

Ned's Head

John 14:9, Dynamic Materiality, and the Intra-Active Legacy of Edward (Ned) Kelly

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Is it possible to fit the (secular) veneration of a local popular hero into the tradition of Christian iconography and its visual explorations of the nature of Jesus? I'm thinking specifically of Australian bushranger and iconic larrikin,¹ Edward (Ned) Kelly, who has taken on the status of ambivalent national hero and local saint. What happens if when bringing the secular and the Christian tradition together, we also consider the various material elements associated with this figure as being deeply and actively interrelated to his ongoing significance and meaning? In the longstanding artistic and devotional tradition of the face and head of Christ, it is understood that to explore visually the incarnation is to open up a point of encounter between the human and the divine (the chief exemplar of this being the Orthodox icon). And so, in John 14:9 we read a critical passage that speaks to this theology of incarnation and the ability to represent the Father via the Son: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." But what does it mean to *see* Jesus, or to *see* God, particularly when we move beyond the traditional boundaries of the Christian tradition? And, with New Materialism in mind, what does it mean to consider a more dynamic relation between traditional divisions like matter and mind?

This paper looks to the contribution New Materialism makes to a reading of John 14:9 and how it might demonstrate the capacity of John's text both to support and subvert traditional theological and cultural narratives around incarnation. Jesus' descriptions of his nature in John are usually pressed into the service of an incarnational theology that privileges meaning over sensation and the abstract over the material. John provides a wealth of emblematic motifs including those found in the Prologue, the "I AM" statements, as well as overarching themes of faith development within an unfolding divine plan. It is no surprise, then, that John's narrative, infused as it is with rich veins of christological and trinitarian theology, has functioned as a source text for a range of subsequent theological and doctrinal issues associated with divine identity and incarnation.²

John 14:9 occurs within a lengthy narrative section where Jesus bids his disciples farewell. Beyond the gospel context, this verse forms part of a larger thematic matrix with a far-reaching influence. A key example that speaks to the broader theological influence

¹ While the meaning of the word has changed over time, a "larrikin" is an Australian colloquial term associated with a rowdy, rebellious young man who flouts authority, often with a degree of humour and endearment. Kelly is often regarded as the archetypal larrikin because his story coincides with the first usage of the term, but also because Kelly epitomizes a sense of loyalty, justice and compassion concealed beneath a rough, even violent, exterior. For a cultural history of the term, see Bellanta (2012).

² Francis Moloney sums up the foundational theological significance of John's Gospel by saying: "The christology and theology of this gospel provided the raw material out of which the great Christian doctrines were forged" (1998, 20; see also Loader 2017).

of this particular text is the tradition of representation and encounter associated with the Orthodox practice of iconography. To appreciate the spirituality of the icon is to appreciate the ways in which John's text has profoundly influenced Christian theological discourse. While icons illuminate John's impact on the development of theology, they also depict things from the material world and in themselves stand as objects of wood, wax and pigment.³ New Materialism, with its attention to the solidity of material objects and the extent to which materiality relates to agency, meaning and ideas, invites us to understand a theology of incarnation very differently. In contrast to abstract theological frames of reference and speculative explorations of divine identity, New Materialism considers the dynamic qualities of material objects that intersect and interact (i.e., New Materialists might use the term "intra-active")⁴ with texts, the cultural practices they generate and the traditions they support. It is in considering these issues of vision, meaning and matter from a New Materialist perspective that we find our way to the figure of a local hero, an outlaw in fact, and the portraits of Edward (Ned) Kelly by Australian artist, Sidney Nolan.

This paper is thus a kind of thought experiment, tracing some basic ideas associated with New Materialist perspectives through a trail of influences that traverses time, medium and memory only to end up where it begins. I take John 14:9 as the point of departure. I ask: What if, contrary to what commentators suggest, the repetition of "seeing" in this text, does not serve to pivot the reader from the physical and material towards the spiritual and abstract (i.e., from Son to Father), but actually maintains a steady yet deepening regard of Jesus's physicality? In other words, what if in "seeing" the Father, one avoids spiritualizing and instead considers a more sustained appreciation of Jesus's materiality?

