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The Shining Garment of the Text.
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative
Strategies for Readers of John 1:1-18

by Alison E. Jasper

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph. D.)
to the University of Glasgow
Department of Theology and Religious Studies

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the issues facing me as a woman-centred reader of the Christian scriptures. I am concerned, for example, with the process whereby women's experience has been given or denied value within patriarchal culture. I believe that the patriarchal culture, determined by an approach to human experience which I have described as 'phallogocentric', has used gender difference in a signatory or symbolic sense and that it has employed the *feminine* gender to define an 'Otherness' against which it promotes or defends its own identity and value. In consequence, women, and by extension, whatever is associated with their differentiated experiences, have suffered a generalised devaluation, which, in the most extreme instances, amounts to an attempt to abolish or exclude them altogether. I am also concerned with the sense in which this phallogocentric approach has determined the process of biblical interpretation, demanding singular, exclusive readings of texts whose authority must be guaranteed by the assumption of a transcendent presence or truth.

My aim is, first of all, to illustrate this analysis of reading practices within a patriarchal context, by examining in some detail the interpretative work of five historical readers. In order to contain the project within manageable limits, I have concentrated on a short scriptural text: the Prologue of John's Gospel (Jn 1:1-18). The chosen text is of particular interest because it is linked, thematically, to Christian teaching about Incarnation and yet avoids, in any explicit sense, references to the female character of Mary or to the role of a human woman in bringing the Incarnate Word to

birth, leaving the passage open to docetic or Gnostic interpretations that orthodox Christian teaching always rejects, at least in theory. The five readers represent points of view that are widely separated in experience and historical context, from Augustine, a fifth-century African bishop, to Adrienne von Speyr, a professional woman, living in Europe, within the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet their interpretations exhibit a common tendency to employ the symbols of woman and the feminine as if they signified the absence or lack of value, defined against the absolute validity of masculine-identified divine presence.

The second aim of this thesis, is to propose interpretation of the same passage that resists the interpretative tendencies I have noted in the five historical readings. In order to fulfil this aim, I have given three different readings of the text. These employ both deconstructive and constructive/structuralist forms of criticism. Deconstructive criticism, for example, reveals the ironic potential of this text for affirming the prior necessity of feminine-identified humanity. It uncovers the bloody and satisfying feminine-identified corporeality that lies beneath spiritualised and Eucharistic interpretations of the Word made 'flesh'. A constructive criticism presents the text in terms of the development - an Incarnation - of the human subject, or what Julia Kristeva calls the *sujet en procès*. Taken together, the three readings mime an interpretative multiplicity that, I believe, does justice both to possibilities within the text and also to the necessary multiplicity - in Kristeva's terms, the heterogeneity - of the reader. In this way, I am able to conclude that this particular textual garment may still be 'put on', that is, found significant by women readers.

The Shining Garment of the Text
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.

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**The Shining Garment of the Text
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1

**Introduction:
Reading the Christian Scriptures as a
Woman-centred Critic.**

"Why, he hasn't got anything on!" the whole crowd was shouting at last; and the Emperor's flesh crept, for it seemed to him they were right. "But all the same", he thought to himself, "I must go through with the procession". So he held himself more proudly than before, and the lords in waiting walked on bearing the train - the train that wasn't there at all.¹

1 **Revealing the Truth.**

1.1 **Preliminary Statement.**

What I want to challenge in the course of this thesis, is the notion that readers can, even theoretically, approach a final, single or definitive understanding of biblical texts. The claim that this is possible concerns me, because I believe that it is born out of a culture of univalence and singularity that has been extremely damaging in the past, and most particularly to women. Within the west, a logic of identity²

¹Anderson, Hans (trans. M. R. James), *Forty-two Stories* (London, Faber and Faber, 1968). 107.

² French philosopher, Jacques Derrida focuses on what he sees as the adherence within Western philosophy to certain logical principles, for example, that everything that is, is, that nothing can both be and not be, and that everything must be either/ or. Alternatively, it is expressed in the claim that the spoken word is simpler, clearer and promises a single authoritative interpretation, immune from the interpretative ambiguities of the written word (logocentrism) and should therefore be privileged. This drive towards all-

largely resists polyvalent or multiple interpretations of texts and makes of Woman and the feminine symbols of whatever the prevailing logic of singularity excludes or rejects. This has had a 'knock-on' effect on the roles of both female readers of the texts and women or the feminine within the texts, rendering them symbolic of presences that are fundamentally perverse in one way or another.

In my thesis I attempt to demonstrate how the currents of singularity flow, in relation both to historical textual interpretations and their presentation of the symbols of Woman and the feminine. I attempt to complicate and problematise the apparent singularity of these symbols by presenting multiple readings of both text and symbols. And by doing this, finally, I try to present an example of critically creative reading practice for woman-centred readers, including myself.

1. 2 Texts of Terror: The Literary Approach.

During the 1970s and into the 1980s, a number of biblical critics, looking back to earlier traditions of women's

interpretation³, began to draw attention to the plight of female characters within the Bible, especially what we call the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament. These characters were, they argued, shamefully mistreated by their fathers and other male relatives within the narratives. Phyllis Tribble, for example, wanted us actively to mourn for women like Tamar, Amnon's sister⁴, and the unnamed concubine of Judges 19⁵, setting the drawing of a tombstone at the head of every chapter of her book, *Texts of Terror*.⁶ These were, she argued, women who had been reduced to ciphers in struggles that were fundamentally to do with men, and treated with quite appalling brutality and indifference as a result. Her work acted upon many readers in a manner rather similar to the way in which the little boy of the children's story about the Emperor's new clothes, enabled all the people to "see" that the Emperor was, in fact, wearing no clothes at all. The abuse, revealed within scriptures held to be sacred, was shown for what it

encompassing singularity is also expressed, for example, in the symbol of the phallus as it is used by the French theorist and psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, representing as it were, the single and tangible goal of all our desires. The same all encompassing singularity is expressed in the presence of binary dualisms - a set of oppositions that, between them, claim to 'cover the ground'. In the work of Hélène Cixous these binary dualisms, situated above all in language, exemplify an underlying dualism in terms of gender. See "The Newly Born Woman" in, Seillers, Susan, *Hélène Cixous Reader* (London, Routledge, 1994). 37 ff..

³ See particularly of course, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's edited collection, first published in 1895, *The Woman's Bible*. This was a collection of comments and commentaries written by women on a selection of biblical texts and designed to challenge the injustices to women contained there, or in their interpretation.

⁴ 2 Samuel 13:1-22. See, Tribble, Phyllis, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (First published 1984. London, S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1992). 36-63,

⁵ See Tribble, op. cit. 64-91.

⁶ Tribble, Phyllis, op. cit.

really was. It was no longer disguised or softened by allegorising interpretations or the sort of focus that condoned brutality against women within the larger framework of Israel's salvific relationship with God.

This perception was important. It was particularly important for previously diffident women readers, because it encouraged them to exercise a judgement on biblical texts, based on their own experience and feeling, in some cases, their *fellow-feeling* with these victims of rape and male arrogance. They were able to articulate a vision of justice based on a *personal* sense of injustice. They were able to express their anger that stories like these had been presented to them as somehow authoritative for their lives as women. But this in itself drew attention to the fact that it was not simply male characters who brutalised female ones within 'sacred' scripture. The women were being obscured or misrepresented by the sort of interpretation they were given. They were being abused by those who called the narratives 'sacred' in the first place. And it was clear that the majority of those who published or preached on the subject of sacred scripture were, at that time, men and not women.

1. 3 In Memory of Her: The Historical Approach.

One serious implication of the growing view that women within the Bible were largely absent, treated as ciphers or badly used, was that it appeared to compromise the whole

status of scripture as the bearer of "Good News". From a more historical critical and faith-committed perspective, the early work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, sought to address the problem. Fiorenza drew attention to the interpreters. Practices of critical historical scholarship, she argued, were far from objective. They were coloured by largely unacknowledged sexist presuppositions that made it possible to ignore, for example, the evidence of women's significant presence within the earliest historical Christian communities. Moreover, she reminded her readers that history is largely written by the winners⁷ - in this case, men rather than women. She set to work to *reclaim* the history of those 'losers', those female figures, convinced that the New Testament could stand as a memorial to the full and autonomous role of women alongside men within the earliest Christian context⁸. And in this way she argued that the New Testament could also support the right of women to self-determination within the Christian Churches and interpretative communities of the late twentieth century.

⁷ Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, *In Memory of Her* (London, S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1983). xix. She is here, referring to the words of Alex Haley, the African-American author of *Roots*, an epic retelling of the journey of African Americans from Africa to America.

⁸ See, for example, an essay included within the volume, Collins, A. Y. (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Chico, California, Scholars Press, 1985), entitled "Remembering the Past in Creating the Future: Historical-critical Scholarship and Feminist Biblical Interpretation". For a more specific, textual study see "Missionaries, Apostles, Co-workers: Romans 16 and the Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History", first published in 1986. Reprinted in Loades, A. (ed.), *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London, S.P.C.K., 1990). 57-71.

1.4 Beyond the Phallocratic Mythology: Radical Inferences.

Alongside these early works of feminist biblical criticism, contemporary feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, and more radically, Mary Daly, had drawn attention to the theological and mythological content of a Christian culture. The emphasis remained one of indicating how Christian theology and mythology was implicitly or explicitly hostile to women. Mary Daly eventually moved into a 'post-Christian' phase, concluding that Christian theology is simply the sacralising of a deeply phallocratic⁹ mythology, injurious to any woman's chances of wholeness and happiness. For example, in her 1979 book, *Gyn/Ecology*, she attacks writer Erich Neumann, for attempting to mask the necrophiliac tendencies of a phallocracy that places Christ's lingering death by crucifixion at the centre of its mythic structures:

The bland "objective" scholarly style dulls the reader's capacity to cut through to a realization of the horror of phallocratic myth. Hags should certainly question *why* such "fruit" of the tree of death is equated to a pledge of the "promised land", for the situation hardly looks promising. We should also question how he could be the life at work in the tree since the "tree" is obviously dead and he is on his way to the same state. As for the "mysterious... and contradictory nature of the tree" - the confusion here is mind-boggling. For a tree *is* mysterious but it is *not* contradictory. What is contradictory is Reversal Religion's reduction/reversal of the Tree of Life to a torture

⁹ By this term, Daly refers to the underlying fear of and aggression towards women, which is present but disguised within male-constructed moralities, so that many are deceived. See Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (First published, 1978. London, The Woman's Press, 1991). 30-31.

cross. In this pseudocosmos of contradictions anything can make "sense".¹⁰

Daly sees the comparison of cross and tree as a ghastly reversal or reading of pre-Christian and pagan mythological associations between women and the tree as a symbol of growing, living, fertile things. Daly's critique, for example, of the 'sado-masochistic' tendencies within Christian mythology implies that Christian texts reflect the hostile intentions of phallogocratic writers towards women, and that these are then relayed and amplified by theologians reading them within a patriarchal¹¹ context where their authority is based upon male power-broking.

2 Revealing Which Text?

2.1 What Does the Emperor's Nakedness Signify?

I owe a debt to these early readings - and particularly to Daly's book *Gyn/Ecology*¹² - for enabling me to give a name to something I have found troubling within biblical interpretation, and more generally within Christian life and theology. Through these feminist readings, I too saw that the Emperor - in my case this was largely the unyielding corpus (corpse?) of what I was required to read as an undergraduate studying theology twenty years ago - was

¹⁰ Daly, Mary, op. cit. 80.

¹¹ By using the term 'patriarchal' or 'patriarchy' I am referring to a model of social and cultural organisation, which understands all institutions, relationships, roles and activities to be male-defined and operating in order to protect male privilege.

¹² Daly, Mary, op. cit.

wearing no clothes. It wasn't simply that I was too dense to understand the subtleties revealed by men more perceptive than myself. The problem was that, in some important respects, their perceptions were different from mine.

But there is a limit to the usefulness of this process of laying bare the Emperor's nakedness. It is my view that the biblical texts, like all texts, are part of a continuing and complex interpretative interplay, such as that described by philosopher Julia Kristeva in terms of 'intertextuality'¹³. Readers must eventually go beyond the admittedly bracing and energising business of pointing their fingers at the iniquities of patriarchal vanities and power-broking. The early work of Tribble, Fiorenza, Daly and Ruether was primarily, and quite understandably, motivated by a concern for women in terms of advocacy, which lead them to simplify the interpretative interplay with the biblical texts, in favour of highlighting the massive evidence of sexist practice - original writers and subsequent readers included. But, let me return, for a moment, to the story of the little boy whose words enabled the people to see and name the Emperor's nakedness. In spite of the fact that in the original version, Hans Andersen makes no reference to the Emperor's physical appearance, most illustrations make the Emperor's nakedness grotesque, invariably shielding his sex from view. Nakedness, being laid bare, is instantly clothed again in a rich variety of significance. It is being read as a sign of an Emperor's gullibility and vanity, his

¹³ See below, section 5. 2.

shame and his common humanity that tells the lie to his Imperial pretensions. What is revealed is a great deal more than the fact of his nakedness. Going back to the biblical text, I observe that revealing or laying bare what lies in the biblical text, opens the flood gates to further interpretation in much the same way as the nakedness of the Emperor leads us to reflect upon what further story this tells. What further stories does the evidence of biblical 'texts of terror' tell? Perhaps they are stories about the brutal tyranny of men over women. Perhaps they are stories about how the tradition recognises and notes, rather than obliterates, the brutal tyranny of men over women. Perhaps they are stories about how, whatever it is that women represent, it cannot be excised and eradicated because it is foundational, if troublingly so. Perhaps they are stories about the multiplicity of all this.

2. 2 Mieke Bal: An Interpretative Model of Greater Complexity.

Mieke Bal's work as a literary critic of biblical texts, gives full recognition to this complexity. If she is concerned to illustrate the ways in which the biblical text is interpreted aggressively to control and exclude women - whether readers or characters - she is also concerned to excavate the strength, intelligence and resolve of women buried within the text itself. Using a combination of methodological and conceptual tools - the insights of historical scholarship alongside those of psychoanalysis and modern or post-modern literary theory, she notes through a process of

close reading, the traces within the texts of disruptive, unyielding female presences. Far from simple victims, these presences threaten and trouble male characters and readers alike, challenging the coherence of traditional readings and suggesting new 'counter-coherences'. Bal defines counter-coherences in *Death and Dissymmetry*¹⁴. Fundamentally, she continually probes the premises of 'coherent' biblical interpretation to discover where presuppositions are based upon ideological assumptions - for example, about the nature or role of women. She thus clears the ground, allowing other coherences, for example, in terms of a psycho-analytic drama to emerge. She does not, however, go on to claim that this counter-coherence is itself the only or true interpretation but simply that it counters or opposes dangerous and even deadly claims to possess the truth.

3 The Aims of the Present Work.

3.1 A Relationship Between Reader and Text.

Bal's work is largely focused on female characters within the text - even if they are silent or scarcely more than mentioned - whereas the text I have chosen as an extended "case-study" is the Prologue of John's Gospel (Jn 1:1-18), in which there are no female characters. My aim is to review the relationship between reader and text in a way that reflects both Bal's practice of close reading of the text and

¹⁴ Bal, Mieke, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1988).7.

her sensitivity to female presences and feminist issues, but to place such reading in the context of specific historical interpretation of the Prologue. By this procedure I hope to draw attention to the characteristic complexities of feminist biblical interpretation.

3.2 The Thematic Context of the Conversation

(i) The Biblical Text - Incarnation As a Way of Dealing with Difference.

This Johannine text is, I believe, a particularly appropriate choice. Its historical readers are concerned with the issue of Christ's incarnation¹⁵ and thus, inevitably, with definitions of 'divine' and 'human' nature¹⁶ and with the relationship between them. And in the light of modern feminist criticism, any discussion of Christ's representative humanity¹⁷ or of ideal redeemed human¹⁸, or indeed of

¹⁵ It should be noted that the specifically Johannine concept of 'Logos' clearly introduced a formulative ambiguity into Christian thought at an early stage, by apparently driving a wedge between the earthly context of Jesus' life and death and the timeless context of divine intervention, thus, on one interpretation, forcing the early Christian churches to contemplate the ontological status of divine incarnation. The formulation of orthodox Christology reached at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.), that Christ remains dual in respect of 'natures' but still a single 'person', has remained significant for most Christian believers up until the very recent past.

¹⁶ Within the Prologue of John's Gospel, the words used for the divine Logos becoming human (Jn 1:14) are the Greek words 'ἐγένετο' (the verb may carry the sense of birth) and 'σαρξ' (distinguished from the expression 'ἄνθρωπος'). There are then strong indications of a connection with that which is symbolically associated with the female.

¹⁷ The argument, very recently rehearsed in debates about the ordination of women, that only a man can represent Christ at the altar, suggests that feminist concerns about the extent of Christ's representative function, might not be without foundation. There is a strong sense within the Roman Catholic tradition particularly, amounting almost to a substitution of Christ as the new Adam in the parallel devotion to Mary as the new Eve. Jerome, indeed wrote:

divinity¹⁹, must make some reference to gender, since it is one of the insights of all feminisms, that the whole of humanity has been defined previously in terms of the normative status of the male, the inferiority or lack of the female.

(ii) The Biblical Text - The Absence or Marginality of Women.

This text, then, gives feminist commentators scope to refine their understanding of marginality - the manifest absence of Woman and the feminine from the visible centre or

'Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary' (See further Warner, *Marina Alone of All Her Sex* (First published 1976. London, Picador, 1990). 50-67.)

