least find myself using the words less and less. As for 'The Matrix', while 'I' prefer the image of layers of reality/virtuality without end in David Cronenberg's film 'eXistenZ', 'Aichele' does like Morpheus better than Neo. And we both agree that Chauncey Gardner is one of the great heroes of Western civilization.

　　I haven't read much Levinas, but as one who cut his wisdom teeth on Sartrean existentialism, I am sensitive to the idea of an 'ethics of reading', especially in the de Manian/Barthesian sense of fully laying out and critiquing my own assumptions and trying to be scrupulously 'responsible' to the text itself, no matter how much I might like to think that it 'really means' something else. Thus I deeply mistrust all claims (first and foremost my own) to 'exegesis' of a text, and I have become increasingly convinced that every purported *exe*gesis is never anything more than carefully 'managed' (in the worst sense) *eise*gesis. I learned much of that while working with Gary on *Semeia* 69/70 (Scholars Press) and with our other friends in the Bible and Culture Collective, Fred Burnett, Elizabeth Castelli, Bob Fowler, David Jobling, Stephen Moore, Tina Pippin, Regina Schwartz, and Wilhelm Wuellner, on *The Postmodern Bible* (Yale University Press).

I thank Richard Walsh for his amusing play on John Lennon's song, and I very much appreciate Richard's reading of Borges' story, 'The Gospel According to Mark', as a kind of reading of Aichele. However, I find that story very disturbing, and that makes me wonder if I should find my own work more disturbing. Richard and I co-edited two books, *Screening Scripture* (Trinity Press) and *Those Outside* (Continuum), in each of which Borges's texts figure in one way or another, and we have been conversing with one another about the writings of Borges for many years. It was Richard who first alerted me some time ago to 'The Gospel According to Mark'. Borges's story is doubly apt, for it not only features the gospel of Mark as a principal character of sorts, but it also narrates the dangerous consequences of translation, and translation theory and its semiotic and theological consequences is another interest of mine. In Borges's story, the illiterate recipients of an oral translation of a written translation are perhaps much closer than anyone reading this response to countless Christians through the centuries who could only listen to the reading of the scriptures. Is this perhaps why we are horrified by what the Gutre family does to the reader/translator?

Were it not for the temporal difficulties involved, I could accept Borges – or better, Franz Kafka, or Lewis Carroll – as the author of the gospel of Mark (that is, the one in the Bible). I have long suspected that whoever wrote Mark had a somewhat perverse sense of humor. As Richard says, Borges's 'Mark' both is and is not the gospel of Mark. That is one of the features that makes Mark 'my favourite gospel': namely, that Mark itself both is and is not... whatever. (As Tina suggests in her essay, Mark's gospel is one of the biblical zombies.) This of course did not keep Christians from claiming Mark for the canon and neutralizing it by adding bogus endings and juxtaposing it to the other gospels and Paul's letters.

Surely no one has done more to alert us – or at least me! – to the presence and significance of the undead in the New Testament, as well as all the other horrific dimensions of the Bible, than Tina Pippin. Tina's essay here is a noteworthy addition to the body of her work on these topics, and it reminds me of the first meeting long ago at SBL in Chicago (as I recall) of two then-much-younger scholars who were both fascinated by the 'new' idea of reading biblical texts as fantastic literature (I met Richard under similar circumstances, a year or two later). It was at about that time that the Bible and Culture Collective was coming together, and it was great to work with both Tina and Gary as part of that group.[1] I will also always be grateful to have had the chance to work closely with Tina on our own various editing and co-writing projects, including special volumes of the journals *Semeia* and *Journal for the Fantastic in the Arts* dedicated to 'the Bible and Fantasy', as well as two books collecting additional essays on that topic: *The Monstrous and the Unspeakable* (Sheffield) and *Violence, Utopia, and the Kingdom of God* (Routledge).

Tina describes Jesus's words as undead. Indeed, as she suggests, all writing (and reading) involves a sort of perverse love for the undead, the written text itself being the quintessential land of the zombies. This surely has something to do with the close relation between apocalyptic and writing. All of us who write or read (about anything) live continually among the revenant. Undoubtedly 'Aichele' is also a zombie; but then, what does that make 'I'? And does this then connect, somehow, with Gary's image of psychopomp or Charon?