In considering this question, my journey quickly moves from text to theology and to the tradition of orthodox iconography—a tradition of representation that connects so directly with John's text. While Christian iconography is thoroughly steeped in traditional practices and affirming of conventional frames of reference, Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic critique of portraiture allows me to move from sacred to secular cultural traditions and from there proceed in a way that is a little less encumbered by traditional theological concerns. Taking up the secular portraiture of Australian artist Sidney Nolan, and his obsession with folk hero and bushranger Kelly, provides a useful vantage point for a New Materialist lens. It is Kelly's helmet that Nolan's portraiture depicts so magnetically. Exploring the ways in which this helmet participates or "intra-acts" with the legend and with Kelly himself, I eventually return to John's gospel narrative. Back at the starting point, it is now possible to consider the further implications of New Materialism on this text. The goal, then, is to revisit John's text with a renewed sense of how a New Materialist perspective might inflect its meaning and reorient its significance. How does a reconsideration of materiality re-shape our sense John's Jesus as revelatory of the Father? How might "seeing" the Father avoid a reflexive pivot from sensory experience to abstract insight and instead regard Jesus' physical form as revelatory of the Father precisely by virtue of its materiality?

³ There are many different traditions associated with the creation of icons—with a variety of materials used—but some of the earliest use an encaustic technique where pigment is added to hot beeswax and then applied to a prepared wooden surface.

⁴ This is Karen Borad's term, distinct from the usual "interact" which refers to separate entities coming together, to the way in which different elements interact in order to allow for the emergence of the subject and the object.

Seeing the Father

In chapter 14 of John's Gospel, we find Jesus conversing with his disciples as part of a broader discourse, the so-called "final teaching" or "farewell discourse" that follows the foot-washing scene in chapter 13.⁵ Following Thomas's initial interruption, Phillip requests that Jesus reveal the Father and, beginning in verse nine, Jesus explains to him something of the mysterious relationship between the Father and the Son. In his request, Phillip seems confident that Jesus can reveal some invisible mystery that makes clear the identity of the Father: "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."⁶ Jesus does not altogether refuse Phillip's request, although he does seem a little exasperated ("How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'; 9b).⁷ He responds to Phillip, saying: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9a).

In John's story, Phillip learns that seeing Jesus equates to seeing the Father. Despite raising more questions than it answers, the idea being communicated here is typically understood as a movement from the material to the spiritual, with Jesus forming a bridge between these dualities. Jesus's divine nature or supernatural identity is apparent in and shines through his natural, physical form, it is just a matter of "seeing" the way in which this man mediates these realities. This scene fits into a broader reading of John that emphasizes the esoteric and spiritual orientation of the believer. The nature of Jesus as somehow intimately connected with the Father is exemplified in such prominent examples as the opening lines of the Prologue,⁸ the "I AM" statements, the divine institution of the church and its sacraments from the cross and the development of faith as a theme throughout the various "signs" described in the narrative—culminating with Mary Magdalene and Thomas's encounters with the risen Jesus. Speaking of the cumulative message of the gospel, Rudolf Bultmann distills the connection between Father and Son in John when he notes: "Thus it turns out in the end that Jesus as the Revealer of God reveals nothing but that he is the Revealer" (1951, 2.66). Beyond the Gospel, this exalted theological perspective connects with a tradition of understanding the divinity of Jesus and his pivotal place between material and spiritual realities.

This trajectory, moving from the material to the spiritual, travels beyond the gospel context and informs a theology of representation that is most elegantly summarised within the Orthodox iconographic tradition. Contemporary icons continue to imitate a particular pattern and form steeped in a rich theological tradition, with incarnational references that trace back to these early understandings concerning the person of Jesus. Included in this genealogy of ideas are various supporting biblical texts, including the creation accounts (Gen 1:27), Jacob wrestling with the Angel (Gen 32:30), Moses's encounter with the

⁵ This (inaccurately described) "farewell discourse" of Jesus represents a "slowing down" of the action and is systematically delivered to the disciples from chapters 13 to 16 ending with the prayer in chapter 17 (see Moloney 2013, 99).

⁶ All biblical quotes are taken from the NRSV translation.

⁷ He has, after all, already made this point before in 12:44-45 to the reader and in 13:20 to the disciples (see Ramsey, commentary on 14:9).

⁸ Francis Moloney writes of the significance of the Prologue for setting the theological agenda of the Gospel: "Central to the thought of the Gospel is that no one has ever seen God. However, his only begotten Son, who is forever in union with his Father, makes him known (see 1:18)). This paraphrase of the final verse of the prologue to the Gospel (1:1-18) sets the scene for the story that follows" (2013, 3).

burning bush (Exod 3:1-17), the Gospel Transfiguration accounts (Mark 9:2-9, Matt 17:2 and Luke 9:29), Paul's various Christological musings (e.g., Rom 1:23 and 2 Cor 3:18) and many others. Grounded as they are in the logic expressed within these sacred passages, icons are understood not simply as illustrations of texts, or visualisations of saints or martyrs. They are themselves akin to sacred "texts" and share this status with the biblical texts that inform them. Thus, an iconographer "writes" rather than "paints" an icon, and an icon is "read" and not simply "viewed." The iconographer's role is not to create an image in order to embellish a text. The goal isn't mere representation. Rather, an icon "inscribes" within it the impossible experience of God present in the material world. The icon is not viewed so much as encountered, absorbed and experienced as a point of connection between the visible and invisible, the spiritual and the material, the transcendent and the immanent.