¹⁸ See for example, the long tradition within the Christian churches of the imitation of Christ, beginning perhaps in the Gospels' vision of Jesus' own mission, but also found more explicitly within the Pauline material in terms of the expected pattern of life within the mystery of 'Christ in you' (2 Corinthians 13:3'5), that might well lead to martyrdom. A more literal interpretation of *'imitatio Christi'* is discovered during the medieval period - in Bernard of Clairvaux's 'meditations on the 'states' of the sacred life', and also, of course, in the phenomenon known as *'stigmata'*, the first reported incident of which was Francis Assisi. The balance, within the Christian life as between *'imitatio'* and, in Luther's expression *'conformitas'*, has shifted through the years. But in both cases, differences of gender within a patriarchal culture will have had to have been accounted for. Such is in evidence even within the Pauline material itself, where the obedience of a wife to her loving husband, within the conventions of Ephesian society, is upheld, as it were in imitation of Christ's love for the obedient Church. (Eph 5:32 ff.)

¹⁹ See, for example, Luce Irigaray's essay "Divine Women" (Venice-Mestre, June 8, 1984. Interdisciplinary study organised by the Women's Centre on *Melusine*. Reprinted in Irigaray, Luce, Gill, Gillian (trans.), *Sexes and Genealogies*, 1993). Here, Irigaray argues that the absence of woman from western traditions of the divine is paralysing for women, particularly when accompanied by strong Marian, maternal traditions: "Our tradition presents and represents the radiant glory of the mother, but rarely shows us a fulfilled woman. And it forces us to make murderous choices: either mother (given that a boy child is what makes us truly mothers) or woman (prostitute and property of the male). We have no female trinity. But as long as a woman lacks a divine made in her image, she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own. She lacks an ideal that would be her goal or path in becoming". Irigaray, Luce, op. cit. 63-64.

foundation of modern western culture. The Prologue of John's Gospel is a text from which it could be argued, commentators have tried to derive theological justification for this marginalisation. In presenting a narrative of creation, which harks back to the creation narratives of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, *all* female figures - including the divinely creative Wisdom and Mary, the new Eve - have been omitted.

(iii) The Biblical Text - The Logic of Identity.

Reading the biblical texts takes place within an interpretative matrix, operating both in terms of cultural reading practices - who gets to read, when and where - and in terms of the conceptual tools employed. One important feature of this matrix identified by feminist and post-modern philosophy, is its binary character, represented in a classic sense by the difference or distinction between male and female. This distinction is understood, not as a purely sexist bias or prejudice that theoretically, could be eliminated, but as a characteristic of the logic within which rational thinking has taken place within the whole patriarchal context of the Christian Churches. This perception, characteristic of the work of post-modern philosophers and writers like Jacques Derrida²⁰ and Hélène Cixous²¹, identifies a logic of identity governing

²⁰ On the critical analysis of the 'transcendental signified' - as it were, the presumption of a single being or truth, guaranteeing or underpinning all speech and writing - see, for example, Derrida, *Jacques Of Grammatology*. (Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (trans.) Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). 19 ff.

²¹ See, for example, "The Newly Born Woman", in, Sellers, Susan, *op. cit.* 37-46.

most of Western thought, through whose phallogocentric principles²², a fundamental conceptual division is opened up. This affects all aspects of human living and is crucially interpreted in hierarchical or exclusive terms. Thus, it supports other cultural and conceptual structures that identify women with that which is different or "Other", shunting them off in the direction of threatening or even diabolical²³ marginality. In the light of these fundamental presuppositions about a conceptual and logical division, then, it is less important to choose texts featuring individual women. Indeed, female characters might reveal considerably less than this pregnant absence within the Prologue.

²² 'Phallogocentricity' is a term used by some feminists in arguing that the masculine or male - symbolised by the phallus - is regarded as normative, and the female or feminine - symbolised by the lack of the phallus - is aberration or absence. It is associated particularly with the perception of the 'invisibility' or 'marginality' of the feminine within all forms of cultural expression, and particularly within language seen as a system of male-defined symbols. See, for example, Du Bois, B. "Passionate scholarship: notes on values, knowing and method in feminist social science", in Bowles, G. and R. Duelli Klein (eds.), *Theories of Women's Studies* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983). Phallogocentricity is understood as the centrality, not simply of the masculine symbol (phallus), but of the male voice (logos) in framing the everyday discursive world in which this symbolism of singularity (the phallus) operates. This term is usually attributed to Jacques Derrida, but used widely by other commentators. It could be said, perhaps, that the notion of feminine diversity and multiplicity represented by, for example, *jouissance* (female, multiple pleasure) and *écriture féminine* in the work of French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, is a specific rejection of, and response to this determination.

²³ See Irigaray, Luce "Divine Women", op. cit. 64. Irigaray maintains that the "only diabolical thing about women is her lack of a God and the fact that, deprived of God, they are forced to comply with models that do not match them, that exile, double, mask them, cut them off from themselves and from one another..."

4 The Shape of the Study.

4.1 A Series of Historical Conversations.

In order to explore the intertextualities of reading the bible as a feminist, I intend to begin with an analysis of five readings of the biblical text in question, from the fifth to the twentieth century. These interpretations are taken from a variety of theological traditions and include the discourse of (marginalised) women as well as interpretation at the defining centre of patriarchal orthodoxy. The purpose of this initial process of analysis is to lay out more clearly the characteristic patterns of interpretation within a fundamentally pre-feminist, patriarchal context.

(i) **Augustine** delivered his homilies on John's Gospel some time between 406 and 416, whilst he was the bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine, a convert from the dualistic philosophy of the Manichaeans, preached an orthodox view of Christ's full humanity, but retains within these sermons, a symbolic association of body and flesh with the feminine, which cannot be separated from his suspicion of sexuality as the site of concupiscence.

(ii) **Hildegard von Bingen** wrote *Liber divinorum operum* during the period from 1163-1173, whilst she was Abbess of a Benedictine convent in the Rhineland. The first part of this work of visionary theology is a meditation on the incarnational theme of the first 14 verses of the Prologue. Whilst writing within a tradition that might be regarded as fundamentally Augustinian, Hildegard's

cosmological vision and sapiential themes, allowed the bodily and the feminine, a far more positive and more integrated significance within this text than Augustine had demonstrated.

(iii) **Martin Luther** began his series of sermons on John 1-4 in July 1537. Within the context of a disputatious and sometimes dangerous age of religious controversy Luther, like Augustine, uses his sermons to address various heretics with the call of reformed orthodoxy. Luther emphasises in these sermons, the redemptive humanity of the Word, but also wrestles with the implications of such an apparently paradoxical connection with the flesh. A drive in Luther's sermons towards the divine singularity of his theology, finds itself hindered by the disturbing flotsam and jetsam, particularly of Marian traditions, dragging along in its wake.

(iv) **Rudolf Bultmann** published his commentary on the Gospel of John in 1941 whilst war was raging in Europe. Bultmann's work on John is, however, that of a scholar and teacher rather than a pastor or social critic. His approach to the Gospel of John was, nevertheless, in a significant sense innovative, attempting a synthesis between the radical implications of Heideggerian existentialism, and the increasing sophistication of 'scientific' historical criticism within the field of biblical studies. Whilst 'Incarnation'

within Bultmann's work is demythologised²⁴, the demythologised realm of humanity is once again characterised by the 'feminine' features of a typical patriarchal symbolism.

(v) **Adrienne von Speyr** published her reflections on the Prologue of John's Gospel in 1953. From 1942 she had experienced the stigmata - the visible, sensible marks of crucifixion - each year during Holy Week. Von Speyr's intense meditations on the Prologue, envisage a consensual principle of creative obedience within the divinity itself, reminiscent of Hildegard's understanding of God's work of Incarnation in the cosmos, and characteristic of Roman Catholic Marian traditions. However, von Speyr's view of obedience and openness to God, appears to be bound far more specifically to patriarchal values, and to the binary logic of identity. This is illustrated in the way in which she clearly felt herself restricted to a quintessentially 'feminine' form of suffering and silence. In consequence, she seems to have been forced to focus on physical symptoms as her main point of access to the authoritative Word of God.

In all these interpretations it is possible to see the trace of the persistent logic of identity, which attempts to escape from the uncomfortably polyvalent implications of Jn 1:14 'the Word became flesh', by promoting a view of the flesh

²⁴ Demythologising is, very broadly, a form of interpretation that attempts to remove the mythic elements of narratives, so that it may be understood in the categories of modern 'scientific' women and men. In theological terms, it is most notably associated with the work of Rudolf Bultmann. See below, Chapter 5.

in terms of the contaminating, perverse otherness, symbolised by woman and the feminine, that is ultimately to be jettisoned without significant loss to either God or man(sic)kind.

4.2 More Unsettling Conversations

In the second part of this study of the Prologue, I attempt to read and interpret the text in ways that are explicitly and self-consciously intended to be multiple, in order to unsettle the existing choices of traditional orthodoxy. However, in some sense they could also be characterised as advantageous to women. They are located at the cross-roads/point of intersection of text and interpretative need. In other words I am also trying to read this text for myself as a woman. There are undoubtedly other ways to read it.

Against the background of these five historical readings, then, I have written three alternative interpretations of the text, that attempt through their multiplicity to resist the tendencies of power-broking singular, monolithic readings, and also, to challenge or complicate the nature or use of the symbols of woman and the feminine as they are present or absent within the text.

(i) A first reading of the Prologue takes shape from a point of 'focalisation'²⁵ other than that of God or Word, or of a narrator whose position could be identified with these. Its 'resistance' is to be found in the proposal that the Prologue

²⁵ See, Bal, Mieke, *Narratology* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, University of Toronto Press, 1985). 100 ff..

be read in an ironic mode whose underlying premise is the feminist challenge to patriarchal culture as a whole. Within the overarching gender symbolism of patriarchal culture, the masculine/feminine relationship is clearly related to the divine/human relationship. The irony (both intended and unintended?) is that the human (feminine) term is primary "Only the one who is sent can reveal the one who has sent him"²⁶. Once again, it is suggested that the symbols of woman and the feminine, do not have to be read in this text as either perverse or expendable.

(ii) The second form of reading the Prologue focuses on how the alternative readings of 'σάρξ' within this text reflect an almost thematic instability, which is picked up again in John 6. Whilst contemporary interpretation frequently seeks to smooth away the evidence of such suggestive inconsistencies, 'σάρξ' seems to possess, in terms of this instability, a strong relevance to the very reversal and upheaval of which divine incarnation is the theological expression. Once again, the implication is that the symbols of woman and the feminine indicate a highly significant and even potentially positive resonance within this text.

(iii) The third alternative, 'counter-coherence' is to read it as a record in mythic terms of a drama of developing human subjectivity. This approach employs the philosopher Julia Kristeva's understanding of subjectivity "en procès" - that is to say male and female subjectivity in

²⁶ Käsemann, Ernst, *The Testament of Jesus* (London, S.C.M. Press, 1968), 23.

that is to say male and female subjectivity in process and on trial. It focuses on the Prologue as a drama of initial fusion followed by a vital and creative, but always painful separation. In this reading, woman and the feminine appear as fundamentally maternal, but they also represent resistance to any form of ultimate exclusion.

5 Methodological Considerations

5.1 Handling Feminist Theory

A series of methodological considerations underpin this study. Some of them have to do with handling feminist theory. Feminist theory is a term covering all attempts to describe and articulate a 'woman-centred' perspective. Feminist theory uses certain key organising concepts such as 'patriarchy', 'phallogocentricity' or 'difference'²⁷ which deal with the position of women in relation to men. It is also concerned with issues of *female* subjectivity, of the prioritising of a disciplined attention to sensual pleasures

²⁷ Feminists use this term broadly in two ways. In the first case, difference is understood to imply the difference of women's experience of themselves and the world in a potentially positive way that takes systematic social stereotyping of sexual difference head on. This sense of difference can encompass many different aspects of that experience including language (for example in the work of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray), gender identity (for example in the work of Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow) sexual preference (for example, see the work of Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly). Alternatively, difference is related to power, as woman is indexed as, in Simone de Beauvoir's phrase, 'Other to man', and black woman as other to white women (See, for example, Lorde, A., "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, California, The Crossing Press, 1984)). Most significantly in this thesis, is the sense of difference understood in the work of Julia Kristeva, where difference, defining to all sense of subjectivity, also functions as a guard against the tendencies towards monolithic totalitarianism within patriarchal society and culture, particularly as demonstrated in art and literature. This is, more specifically enunciated in the concept of heterogeneity. See below, Chapter 9.

and pains and of intuitive thinking versus an exclusive commitment to logic or intellectual reasoning. It is surely no coincidence, for example, that both Hildegard von Bingen and Adrienne von Speyr, were afflicted by forms of physical suffering and debility to which they gave theological significance²⁸. It is also notable that Hildegard, who was to a large extent unschooled, gave expression to her devotion in terms of the sensual delights of both music and painting.

(i) One way of introducing feminist or women centred concerns into reading the biblical text, is to employ a hermeneutic of suspicion. The expression 'hermeneutic of suspicion' was first coined by the French critical theorist, Paul Ricoeur. In his work, suspicion, such as that cast on the Kantian notion of the will by theorists like Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud, was hermeneutic in the sense that it called for increasing sophistication of the arguments in favour of an ontological position. In the interpretation of religious texts, Ricoeur saw such an "attitude of suspicion and cautious critical scrutiny", to be necessary in order to reveal more precisely the sense in which their "peculiar mode of dissimulation" might be defended as positively significant²⁹.

²⁸ See below, Chapter 3.

²⁹ See Ricoeur, Paul, *The Conflict of Interpretations* Ihde, Don (ed.), (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1974). 442. "For this reason, religion demands a type of interpretation that is adapted to its own peculiar mode of dissimulation, i.e., an interpretation of illusion as distinct from simple "error" in the epistemological sense of the word, or as distinct from "lying", in the ordinary ethical sense of the word. Illusion is itself a cultural function. Such a fact presupposes that the public meanings of our consciousness conceal

The expression was used, analogously, by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to describe the sharpening of her fundamentally historical-critical analysis of the New Testament, in order to defend the possibility of rescuing the autonomous and charismatic women of the early Christian Church³⁰. In the context of this study, suspicion is directed at the metanarratives created by readers of the Prologue. The underlying question to be posed is whether the text may indeed be said to possess positive significance for feminist readers.

(ii) Another way of giving voice to feminist concerns with voiceless or silenced female voices and presences, is through deconstructive analysis. In undertaking a work of feminist biblical criticism, I am clearly, first and foremost, engaged in analysing the biblical text.

Of course, one clear trend within feminist theory is to move away from analysis altogether, towards something apparently more creative, such as poetry. Some feminist writers and theologians have wished to move right away from existing texts, especially the classic texts of patriarchy such as the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. They strive to avoid the very shape of exclusions and the drive

true meanings, which can be brought to light only by adopting the attitude of suspicion and cautious critical scrutiny."

³⁰ See, *In Memory of Her* (London, S.C.M. Press Ltd, 1983). xxiii.

towards singularity that seems characteristic of what Hélène Cixous, once called "the spurious Phallogentric Performing Theater"³¹. This they do by, for example, reading and writing on the body, the site of diffuse pleasures and the reverberating "what-comes-before-language" - in other words the very type of a non-text, so strongly associated with women in the past.

Arguably, however, this *écriture féminine* cannot altogether evade the texts of the past, since these are still determining the overall agenda, by determining which site has been buried or neglected. But it strains towards a poetic that is not mimetic, and away from reflecting and imitating existing (male) texts. However, I believe that it can be argued, all forms of mimesis are also poetic³². This enables me, critically, to acknowledge the past, rather than having to try and dismiss it into oblivion in an attempt to be truly creative. In the words of Luce Irigaray, "[t]he passage from one era to the next cannot be made simply by negating what already exists"³³. And, as Kirsten Andersen points out in a recent essay on feminist biblical interpretation, discounting all historical texts, and all the insights of their past interpretation leads into mere solipsism and the indefensible claim that "tradition begins with me".³⁴

³¹ See, Sellers, Susan, op. cit. 41.

³² This is a point discussed at some length by Paul Ricoeur in his book, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977). See especially 36-42.

³³ Irigaray, Luce *je, tu, nous: Toward a culture of Difference* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993). 23.

³⁴ Andersen, Kirsten, "Mimetic Reflections when Reading a Text in the Image of Gender" in Hunter, A. and Jasper, A. (eds.) *Talking it*

The broadly deconstructive mode of analysis undertaken by scholars and critics like Mieke Bal and Julia Kristeva is thus, as much ideologically as methodologically suited to my work on the text. It seeks to release the multiplicity of texts, finding another story told in the same words, or to find in the gaps, and inconsistencies of any text, a clue to the essential heterogeneity³⁵ of human motivations and desires that may encompass past interpretations as well as encouraging future ones.

5. 2 Dealing With the Nature and Process of Reading

(i) My understanding of this process is strongly influenced by Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality. In her essay translated as "Word, Dialogue and Novel", and published in *The Kristeva Reader*, Kristeva refers to Mikhail Bakhtin's classification of words within a narrative, to explore the sense in which such words work on different levels, and possess varying degrees of ambivalence, in order to contest any notion that narrative can be regarded as monologic, or univocal. Narrative is ...

... an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the

Over: *Perspectives on Women and Religion 1993-5* (Glasgow, Trinity St. Mungo Press, 1996). 19.

