

○ TO SEE, TO LEAD, TO TEACH

REFLECTIONS IN APPRECIATION FOR GEORGE AICHELE

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George Aichele's rich theoretical, exegetical, and ethical contributions are acknowledged in this essay. Working deftly across disciplinary and textual borders, Aichele is recognised for the close scrutiny he gives to the complex ways biblical texts inhabit the lived spaces of diverse readers and cultures, and the challenge of describing the dynamism of sacred texts. This essay pays tribute to Aichele's field guide and path finding leadership, a much needed and clarifying guide for 21st century biblical scholarship struggling to find its way.

Theology is not simply reflection or thought about God; it is a form of ideology, a complex and never-wholly conscious network of understandings, preconceptions and expectations about the 'way things are'... Theology is ideology in relation to first things, the ultimate truth by which we live. Postmodernism continually attempts to bring ideology to consciousness and to interrogate it. (George Aichele 1999, *Sign, Text, Scripture*)

Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality. (Emanuel Levinas 1979, *Totality and Infinity*)

Reading is an endless and violent playing with the text, and the reader is in a perpetual struggle with the Law of the Text. (George Aichele 1996, *Jesus Framed*)

First things first. Author and co-author, editor and coeditor of numerous monographs and compendia of essays, teacher/scholar in the liberal arts vein, George Aichele is a consummate traveler and guide to many foreign lands, a postmodern psychopomp who conducts souls to the worlds of the Bible beneath and beyond. Theorist and practitioner of close readings, essayist and assayer, exegete and didact who traverses the wide gulfs separating biblical studies, theology, religion, and cultural studies, a Charon of critical theory, George has over the course of a rich career ferried his readers to the foreboding shores of semiotics, structuralism, narratology, ideological critique, film criticism, and postmodernism with the aim of making the contours of those places understandable, comprehensible, if not inviting. At the same time, he has guided us through more familiar disciplinary lands of gospel studies, continental philosophy, and theology with the aim of making the recognizable strange, to encounter textual realities differently, for what they are rather than what we would wish them to be. The effect is comparable to T.S. Eliot's poetic purpose in 'Little Gidding': to come to know these seemingly familiar places for the first time, to expose the strange worlds of the Bible for all their density and danger; and likewise to challenge today's readers of the Bible to develop the critical habits of engaging the complicated and contested worlds they now inhabit. To be clear, his is not a renewed 21st century Karl Barthian effort to bring the modern world under the illuminating gaze of the Bible, but instead a Roland Barthian effort to expose through a variety of postmodern perspectives the thickness

of texts and worlds that resist reduction to a single way of seeing or dreaming. Like Morpheus in the 'Matrix', he guides readers through the world of the real.

George's guide work is paradoxically recuperative. His readers are exposed to the materiality and the spirituality of the strange and estranged modern worlds of both Bible and readers. If Eliot invites us in his *Four Quartets* to explore the remains of a modern world sundered by suffering and violence, allowing for the prospect of theological renewal and a getting beyond, George provokes us to read the Four Gospels to see the ways violence ever pervades religion and the acts of reading and writing, allowing for the possibility of an atheological renewal (as Altizer might envision it) that does not promise escape. If Eliot's project is a synthesis of spirituality and aesthetics pointing to some sort of ultimate reconciliation, George's project is a mixture of semiotics and narratology that eschews final resolutions. Critical reading and writing are not ways to evade but to evoke unending semiosis and the perpetual struggle on the part of the reader to make sense. The familiar empty tomb scene in Mark's gospel that elicited repeated efforts to bring story and text to conclusion functions as a metaphor for and testimony to a different kind of good news that George delivers: there are many endings, readings, futures, and forking paths.