This capacity of the icon to bring together incongruities mirrors what we read in John 14:9 where, just as Jesus channels the Father, an icon becomes a conduit that allows one to peer into the spiritual realm. The subtlety with which these paradoxical elements can be dealt with is not just a function of John's texts. It also owes a great debt to the Greek philosophical tradition, the frameworks of which provide an underlying worldview and structures of interpretation important for sustaining the traditional spirituality of devotional icons. Characteristic of this Greek backdrop are binary terms that dichotomize body and soul, mind and matter, spirit and corruption, logos and chaos. The enduring structures of Greek thought have proven to be rich fodder for deconstructive readings⁹ and more recently, are challenged by New Materialist perspectives. Greek thought was instrumental in the articulation of early Christian doctrines and creeds, and continues to provide the setting for much contemporary Christian theological inquiry—and, indeed, biblical scholarship.¹⁰ And yet, there is more to be said. In other words, not everything has been articulated, and there are possibilities for responses to emerge from beyond the parameters that Greek philosophy inscribes.

Heads

A valuable challenge to the dominance of a theological tradition and Greek philosophical parameters can be found in Julia Kristeva's book: *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* (2012). In this work, Kristeva pays attention to what lies outside or is excluded from traditions of representation that inform portraiture within Western culture. Kristeva's strategy is to use psychoanalytic theory to uncover the "outside" from within the centre of the tradition and, in so doing, demonstrate that the tradition is not hermetically sealed. Her study, which includes an analysis of the tradition of depicting the "Head of Christ" in Orthodox iconography, represents a kind of deconstructive reading, demonstrating that the secular feminine is covered over and suppressed, and yet powerfully present at the very heart of

⁹ Derrida's notion of "logocentrism" is a key example of the ongoing legacy of Greek philosophy. Derrida's claim here is that the Greek notion of "logos" is the privileged, central principle of Western philosophy (See Derrida 1978 for one of his most well-known expositions of the structures of logocentrism). Moreover, and not altogether unconnected, the Greek work "logos" is itself famously prominent at the beginning of John's story.

¹⁰ In *Transfigured* (2007), I discuss the implicit Western philosophical structures that continue to influence scholarly interpretation using the transfiguration passage from Mark's Gospel as my example.

Christian sacred representation. Kristeva demonstrates the multivalence of traditions and the capacity of narratives to intersect with unexpected and even conflicting cultural locations.

In *The Severed Head*, Kristeva offers a view of the tradition of Christian iconography that potentially destabilises the tradition from within. Kristeva was commissioned to write this work as an accompaniment to a special exhibition she curated at the Louvre in 1998—as part of the *Parti Pris* (Taking Sides) series. The exhibition had as its theme the human head and included ancient decorated skulls, various artistic studies in sculpture and painting and assorted cultural references to heads and beheadings. Working her way through these many and diverse examples, Kristeva sums up some of the broad character of violence in Western civilization through her distinctive psychoanalytic lens. Along the way, she takes as her subject Christian icons, in particular, the “Head of Christ” tradition.

Kristeva’s investigation of icons builds on something that she identifies in the simplest of drawings—any line drawn across a page effects a separation, a cutting. All art is a development of this “cutting” not the least being depictions of severed heads. In the vision of the decapitated head, Kristeva finds on the one hand a privileging of the masculine, of abstract reasoning and rationality cut off from emotion. On the other, she also finds oblique references to the monstrous Medusa, the abjected mother who threatens the ossification and castration of male power and autonomy. For Kristeva, severing is a reference to psychic separation, a confrontation which evokes fascination as well as horror. The Medusa also fascinates and it is difficult to resist the urge to “look.” In the face of Jesus, Kristeva finds a recapturing of this feminine power in a way that absorbs its power and yet inevitably allows its subversiveness to remain in place. Jesus’s head is severed from his body in as much as it is transferred to the Mandylion (in the East) or Veronica’s Sudarium (in the West). Jesus’s body is pierced and broken, his face imprinted in such a way that it leaves his body behind. His portrait invites the viewer to participate in the horrors of undifferentiated oblivion, the maternal body, a time prior to ego and individuation.