³⁵ Fundamentally, Kristeva uses this term to describe, in the journey of the subject, a sort of functional inability to entirely heal the wound of separation, or completely close the boundaries between the semiotic and the symbolic. Moving between the two is a restless painful process but also a creative one.

character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context.³⁶

From Bakhtin, she adopts the notion of dialogism that becomes the basis for her own view of the text as a mosaic of quotations in which any text is "the absorption and transformation of another"³⁷. What she wants to make clear however is that there is also a pressure within language itself, that continually frustrates and indeed, mocks analytical effort from within homogenous static systems.³⁸ She is, so to speak, always aware that the universe cannot be entirely reduced to literature, any more than literature can be entirely reduced to the work of literary criticism or theoretical analysis³⁹. For Kristeva, all elements involved within interpretation do not belong on the same level. She indicates that the semiotic, pre-linguistic drives and energies of the human body are also implicated in any process of reading and interpretation, signalling their presences through slips and logical inconsistencies, sounding in the linguistic miming of bodily rhythms. This is the point at which her interests dovetail

³⁶ Kristeva, Julia, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", in Moi, Toril (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986). op. cit. 36.

³⁷ Kristeva, Julia, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", op. cit. 37.

³⁸ See, for example, Kristeva, Julia, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", op. cit., and Moi's introduction, op. cit. 34.

³⁹ See, Genette, Gérard, "Structuralism and literary criticism" in Lodge, David (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory* (London and New York, Longman, 1988). 64. In Kristeva, Julia, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (First published 1974. New York, Columbia University Press, 1984), 59-60, Kristeva speaks about intertextuality as the "passage of one sign system to another":

"The term *inter-textuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of "study of sources", we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of thethetic ..."

with those of other feminist philosophers since she endeavours in this way to uncover the presence of the female-identified body in the arena of conceptual rational analysis and creative writing⁴⁰.

(ii) **Summary:** The *meaning* of the Text? One important presupposition of this thesis then, is that the text has no 'meaning' in so far as that implies a single, fixed or 'correct' interpretation, but neither is it 'meaningless'. I do not dispense with the idea of a text altogether, but argue that any question or project has to be directed at or formulated from the face of intersection between text and interpreting or reading subjectivity - whether unified or fragmented, mine or someone else's.

It is for this reason then, that the thesis is divided into two sections. In the first section, the primary intertextuality is between myself as reader and a series of historical readers of the Prologue. In the second section, the primary intertextuality is between myself as reader and the text of the Prologue. But, illustrating the complexity of the reading process, in both cases, there are subsidiary intersections reflecting the perception that every text is itself a reading, an interpretation of some further text or oral narrative, and every reader is reading with an eye upon any number of other interpretative dialogues or conversations - with other

⁴⁰ See below, Chapter 9, "In the Beginning was Love" in which I attempt an analysis of the Prologue based on the principles of Kristeva's 'semanalysis'. This aspect of her theoretical work is treated in greater detail at this point.

readers of the text, or even with the unconscious within their own 'subjectivity'⁴¹.

5.3 Reading the Biblical Text

(i) **Authorial intention and the authority of the original text.** I am not, in this study, concerned with what the 'original meaning' of the text might have been, if, for example, that is defined in terms of the intentionality⁴² of its author or the notion of an original 'intended reader'⁴³. This does not mean that I absolutely abandon any concept of authorial intention. Naturally enough, an author's view of what s/he is doing presents one obvious interpretative framework! But such perceived intentions cannot be exclusively authoritative. In the first place, an author's conscious intentions very rapidly become - in an ultimate sense - a matter of speculation once they are no longer on hand to explain. Some authors never explain. And even intentions stated publicly by authors may be, or may be accounted lies or self-deceptions, or unsatisfactory and

⁴¹ I use this term in the sense understood by Kristeva in speaking of the *sujet en procès*. See below, Chapter 9, "In the Beginning was Love".

⁴² The issue of authorial intentionality, and the limitations of such a concept in the analysis of any text, was most notably raised by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley in "The Intentional Fallacy", *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Kentucky, University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

⁴³ The idea of John's 'intended readership' plays a structural part within the analysis proposed by John Ashton in his book, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991). 113. " ...the intended impact on the readers is the only kind of aim or purpose which is really integral to a full understanding of the work as such. *Pace* Bultmann, it must be included in any complete account of *das erste Rätsel*, the problem of locating the Fourth Gospel within the history of early Christianity."

insubstantial, particularly by later commentators in search of the 'truth'.

Texts may function quite satisfactorily for readers without explanatory notes. Moreover, of course, the writers of explanatory notes always have their own agendas. The significance of any text then, transcends the conscious intentions of its author as every new moment of reading and interpretation inevitably creates its own intertextualities. In as far then, as I make reference to the work of biblical critics, Church historians or historians of western culture, these are seen as individual readers, or possibly as representatives of a certain 'genre' of interpretation, who undoubtedly have much to contribute in terms of critique or corroborative evidence, but who must still be seen to operate with their own set of presuppositions and relations of power within a patriarchal reading context. As indeed, must I.

(ii) **Real readers.** The text becomes 'significant'⁴⁴ in interaction with readers. By 'readers', this thesis - unless

⁴⁴ The term 'significant' used in preference to 'meaning' for example, refers the reader to conclusions drawn originally from the work of the linguist Ferdinand Saussure, who proposed fundamentally that signifiers (that is the word or acoustic image, 'ox' for example) were related to the signified (that is the concept, ox) only by convention, within a system of such conventional relations. Julia Kristeva understands significance as incorporating within such a linguistic system, an encoding of archaic and fluidly pervasive (feminine?) forces that are not given open expression, but which nevertheless may produce disruption within the patriarchal context. (See, for example Kristeva, Julia, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984), of which a section is reprinted within Moi, Toril (ed.), op. cit. 34-61.

otherwise indicated - implies real readers, and not the literary concept of an 'implied reader'. The concept of the 'implied reader', which is taken originally from the work of Wolfgang Iser, was introduced to readers of the secondary Johannine literature through Alan Culpepper's groundbreaking study *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* ⁴⁵. Culpepper, in trying to get away from approaches to the text that focused exclusively on sources and origins, used a communicational model of narrative derived from the work of Seymour Chatman to support his reading of the gospel as a unified narrative⁴⁶. This model suggests that an 'implied' author and an 'implied' reader are constructed by the selection and organisation of the material and by the literary choices involved in such processes as characterisation, narrative settings, the movement of the plot and by the implicit commentary of a particular symbolism or the use of irony or the role of the narrator. This author and reader are part of the - rhetorical - project of the Gospel, seen as the communication of a series of vital theological insights into the events they purport to report.

Whilst this is suggestive work, it does not speak in any substantial sense to the needs of feminist interpretation, since it is once again situated within the interpretative model that sees texts as related primarily to the

⁴⁵ Culpepper, Alan R., *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983). 6.

⁴⁶ Chatman, Seymour, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1978).

intentionality of authors, understood in a fundamentally redactive sense.

6 The Shining Garment of the Text.

6.1 Major Themes

The title I have chosen for this work is an attempt to indicate something of the multiplicity of themes that have emerged for me, as a result of making this study.

(i) **Texts.** One of these themes is that of the *text*. Texts are interpreted, or 'put on', by every new reader, according to her desires or anxieties and according to his desires and anxieties. But text, like the material of the Emperor's new clothes, is an intangible substance. What the story reveals is always ambivalent. And in particular, readers of texts, like the Emperor of the story must reckon with the danger of any attempt to make use of texts either to clothe themselves with authority or to cloak their most profound intentions from view. In other words, by trying to use texts, they run a real risk of revealing themselves. I am concerned here, to challenge those who would similarly use texts rather than read them.

(ii) **The fleshy garment of the feminine flesh.**

Secondly, the title refers to a figure of the *flesh* as a garment. This fleshy garment is strongly - although not invariably - associated, in the Christian west, with Woman as the site or cause of sensual desire, physical changeability

cause of sensual desire, physical changeability and decay. It becomes something of a text in its own right because, illuminated through this sort of association, are the outrageous pretensions of readers who try to reduce all the multiplicity of human living to such a symbol of the flesh, and then go on to declare that this is simply a veil, a container or an adornment for the divine Word, without any intrinsic value. Less frequently, however, the fleshly garment is also seen as the manifestation of the divine, an expression of that divine love in itself. In other words I am concerned by the fact that it is still incredibly difficult for readers of biblical texts to accredit something positive to the realm of bodily desires.

(iii) **Mirrors: illuminating reflections.** Thirdly, the implication of a shining garment draws attention to a image that has intrigued many modern feminists - that of *the mirror*. Virginia Woolf⁴⁷, Mary Daly⁴⁸, and Luce Irigaray⁴⁹, amongst others no doubt, see the ironies, the dangers and the opportunities of mirrors for women, as, in the past, the mirrors of men, and now to be used in order to reflect long and carefully upon themselves. Here is an attempt to look and see what, in the context of a self-conscious feminism, is

⁴⁷ See, for example, Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own* (First published, 1929. London, Grafton, 1977). 41.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Daly, Mary, *Beyond God the Father* (First published, 1973. London, The Women's Press, 1986). 195-198.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Irigaray, Luce, "Divine Women", op. cit. 65, and, of course, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris, 1974), in which Irigaray adapts Lacan's image of the mirror.

now being mirrored in the Word(s) of the Prologue. What I hope to see mirrored there, is, of course, my own face.

**The Shining Garment of the Text.
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.**

Part I

2

Having His Cake and Eating it: The
Symbolism of Gender in Augustine's
Tractates on the Prologue of John's
Gospel.

... drive carnal thought from your hearts that you may truly be under grace.¹

1 Introduction.

The term 'Tractates' refers in a technical sense in Latin Christian writings to a form of homily, specifically that of a bishop to his congregation². Seemingly, the Tractates on John's Gospel were originally delivered extemporaneously within a liturgical setting and taken down in some sort of shorthand³. In origin, therefore, they were designed for a mixed congregation that Augustine was teaching against the background of a number of other persuasive philosophical and

¹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), *St. Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John 1-10* (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1988). 89. Tractate 3:19 (1).

² See, Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 31f..

³ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 8f..

theological alternatives⁴. These are not texts written simply for the sophisticated or for wholly committed Catholics. There is no final consensus about when the first three Tractates - usually considered within a somewhat larger grouping - were written. Various dates have been suggested⁵ during the ten years from 406⁶ to 416⁷. All, at least, place the work during the period when Augustine was settled as Bishop of Hippo in North Africa.

⁴ Although the Emperor Constantine (274 or 288-337) ending persecution of the Church, had embraced Christianity and worked to unite the Christian Church with the secular state, pagan philosophy and religions continued to flourish during Augustine's formative years. Amongst the most important influences and alternatives open to Augustine, born to a pagan father and a Catholic mother, were neo-platonist philosophy - a reinterpretation and expansion of Platonic ideas, particularly as found in the work of Plotinus and his pupil, Porphyry and Manichaeism. Manichaeism was a form of heterodox Christianity, with an ultra-ascetic code of morality derived from a fundamentally dualistic cosmology. In later years, as a Catholic bishop, Augustine remained preoccupied with theological debates, engaging particularly with the work of Pelagius - declared heretical in 418. Pelagius, a British lay monk, took issue with Augustine on the grounds of the freedom of the will. He contested Augustine's conviction that humankind is entirely dependent for whatever they do or are that is good, upon the grace of God. He believed that such an attitude was incompatible with any sense of human responsibility, and would lead to lawlessness and sinful indulgence. Augustine was also preoccupied with the Donatists, a schismatic Christian group that looked with great suspicion on the, as they saw it, secularising activities of Catholic bishops. Those who co-operated with the civil authorities and were prepared to live at peace with their pagan neighbours were thought to have destroyed the authentic holiness and ritual purity of the Church.

⁵ To set these Tractates in the historical context of Augustine's better known writings: the *Confessions* have been commonly dated as belonging to the last years of the fourth century (397-8 according to *St. Augustine: Confessions* (Penguin Books, 1961)), whilst the *City of God* undoubtedly belongs to the period after the sacking of Rome by Alaric and his Goths in 410 (413-426 according to *Augustine: City of God* (Penguin Books, 1972)).

⁶ See, La Bonnardière, A. -M., *Recherches de chronologie augustiniennne* (Paris, 1965) and, for different reasons, Berrouard, M. -F., "La date des Tractatus I- IIV In Iohannis Evangelium de saint Augustin", *Recherches Augustiniennes* 7 (1971). 105-168.

⁷ See, Zarb, S. "Chronologia Tractatum S. Augustini in Euangelium primamque Epistolam Iohanne Apostoli." *Angelicum* 10 (1933) 50-110. A summary of scholarship concerned with the dating of these Tractates is to be found in Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 23-31.

In the course of the first three Tractates on the Prologue of John's Gospel, Augustine defends Catholic orthodoxy against Arians⁸, Manichaeans⁹ or neo-Platonists¹⁰ for the benefit of doubters or the faithful alike. He interprets the Prologue as saying that everything has been created by God the Word; the world, the sky and the earth¹¹ and also the spiritual powers of angels and archangels.¹² He says that God created all things and is not - like a craftsman who constructs a chest which is then separate from him - somehow detached from the world¹³. But although God, infused in the world, may be seen in the world¹⁴, it is not enough. For humankind is blinded by pride and swollen with sin. And the true light came precisely to "weak minds, to wounded hearts, to the vision of bleary-eyed souls"¹⁵. John the Baptist - a man of "immense merit, great grace, great eminence"¹⁶ but not himself the light - comes first as a witness to the true light who will shed his rays even on those who have injured eyes¹⁷. The true light shed by the cross of Christ, is a boat or ship which holds the faithful up as they struggle to cross the sea of the world¹⁸. The faithful,

⁸ See, for example, Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 50. Tractate 1:11 (1).

⁹ See, for example, Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 53. Tractate 1:14 (2).

¹⁰ See, for example, Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 63. Tractate 2: 4 (1).

¹¹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 49. Tractate 1: 9 (3).

¹² Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 50. Tractate 1: 9 (3).

¹³ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 68-9. Tractate 2: 10 (1).

¹⁴ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 63. Tractate 2: 4 (1).

¹⁵ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 66. Tractate 2: 7 (1).

¹⁶ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 65. Tractate 2: 5 (1).

¹⁷ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 66. Tractate 2: 7 (2).

¹⁸ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 62. Tractate 2: 2 (4).

though born of the will of the flesh, are, through Christ's birth from a woman, 'remade' through grace and born of God. And this astonishing grace¹⁹, administered by Christ the physician²⁰, cures the damaged sight. But with the cured sight, the faithful do not see with the 'eyes of the flesh'.²¹ The physician's medicines are still "rather bitter and sharp"²² and in order to be truly under grace, rather than under the law that simply points out the sickness without offering a cure, there must still be a struggle and an enduring. Finally then, Augustine urges his people: "drive carnal thoughts from your hearts that you may truly be under grace, that you may belong to the New Testament"²³

2 Female Figures in Augustine's Tractates on the Prologue.

2. 1 A Hierarchical Discourse.

Augustine's rhetoric has a persuasive rather than coercive tone. He acknowledges that the truth of the matter is ineffable and yet listeners and speakers, even the apostle and evangelist John himself, must persist in trying to speak as they are capable, inspired by God:

Ultimately, God's mercy will be present so that there will perhaps be benefit enough for all, and each person will grasp what he can. In fact, the speaker, too, says what he is capable of saying. For who can say it as it is?²⁴

¹⁹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 73. Tractate 2: 15 (2).

²⁰ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 77. Tractate 3: 3 (1).

²¹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 89. Tractate 3: 18 (1).

²² Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 86. Tractate 3: 14 (2).

²³ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 89. Tractate 3: 19 (1).

²⁴ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 42. Tractate 1:1 (1).

Something of the appeal of Augustine's writing is contained in this preliminary remark. For whilst it is quite clear that the matters with which he deals are of overwhelming importance to him, he does not harangue his listeners. In this sense his commitment to reason and to the logic of the mind seems eirenic in an exemplary way. It excludes - theoretically at least - the mere imposition of views based upon his power as teacher or bishop²⁵. It accepts the need for conviction to grow as the gradual accumulation of arguments, individually acknowledged. His understanding of faith does not preclude the assent of the rational mind.

And yet a certain pre-eminence of reason and the rational mind within the patriarchal context is something that feminists have found disturbing. Within this patriarchal context the symbols of woman and the feminine typically represent the absence or antithesis of reason or rationality. Admittedly, there is little indication in Augustine's work of the virulent misogynism to be found, for example, in the earlier writings of Tertullian (c. 160-220)²⁶. Neither does he assume that individual women are essentially less rational than

²⁵ It does have to be said however, that as a Bishop, Augustine - notwithstanding some initial trepidation - was prepared to endorse the imperial government's forcible interventions against the Donatist extremists of Numidia. Moreover, he devoted some time and energy to providing a rationalisation for this policy which, whilst bringing an end to implacable antagonisms and sporadic violence particularly against Catholic clergy, also had the not insignificant consequence of strengthening the hand of the Catholic Church in North Africa. See, for example, Chadwick, Henry, *Augustine* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986). 75 ff..