Paul de Man once said that he called himself a 'rhetorician' because he wanted to make 'rhetoric' problematical. I call myself a 'theologian' for similar reasons. I still want to think about 'theological things', even though I left the church a long time ago. Theology was transformed by

the death of God into anthropology, as Feuerbach anticipated, but it survived nevertheless. Indeed, the death of God became the primary concern for modernist theology, whether liberal or fundamentalist. Now that we live in the age of the death of 'man' (I use the word advisedly), it remains to be seen whether theology can metamorphose yet again. For too long, it has occupied the modern space of logocentric idealism, and whether it can survive outside of that space is uncertain.

However, as I have drifted away from Christianity, I have become increasingly aware of the churches' claims to ownership of the biblical texts, and I have increasingly wanted to dispute those claims, to steal the texts and allow them to sink or float on their own in the cultural currents of our times, just like any other text. I turned to the field of biblical studies because I was fascinated and disturbed by biblical texts, but also because I wanted to get away from the metaphysical abstractions of theology. I wanted to be able to ground in concrete texts whatever abstractions I wound up with, to undo logocentrism and 'return to the signifier', as the saying goes. I was not interested in uncovering a single clear message in any biblical text to be faithfully, transparently transmitted, but rather I sought what Walter Benjamin calls 'literal translation' (1968, 69–82), not only as the ideal for translation, but also as the model of critical scholarship. I also wanted to avoid the seemingly endless historical speculations regarding something hidden behind the texts – debates about their historical accuracy as well as hypotheses concerning the histories of their production – that still dominate mainstream biblical scholarship. Despite protestations to the contrary, these speculations are for the most part driven by theological agendas, thinly disguised and frequently much too un-self-conscious.

In my second book, *The Limits of Story* (Scholars Press), I called for a 'Dada theology' that would focus more on the 'concrete word', the hyletic material of the signifier, and less on abstract, spiritual levels of the signified. My desire ever since has been to make the physicality of the text an important aspect of my readings of both biblical and nonbiblical narratives. Semiotics provided ways to say things about texts in ways that do not inevitably become statements about extra-textual realities such as God or the author or 'what really happened' – ways to look at stories without concern for whether they are true. I wanted to bring to light the silent, inert materiality of the text, to become aware of how that materiality lets the text signify, and how it also keeps the text from signifying. This would lead to an un-onto-theological theology, a way to pursue or even create what the artist Marcel Duchamp (speaking of his most famous work, 'The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even') called a 'delay in glass':

> It's merely a way
>
> of succeeding in no longer thinking
>
> that the thing in question is
>
> a picture – to make a 'delay' of it
>
> in the most general way possible,
>
> not so much in the different meanings
>
> in which 'delay' can be taken, but
>
> rather in their indecisive reunion

‘delay’ – a ‘delay in glass’

    as you would say ‘a poem in prose’

       or a spittoon in silver

(Duchamp in Caws 2001: 324 [George Heard Hamilton, trans.])

Duchamp’s phrase, ‘indecisive reunion’, is perhaps an odd way to describe a zombie, but the phrase fits the gospel of Mark and its Jesus rather nicely. I want to read texts as problematic, to treat them not as answers but as questions or puzzles. I invite my readers (this written ‘I’ always requires a ‘you’ – zombies again) to read from the outside, stupidly, as I do, and not to assume that they already know what the text means, or that someone else does. Reading from the outside counters the widespread belief that only those within the faith community can properly understand the scriptures. As one who is himself estranged from the believing community, to me the biblical texts serve always as an irritant, a provocation, and a cause for wonder.

Once again, I offer a most heartfelt ‘thank you’ to all of the scholars – my friends – who have contributed to or otherwise made possible this issue of *The Bible and Critical Theory*.

ENDNOTES

[1]   I also want to acknowledge Elizabeth Castelli and David Jobling, who spoke in the SBL session honoring me in Boston but were unable to contribute to this collection.

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