Through her reading, Kristeva is not just providing a way of viewing the art, but of “seeing” within art a vision of psychic power. Like John 14:9, Kristeva’s sense of “seeing” is at least two-fold. For Kristeva there are two experiences that confront the viewer of the icon. The icon depicts the head of Jesus but also provides a confrontation with the annihilation of death, of the ultimate and the infinite, the impossible and invisible. While the Medusa is associated with the feminine and is hidden, the invisible is linked with the masculine godhead and becomes the dominant mode, aspired to by the believer. These two modes of experience co-mingle in the icon in a way that generates considerable cathartic power to these sacred renderings.

Rather than leave these modes of “seeing” as distinct and separate—not to mention dichotomised—Kristeva argues that together, these two modes of experience contribute to an “economy” of the divine life whereby the physical and material are merged with the spiritual and supernatural. Kristeva draws here on early church theology, where church fathers attempted to articulate the nature of God and correspondingly, the connection to Creation. Elements were viewed as interconnected and participating in an overall divine plan. This connection allowed for an interrelationship of dissimilar elements, one that maintained their absolute differences—the difference between creature and Creator, for instance. This interconnectivity is what is “represented” in the icon. The icon doesn’t

represent an *object*, so much as an “*economy*.” Through this economy, the flesh of the Medusa enters into theology in the same way as the sacred opens to the secular and the grounding structures of Greek thought are shot through with difference.

Kristeva’s reading demonstrates the intricate enmeshment of psychoanalytic processes within the Christian tradition of representation. At the same time, her move from *object* to *economy*, while connected with the created world and in keeping with some of the critical moves of New Materialism (e.g., intra-action), nonetheless perpetuates the erasure of the material in traditional Christian (and indeed, Western) systems of meaning. The situation of the Medusa within the portrait of Christ certainly locates a subversive image at the heart of the Christian mystery but with her characterisation of difference as the “void,” she somewhat undermines that subversion by reinscribing a system very much disconnected with materiality. New Materialism adds further scope to readings like Kristeva’s, readings that attempt to demonstrate the limitations of traditional (Greek) structures of meaning, by asserting the agency of the material object within the experience of meaning. Kristeva uses the lens of psychoanalytic theory to frame her analysis, a lens that depends heavily on the linguistic structures (following Lacan) of the conscious subject.

In some ways, New Materialism seeks to reconnect the subject to the Lacanian “Real” of the material world, a connection that would collapse the divisions and splits upon which a psychoanalytic reading depends. As mentioned above, Kristeva notes that we only need a single line dividing the page to establish a split or a cut. Additionally, Kristeva might point to other features that further serve the collapse of these divisions and splits, such as the underlying theme of death, the formal beauty of the picture and even the invisibility of the subject. New Materialism might ask, by contrast, about the character and effect of the paper, the granular quality of the graphite or charcoal and the fluid movement of the hand across the page. New Materialism would certainly see the cut emerging directly from within the relation of the materials assembled. In order to re-discover the underlying unity of things, New Materialism works to reintegrate the inanimate and attribute agency beyond consciousness and human awareness in such a way that the mind is revealed to be “always, already material” (Dophijn and van der Tuin, 49).

Kristeva’s reading searches for a path that traces an alternate route through the familiar terrain of Western representation. The challenge here is that the tradition of sacred icons is so thoroughly informed by the underpinning structures of its conceptual landscape that Kristeva’s counter-reading expends significant effort to depart from a Greek philosophical reading of a transcendently oriented interpretation. The underlying structures in place are strongly reconfirmed by the shape and character of the iconographic tradition. In order to propose a different kind of reading, a reading that more fully demonstrates the impact of New Materialism, it might make sense to engage with a differently situated kind of iconography. In doing so, we will be following Kristeva’s lead, appreciating the movement of Christian iconography into the Western tradition of portraiture with the benefit of creating a certain distance from the tradition, ending up at least one step removed. And so, in the next section, I pivot somewhat to a more overtly secular example of iconography, an example not so directly tied to a specific and elaborate structure of theological meaning and yet one that has certain points of continuity with the more familiar Orthodox tradition—Sidney Nolan’s portraits of Australian “bushranger,”

Edward (Ned) Kelly. The hope is that this lateral shift, a move more in keeping with biblical reception theory than New Materialism, will ultimately allow for a more vivid demonstration of a New Materialist perspective. Ultimately, the goal remains to return to John's text and consider the ways in which this text might be read differently when read through a New Materialist lens.