²⁶ See for example, *De Cultu Feminarum* 1:1. Here, it is Eve who is deemed "the Devil's Gateway".

men, as is suggested, for example, in the work of Philo (c. 20 B.C.E.-50 C.E.) in his synthesis of Genesis with Greek philosophy²⁷. Augustine was quite clear that women as well as men were made in God's image and that they were possessed of reason in equal measure. However, given that the account of Genesis proposed some divine reason for creating men and women differently, he justified the subordination of women on the grounds that that subordination represented a subordination of corporeal, fleshly or practical concerns to a higher spiritual form of Reason:

But because she differs from man by her bodily sex, that part of the reason which is turned aside to regulate temporal things could be properly symbolised by her corporeal veil; so that the image of God does not remain except in that part of the mind of man in which it clings to the contemplation and consideration of the eternal reasons, which, as is evident, not only men but also women possess.²⁸

The superiority of reason and the rational mind in Augustine's work then, was bound to compound and concentrate reflection on woman and the feminine as natural symbols of a *devalued* realm of human experience.

2. 2 Divine Wisdom.

If Augustine's attitude expressed towards women and the feminine within his theological work in general could not be regarded as essentially misogynistic, there is a clear sense in

²⁷ See Lloyd, Genevieve, "Augustine and Aquinas" in Loades, Ann (ed.) *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London, S.P.C.K., 1990). 90-99.

²⁸ McKenna, S. (trans.), *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. XLV (Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1963). 355. *De Trinitate* 12:7.

which feminine images and roles in the Tractates on the Prologue are seen as submissive, ancillary or preliminary.

One feminine image that he might have used within his exegesis of this text is certainly absent. In his first Tractate on the Gospel of John - on John 1:1-5, Augustine comments on the wisdom of God by which all things were made:

For he himself is the wisdom of God and in the Psalm it is said, "You have made all things in wisdom". If, then, Christ is the wisdom of God and the Psalm says, "You have made all things in wisdom," as all things were made through him, so they were made in him.²⁹ The earth was made; but the earth itself which was made is not life. There is, however, in wisdom itself, in a spiritual way, a certain reason by which the earth was made: this is life.³⁰

Augustine's principal scriptural quotation at this point is Psalm 104:24. The psalm plays richly, in a meditation on the greatness of God, on the themes of creating and giving life. And this creative, sustaining function - which Augustine uses here to describe Christ and the work of the Word - is frequently associated with the *female* figure of Wisdom in the Wisdom literature³¹. But of the specifically female hypostasis or personification so characteristic of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, there is no sign within Augustine's discussion at this point.

²⁹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 55. Tractate 1:16 (1).

³⁰ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 56. Tractate 1:16 (3).

³¹ See for example, Proverbs 8:22-31 - Wisdom as the master-builder, Sirach 24 - Wisdom as agent of creation and giver of life, Wisdom of Solomon 9 - Wisdom creates, saves and reveals.

As symbols, Woman and the feminine appear to belong to a discourse of sovereignty and subordination in Augustine's work that makes values or qualities identified as masculine normative or superior to the feminine. It may be simply for this reason that the female figure of Wisdom from the Wisdom literature of the Apocrypha and the Old Testament appears to hold no particular attraction for Augustine. Or there may be more complex reasons. Wisdom features as an aspect of the divine; the beauty and power of God's creative and sustaining word or the attraction of the law. In Proverbs 9, for example, Wisdom is presented as strong and positively feminine. But then she is contrasted with Folly - a deceptive and seductive woman. The very contrast itself draws attention to a strongly negative cultural paradigm of woman. Wisdom's own probity is subtly undermined³². It is perhaps this very 'pitch', drawing attention to a view of woman as potentially deceptive and seductive, appealing to some irrational and dangerous passion in men, that makes Wisdom's gender problematic and, for Augustine, renders her feminine persona unhelpful in this exegetical context.

Of course, it could also be argued that in the earliest Christian centuries, very little significance was attached generally to the gender of Wisdom in its connection with the Word of the Prologue. Thus, Augustine's omission might be merely 'circumstantial'. Some modern biblical scholars are beginning to argue, however, that the relationship between Wisdom and

³² See, McKinlay, Judith, *Gendering Wisdom The Host: Biblical Invitations to Eat and Drink* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 62.

the Word of the Prologue is a good deal more significant than earlier commentators have allowed. The implication of this might be that earlier commentators such as Augustine have actually contributed to the *suppression* of a connection between the two. Adela Yarbro Collins, for example, writing in the early 1980s, argues that the presentation of the Logos in the Prologue is parallel with the typical presentations of Wisdom in the Wisdom literature, and she argues that Wisdom and Logos, are virtually interchangeable in the Wisdom literature of Solomon and Philo³³. She is the more convinced of this argument in the context of the Prologue, because she believes that a very female personification of Wisdom is called to mind at various other key moments in the Gospel - for example she points to the motif of Jesus offering food and drink as symbols of instruction and revelation³⁴, which is both characteristic of Wisdom personified³⁵ and of activities culturally associated with women and with the nurturing that they represent.³⁶

Martin Scott - making similar connections - builds a convincing case for saying that these Wisdom traditions offered, within the history of the Jewish religion, a means of accommodating feminine aspects of God, whilst retaining the heavily masculinised monotheism that distinguished it so clearly from the cults and religions alongside which it developed. Scott

³³ See Collins, Adela Yarbro, "New Testament Perspectives: The Gospel of John", *Journal of Studies in the Old Testament* 22 (1982). 47-53. 50.

³⁴ See indirectly Jn 2:8; and also 4:10; 6:11ff.; 6:35.

³⁵ See, for example, Proverbs 9:1-5.

³⁶ Collins, Adela Yarbro, *op. cit.* 51.

argues strongly that the gender of Wisdom was *always* of central significance and that for precisely this reason, her position did not remain unchallenged. He traces in Sirach for example, both a development and elevation of her role as creatrix³⁷ and also an identification with Torah, seeing in this identification, an attempt to suppress the significance of the gender of Wisdom. When it comes to John's Gospel, Scott argues that it is precisely the awkwardness of gender that prevents a closer identification of Jesus with Wisdom, although he also argues at length that the Gospel presents a fully developed 'Sophia-Christology'.

Whereas Collins suggests that references to Wisdom in John cannot generally be said to belong to the conscious intentionality of its author(s), Scott believes that Jesus-Sophia is an essential key to the whole Gospel. But this hypostasis or personification is undeniably veiled. Even Scott recognises that she cannot be named directly and that she cannot be named as feminine, suggesting that, in the light of the developed theory of pre-existence in this Gospel, it may be precisely Jesus' masculinity that is constitutive of what or who is pre-existent. But, whatever Scott or Collins for example, argue about the resources available for more inclusive ways of interpreting the Gospel of John, references to the female identity of the Wisdom figure depend on a series of inferences³⁸. The explicitly

³⁷ Scott, Martin, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). 78.

³⁸ The strongest arguments relate to the connection between the creative, sustaining work of Word (Jn 1:3-4), and the close textual relationship between the Prologue and such passages from Wisdom literature in, for example, Proverbs 9:1 and Sirach 24:8.

masculine images of Logos and Son of God within the Prologue have acquired a certain unassailable predominance. And Augustine shows no interest in challenging this by reference to a female figure of Wisdom.

2. 3 The Nursing Mother.

Augustine's Tractates employ a number of structural metaphors or interpretative symbols. In the first Tractate, concerned with understanding the relationship of God and Word, he employs the metaphor of the nursing mother and her milk. This is the development of a scriptural metaphor taken especially from the writings of Paul, where a mother's milk sometimes represents the first and most easily digested spiritual sustenance; a necessary prelude for Christian believers not ready for 'stronger meat', because they are yet "of the flesh"³⁹. The evangelist John himself - identified with the 'beloved disciple' - is seen by Augustine, to have been first nursed at the Lord's breast, but ultimately, to have replaced that milk with words:

.. that John, my brothers, who reclined upon the breast of the Lord and who drank from the breast of the Lord that which he might give us to drink. But he has given you words to drink⁴⁰

Later on, Augustine uses the same image to give encouragement to those who might find the discussion hard-going:

³⁹ I Corinthians 3:1-2. See also, Hebrews 5:12, 13; 1 Peter 2:2.

⁴⁰ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 46-47. Tractate 1:7 (2).

"The Word was in the beginning, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," if you cannot imagine what it is, put it off so that you may grow up. That is solid food; take milk that you may be nourished, that you may be strong enough to take solid food.⁴¹

And the same image takes another turn, when those who find the argument hard to follow, are encouraged to nurse what they can follow like a child who is eventually to grow up. Significantly, this child is associated further with Christ, born of the flesh, the whole metaphorical cluster tied into a reference to something necessary but necessarily to be superseded:

Let each person grasp as he can, as far as he can; and he who cannot grasp, let him nourish it in his heart that he may be able to. With what is he to nourish it? Let him nourish it with milk so that he may arrive at solid food. Let him not withdraw from Christ, born through flesh, until he arrives at Christ, born from the one Father, the Word, God with God, through whom all things were made.⁴²

It seems that Augustine sees the female figure of the nursing mother and the milk she produces from her body as an appropriate configuration of the person and activity of the Lord himself. But the figure and the substance she produces is associated, as in the New Testament sources of the metaphor, simply with spiritual infancy. Milk and - presumably also - mother are to be left behind by the spiritually mature. Of course, in terms of his reflections on the text of the Prologue, Augustine is using this image rhetorically, to encourage his listeners to persist in trying to make sense of such a profound

⁴¹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 51. Tractate 1:12 (2).

⁴² Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 57. Tractate 1:17 (3).

passage of scripture, rather than as an interpretative model for something within the passage itself. The metaphor of milk still functions, however, to support and strengthen the hierarchical pattern of bodily subordination, since it represents a lower level of spiritual development. The spiritualised category of 'milk' is to be superseded by that of 'word'.

3 The Feminine Identification of Carnality.

Explicitly feminine images within Augustine's sermons on the Prologue seem to be something of a blind alley, for the feminist reader. Wisdom is absent, and the nursing mother (Mary-Mother of the Word/Mother of the Church of believers?), whilst present, seems definitively subordinate⁴³. Could anything be said to escape from or challenge the hierarchical pattern of gender-identified values and roles within Augustine's sermons on the Prologue?

3.1 The Engendering of the 'Flesh'.

'Flesh' figures in the Tractates 1-3 very largely as it does in the Pauline literature. It is related hierarchically to a masculine-identified 'spirit'. The pattern of the subjugation of

⁴³ It is interesting to note, however, the way in which Augustine describes his mother's behaviour towards him in the *Confessions*. Whilst he is critical of her possessiveness, and certainly does not exempt her from the inheritance of sorrow which is 'Eve's legacy' (*Confessions*, Book V:8, op. cit. 101.), he dwells on her suffering in language that evokes both Christic and Marian themes. "Night and day my mother poured out her tears to you and offered her heart-blood in sacrifice for me" (*Confessions*, Book V:7, op. cit. 99.). He speaks of her anxiety for his spiritual birth in terms of the pain of child-birth (*Confessions*, Book V:9, op. cit. 100.). He comes close to giving her credit, through perseverance and prayer, for his re-conversion to Catholic Christianity (*Confessions*, Book V:9, op. cit. 102.).

flesh to spirit is very clearly drawn, and explicitly related to a standard cultural model of gender hierarchy:

... and the Apostle says "he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own flesh." Therefore "flesh" is put for "wife", just as also sometimes "spirit" is put for "husband". Why? Because the latter governs, the former is governed; the latter ought to rule, the former to serve. For when the flesh commands and the spirit serves, the house is awry. What is worse than a house where the woman has absolute authority over the man? But upright is the house where the man commands, the woman obeys. Upright, therefore, is mankind itself when the spirit commands, the flesh serves.⁴⁴

Once spirit and flesh are identified in this gendered way, of course, the justification for making the relationships between actual men and women relate more closely to the symbolic pattern is all the stronger. The symbolic masculinity of the spirit is, in this quotation, used to justify the argument that men ought to control women and to support the stereotyping of women as incapable of controlling a household properly. Arguably Augustine's view that defects of the soul are passed on through physical conception⁴⁵, is itself an illustration of the same dynamic at work. After all, humankind's (spiritual, masculine) contamination through irrational (fleshly, feminine) desire, is perfectly illustrated in sexual intercourse between unequal partners (male and female or female substitute).

Augustine, accounting the natural man '*ex anima et carne*' as 'fleshly' in body *and* mind, would submit them both to a

⁴⁴ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 72. Tractate 2:14 (3).

⁴⁵ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 85. Tractate 3:12 (1)

spiritual scrutiny and control. Woman and the feminine within this system, belong to a symbolic realm *doubly* to be distrusted. They signify powerfully the essential bodily, material elements of all human experience, which are suspect because characterised by the change and decay that is not shared by the things of God, and they also represent a perniciously irrational carnality that affects both body and mind⁴⁶ and needs to be controlled by the masculinity of the spiritual. And I believe that one may read here in the description of concupiscence, the imprint of a phallogocentricity that characterises the whole of *human* experience in terms of a drive towards a singular *male* identity and an anxiety about its loss or confusion.

And yet, of course, within this text, Augustine recognises that within the divine scheme of Incarnation, whatever is represented by 'flesh' is divinely necessary. Augustine, reads this necessity in terms of human need of course. In order that humankind can be born of God, God must first be born in the 'flesh'. The intertwining of human birth from God, and the birth of the divine as human is the main theme of the second Tractate (Jn 1:6-24):

Why then are you astonished that men are born of God? Notice that God himself was born of men: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See McKenna, S. (trans.), *The Fathers of the Church: op. cit, De Trinitate* 12:8

⁴⁷ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), *op. cit.* 73. Tractate 2:15 (2).

And yet, it is questionable whether Augustine's reading of Incarnation in this Johannine text, ever seriously challenges the prevailing hierarchy of spirit over flesh, or recognises its autonomous validity.

3. 2 Dust, a Defiling and Salvific Symbol: Challenging Gendered Hierarchies in the Prologue?

Augustine, like most other commentators, apparently feels the *necessity* of introducing Jesus' mother⁴⁸, into interpretation of the Prologue, although she is not mentioned in the text. To include the human mother of the Word is, of course, in one sense, to make a very clear suggestion about the necessity of the 'flesh'. Without the human mother, the Word could not be born as human child. However, the tendency is to somehow try and dissociate the Word from the contaminating "Otherness" or disturbing confusion of which woman and the feminine have become such rich and disturbing symbols within patriarchal culture. Thus, the mother is typically described as a virgin, utterly separated from sexual knowledge, the highly evocative symbol of human heterogeneity.

However, although he appears to take them for granted⁴⁹, Augustine does not lay great stress the mother's virginity or innocence of the carnal passions. In fact, rather to the contrary, the fleshliness of Christ and his dwelling alongside

⁴⁸ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 72. Tractate 2: 15 (1).

⁴⁹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 72. Tractate 2: 15 (1): "For Christ is God, and Christ was born from among men. Indeed, he sought on earth only a mother since he already had a father in heaven."

humankind is stressed, as the necessary means whereby individuals can be born safely⁵⁰ of God. But the necessity of the 'flesh' attested within this Johannine narrative of Incarnation is, for Augustine, largely carried by a very different metaphor in these Tractates. This image is one of blindness and its cure, which focuses on the description of carnality, not in terms of flesh, but of earth or dust or mud. And it is arguable that Augustine must here plead guilty to the charge that he is performing theological conjuring tricks by sleight of hand, since his use of earthy indices of carnality in this context, which is in any case very largely given a spiritualised interpretation, distracts attention from the tricky area of just how carnal and fleshly the incarnation must be to produce its effect.

Indeed, because 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,' by the nativity itself he made a salve by which the eyes of our heart may be wiped clean and we may be able to see his majesty through his lowliness.⁵¹

Augustine constructs a powerful image of the incarnation as a remedy that will enable man, blinded by lack of faith, to see the glory of God (Jn 1:14):

His glory no one could see unless he were healed by the lowliness of his flesh. Why could we not see? Concentrate, my beloved people, and see what I am saying. Dust, so to speak, had forcibly entered man's eye; earth had entered it, had injured the eye, and it could not see the light. That injured eye is anointed; it was injured by earth, and earth is put there that it may be healed. For all salves and medicines are

⁵⁰ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 73. Tractate 2: 15 (1).

⁵¹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 73. Tractate 2:16 (1).

nothing but [compounds] of earth. You have been blinded by dust, you are healed by dust; thus the flesh had blinded you, flesh heals you. For the soul had become carnal by assenting to carnal passions; from that the eye of the heart had been blinded. "The Word was made flesh". That physician made a salve for you. And because he came in such a way that by his flesh he might extinguish the faults of the flesh and by his death he might kill death, it was therefore effected in you that, because "the Word was made flesh" you could say, "And we saw his glory".⁵²

Incarnation within these Tractates, then stands as a recognition of the efficacy, the value, the central *necessity* of 'flesh'/ carnality. The analogy with the remedy is strange but suggestive since the healing salve is composed from the same source as the dust which caused the injury. And the potential of 'dust' - of carnality - to both harm and heal displaces it, momentarily from hierarchies of value, from the discourse of subjugation. It is removed temporarily from the prevailing hierarchical view of the subjection of flesh to spirit.

But of course, the action of healing, is performed by the physician. The motif of the physician, as an image of Christ, was used widely by the Christian fathers as by Augustine⁵³ himself, and there is thus little real potential for reading a deconstructive challenge to spiritual values which exclude the flesh within Augustine's interpretation. The re inscription of Incarnation as healing, refers specifically to the healing of spiritual blindness caused by carnality. Restored sight enables us to see the glory "al of the only begotten of the

⁵² Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 73-74. Tractate 2:16 (2).

⁵³ See Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 73. Note 42.

Father, full of grace and truth."⁵⁴ New birth is cure. The sovereignty of sight, transcendent Reason is quickly restored:

Now because he did this, he cured [us]; because he cured [us], we see. For this, namely that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us," became a medicine for us, so that since we were blinded by earth, we might be healed by earth.⁵⁵

3. 3 Defilement as Cure - a Necessary Carnality? Parallels in Augustine's Tractates on John 9.