To read Mark or the *Matrix* with George is to follow a path that leads to an interrogation of the obvious in search for the obscure, the plainly revealed for what is hidden. A bolder, franker, more muscular hermeneutic than that offered by Kermode, George shows the ways readers and readings insinuate themselves into texts and traditions, lodging themselves in irritating ways that disquiet. Whereas Kermode favors inside readers and spiritual secrets that privilege the critic and settle matters down, George instead decenters both reader and religious privilege in unsettling ways. This is akin to what Levinas call ethics. Although George might not use these terms, I regard his critical effort as teaching that invokes ethics. Levinas characterises ethics as the advent of the intrusion or interruption of the other into my conscience and consciousness, into my orbit, my egoism, my classroom, my disciplinary training, my preconceptions, my professional relationships, and my theological anticipation about the ways things are or are supposed to be. It is teaching whereby exteriority asserts itself as a rude awakening to my secret-keeping and privilege-holding whether over the Bible or my ideological interests. Such reading otherwise is the very means by which the reader gets out of himself. As Levinas (1979) writes, it 'signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not first produced to then teach; teaching is its very production. The first teaching teaches this very height. Tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical' (p. 171). Neither gentle nor deferential to the reader, critical reading as George practices it elevates the reader's attention, accentuates the particularity of the text, and increases the demand for heightened discernment about what is more, what is larger. From the first moment I read *Limits of Story*, I recognised a teacher who shows through theory how to embody the event and advent of ethics by underscoring the exorbitant character of critique.

The word 'theorise' illumines another aspect of George's manner of leading. Rooted etymologically in the classical Greek term *theōreō* (meaning to see, to visualise, to bring into view, to give conception of through sight), this verb and its cognates were employed by the ancient Greeks to characterise the activity of ambassadors dispatched from the city (Athens being one) to foreign lands, representative of authority, sent out to learn about the strange habits and cultural practices of other peoples and lands. The point in sending seers out was for them to return home with knowledge of what lies beyond the horizons of their world, to be informed and to inform, to teach those who did not comprehend what lay outside their orbit of experience, knowledge or

power. Theorizing so conceived is a direct engagement with the exorbitant, a teaching of the outside. Were we to give a disciplinary name to the activity of such seeing, describing, reporting, interpreting, and teaching we might think of the cultural anthropologist or the cultural analyst of the sort Mieke Bal (2002) describes in *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities*. The making sense of the strange is an honoring and preservation of the different and differences that does not dominate, overpower, or totalise. A Geertzian-stylist of thick description of theology-land, bible-places, canon-territories, ideology-spaces, George strives to make accessible and acceptable the unfamiliar and to defamiliarise and defange the accepted through engagement with visual and scriptive texts. Whether it is an analysis of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* or Mark's gospel framing of Jesus as the absent presence – all too reminiscent of Peter Sellars' character Chauncy Garder in *Being There* – George provokes questions and the question of provocation insinuated in ancient and modern texts and experiences. It is no easy task to follow George's theoretical lead. He does not stay put within disciplinary boundaries or follow the disciplinary laws; he is forever crossing borders of fields and methods on the lookout. This is interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary travel at its dangerous best. It is excellent teaching.

Like theorizing, exegesis is a leading out (from the classical Greek root *hēgemonēō* meaning 'to go before, to lead out'). The act of exegesis conveys a wide set of meanings: (1) to lead the way, to govern (so Hesiod, Plato); to show the way, to go before as in to lead (so Homer); to lead an army (so Xenophon); to rule, command, to take charge, to have authority (so Herodotus); (2) to dictate, expound; to interpret; to prescribe the order of religious forms and ceremonies; to tell at length, to relate in full as in to recount a story; and (3) to be interpreter, expounder of dreams, oracles, visions, omens of sacred rites or customs; to be guardian of the Temple; to be spiritual director (the official title Plato gives to Apollo) (Liddell and Scott 1968, p. 763). The military-religious complex of connotations is not to be ignored. Exegesis of a biblical text as George practices it is a combative leading that can be fraught with danger. Reading the Bible 'is an endless and violent playing with the text, and the reader is in a perpetual struggle with the Law of the Text' he writes (1996, 125). Like Jacob at the Jabbok, the reader is constantly tested and at risk of limping away from the experience changed. Exegesis is agonistic, a potentially dangerous alteration of the given, a going out to foreign lands and placing oneself at risk in order to return with deeper understanding of, if not a new name for, oneself and things, not a making safe or providing of assurances. In this respect, theory and exegesis share something vital in common: both are not for the faint hearted. Like Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*, the reader of the Bible must take responsibility for understanding the Law of the text, and that means opening eyes to reality and the necessity of the red pill. The seeing/leading work required is not the ordinary banker's labour but an insightful grasp of the power relationships at work in the complex forging and forgetting of a text's meaning. Reading is a trial, a struggle to stay awake and to awaken to responsibility in Levinas's terms that provokes one to action.