Ned Kelly: A Secular Icon

Twentieth century Australian artist Sidney Nolan's 1947 painting of Ned Kelly stands as the first in a series of twenty-seven paintings chronicling the story of Australia's most famous outlaw, nineteenth century bushranger and all-round larrikin, Edward (Ned) Kelly.¹¹ This painting depicts Kelly, holding his rifle and dressed in his iconic black armour complete with its square helmet and letter-box eye slit. He sits at the centre of the picture, mounted on a horse, traveling away from the viewer, across a stark, arid landscape. Clouds hang in an uncertain sky and the horizon glows with a pale blue light through a hint of distant trees. Nolan's series forms what is probably the most famous sequence of Australian paintings (Sayers, NGA). His image of Kelly, a black two-dimensional cut-out amidst a more naturalistic, albeit primitive landscape, has become iconic within Australian culture. The crude black helmet in particular would always be associated with the outlaw (Sayers, 17). In these pictures, Nolan explores post-war Australian identity and landscape through the history and legend of an ambivalent folk hero.

Despite its formative place in Australian culture, Nolan's series is far from the last word on the legacy of Ned Kelly. More recently, Peter Carey would pen a Booker prize-winning novel *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), but this too owes something of a debt to Nolan's paintings. In reminiscing about writing this story on the occasion of its 25th anniversary re-issue, Carey speaks of the influence of Nolan's series "as if they were stations of the cross" (Carey, 2020). In the absence of an equivalent historical figure like Thomas Jefferson, he speaks of Kelly as an "imaginary founding father" of Australian cultural identity (Carey, 2020). In the journey that led to the publication of *True History*, Carey also speaks of his own personal investment in the Kelly's story and its significance for his own identity as an Australian expat and, much like Nolan, he demonstrates a weaving together of land, legend, history, autobiography and the sacred and literary arts (Carey, 2020).

Kelly's Jerilderie letter, a major inspiration for Carey's story, provides important insight into his thoughts at a time when he was most active in his district.¹² Dictated to Joe Hart, one of his gang of outlaws, during a hold-up in the small town of Jerilderie in 1879, this letter forms a kind of manifesto where Kelly mounts a defense against unjust persecution, providing explanations against accusations of horse stealing, bank robbery, assault and ultimately capital murder. It is also full of humour and wit, showing something of Kelly's more iconoclastic, larrikin-like tendencies. The Jerilderie letter is an important testimony that tells of a struggle for justice in a life of persecution, perceived or actual.

¹¹ Nolan's Kelly series is owned by the National Gallery of Australia (<https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=28926>).

¹² <https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/features/ned-kelly-jerilderie-letter>; for an introduction to the Jerilderie Letter, including its context within Kelly's story and comments on provenance, see Germain Greer's essay, "The Jerilderie Letter" (<https://readingaustralia.com.au/essays/the-jerilderie-letter/>)

Kelly is eventually captured during a daring dawn shoot-out in Glenrowan and ultimately executed by hanging in Melbourne on 11th November, 1880. He was twenty-five years old.

Ned Kelly is sometimes likened to Robin Hood. The comparison works in so far as Kelly is regarded as a champion for the poor and disenfranchised of colonial Australian society. Kelly was of Irish descent in a culture where the English held the positions of power. Kelly was often in trouble with the law, but challenged authority in the face of injustice. Kelly was a folk hero, aided by locals in defiance of police searches and warrants. Kelly is not like Robin Hood, however, in the sense that he was less interested in the redistribution of wealth than in the founding of a sovereign state. Kelly was involved in police killings and threatened to derail a train, which would have resulted in the loss of many innocent lives. Kelly's folk hero status is, therefore, far more ambivalent than Robin of Sherwood and yet no less legendary in the Australian imagination.

An evocative summary of the various threads and influences in both the work of Nolan and Carey might be Nolan's rendering of Ned Kelly's helmet. In many ways this helmet functions as a symbolic short-hand for the significance of Kelly's story for Australian identity. It might even be said that this instantly recognizable and richly symbolic head, and the cultural devotion it elicits, evokes a kind of secular religiosity.¹³ Carey's reference to Nolan's pictures as "stations of the cross" matches the kind of pilgrimage experience one has travelling the touring route through "Kelly Country" in Northern Victoria. For example, the site of the Kelly gang's final battle, the "siege of Glenrowan," is spread across eight separate locations where, like a secular "way of the cross," it is possible to travel through the final stages of the gang's stand-off with police and Kelly's eventual capture.