In reading Augustine's Tractates on the Prologue, and particularly the representation of divine Incarnation as the cure for an inherited spiritual blindness, some connection with the text of John 9, naturally suggests itself. Here indeed is the physician, Jesus, curing blindness with a salve of earth and spittle, in defiance of the (Sabbath) law that can only diagnose the weakness, and not provide the remedy (Jn 1:17)⁵⁶. Here too is an insistent, if uneasy discussion of the relationship of birth and sin. And here, the mother hovers in the background, signifying - in her co-operation with/corruption of her husband? - body and carnality, the cause of spiritual blindness, she is impotent to cure (Jn 9:1-2, 18-22). For here, birth that is related to human conception is clearly read by Augustine as having to do with inherited sinfulness:

...this blind man is the human race, for this blindness happened through sin in the first man from whom we

⁵⁴ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 81. Tractate 3: 6 (3)

⁵⁵ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 81. Tractate 3: 6 (2).

⁵⁶ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 86. Tractate 3:14 (1).

all have taken the origin not only of death, but also of wickedness. ⁵⁷

There is thus, a parallel between the metaphor of the remedy and the physician in the second and third Tractates, and Augustine's reading of the story of the blind man in John 9, in Tractate 44. Physical birth is again, related to spiritual blindness. Thus physical birth is unavoidably presented as an indication of spiritual sickness. Yet in reading these two passages Augustine interprets defilement as the cure, the story linking blindness with lack of faith as an inherited flaw ⁵⁸. And, once again there is an echo both of necessary carnality and sleight of hand. Linking Word and spittle and flesh and mud⁵⁹, Augustine declares this as a symbol of the mystery; the Word become flesh. And the resulting salve or ointment of mud and spittle is besmeared on the blind man's eyes. To be healed, released from the inherited defilement, requires the man to become 'besmeared' defiled again. But just as before, in Augustine's description of divine Incarnation in the earlier Tractates, the suggestion of a more radical cure for carnality through carnality is modified by the image of the Physician. Here the cure seems performed in two modes; besmearing and then washing - a washing clearly associated with baptism:

What did I say about the spittle and the mud? That the Word was made flesh. The catechumens also hear this; but for the purpose for which they have been

⁵⁷ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), *St. Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John 28-54* (Washington D. C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1993). 175. Tractate 44: 1 (2).

⁵⁸ In Latin, *vitium*. See Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1993. op. cit. 175-176.

⁵⁹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1993. op. cit. 176. Tractate 44:2 (1).

besmeared this does not suffice for them. Let them hurry to the baptismal font if they seek light.⁶⁰

Once again, the Incarnation figures as dust, as the defiling and defining "Otherness". But it is identified here with the proper subjugation of the female to the male. This dust is accounted the cure of spiritual blindness. But ultimately, the salvific role of carnality is undercut within Augustine's writing on Jn 1 and Jn 9, by his unwillingness to abandon the fundamental discourse of subjection and the sovereignty of (masculine) reason. However necessary 'flesh' might be in divine Incarnation, it is always configured as the lower term in a hierarchy of values that accounts spiritual values higher. Thus references to the 'flesh' in these Tractates are already largely metaphors for Augustine's spiritual concerns.

4 The Word made Flesh?

If the reader then looks for the feminine within Augustine's exegetical sermons on the Prologue, she is to be found, explicitly and positively, as the nursing mother, configuring both the Lord, and Augustine himself as exegete, even though she and her milk remain associated with immaturity and - spiritualised - dependence. But she is also present, implicitly and perhaps more ambivalently, in Augustine's treatment of the 'flesh'. In itself, 'flesh' is an image of something injurious to the soul, something whose effects are damaging or disruptive. Defined within a discourse of male sovereignty and female subjugation, I believe that 'flesh' presents Augustine

⁶⁰ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1993. op. cit. 176-177. Tractate 44: 2 (2).

with something of a problem. I think that he gets around the difficulty largely by treating the disruptive 'flesh' as merely the sign of the ultimate divine (masculine/ singular) imperialism. Contained within the hierarchical definition of values that Augustine adopts, whatever of difference, or of "Otherness" is represented by reference to 'flesh' is simply absorbed without remainder by the divine, becoming part of his divine and spiritual splendour. Safely spiritualised or, so to speak, transposed into a divine key, 'flesh' may be recognised as necessary. Spiritually speaking Christ's Incarnation was necessary to restore spiritual sight and wholeness.

What is clear is that Augustine himself was comfortable with the hierarchical implications of a gendered dualism, moving from 'masculine' to 'feminine' positions depending upon the context. If he advocated the feminine role *vis a vis* God for human believers⁶¹ or made a clear association between woman and the disturbing forces of sexuality, his preference for an authoritative masculine divinity remained etched into his theological position, but - self-consciously- largely unexplored.

⁶¹ See, Connolly, William E., *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* (New York, London, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1993). 55-61. Connolly argues that Augustine adopted, in relationship to God, the model he believed had been given to him by his mother, Monica, in coping with and influencing the men in her life. That is to say - Connolly argues - that she maximised the potential of her subject position, and prevailed through patience, obedience but also gentle persistence. Or, perhaps, putting it another way, he rationalised his mother's sufferings and the injustice of her treatment by regarding it as an effective way of dealing with a tempestuous tyrant.

4 Woman and the Feminine and Gender Hierarchy in Relation to Dualism and Original Sin.

Augustine's attitude towards and use of the symbolism of gender may be further explored in an examination of how, in these three short Tractates on the Incarnational text of the Prologue to John's Gospel, he draws together the characteristic outlines of his teaching on original sin and against any fully Manichaeian dualism. In both cases woman and the feminine play a very particular role.

4. 1 Original Sin

Augustine's interpretation of Jn 1:17, which brings together in the same verse, both the gifts of the Law and of grace and truth, makes of this juxtaposition, a comparison in an explicitly Pauline sense. He quotes "the Apostle": "The Law entered in that sin might abound..."⁶² (Romans 5:20), and he designates Moses, through whom the law was given, as a servant incapable of granting release from guilt:

"The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Through a servant the Law was given; it made men guilty. Through an emperor pardon was given; it set free the guilty. "The Law was given through Moses." Let the servant not consign to himself anything greater than what was done through him. Chosen for a great ministry as a faithful man in the house, but still a servant, he can act according to the Law; he cannot release from the guilt of the Law.⁶³

⁶² Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1988. op. cit. 84. Tractate 3:11 (1).

⁶³ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1988. op. cit. 87. Tractate 3:16 (1).

The reference to the Law draws Augustine into a discussion of the concupiscence of the flesh, and of the solidarity of all men as sinners, with Adam:

It was not because they willed it that men have been born from Adam; nonetheless all who are from Adam are sinners with sin.⁶⁴

Augustine, in formulating his understanding of an inherited propensity to sin - to break God's law and will evil rather than good - seems to have been attempting to project a vision of God that would do justice to a spectrum of deeply felt emotions, including his longing both to love and be satisfied⁶⁵ and his aesthetic and sensual sensitivity as well as a strong sense of human helplessness and anxiety. At the same time any such vision needed, for him, to be intellectually rigorous and in accordance with his rational understanding. His approach, formed by the rhetorical training of his youth, was defined in intellectual terms. Whilst Augustine saw that there was often an intellectual arrogance in the solutions proposed by thinkers he met along his long journey to faith in the Catholic Church, he was not anti-intellectual. A proposal to suit all these requirements proved, for a long time, beyond his grasp.

⁶⁴ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1988. op. cit. 85. Tractate 3:12 (2).

⁶⁵ *Confessions*, Book II:2 op. cit. 43; Book II:5 op. cit. 48: "The eye is attracted by beautiful objects, by gold and silver and all such things. There is great pleasure too, in feeling something agreeable to the touch and material things have various qualities to please each of the other senses. Again, it is gratifying to be held in esteem by other men and to have the power of giving them orders and gaining the mastery over them."

The solution he proposed, eventually, had the result, of focusing attention upon sexual desire as a form of punishment - and it is quite clear within the *Confessions* that this is precisely how he is both reconstructing and indeed *experiencing* his own youthful - and considerable - desire for sexual satisfaction. But, in fact, of course, he understands the first sin, as recounted in Genesis to be disobedience - or perhaps more exactly the *wilfulness* of going against God's prohibition. And this wilfulness is largely distressing because it seems to Augustine, inexplicable in any rational sense, even that sense that would see disobedience as a means to achieving some wicked end. In the *Confessions*, Augustine dwells at length on what he sees as a particularly shameful incident in his youth, when he, along with a group of other boys or young men, stole pears from a tree:

I was willing to steal, and steal I did, although I was not compelled by any lack, unless it were the lack of a sense of justice or a distaste for what was right and a greedy love of doing wrong. For of what I stole I already had plenty, and much better at that, and I had no wish to enjoy the things I coveted by stealing, but only to enjoy the theft itself and the sin.... We took away an enormous quantity of pears, not to eat them ourselves, but simply to throw them to the pigs. Perhaps we ate some of them, but our real pleasure consisted in doing something that was forbidden.⁶⁶

This will to evil, according to Augustine had no cause, was its own cause as a sort of convention for the category of nothingness - outwith God; the futile gesture of the convicted prisoner, pointing to an alternative that was no alternative, a

⁶⁶ *Confessions*, Book II:4, op. cit. 47.

defiance against any sort of rationality, the result of a fundamental *misconception* of the founding relationship between God and humankind - something essentially not effective, but defective:

The truth is that one should not try to find an efficient cause for a wrong choice. It is not a matter of efficiency, but of deficiency; the evil will itself is not effective but defective. For to defect from him who is the Supreme Existence , to something of less reality, this is to begin to have an evil will. To try to discover the causes of such defection - deficient, not efficient causes - is like trying to see darkness or to hear silence. Yet we are familiar with darkness and silence , and we can only be aware of them by means of eyes and ears , but this is not by perception but by absence of perception.⁶⁷

It thus becomes clearer how such ideas might be reconnected with his commentary on the Prologue, where Augustine appears to see the Law and the law-giver, Moses - in contradistinction perhaps to many modern commentators⁶⁸ - as something essentially to be delivered from by God's grace. The law, against stealing, against fornication and adultery, was in terms of Augustine's tormented understanding of wilfulness, a scourge, revealing at least to him, the essential helplessness of the will to avoid willing what is evil, without God. And, of course, there is a perfectly clear line of inference from such a conviction to the belief that this irrational defect was passed on through the act that itself carried the rational soul -

⁶⁷ *Augustine: City of God* , Book XII: 7, op. cit. 479-480.

⁶⁸ See, for example Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1966). Brown sees the reference to Moses in honorific terms, relating Jn 1:17 to Jn 1:45; 3:14; 5:46.

particularly as Augustine understands this in the *Confessions* in relation to his own life - so close to the chaotic waters of irrational inexplicable motivation; the formation of the new soul through the spiritual and creative generation of man and woman in sexual intercourse.⁶⁹

A late twentieth-century feminist perspective suggests that part at least of his problem with sexuality seems to have been caused by the overvaluation of reason and rationality within patriarchal society as a whole, and in his intellectual circles in particular. He was clearly deeply sensitive to the sense in which the urgency of his own sexual demand challenged that rationality, that intellect within him by which, and only by which, he came to account himself better than the animals and made in the image of God:

If therefore you are better than a animal precisely because you have a mind with which you may understand what the animal cannot understand, and, in fact, therein a man because you are better than a cow, the light of men is the light of minds. The light of minds is above minds and transcends all minds. ⁷⁰

In the *Confessions*, his confusion is revealed in the suggestion that the institute of marriage - defined simply in relation to procreation as God's purpose - and the making of himself a eunuch for love of the kingdom of heaven represent some sort of realistic alternatives. As he himself attests, he desperately

⁶⁹ Augustine favoured a 'generationist' position on the origin of souls. That is to say he rejected the idea that human souls were created either individually or *en masse*, before their bodies were produced by their parents' sexual relationship. Equally, of course, he rejected the idea that souls were simply and solely the product of human intercourse.

⁷⁰ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1988. op. cit. 78. Tractate 3:4 (3).

needed some solution to the problem of relating those powerful elements within him of sexuality, affective emotion and intellect:

I was tossed and spilled, floundering in the broiling sea of my fornication, and you said no word. How long it was before I learned that you were my true joy....⁷¹

Eventually, he seems to have resolved the difficulty by cutting the sexual urge and the joyousness of its satisfaction loose, and redefining them as aberrant. Desire and its satisfaction are spiritualised and re-routed through the forms of a fundamentally feminine compliance⁷², in obedient joyous devotion to the God of grace. If it worked for Augustine, it undoubtedly left western Christendom with something of a legacy. For at least the next ten centuries, Orthodox Christianity was deeply influenced by this Augustinian anxiety about the body and its non-rational motivations and modalities that bore witness to a fundamental drive towards masculine singularity and away from the claims of humankind to express a positively evaluated heterogeneity.

4.2 Manichaeian Dualism

As a convert from the Manichee philosophy, Augustine was more conscious than many, of course, of its potential

⁷¹ *Confessions*, Book II:2, op. cit. 43-44.

⁷² See, Connolly, William E., *The Augustinian Imperative*, op. cit. 58. "After her death, Monica continues to live within Augustine as a set of tactical dispositions through which to relate to the (masculine) god who stands above him. Augustine internalizes the voice of Monica with respect to his god. Specifically, I want to suggest, Augustine enacts the traditional code of a devout woman with respect to this god and the traditional code of an authoritative male with respect to human believers and non believers below him."

attractions. He drew up a comparison between Catholic and Manichee positions, most explicitly, in a series of books (c. 421) *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, which were fundamentally addressed to the position of Julian of Eclanum, who led a movement of bishops against the condemnation of Pelagianism⁷³. Julian accused the Catholics, and particularly Augustine, of being, as it were, covert Manichees. Augustine therefore felt that it was important to make distinctions between all three positions - Catholic, Manichee and Pelagian - in order properly to answer Julian's criticisms.

The dispute between Augustine and Julian, however, became somewhat of a slanging match, terms such as 'Pelagian' and 'Manichee' being bandied about rather as abusive slogans. But in substance, Julian accused Augustine of slipping back into modes of thought that belonged to his earlier Manichaean period before his conversion to Catholic Christianity⁷⁴. One general issue of contention between the two men, concerned marriage and the role of sexual intercourse within that. The religion of Mani, apparently, simply relegated genital sexuality to the realm of the devil, though for the lower grade of adherents or 'Hearers', sexual partners were tolerated⁷⁵.

⁷³ Julian of Eclanum was an adherent of the Pelagius' teaching on free will and the essential goodness of humankind. Fundamentally, Pelagius believed that to account humankind too damaged and too weak to help itself, was to discourage individual effort to improve and do good. Eventually, Pelagius' teaching was condemned by the Catholic Church but Julian refused to accept the ruling, gathering together a group of sympathetic Italian bishops. Eventually in 419 he was forced into exile, from where he continued to write letters and books, some of them directed specifically at Augustine.

⁷⁴ Augustine describes this event - understood to have occurred during 386 - in great detail in *Confessions* Book VIII, op. cit.

⁷⁵ See, Chadwick, Henry, op. cit. 11 ff..

Against those of Julian's opinion, who complained that Augustine, favouring celibacy, condemned marriage, Augustine also wrote *De Bono Conjugali* and *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* in which he attempted to defend both the state of marriage and his own distinctive approach. The key to Augustine's position was that although marriage was good, sexual union was not, except in so far as there was a purpose to it:

It lay beyond the control of reason, and that, to Augustine, and to the mind of any contemporary Platonist, showed it to be, not a good but intrinsically an evil thing, sanctified only within marriage and for the procreation of childrenThe desire to have children and care for them and educate them is surely, says Augustine, an appetite not of the lust (libido), but of the reason.... It is the mode of begetting which has been infiltrated by evil, as a result of the sin of Adam. If Adam had not sinned, he would have begotten his children not by lust but by rational decision (*De Nupt*; II. vii. 18).⁷⁶

It does seem that here Augustine is trying again in some sense, to have his cake and eat it too. The reason why the Catholics were accused by Julian and his like of being covert Manichees was not so much that they favoured celibacy over marriage - although the Manichaeans certainly did this - but surely, that the reasons for this preference, as expounded by Augustine and other Catholics, were based upon an association of marriage with sexuality and sexuality with the material realm understood as evil. The dualistic tenets of the Manichee philosophy therefore were perceived as underpinning their unwillingness to accord marriage a greater status. Jovinian, for

⁷⁶ Evans, Gillian R., *Augustine on Evil* (2nd. edn, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990). 144.

example, had accused the Catholics of being Manichaeism on account of their teaching about the virginity of Mary even after the birth of Jesus. Such a teaching perhaps offended against the perception that procreation and sexuality are intrinsically physical and bodily and that these are also definitively human. Thus for Christ to become 'human' without the physical, bodily, material point of reference - conception by sexual intercourse - shared (at that time) by all other human individuals, is to draw an absolute distinction between the humanity of Christ and the humanity of every other human being - a distinction that lends itself to the definition of materiality as evil, so characteristic of the Manichee point of view.