As exegete, George Aichele leads the advance party, the squad, the unit on patrol, taking the point, leading troops – we are reminded also of Xenophon's use of *theōreō* to refer to the inspection or review of troops – through potentially heavily mined and minded territory. George warns us repeatedly of the disciplinary dangers, the I.E.Ds hidden on the path, the violence ingredient in all reading and writing worth its salt. But we may understate his Kafkaesque or Morphean warning should we let ourselves be lulled by appearances: the ever-present blue jeans, floppy hat, clausian hair, and hearty laugh. Appearances deceive. Do not underestimate George nor the

difficult work required in going out on exegetical patrol. For exegesis is a martial art and act, an ideological combat. Whether we speak of text or exegete or critique or ideology or ethics, Derrida reminds us, ‘There is no phrase, “...which does not pass through the violence of the concept”’ (Derrida, 1978, 185).

Theorist, ambassador and anthropologist, poet and exegete, unit commander of a postmodern military unit, George teaches us what it means to observe, record, lead, teach, see, and conceptualise the different in terms we might hope to grasp without domination. In the encounter with the other, George makes no apology for the difficult work of traveling abroad, of moving from discipline to discipline, text to text, field to field. After all, interdisciplinary labour is hard work, and the subject matter off-putting. Think of the subject matter of George’s writing: violence, horror, fantasy, signs, materiality of reading, canonical and noncanonical texts, Gibson the Gospels, Benjamin and Borges, Peirce and Passolini, Mark and Marx, e-texts and atheology, deconstruction and constructive theology, de Saussure and Derrida, Freud and film, Steiner and Scripture. To think deeply, critically, poetically, exegetically in a prolonged way about the Bible and these issues that goes beyond the superficial and obvious is a challenge. George challenges his students and colleagues to embrace the work, to awaken from stupor, and recognise the trials to be faced.

I am reminded of a story once reported by the language philosopher Anthony Flew about how difficult it is to think about classical texts and to make clarifying arguments about complicated matters. Once in a presentation on Hume, a self-confident but shallow colleague responded in what was clearly intended to be condescending terms to Flew’s carefully crafted comments by saying: ‘Both of your points a moment’s thought would make obvious’. In measured response, Flew summoned up the disarming words of poet A.E. Housman: ‘Well, perhaps, but I remind you that “thought is often a painful process, and a moment can last a very long time.”’ One of the great attributes of George’s teaching and scholarship is that he does not shy away from the painful process of thinking. Time and again he shows his willingness to tackle difficult texts, authors and ideas; indeed he has led many of his colleagues and students in uncharted philosophical and theological waters before it was fashionable. I think of his early work on narrative, narratology, and film. George teaches a way to think and read with care different texts that we would just as soon make obvious, reduce to the Same, not think about except from the safe posture of home territory.

Teaching. The active voice of the classical Greek verb *didaskō* was unstable and the later Classical Greek Poets blurred the boundary line between the active and the middle voices. ‘To teach’ became ‘to have oneself taught’, ‘to educate oneself’. Active form, middle function. The poets eschewed the active voice in favor of the middle. What did they know? What were they accomplishing in blurring the two? George, too, blurs voices, texts, and traditions. He violates the boundary posts demarcating traditional biblical studies and other fields, for instance film/cinema studies.

An anecdote. The Bible and Culture Collective were meeting in Nashville, and we decided to take in the first ‘Mission Impossible’ movie. We all sat befuddled by the reference to ‘JOB314’ until George clarified for all – ‘Job 3:14’. He moves deftly between canonical and cinematic texts; he crosses borders and boundaries that are carefully policed, thought to be impervious but in fact are deeply permeable. George finds and breaks the Law, violates the boundaries, crosses over. My own engagement with the visual texts of Samuel Bak, the Holocaust painter/survivor

whose work has enabled me to read the Bible so very differently, I owe in some large measure to George's leading. George has taught me and others how to border raid, to go out on patrol, to set out on expeditions into the vast countryside of visual and scriptive production. George's work sets a standard for interrogating those ideological forces that constrain thinking and action, and for exposing the violence and power that enable the modern myth of purity to keep us disciplined and dreaming, clueless like Joseph K. or Neo.

To theorise, to exegete, to teach. Critical reading as martial artistry, as ethical activity, as teaching activity. Border crossing, boundary violating, intertextual intergenesis. George has taught us how to interrogate texts and ideas, to think exorbitantly. Thank you Charon, Virgil, Beatrice, Morpheus.

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