If Kelly were a secular saint, then his helmet would be his iconographic identifier. Like St. Peter's keys or Mary Magdalen's jar of ointment, thanks in large part to Nolan, Kelly's square black helmet with its crude eye slit will always be associated with Kelly and his legend.¹⁴ It is a roughly smithed tube of riveted iron taken from plough mould-boards. It covered the head of the outlaw like a large heavy pipe and required some padding inside to prevent it from shifting awkwardly when he moved. It was matched by equally rough chest and backplates and aprons. All told, Kelly's armour weighed around 45 kilograms or close to 100 pounds.

Kelly both approaches and departs from traditional notions of Christian sainthood. Certainly his legend and example weave a complex symbolic and cultural fabric. Yet, his status as an outlaw, a murderer and a thief embroider his legacy with enough ambivalence that it is not entirely clear whether he can provide the imitation of Jesus necessary for canonization. For example, Kelly's legacy is littered with the kind of traditional iconographical representations that we would normally associate with saints and martyrs. These are objects or symbols that might speak to the distinctive story of the holy person, be they implements of torture in the case of a martyr, or artifacts that point to a particular episode from their life story. In Kelly's case, we can point to his armour and helmet,

¹³ The image of Nolan's Kelly was used as part of the Sydney Olympic games opening ceremony in 2000, arguably a more secular statement of ritualized sacred nationalism, it would be hard to find (see <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/15-years-ago-today-the-world-watched-in-awe-as-the-sydney-2000-games-began-20150915-gjmx7p.html>).

¹⁴ The helmet Kelly wore, along with the rest of his armour, is now part of the collection of the Victorian State Library: <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/stories/ned-kellys-armour>

already mentioned, but also to his favourite rifle “Betty” and a green bloodstained silk sash, a reward for childhood heroism that he was wearing when captured in Glenrowan. Of these items, it is the helmet in particular that is most closely associated with Kelly’s legacy.

Ned’s Head

Ned Kelly’s helmet can be regarded as an example of an inert object that makes its own specific contribution to his story, quite apart from its place in constellations of mythic and symbolic power. While Kelly’s helmet resembles the objects and relics traditionally associated with saints, through Nolan’s paintings, the helmet also connects the viewer to an experience of materiality. The same could be said of the wood and pigment of an icon, both of which mediate and act on the viewer’s experience in their own specific ways. This material contribution does not support a conceptual framework that moves beyond the physical and material, but precisely one that re-connects meaning (and in this case, divinity) to an experience of the solidity of matter with implications for readings of John’s Gospel story.

The potential advantage of theories of New Materialism is that they might enable scholars to reassess this configuration of matter and spirit in ways that don’t immediately fall back into traditional categories of human agency, vitality and action. In a similar way to Ned Kelly defamiliarizing the Orthodox iconography and the tradition of Christian saints, New Materialism allows us to look again at the relationship between matter and being, spirit and form. Indeed, New Materialism might provide a useful key for understanding the figure of Kelly as a parallel to traditional devotion and spirit in a way that generates implications for incarnational theology and ultimately, the ways in which we read the underlying biblical texts.

The rich symbolism of Kelly’s helmet confronts us with a few things that, while familiar to Christian iconographical traditions, deviate in interesting ways. Kelly’s helmet is made of iron. It is inert and obscures his face. What’s more, with his helmet in place, Kelly’s head effectively disappears both from view and, as the story unfolds, from his body altogether.¹⁵ Indeed, the helmet comes to stand in for his head. When Kelly is depicted in Nolan’s portraits, not only is the head severed, it is sometimes missing altogether. When the head disappears and helmet remains, we are confronted with a vision that is less about ideas, individuality, identity, thought, meaning, senses and all those other associations we connect with heads and faces, and we are left with something that is by comparison inert, characterless, heavy and expressionless. We know this is not necessarily the case when we track the symbolism of the helmet and of the mask, but what if we pursue the experience of the helmet as a featureless object of iron? As such, the helmet provides no easy entry point into the symbolic system that Kristeva describes and insists on being taken in its purely material state.

¹⁵ Following his execution, the subsequent journey of Kelly’s actual head and skull is itself a curious subplot to his ongoing story. While Kelly’s remains are buried in Greta cemetery, with the exception of a skull fragment, his head remains missing. For further detail on this story, see: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-11/ned-kelly-skull-location-remains-a-mystery/10476666>.