Certainly Augustine distinguishes the notion of an evil will very clearly from the notion of materiality as intrinsically evil. But one senses that, in his writing about marriage and sexual intercourse within marriage, the distinction dilutes the sacramental solemnity of marriage that was taken up in later medieval spirituality, for example, in its understanding of the relationship between Christ and his Church and which is centrally concerned with the admixture of divinity and materiality in the Incarnation. It is as if, repeatedly, Augustine cannot quite face the logical inference from the very form of Incarnation which he teaches, that it represents some ultimate reversal, some absolute status for what he would regard as lying beyond the realm of positively divine (masculine) value and within the realm of the carnal, in its very irrational (feminine) desires.

In *De Bono Conjugali*, Augustine speaks of marriage in terms of Roman law, as constituted by the consent of the couple rather than having to do with sexual consummation. In the same work he praises three good constituents of marriage - the purpose of procreation and the benefits of mutual fidelity and 'sacramental' indissolubility. Whilst he certainly makes mention of sexual pleasure, this is not accounted as especially good, but as an impulse which has a right use, but also a tendency to be 'misused'⁷⁷. In sum, Augustine's attitude towards sexual intercourse as within marriage, could be justifiably described as marked by suspicion, mistrust and anxiety. By the letter of what Augustine writes, it is accounted positive and God given, but his approval is circumscribed and guarded.

Of course, one might argue that Augustine here presents a view of marriage that attempts to see it as more than the mere context of sexual satisfaction. This is a point of view that might find favour with modern feminists by contesting the view of woman within patriarchal forms of marriage, as merely a receptacle for semen and babies⁷⁸. The impression remains however, that, as a Christian, Augustine accepted divine authorisation of the dangerous delights of sexual involvement, as an exercise in humility. In one sense, it required humility, since the impulse towards sexual satisfaction and sexual

⁷⁷ See, Chadwick, Henry, *op. cit.* 114-115.

⁷⁸ See Margaret Atwood's treatment of the notion in her dystopic novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

ecstasy, swamp the mind⁷⁹ and literally motivate the body without conscious control, obliterating the icon of rationality that, clearly for Augustine, represented God himself. In another sense, as he relates in the *Confessions*, the account of his own life revealed how far this particular impulse had ruled his own life for a considerable number of years.

5 Conclusions

I believe that the process whereby Augustine reached his definition of a damaged or tainted will is illuminated by the conclusions of modern theoretical feminism, which would explain this process in terms of an anxiety produced by the unavoidable evidence of "Otherness" within the singular phallogocentric structures of patriarchal culture. I also believe that Augustine's efforts to make sense of and to articulate his perceptions of that which was strictly beyond the control of his conscious will, centred upon a common cultural hierarchy of values which had a gendered character. Thus the sort of incomprehensible desire for something apparently valueless is aptly symbolised in terms of sexual desire leading to intercourse with a woman (or female substitute?) the very symbol of valuelessness. However, the Prologue of John's Gospel, an important source for Orthodox Christian teaching about divine Incarnation, forces the reader to address the question of how exactly, God might himself engage with this incomprehensible desire or "Otherness", in becoming 'flesh'.

⁷⁹ See, *Contra Julianum Pelagianum* 4. 7.

The solution Augustine offers here is ultimately, through grace, to make that 'flesh' disappear. By means of the 'flesh' that disturbs him because of its invocations of all that lies beyond the control of singular masculine rationality, 'flesh' is finally banished. 'Fleshly' birth, by the end of Augustine's commentary on the Prologue is irrelevant, inessential and absent. And yet he is able to retain the appearance of commitment to the necessity of the 'flesh' by claiming that it has had an essential role in making possible our birth "in Christ" without the concupiscence of the flesh⁸⁰. In other words it has become itself the means of severing its own connections with inarticulate and desiring human experience. It has become the means to spiritualise humankind. And of course, by this means all references to woman and the feminine, their roles and modalities become metaphorical, related to the lower term in a hierarchy of entirely spiritual values. Woman as a sexual, gendered being is eradicated, for the will, damaged by a hereditary taint, is healed by the Incarnation so that the carnality, the materiality and the irrationality of sexuality is no longer necessary. Christian believers may continue to reproduce, but they will do so rationally, performing their parts in order to fulfil God's plan and not to satisfy any turbulent desire. Christian readers are urged to "drive carnal thought from you hearts that you may truly be under grace, that you may belong to the New

⁸⁰ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1988. op. cit. 85. Tractate 3:12 (1).

Testament"⁸¹, seeing not with the eyes of the flesh⁸², and in no need of carnal promises like the Israelites in the Wilderness⁸³.

For individual women, Augustine appears to have had as much affection or respect as any other elitist male of the fourth or fifth century C. E⁸⁴. But it is also very apparent that he read this Incarnational text, within a phallogocentric context and that he therefore sought to articulate his experience according to its view of (masculine) singularity. Nevertheless, he clearly found that Christian orthodoxy ultimately suited him better than a more extreme dualism. And in conclusion, it seems to me that this may well have been because it enabled him to have his cake and eat it too. In other words, whilst he took the Prologue of John's Gospel for example, to be saying that everything was created by God - thereby denying that there could be an autonomous demiurge or multiple principle of creation - he found that he could also effectively obliterate the troublesome aspects of material creation including those aspects of humankind related to desire. He could do this by defining the essentials of humanity in terms simply of its rationality - the sense in which it was made in the image of

⁸¹ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1988. op. cit. 89. Tractate 3:19 (1).

⁸² Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1988. op. cit. 91. Tractate 3:21 (1).

⁸³ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1988. op. cit. 91. Tractate 3:19 (3).

⁸⁴ The *Confessions* attest movingly, for example, both to his love for his concubine (See Book VI:15 for example) and his spiritual companionship with his mother (See Book IX:10 for example). Equally, the *Confessions* reveal that he saw no overriding reason against marrying, as an adult, a girl who had only just reached sexual maturity (See Book VI: 13), for casting off a woman who had, on his own admission been a loyal and loving companion (Book VI: 15), or for counselling anything more than prudence and compliance in the case of the flagrant physical abuse of women by their husbands (See Book IX:9).

God⁸⁵. And by effectively re-defining 'flesh' in fundamentally spiritual terms - as the bottom end of a gendered hierarchy of spiritual values - all aspects of human existence not included under the heading of the intellect could safely be relegated, ignored or excluded altogether from consideration. The material, feminine and physical nature of much of Augustine's imagery seems then, to me to be deceptive. It does not recognise the positive value of the 'flesh' in itself which might challenge God's divinely and masculine spiritual singularity, so much as tame and control it by rendering it merely metaphorical.

⁸⁵ Rettig, John W. (ed. and trans.), 1988. op. cit. 78. Tractate 3: 4.



Illustration of Second Vision, Liber divinatorum
operum.

Lucca Biblioteca Statale, Codex 1942
c. 1200.

**The Shining Garment of the Text.
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.**

3

**Hildegard of Bingen 1098 -1179:
Visionary Reflections on the Prologue.**

At a later time I saw a mysterious and wonderful vision so that my inmost core was convulsed and I lost all bodily sensation, as my knowledge was altered to another mode, unknown to myself. And by the inspiration of God, drops, as it were, of sweet rain were sprinkled on my soul's understanding as the Holy Spirit filled John the Evangelist when he sucked the most profound revelations from the breast of Jesus ... Thus the vision taught me and allowed me to explain all the words and teachings of the Evangelist which concern the beginning of God's works.¹

1 Introduction: *Liber divinorum operum*.

Hildegard von Bingen wrote *Liber divinorum operum* (Book of Divine Works), during the years 1163-1173². It is a

¹ From *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*. See, Flanagan, Sabina *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (London and New York, Routledge, 1989). 141. The passage is a description of the experience that resulted in the writing of *Liber divinorum operum*, which, in her own judgement, was Hildegard's most important work.

² The English version of Hildegard's original Latin text referred to here (Cunningham, Robert (trans.), "The Book of Divine Works: Ten Visions of God's Deeds in the World and Humanity", in Fox, Matthew (ed.), *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs* (Santa Fe, New Mexico, Bear and Company, 1987)), is an edited version, based on Heinrich Schipperge's German translation, entitled *Welt und Mensch: Das Buch "De operatione Dei"* (Salzburg, Muller Verlag, 1965). Schipperge's version - also edited - is, in turn, based largely upon Codex 241, a manuscript in the library of the University of Ghent with the title *De operatione Dei* (On God's Work). It is believed that this Codex was prepared, under Hildegard's supervision, at Rupertsberg between 1170 and 1173. Schipperge also uses three other copies of the work, all entitled *Liber divinorum operum*: a 13th Century copy of Codex 241 found in the Wiesbadener Riesencodex (giant codex at Wiesbaden); Codex 683 of the Bibliothèque Municipale

description of ten visions and interpretations. Visionary experience was part of Hildegard's life from an early age. By her own account, she experienced her first vision before she was four years old³. However, it was not until she was in her forties, that she came to understand these visions as something she had to communicate publicly. As she recalls in the preface to her first visionary work, *Scivias*,⁴ the dramatic revelation directing her unambiguously to write down what she saw had begun quite suddenly during her forty-second year. And such voices then continued to instruct her:

at Troyes (previously at the Abbey of Clairvaux); and Codex 1942 of the Biblioteca Governativa/Statale(?) di Lucca.

The first printed edition appeared in 1761 under the name of Archbishop Giovanni Domenico Mansi. Although there are some doubts about its reliability, this contains the entire work, and in the 19th Century, Jacques-Paul Migne used Mansi's complete edition in volume 197 of his monumental, 221-volume, *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1841-1864). Migne's work is now being replaced by *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* (CCCM) (Belgium, Brepols).

³ Fragments of autobiographical material are included in the earliest biographical work, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* (Life of St. Hildegard), begun by Godfrey, a monk from Disibodenburg who acted as Hildegard's secretary, but died in 1176, leaving his biographical work unfinished. It was completed by Theodoric of Echternach in 1186. See quotation translated by Dronke, in Dronke, Peter, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Cambridge, London, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney, Cambridge University Press, 1984). 145: "And in the third year of my life I saw so great a brightness that my soul trembled; yet because of my infant condition could express nothing of it."

⁴ *Scivias*, 1151. The two further works in the trilogy of Hildegard's major works are *Liber vitae meritorum, per simplicem hominem a vivente luce revelatorum*, 1163 and, of course, *Liber divinorum operum (or De operatione Dei)*, 1173. See Newman, Barbara, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the The Feminine* (California (University of California Press), Aldershot (Scolar Press), 1987). 11, n. 29. Also see Flanagan, Sabina, op. cit. 57: "Hildegard's three major visionary works stand apart from her other writings because of their length, their shared visionary form, and their similar theological concerns."

... Transmit for the benefit of humanity an accurate account of what you see with your inner eye and what you hear with the inner ear of your soul.⁵

Hildegard admits she was at first extremely hesitant about complying with her heavenly orders. At first, the anxiety and uncertainty made her ill. Ultimately however, she interpreted this sickness as God's punishment for her inactivity and silence and she confided in her male colleagues and superiors at Disibodenburg - the Benedictine monastery where she had lived from the age of 7 or 8⁶. They appear to have been supportive, affirming the particular charism she disclosed to them⁷, but it is clear that initially she still felt considerable disquiet about drawing attention to herself, a woman, in this way.⁸

⁵ See Hildegard's foreword to the first part of the work "The World of Humanity", in Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 5.

⁶ Hildegard, the daughter of a minor nobleman in the area of Alzey (about 20 km south-west of Mainz), was enclosed by her parents as a child of 7 or 8 years, in the cell of Jutta, an anchoress of noble birth. Jutta's cell was attached to the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenburg. Although they were strictly and literally enclosed within the anchorage, other noble parents and daughters were undoubtedly attracted by the combination of respectable birth and notable spirituality they came to represent. Thus by 1113, when Hildegard was old enough to make her profession as a nun, Jutta and Hildegard had been joined by a number of other women, forming something more akin to a small convent community. See Flanagan, Sabina, op. cit. 2-3.

⁷ See, Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1987). 229 ff.. Bynum draws attention to the sense in which the piety of women of the medieval period was sometimes welcomed by men. In their very displacement from the centre of mainstream ecclesiastical and theological structures, they were able to focus areas of ambivalence, for example to do with wealth and power, and their role as implicit or explicit critics of clerical corruption was widely recognised.

⁸ See, for example, passage translated from Hildegard's *Vita* in Dronke, Peter, op. cit. 145: " ... in that vision I was forced by a great pressure (*pressura*) of pains to manifest what I had seen and heard. But I was very much afraid, and blushed to utter what I had so long kept silent".

Hildegard's responsibilities, reputation and assurance had grown substantially by the time she came to write *Liber divinorum operum*. She was then over sixty, having an established reputation as a writer and spiritual advisor. From 1136⁹, she had been acknowledged as the leading figure amongst those nuns who lived within the environs of the monastery in Disibodenburg. Already, against strong opposition¹⁰, she had negotiated a move for these sisters (c. 1150) to a separate establishment at Rupertsberg and she was, by this time, in the process of founding a second convent.

Sabina Flanagan notes the sense in which Hildegard appears, increasingly after the revelatory experiences of 1143, to use her accounts and interpretation of visions in a systematic way, to develop certain key theological themes. Flanagan admits that it would be an oversimplification to say the visions were a deliberate fiction, designed to give weight and authority to theological speculation that might otherwise have been dismissed because of its author's gender and lack of formal education¹¹. But she argues that Hildegard's freedom

⁹ Jutta, Hildegard's teacher and mentor for more than 30 years, died in this year. Hildegard was her natural successor.

¹⁰ Hildegard proposed a move from the established monastic community at Disibodenburg to a largely undeveloped site about 30 km away. Objections were raised on the grounds that Hildegard was suffering from delusions! The authorities at Disibodenburg were probably also distressed at the prospect of losing both the prestige of Hildegard's presence and also the financial gains accruing as a result of dowries and endowments given to the monastery by the families of wealthy novices and sisters. (See extract from the *Vita*, translated by Dronke in Dronke, Peter, op. cit. 150-151.)

¹¹ It seems clear that Hildegard always needed some secretarial assistance to write her works. Newman notes "... Hildegard, despite

to publish and preach was intimately bound up with her perceived divine gift of visionary prophecy¹². Certainly, in whatever Hildegard's visionary experience actually consisted¹³, once it had been discussed at the synod at Trier in 1147-8 and Pope Eugenius III had issued a letter of greeting to her with an apostolic license to continue writing, Hildegard's fame was assured amongst her contemporaries at least. One indication of this is the increasing weight and significance of her correspondence after this time¹⁴.

In attempting to distinguish the major philosophical and theological influences on Hildegard's work, readers are given a more difficult task than usual. Even a woman from a branch of the minor nobility could not expect to follow

her encyclopaedic knowledge, never mastered Latin grammar well enough to write without a secretary to correct her cases and tenses. Even with such assistance, her style suffers from redundancies, awkward constructions, and baffling neologisms; and her ideas often stretched her limited vocabulary to the breaking point." Newman, Barbara, *op. cit.* 22-23.

¹² See, for example, Newman, Barbara, *op. cit.*, Chapter One: "A poor little female".

¹³ The suggestion that Hildegard's visionary experiences were consistent with the symptoms of both common and classical migraine has been referred to frequently since it was first made by Charles Singer in *Studies in the History and Method of Science* (Oxford, 1951). There is some discussion of the idea in both Dronke, Peter, *op. cit.* 147, and in Flanagan, Sabina, *op. cit.* 199 ff.. Peter Dronke also offers a definition of the nature of Hildegard's visions, based upon the analysis by a contemporary Scottish mystic, Richard of St. Victor, of four types of visionary experience. Dronke accounts Hildegard's visions as belonging to the third type described by Richard, that is to say, a form of spiritual rather than purely physical vision in which "... the human spirit, illuminated by the Holy Ghost, is led through the likenesses of visible things, and through images presented as figures and signs, to the knowledge of invisible ones" (Dronke, Peter, *op. cit.* 146).

¹⁴ Correspondents after 1147 included three popes (Anastasius IV, Hadrian IV, Eugenius III) and a host of European monarchs (Conrad III, Frederick Barbarossa, Henry II of England, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the Byzantine Empress Irene). See Dronke, Peter, *op. cit.* 149, and also Newman, Barbara, *op. cit.* 9.

systematically, the study of those subjects and techniques that were the basis of all secular and sacred learning during the medieval period¹⁵. However, Hildegard was more fortunate than most girls of her time. She was taught to read - from the Bible - and, as Sabina Flanagan suggests, there may have been some cultural interchange between the monastery at Disibodenburg and the anchorage within its precincts. In her *Vita*, Hildegard notes, for example, that she had chosen as a *magister*, one of the monks. He may well have provided her with ideas or even theological works to read for the purpose of spiritual development if for no more than this¹⁶.

Hildegard was living at a time during which the principles of medieval scholasticism were being put together by men like Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and Peter Abelard (1079-1142)¹⁷. However, it seems that she looked beyond the theological mainstream, and perhaps a little deeper into the Church's more popular traditions for inspiration. Her work is characterised by a great familiarity with scripture, often interpreted mystically and allegorically, and particularly by the figure or attributes of Wisdom, associated with a Platonizing cosmology that saw the divine as all-pervading, all-knowing, and life-creating¹⁸. In 1 Corinthians, Paul refers

¹⁵ Somewhat ironically, such subjects were sometimes personified as female figures. See, for example, the Lady Philosophy of Boethius' *de Consolatione Philosophiae*. Boethius died in about 524, but his work was important throughout the medieval period.

¹⁶ See, Flanagan, Sabina, op. cit. 36 ff..

¹⁷ It should perhaps be noted however, that she pre-dated what many consider the ultimate formulation of the scholastic project, the *Summa Theologica* (c. 1272-4) of St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) by almost a century.