Kelly's helmet was made from plough mould-boards once used to break up soil and till the land. As part of a plough, this iron would have contributed to the cultivation of the land and the creation of something fertile and productive from something regarded as unproductive, barren and even hostile. As a helmet, these iron plough mould-boards are appropriated for a different purpose. In instrumental terms, they may serve as protection against projectiles, namely the firing rifles of law enforcers. They also provide a screen against identification. But they go beyond utility and exceed their original purpose when they simultaneously evoke something strange and disconcerting. For New Materialism, matter is understood to be far from passive and acts as "an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable" (Coole and Frost 2010: 9). As Kelly's helmet, the iron itself contributes something more, quite aside from its previous life serving as plough mould-boards, and presses itself into the situation, creating an impact and an effect.

When Kelly confronted the police in the early morning hours of the siege of Glenrowan, reports of his appearance included references to his supernatural appearance.¹⁶ Kelly appeared in the morning mist wearing his armour under an oil-skin coat and daring the police to return his fire. His helmet increased his already impressive height (Kelly was 5'10") and created the disconcerting illusion his head had disappeared or been transformed into something monstrous. Eye-witness accounts mention his other worldly appearance; was he a ghost, a demon or maybe a "bunyip"?¹⁷ Excerpts from the 1881 *Royal Commission into the Circumstances of the Kelly Outbreak* record the impact of Kelly's last stand against the police:

As the tall figure of the outlaw, encased in iron, appeared in the indistinct light of the dawn, the police for a time were somewhat disconcerted. To some it seemed like an apparition; others thought it was a black man who had donned a nail-can for a joke, but as the shots fired from Martini-Henry rifles, at short range, were found to have no effect, the sensation created resembled superstitious awe. One man described it as the "devil," another as the "bunyip" (*Royal Commission*, xxvii).

The reference to "bunyip," a threatening indigenous water spirit, is particularly intriguing when we consider the way in which nineteenth century Western views of environmental domination along with colonial and settler perspectives served to disconnect rather than engage with the strangeness of the Australian landscape. New Materialism has revisited what would have traditionally been termed animism to consider the ways in which other religious traditions avoid the kind of dichotomizing prevalent in Western traditions. If anything, in this context the bunyip may signify the colonial struggle with the land, the specific landscape of the Australian continent, so harsh and seemingly hostile by European standards, that it needed to be overcome through colonial effort—much as the indigenous

¹⁶ Important primary sources of Kelly at the Glenrowan siege include "Donald G. Sutherland's letter to his parents in Caithness, Scotland" held in the State Library of Victoria archives, MS134713: <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/251621> and the account of railway guard, Jesse Dowsett, <http://latrobejournal.slv.vic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-11/t1-g-t2.html>

¹⁷ An important secondary source detailing the final show-down between Kelly and the police comes from the Royal Commission on the Police Force of Victoria that followed Kelly's execution: Police Commission, *Second Progress Report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry in the Circumstances of the Kelly Outbreak*, Victoria, 1881: xxvi-xxviii.

populations themselves.¹⁸ There is also the sense that in his unearthly visage, Kelly stands outside of the Christian (e.g., as devil), civilized world (e.g., as bunyip) and hence, threatens the natural order of things. Significantly, the helmet features largely in the creation of this unsettling experience.

Helpfully, Nolan takes the dynamic significance of Kelly's helmet further, rendering it in such a way that it more overtly connects the viewer to the specific character of the landscape of the Australian context. In a number of pictures from Nolan's series, the letter-box shaped slit in the helmet does not reveal Kelly's eyes, as one might expect, but rather peeks through to the surrounding landscape.¹⁹ It is as though the landscape replaces Kelly's head and is continuously present, ignoring boundaries and participating with an outlawed agency that observes the unfolding events, peeking as it does through the iron eye-slot. The world that surrounds and supports the narrative becomes the stuff of Kelly's inner world, outside becomes inside and hence dissolves the distinction between matter and thought, object and intention. In this way, Kelly's helmet plays a key role in troubling boundaries between nature and culture, body and spirit, order and chaos and mind and matter. The puzzling erasure of Kelly's head, both literally and figuratively, displaces the anthropocentric from the centre of this scene and configures an "intra-action" of the self and its surroundings where, as New Materialist critic Manuel A. Vásquez puts it, elements "engage with each other not as independent entities but as agents within a single material matrix of becoming" (2011, 315).