¹⁸ One or two contemporary theologians, such as William of Conches and Peter Abelard argued for an explicit identification of this all-

to Christ as "the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24) and many of the Greek fathers of the Church use 'Wisdom' as a synonym for the Incarnate Word or Logos of John's Prologue. In so many ways influenced by the theological presuppositions of Augustine, the western medieval Church seems not to have been inhibited by his lack of interest in this female figure. She figures widely in medieval thought, both learned and popular¹⁹. Hildegard's use of this theme of divine Wisdom supports the development of powerful feminine paradigms such as Ecclesia/Mother Church and Mary which set the feminine divine on centre stage in the cosmic dramas of creation and Incarnation.

In *Liber divinorum operum*, Hildegard presents her readers with a vision of the whole of God's works. It comprises three books: "The World of Humanity", "The Kingdom of the Hereafter" and "The History of Salvation". The scope of the visions is vastly ambitious and attempts to delineate the divine work in all its aspects; its ultimate Incarnation in the

knowing Platonic world soul with the Holy Spirit. Abelard's teaching on this was condemned. Hildegard never mentions the term but arguably, the vision of Caritas or divine Love in the first Vision of *Liber divinorum operum*, is itself a revelation of a comparable 'anima mundi'. See Newman, Barbara, op. cit. 69 ff.

¹⁹ See Newman, Barbara, op. cit. 42 ff.. Newman notes that the Carolingian period (Charlemagne c. 742-814) saw the development of something like a cult of Sapientia. She draws attention particularly to the dedications of York Minster and the palace chapel in Soissons to the Holy Wisdom, after the example of the Cathedral of Santa Sophia, Constantinople, in 538. Alcuin (c. 735-804) composed a votive *Mass of the Holy Wisdom*, which was still in use in 1570. See Warner, Marina *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, Picador, 1990). 197-8. Warner writes about the "complex of symbolism that associated the Virgin with Wisdom". Particularly she notes a legend of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who saw a vision of the Virgin, and was fed by her with the milk of her breast. Such feeding and such milk - symbols of the sustenance of the Christian soul - are powerfully connected to the iconography of Wisdom.

shaping of the cosmos - earth, heaven and hell - on the divinely ethical principles of love and justice; its characteristic salvation history from the Word's creation of Adam in the world through to the projection of a final conclusive apocalypse, and its particular indexing in the very structure of the human form. In its own right, *Liber divinorum operum* is a complex and considered work of theology.

2 The Prologue of John's Gospel.

A phrase by phrase commentary on Jn 1:1-14 comes at the end of the first part of *Liber divinorum operum*, "The World of Humanity". Robert Cunningham gives the fourth and final vision described within that part of the work the title "On the Articulation of the Body". Unlike Augustine the Bishop, of course, Hildegard had no automatic or regular access to a public platform for scriptural exegesis. Why then did Hildegard make a special reference to *this* scriptural passage and why is it included at this point?

All four visionary texts within this first book are linked in one way or another to the human form. By 'human form', I refer first to Hildegard's understanding of the essential nature of humanity as composed of both body and soul²⁰. Secondly I would argue that in her visions and theological reflections on

²⁰ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 128. Vision 4:104. See Migne, Jacques-Paul (ed.) *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1841-1864). Volume 197, 888: "Itaque ... talis est forma hominis cum corpore et anima opus etiam Dei cum omni creatura existens."

them, she sees the shape or appearance of human figures as representing, besides the essentially composite - microcosmic - human entity, a yet larger composite - macrocosmic - entity. That is to say, such figures frequently symbolise aspects of the creation and workings of the whole divine cosmos. In the first three visions, Hildegard describes a form that is either human or like a human as the vision's central feature²¹. In the fourth vision, along with an extended discussion of the relationship of the human soul and body, the *parts* of the human body, separately described, form the basis for a discourse on the scope of God's cosmological economy.

I should wish to say that the scriptural passage Jn 1:1-14, is then presented as both summary and conclusion in this reflection on the human form as *model and essence of divine Incarnation*. The four preceding visions are, so to speak, extended illustrations or illuminations of the central incarnational theme of that passage. This is a hymn to the

²¹ One of the aspects of Hildegard's work that has appealed to more recent admirers is undoubtedly the series of beautiful illustrations associated with her visions. These illustrations are fairly faithful renderings of central images within her written accounts. Illustrations from the *Liber divinorum operum*, reproduced in Newman, Barbara, op. cit., Flanagan, Sabina, op. cit. and (in colour) in Fox, Matthew, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* (Santa Fe, New Mexico, Bear and Company, 1985) are all taken from Lucca, Biblioteca Statale, Codex 1942. Illustrations in Fox, Matthew (ed.), 1987, op. cit. have been copied by Angela Werneke, from the same manuscript. These illustrations date from 1200, after Hildegard's death, but still contain her "signature" in the left hand corner of each page, indicating a close reliance on the written texts. Reliable information is available, however, about the illustrations in Hildegard's earlier work, *Scivias*. It is at least clear in this case, that Hildegard personally supervised the preparation of an illuminated manuscript edition of this earlier work in about 1165, and that therefore she must have regarded such illustrations as appropriate illustrations of her visionary theology, alongside her written descriptions.

splendour and loving vitality of God and a vision of that love and vitality envisaged in the human form - body and soul together. It is indeed a vision that accords well with the view of women as more in tune with the pleasures and rhythms of the body, and the relationship of both soul and body to the divine address, calling on humankind to respond, "look at God in faith and acknowledge [its] Creator"²².

First of all, the descriptions of these visions contain reflections on divine creativity and Incarnation that explore the 'intertextuality' between the Prologue of John's Gospel and, in particular, the book of Genesis²³. The first fourteen verses of John's Gospel evoke for Hildegard the story in Genesis, of the creation of all creatures, including man and woman in God's image. She understands the Word of Jn 1:1 in this sense of biblical creativity, and records the interpretation of God's creative speech in the form of heavenly words:

I spoke within myself my small deed, which is humanity. I formed this deed according to my own image and likeness so that it would be realized with

²² Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 135. Vision 4:105.

²³ See for example, Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 10, Vision 1:2 : "For I am life. I am also Reason, which bears within itself the breath of the resounding Word, through which the whole of creation is made. I breathe life into everything... I am life, whole and entire (vita integra) - not struck from stones, not blooming out of twigs, not rooted in a man's power to beget children. Rather all life has its roots in me. Reason is the root, the resounding Word blooms out of it." See also Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 17. Vision 1:13 "The figure treads upon both a frightful monster of a poisonously dark hue and a serpent....." And references to Eve ("the woman"), op. cit. 17, and to Mary as, for example, the descendent of faithful Abraham, rather than of a deceived woman, Eve, op. cit. 20.

respect to myself because my Son intended to adopt the garment of flesh as a human being.²⁴

Hildegard combines these reflections with certain theories about the actual workings of the human body and soul that effectively increase the scope of the theological into what strikes the modern reader, as a more purely medical or scientific writing²⁵. But the interconnectedness of the two is one more illustration of her theme, emphasising the interconnectedness and symbolic interdependence between all aspects of creation, so characteristic of her anthropology in general. Both health and disposition are linked to wider cosmic forces.

But is it possible to be more precise about the way in which Hildegard's visions of the human form can be related to her understanding of this Johannine passage? In the first place, the human form, placed centrally in Hildegard's visionary experience, is a structural element in her theological reflections on the Incarnation. The human form, understood as body and soul, interdependent and in relation both to each other and together, to the whole cosmos, appears in these four visions as a key to unlock the mysteries of divine creation and especially the mystery of Incarnation powerfully and traditionally represented in the words of the Prologue to John's Gospel and understood by Hildegard as determining

²⁴ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 129. Vision 4:105.

²⁵ See, for example, Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 56 ff.. Vision 3: 'On Human Nature'. Here, Hildegard develops a theory of the humours of the human body. See also Newman, Barbara, op. cit. 126 ff., on the medieval doctrine of elements.

both the order and the purpose of the cosmos *from the beginning*:²⁶

We are an essence made up of body and soul, and we exist as God's work together with all of creation (*opus Dei cum omni creatura*). This is what is meant by the words John set down under my inspiration:

IN PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBUM. ²⁷

Hildegard writes that "... God has inscribed the entire divine deed on the human form"²⁸. And it is perhaps for this reason that she then makes no emphatic distinction here between the human form in a general sense, and the specific Incarnation of the Word in the person of Jesus. In other words the human body is already the pattern of divine Incarnation. And if the creation of the human body is seen to be, in this way so significant, Hildegard's reading of verses Jn 1:3-4 similarly emphasises the significance of creation as a whole as

²⁶ Hildegard understood the Incarnation as the divine purpose for which the world was made. This absolutist or predestinarianist position stood in contrast to the mainstream view as expressed in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* for example, that God became man because it was the only way the evil of Adam's fall could be righted. Hildegard's visionary theology following a form of Christian Platonism, saw the Incarnation as the divine purpose set from the very beginning. Her position on this may have been influenced by reading the work of her contemporary, Honorius of Regensburg, who popularised the work of the ninth century Irish scholar, Erigena (c. 810- c. 877), who was, in turn, influenced by the Fathers of the eastern Church. Erigenian teaching of absolute predestination regarded the Incarnation of the Word as pre-destined by God from the beginning, independently and without reference to Adam's fall from grace. The purpose of Incarnation according to this doctrine which is strongly influenced by neo-platonic themes, is the reuniting of the primordial causes with their created effects - wisdom, reason, power, justice. The divine Wisdom of the biblical and apocryphal Wisdom literature is thus brought together, within Hildegard's work, with the notion of the virtues, including wisdom, as causes or ideas within a mythological framework of emanation and return. The fulfilment of God's plan, whose completion is the reuniting of creation with divine creator, is not placed in doubt, even by the fall into sin.

²⁷ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 128. Vision 4:104.

²⁸ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 129. Vision 4:105.

against a narrower framing of divine enlightenment, concentrated on the Incarnate Word in a more re-stricted and largely spiritual sense. She then appears to read these verses as if they suggested that "the created universe was life in him, and that this life was the light of men"²⁹. In other words, she expands the definition of the Word's enlightening Incarnation explicitly to include "all things"³⁰. For Hildegard, the life of creation is *indeed* the light of humankind (Jn 1:4) and the very manifestation of God's Word.

²⁹ This is an alternative reading of Jn 1:3-4 rejected in C. K. Barrett (*The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, (2nd. ed. London, S.P.C.K., 1978). 156). Some disagreements about interpretation of the earliest Greek texts of the New Testament have undoubtedly been caused by the fact that these texts were not punctuated and this is clearly the problem here at Jn 1:3-4. Barrett distinguishes two alternatives, with historical precedent, for dividing up Jn 1:3-4: (a) ἡ ὥρις αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἐν ὧ γέγονεν . ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν' ('...without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life..') (see Revised Standard Version, 1971)), and (b) ἡ, αὐ. ἐγ. οὐδὲ ἐν. ὁ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν' ('...apart from him not a thing came to be. That which had come to be in him was life' (see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (New York, Doubleday, 1966. 3.)). Barrett notes that reading (b) was favoured by the earliest fathers and some heretics. However he rejects it - and the interpretation quoted above which is related to it - on the grounds that it does not make as much 'Johannine sense', as the alternative interpretation that reads '... in him (the Word) was life'.

³⁰ A number of modern biblical commentators who reject the interpretation of Jn 1:3-4 that Hildegard's theology seems to favour, make a distinction between the life of "all things" and a definition of life that is strictly tied to Word, and interpreted in a much more spiritual sense. Thus, for example, both Barrett C. K. (op. cit. 157) and Brown, Raymond E. (op. cit. 7) argue that the association of 'life' (Jn 1:4) with the life of the greater creation, or 'natural' life is uncharacteristic of the Evangelist's work as a whole. Brown argues, for example, that in the Johannine literature, life (ζωή - Jn 1:4) never implies 'natural' life (ψυχή. See Jn 13:37 and Jn 15:13. See Brown, op. cit. 506), having to do with sin (Brown, op. cit. 507), and "to which death is a terminus" (Brown, op. cit. 506), but rather eternal life (ζωὴ αἰώνιος) to which, presumably, these things are unconnected, "... the life of the Age to Come given here and now" (Brown, op. cit. 507.). However Hildegard appears to effect a blend of the two ideas. It is through the created cosmos that the discerning believer sees God.

The life that awakened the creatures is also the life of our own life, which becomes alive as a result. Through understanding and knowledge it gave us light. In the light we should look at God in faith and acknowledge our Creator. We are flooded with light itself in the same way as the light of day illuminates the world. For we imagine our conscience's ability to soar to be like the heaven that gives rise to the sun and moon...³¹

To return to the human figure within Hildegard's view of the divine scheme of things, it is as if the particular redemptive act or mode of the Word has been, for Hildegard, already recorded in the providential 'articulation' of both the symbolic human figure of her visions, and of each human individual. And in all this, what is significant is the *human form* rather than its quality of "fleshliness" or its tendency towards concupiscence, its Augustinian misdirected will, its fallenness or its purpose as the garment of the soul. God's creative act, from the beginning, can be seen as Incarnation - embodied and also illustrated and displayed in the very minutest workings of the human body as projected by its creator from the beginning.

This use of the human form, as a *living model* of Incarnation within Hildegard's commentary on the Prologue is striking. It resembles a theological or even a divine 'artificial memory'³²

³¹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.) 134-135. Vision 4:105.

³² Techniques for improving the power of memory had been commonly studied in antiquity as an element of the standard training all students received in rhetoric. The art of 'artificial memory', a form of mnemonic of places and images, is dealt with by Cicero, for example, in his *De oratore* and by Quintillian in his *Institutio oratoria*. An unknown teacher in Rome compiled a text-book on the subject c. 86-82 C.E., called *Ad Herennium* which was probably the most familiar text on the subject during the medieval period. During the medieval

for the benefit of humankind. The "accurate account"³³ she gives of her vision, appears to this reader as the presentation of a map, a plan, a guide, whose purpose is yet not simply to employ some rhetorical device. The human form in its actual wholeness and composite essence is a means, whereby "human beings should learn how to know their Creator and should no longer refuse to adore God worthily and reverently."³⁴

There are many delightful examples of the way in which the human form is seen within this part of Hildegard's work, as an imprint of the divine deed:

The sphere of the *skull* indicated the dominant power of humanity...God reveals through our eyes the knowledge by which God foresees and knows everything in advance God opens up to us through our *ability to hear* all the sounds of glory about the hidden mysteries by our *nose* God displays the wisdom that lies like a fragrant sense of order in all works of art.... by our *mouth* God indicates God's Word the Word by whom God has created everything.³⁵

The body becomes almost playfully representative, like a child's action song by which to remember a whole catechism of both human and divine features, from the eyebrows that

period, however, the rhetorical techniques of artificial memory were put to use as a much more virtuous and indeed mystical activity, Paradise and Hell in particular, becoming memory places - sometimes with diagrams - connected with virtues and vices, made vivid in order to aid the faithful in reaching Heaven. Albertus Magnus (c.1200-1280) and his pupil Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274) advocated the exercise of 'artificial memory' as a part of Prudence. See on the subject in general, Yates, Frances A., *The Art of Memory* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1969). First published 1966.

³³ See note 2 above.

³⁴ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 5. Foreword.

³⁵ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 129 ff.. Vision 4:105.

remind us of wings and thus of God's wings which we may hear in the wind's blowing³⁶, to our mouth that indicates God's Word, by whom God has created everything.

There are other ways too in which Hildegard uses the human form instructively. Within her exegetical text, John the Baptist, for example, is compared to the stomach, transforming food into nourishment³⁷. John is also related through the unusual sexual circumstances of his conception ("... the fire of God's Word has caused the dry flesh of his parent to turn green again" ³⁸) to the thighs of the human figure of incarnation³⁹ as a witness to the corporeality of humanity and God's "wondrous work"⁴⁰. In this way, humanity exemplified by the human individual John, becomes "both a significant achievement and a light from God (*designatum opus et lumen a Deo*)".⁴¹

The failure of the world to acknowledge or recognise the coming or achievement of holy Godhead in Jn 1:10, is compared, somewhat curiously to our knees and once more, to the thighs. The rather peculiar analogy appears to compare such ignorance to the feebleness or perhaps softness of an infant's legs. In such a way, the failure to recognise is seen as

³⁶ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 130. Vision 4:105.

³⁷ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 136. Vision 4: 105.

³⁸ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 136. Vision 4:105.

³⁹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 137. Vision 4:105.

⁴⁰ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 137. Vision 4:105.

⁴¹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 138. Vision 4:105.

a childish aspect of the human species, that prevents us walking along the path of justice⁴².

In yet another sense, Hildegard regards the relationship of soul to body as illustrative of the relation of Word to a world in which the human symbol is central. It is also within God's providence for humankind that the rest of creation is imprinted with reminders of God's nature and of our proper disposition towards him as human creatures. Thus the sun and the moon by giving light indicate the knowledge of good, and night serves the purpose of reminding us of the infinite darkness that rejected the light, and which "our knowledge of the good, on the basis of reason, holds back...."⁴³ This is Hildegard's interpretation of the light, or lights, that shine in the darkness (Jn 1:5)⁴⁴. It is to see a moral and theological import in every feature of the natural world, and, perhaps, to give a yet deeper resonance to the divine words of the second vision, that state:

All nature ought to be at the service of human beings so that they can work with nature since, in fact, human beings can neither live nor survive without it.⁴⁵

Finally, in determining why Hildegard chose to use exegesis of this Johannine passage as the summary and conclusion to the first part of her visionary text, 'The World Of Humanity',

⁴² See Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 140. Vision 4:105.