Coming back to John's narrative, therefore, in light of New Materialist concerns, we might decide to read this story a little differently. The implications of a New Materialist perspective may be that it adds to and reconfigures our theological appreciation of such big-banner concepts as incarnation, revelation and divine encounter. What if the repetition of "seeing" that Jesus charges his disciples to practice ("whoever has seen me has seen the Father" 14:9) is not a move from sensory experience to abstract insight? What if the disciples are being asked to see the "Father" precisely in the concreteness of Jesus's physical form and hence challenge their tendencies to spiritualise or otherwise conceptually transcend the banality of the material world before them? What if a similar attention to Barad's "intra-action" is required when reading elsewhere in John's narrative? Viewed in this way, what of the foot-washing scene that precedes this verse? What of Thomas's verification of Jesus's resurrected body via the wounds of his crucifixion that comes nearer the end of John's story? By troubling traditional distinctions, an active materiality may lead to further insights into and alternative readings of John's text. Indeed, it may re-orient our view of incarnation so that it takes flesh in its perforations, healings and textures (and its extensions to other bodies) more seriously.

In John's Gospel, the development of faith as a process marked by various signs is an overarching narrative theme. Traditionally, this theme culminates in an interpretation

¹⁸ George Ioannides notes that in recent New Materialist work: "while 'animism' was a negative classification and categorization placed onto those 'othered' in the colonial encounter, the term has undoubtedly been effectively revised and reconfigured" (2013, 245). For a discussion of the worldview of colonial missionary efforts and their impact on animistic as well as New Materialist proposals for a neo-animism, see Ioannides (2013, 245-247).

¹⁹ Nolan's use of the Kelly story to explore the Australian landscape is well documented. Of the series, he said "this is a story arising out the bush and ending in the bush" (Nolan quoted in Sayers, 8).

of John that approaches what might be termed a “high” theology.²⁰ For example, the faith of the people surrounding Jesus is showcased in the final scenes of the gospel that describe the experiences of Mary Magdalene at the tomb and Thomas in the upper room. Rather than reaching for the theological heights, a New Materialist reading might understand the insights generated in these scenes to be firmly embedded within the material elements of bodies and objects—in the natural, the vegetal, the corporeal, the fleshly. For example, Mary does not recognize Jesus when she initially encounters him following his resurrection. When she first sees him, she assumes he tends to the garden. Rather than casting this as an error, Mary’s “insight” might indicate that the immediate surroundings are significant in mediating her sense of the encounter. Moreover, while Mary is told not to touch the resurrected Jesus, Thomas is invited to put his hands into Jesus’ wounded flesh. While there is much to unpack here, it is clear that in both these stories, such an emphasis on embodiment at a time when Jesus’s resurrection is being verified, speaks to the significance of materiality in a reading of John’s story—a story that emphasises a journey of faith. Because of the close connection between John’s text and theological thought, a reappraisal of notions of embodiment in John’s text offers at the same time a renewed perspective on incarnational theology. The task of the scholar, therefore, is to carefully attend to notions of materiality and embodiment and the resulting impact of this on attempts to “ground” such influential theological frameworks as incarnation and divine encounter. It seems that the question of “neo-animism” is not restricted to what lies beyond the Christian tradition, but may well influence the ways in which materiality is read within the tradition also. Pursuing this question may involve the scholar broadening their field of view and considering a more expansive notion of Christianity, both in terms of the textual details but also the cultural reception and influence.

Nolan’s head, as a rich and multi-layered symbol, is no longer the iron helmet of the bushranger. New Materialism asks us to return to the iron of this helmet and to ask about its participation and agency in the story and experience of Ned Kelly as a “secular saint.” Along similar lines, we might trace our way back from this point to some of the scriptural antecedents of the tradition of iconography and ask to what extent the text is creating for us a richer scene of inter-action where a broader range of connections work together to produce abundant and meaningful constellations of relations that do not dichotomize and do not spiritualize by default. Such a New Materialist perspective is particularly intriguing when applied to the text of John’s Gospel, a story so formative in the broader story of incarnational theology. How might we understand the materiality of Jesus and the story more broadly if we read it in ways that collapse dualisms and acknowledge, in Borad’s words, the “entanglement of matter and meaning” (in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 50)? Might such a perspective reshape the theological traditions that build upon traditional readings of John’s text, readings that privilege human (or divine) agency and assume dichotomies all too familiar within traditional metaphysical constructions? What if Ned’s head guides us to a more relational, interpretive perspective, one that considers a broader scope for agency, for understanding interactions and for a rejuvenated sense of the relationship between the spiritual and the material? Such a New

²⁰ In his recent commentary, Michael Card provides an indication of the exalted regard with which the Gospel is held when he characterizes John’s prologue as “echo[ing] with his themes, with his high Christology. [John] is straining at the limits of language here, describing in “clumsy bricks” all that his eyes had seen, his ears had heard and his hands had actually touched!” (Card 2014, 30).

Materialist reading of John's Gospel might even contribute to theology a sense that "[m]atter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 59). At the very least, such a reading of John's Gospel might allow us to see very differently indeed.

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