⁴³ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 135. Vision 4:105.

⁴⁴ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 135. Vision 4:105.

⁴⁵ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 26. Vision 2:2.

it is vital to consider the figure of Sapientia/Wisdom. This figure, found originally of course within biblical and apocryphal literature⁴⁶, became important in medieval theology and within the work of Hildegard, the sapiential themes are implicit throughout⁴⁷. Hildegard's theology as a whole may be described as 'sapiential'. And, in particular, the themes of cosmic creation and Incarnation with which Wisdom/Sapientia is particularly associated, in both biblical and apocryphal literature and also in medieval theology, is absolutely crucial for understanding the whole of this first part of *Liber divinorum operum*, "The World of Humanity".

⁴⁶ See for example Proverbs 8, Ecclesiasticus 24, and Wisdom of Solomon 7-9.

⁴⁷ Amongst the more obvious and explicit examples, see *Scivias*, III: 9.25. Here Wisdom/Sapientia is featured, richly dressed with the regalia of royalty.

She also appears on several occasions, in *Liber divinorum operum*, most notably in the first, the eighth and ninth visions. In the account of the ninth vision, Wisdom/Sapientia is described as a dazzling female figure in white silk with a green mantle, richly decorated.

Characteristic associations are with the created world of humanity, with the incarnation of God's Son, and with what lies beyond human reason:

"The figure in the northern corner indicates the Wisdom of true rapture, a Wisdom whose beginning and end are beyond human reason. The silken garment indicates the virgin birth of the Son of God; the green cloak indicates the world of creation along with the human species associated with it; the adornment too, is a symbol of the order of creation that is subordinate to humanity" (Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 212. Vision 9:2.)

In the eighth vision described within the *Liber divinorum operum*, the resonances between the figure of Wisdom and Word in the Johannine Prologue are more pronounced:

"Out of her own being and by herself she has formed all things in love and tenderness. Nor was it possible any more for anything to be destroyed by an enemy. For she oversaw completely and fully the beginning and end of her deeds because she formed everything completely, just as everything was under her guidance....." (Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 207. Vision 8:2.)

Certainly, Wisdom/Sapientia is not referred to directly in the commentary on the Prologue within the fourth vision, but this must surely be because Hildegard reads the words of scripture concerning Logos as simply the reiteration of the same vision. In other words Wisdom is replaced here by Word in the words of scripture, but is fully explored within the preceding visions. Thus, the figure of Sapientia in the guise of Caritas or divine Love, decked in the iconography of the Trinitarian God - the bearded head of God the Father, the winged figure of the Holy Spirit, carrying the lamb, the Son - opens *Liber divinorum operum* with her stirring declaration of creative power:

I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every spark of life, and I emit nothing that is deadly. I decide on all reality. With lofty wings I fly above the globe: With wisdom I have rightly put the universe in order. I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame beyond the beauty of the meadows ...⁴⁸.

Implicitly, of course, Sapientia/Wisdom is present throughout since the Incarnation in the human form - Hildegard speaks of the 'flesh' here without prejudice - is the very revelation of the hidden Word.

The Word is concealed in the flesh..... the Word remained Word and the flesh remained flesh. Yet they became one because the Word, which was within God without time and before all time and which does not change, concealed itself within the flesh⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 8. Vision 1:2.

⁴⁹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 146. Vision 4:105.

In other words, this flesh is viewed as the visible revelation of the invisible divine, and as such is revered, even celebrated. It is, as belonging to the human form, the soul's beautiful and delightful adornment. It is, as belonging to the divine cosmos, the revelation of the Word. Once again, such revelation belongs to the traditional remit of Sapientia/Wisdom, the feminine divine.

Sapientia/Wisdom also by tradition, represents the synergetic relationship existing between Creator and creature - the mystery of Incarnation *and creaturely response* in faith and virtuous living⁵⁰. Wisdom is the gift of the Holy Spirit, by

⁵⁰ Thus the few direct references to Wisdom in this first part of the work, and outside the more specific commentary of Vision 4:105, consistently emphasise the sense in which humanity is empowered to respond to God in both faith and virtuous living:

"The power of human virtue is fulfilled in the fire of the Holy Spirit and the moisture of humility within the vessel of the Holy Spirit, where Wisdom has made her abode". Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 111, Vision 4:36.

Again, Hildegard refers in the second vision to a strengthening, guiding Wisdom who pours into us a faith that protects:

"Wisdom, however, pours into the chambers, that is, into the spirit of human beings, the justice of true faith through which alone God is known. There this faith presses out all the chill and dampness of vice in such a way that such things cannot germinate and grow again. "Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 39. Vision 2:19.

Significantly perhaps, Hildegard at this point, goes on to characterise the response to Wisdom's gift of faith, in terms of an image of the (feminine) divine as a nursing mother:

".believers should rejoice and be glad in true faithThirsting for God's justice, they should now suckle the holy element from God's breast and never have enough of it, so that they will be forever refreshed by the vision of God." This is a relatively conventional image within the medieval period. See, for example, Caroline Walker Bynum's discussion of female images of God in Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, (New York, Zone Books, 1992). 157 ff..

In this way, Wisdom's concern with creaturely response to all the initiatives of divine incarnation is once more located within the model of the human form; the affective but also nourishing, protective activity of a nursing mother and her infant.

means of which, humankind may see and then respond in love to the initiatives of God. This sapiential theme is undoubtedly present for Hildegard in the Johannine passage, that speaks of a light that enables all to believe (Jn 1:7) and that rewards those who receive him with the kiss of the faithful⁵¹, with a parental, and perhaps above all, a maternal embrace (Jn 1:12).

The commentary on Jn 1:1-14 is translated in its entirety by Robert Cunningham. Only the first fourteen verses interest her in this context⁵². She concludes with our perception of God's glory *in the world*.. The particular redemptive work of the Incarnate Son of God through his crucifixion, and the final conclusion of his peculiar mission is dealt with elsewhere.

3 Hildegard's Reading of Gender in John 1:1-14.

What then of the question of gender in this text? In what sense could it be said to find expression here? Are there perceptible indications of woman's identification with bodily

⁵¹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit., 142. Vision 4:105

⁵² It should, of course, be noted that Hildegard does not offer any specific commentary on Jn 1:15-18, treated by most modern biblical scholars as if it belonged within the literary unit of Jn 1:1-18, in its final form. See below, Chapter 7 for Sjef van Tilborg's discussion of a possibly different arrangement of the material in Jn 1. See Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John 1-XII* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland, Doubleday, 1966), 18-23, for a brief summary of more recent scholarly conjecture about the balance of borrowed versus original material within Jn 1:1-18. All the scholars he mentions (pre-1966) appear to accept the division of Jn 1:1-18 from the rest of the chapter as a given.

materiality, sexuality, sin and death⁵³? Is gender simply employed as an metaphor for the familiar hierarchical dualism as between the glory of the divine Word and the humility of his incarnation in human flesh⁵⁴ or between soul and body, God and material world? And what of the figure of the mother, absent from the Johannine text?

3.1 The conundrum of the Incarnate Word.

Hildegard works with a definition of humanity which in *theological* terms, does not take a very positive view of sexuality (a sense of a sexual self, an *embracing* of sexual desire or action independent of mere reproduction)⁵⁵. This makes her commentary on the first 14 verses of John's Gospel, appear conservative and conventional, although its tone is not marked by the sort of excesses that would lead one to think her unusual within the context of medieval theology in general. It maintains the Augustinian view of inherited guilt through sexual intercourse⁵⁶ that is based upon an interpretation of Genesis 2-3.⁵⁷ Hildegard writes:

⁵³ See in Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 20. In Vision 1:17, Hildegard combines an identification between woman and the earth with the untouched purity of the Virgin Mary: "God chose from Abraham's stock the dormant Earth that had within itself not a jot of the taste whereby the old serpent had deceived the first woman. And the Earth, which was foreshadowed by Aaron's staff, was the Virgin Mary."

⁵⁴ See for example in Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 123. In Vision 4:101, Hildegard notes that "Man is in this connection an indication of the Godhead while woman is an indication of the humanity of God's Son."

⁵⁵ She does, in Vision 3, speak of reason coming to flower within the sex organs, "so that we can know what to do and what to leave off. On this account we enjoy what we do". See Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 71. Vision 3:12.

⁵⁶ Note, however, Hildegard's frequent reference to the fall of Lucifer in this work as the first act, so to speak, of the drama of the Fall. In

God created Adam to live forever without any change. But he fell because of his disobedience and as a result of heeding the serpent's advice. Hence, the serpent believed Adam to be lost once and forever. But that was not God's wish. He granted the world as a place of exile for us, and in the world thereafter we humans conceived and bore our children in sin. Thus we as well as our descendants, became subject to death. Indeed, when we are conceived, the sinful foam of human seed is transformed into an inferior material. And this situation will continue until the Last Day⁵⁸.

In her commentary, what distinguishes new birth as children of God (Jn 1:12-13), is, as one would expect within this Augustinian framework, the absence of fleshly desires or the exchange of blood between parents⁵⁹. What significance this metaphor of birth retains, is, of course, its implicit denial of death, hedged about by the explicit denial of an evil, death-related sexuality. New birth as a child of God, comes about as the result of good works and from the "gift of divine revelation in the purification of baptism and through the ardent effusion of the Holy Spirit"⁶⁰. In other words, Hildegard follows Augustine making the 'fleshly' sometimes merely a reference to spiritual evil or failure.

Similarly Hildegard's understanding of the Word made flesh, is based on the familiar (and, for modern readers at any rate, perplexing) assumption that it is possible to affirm the

other words, the weight of the cause of sin does not rest simply on the reading of Genesis.

⁵⁷ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 143. Vision 4:105

⁵⁸ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 143. Vision 4:105.

⁵⁹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 143. Vision 4:105.

⁶⁰ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 143. Vision 4:105.

humanity of the Word whilst aborting his sexuality and making his mother a virgin.

..he was conceived by the Virgin through the fire of the Holy Spirit. To that end there was no need of the sex act of a man in the same way as every other human being is begotten in sin by the man who is that person's father.⁶¹

Within this scheme of things, 'fleshly desires' do not belong to the constitution of the first human beings⁶², nor, it is suggested, to those that are finally restored to wholeness. It is therefore unnecessary, for the Word to take part in 'sinful' conception in order to be concealed within the flesh. Re-iterating, Hildegard's visions occur within a fundamentally Augustinian framework with an understanding of 'flesh' as a subjection to concupiscence or to uncontrolled desires that are absent from the state of childlike simplicity and innocence to which we should aspire. She could with some justification, be said to use a concept of body that excludes sexuality, and a concept of Word made simply human, that is soul within body in a fundamentally asexual sense.

..our body is the concealing garment of our soul, and the soul offers services to the flesh through its actions. Our body would be nothing without the soul, and our soul could do nothing without the body.... But the Word of God adopted flesh from the unfurrowed flesh of the Virgin without any flame of passion. As a result, the Word remained Word and the flesh remained flesh. Yet they became one because the Word, which was within God without time and before all time and which does not change, concealed itself within the flesh .⁶³

⁶¹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 147. Vision 4:105.

⁶² Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 237. Vision 10:9.

⁶³ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 146. Vision 4:105.

It is hardly surprising then, that the illustrations commonly associated with this text, portray a naked human figure that is short-haired, flat-chested and yet without any indication of male sex-organs; which is to see the notion of 'normative masculinity' in a new light!!

But, of course, it is just not that simple! Hildegard's use of 'flesh' (as opposed to 'body' or 'human form')⁶⁴, is close on occasions to an understanding of humankind driven by uncontrolled sexual lust. But it is difficult for Hildegard (as for many others!) to maintain consistency in interpreting the word 'flesh' in this passage. The problem of adhering rigorously to Augustinian orthodoxy, is that it simply does not do justice either to the complexity of the text or to Hildegard's obviously profound common sense. Whilst rampant sexual energy clearly troubles her, she knows that it is intimately related to a vital fertility whose signature is to be found within the articulation of the Incarnate body:

The fertile Earth is symbolized by the sex organs, which display the power of generation as well as an indecent boldness. Just as unruly forces at times rise from these organs, the recurring fertility of the Earth

⁶⁴ It is not always clear precisely what distinction Hildegard makes between body and flesh. At times the two terms appear to be used interchangeably. However, as a rough rule of thumb, it might be said that 'flesh' is associated with an Augustinian sense of original sin and inherited guilt, related to different experiences of lust or loss of control. "[W]hatever frisks about wildly with indecent actions"(Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 43. Vision 2:27) seems to refer especially to sexual passion (See also, 33, 53), but probably includes all forms of undisciplined activity, such as gluttony (71) or pride (115-116). 'Body', on the other hand, implies an essential element of that which is called the human form and which belongs inseparably to humanity.

brings about a luxuriant growth and an immense overabundance of fruits..."⁶⁵

And, of course, she knows - whether or not from personal experience it is impossible to say! - that the sexual body may give delight⁶⁶. Here there is undoubtedly some interesting confusion. If the human body, is full of significance, 'flesh' lacks the power of life and is not of itself sufficient to be called human, even in the case of the Incarnate Word. But conversely, without 'flesh', we could not be called human:

The spirit does not become flesh, nor does the flesh become spirit. But by the flesh and the spirit we are completed. If it were otherwise, we could not be human beings or be called human beings ⁶⁷

Hildegard's *theological* construction of humanity does not, as I have already said, allow for much in the sense of positive sexuality. What Adam and Eve fell into, indeed, was sexuality. However, if it is correct to identify such a complicated construction of sexuality- combined of desire and prohibition⁶⁸ - with the cultural symbols of woman and the feminine, then this may very well be one reason why Hildegard looked particularly, to images of the feminine divine. She was profoundly committed to a vision of the

⁶⁵ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 114. Vision 4:79

⁶⁶ See for example, Dronke, Peter, op. cit. 175-6. From a 'medical passage': "When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings with it sensual delight, communicates the taste of that delight during the act and summons forth the emission of the man's seed. And when the seed has fallen into its place, that vehement heat descending from her brain draws the seed to itself and holds it, and soon the woman's sexual organs contract and all the parts that are ready to open up during the time of menstruation now close, in the same way as a strong man can hold something enclosed in his fist."

⁶⁷ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 20. Vision 1:17. Eve is the one who has been deceived. She desires something she should not possess.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 20.

Church, accepting its authority and its right to impose prohibitions. But she was also profoundly and above all, realistically aware of the springs of human energy - the modern psychoanalytical concept of *libido* or *jouissance* seems useful and illustrative here. The gloriously divine feminine Sapientia/Wisdom which was also and equally Mary, and Mother Church, for example, through its gendered symbolism, undoubtedly finds a place for both these elements, but within the prevailing patriarchal framework, it is an inherently unstable dialectic.

Another, rather more conventional solution to the conundrum of divine Incarnation, proposed within this work, is the construction of humanity as soul and body linked together in a loving but hierarchical relationship. As an essence made up of body and soul⁶⁹, soul has to overcome the body and be in charge⁷⁰. Hildegard's account of the fourth vision strives to prevent the first or higher term of soul becoming merely exclusive of the secondary or lower term, and from toppling over into a rejection of the body:

And thus the soul says after every victory: "O my flesh and you my limbs, in which I have my dwelling, how much do I rejoice that I have been sent to you who are in agreement with me and who send me out to my eternal reward"⁷¹.

⁶⁹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 128. Vision 4:104.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 113. Vision 4:78. (See also, Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 213. Vision 9:3.

"For no one - so long as he or she is burdened by a mortal body - can gaze upon the transcendent Godhead that illuminates everything".

⁷¹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 96. Vision 4:19

For Hildegard, as indeed for Augustine, orthodox Christian beliefs about the incarnation of Christ discourage dualistic descriptions of the relationship between body and soul. If Christ became human in the same way in which we are human, then this is a factor in favour of our whole humanity, whatever its physical vulnerability or apparently irrational motivations. In Hildegard's work, there is a perception of the human soul and body belonging to each other in potentially joyous and even comfortable co-operation, mirroring the joyous relationship of Word to the flesh of the Incarnation:

The Word is concealed in the flesh in the following way: The Word and the flesh formed a unified life. But they did not do so as if one of them had been transformed into the other; but rather they are one with unity of a person. Thus it is that our body is the concealing garment of our soul, and the soul offers services to the flesh through its actions. Our body would be nothing without the soul, and our soul could do nothing without the body. And thus they are one within us, and we accept this arrangement. And thus God's work, humanity, has been created in the image and likeness of God.⁷²

She defends the orthodox position in this work, against, for example, the views of the Cathars, which were first introduced into the Rhineland at about this time⁷³. Catharism was a form of dualism, which saw the world and particularly procreation, as the devil's work⁷⁴. Hildegard rejected this position. And she views the first verses of the Prologue

⁷² Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 146. Vision 4:105.

⁷³ At the request of a religious community in Mainz, Hildegard wrote a tract against them 'De Catharis'. See Newman, Barbara, op. cit. 12.

⁷⁴ See Cross, F.L. (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London, New York, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1958). 246-247. 'Cathari'.

culminating in Jn 1:14, as a forthright rejection of any dualistic or Christological position that denigrates the material or bodily elements of God's creation:

God formed us out of clay and breathed into us the spirit of life. Hence, God's Word also adopted in his humanity a royal garment along with a soul endowed with reason. He took the garment totally and completely to himself, and remained in it. For the spirit in a human being, which is called the soul, penetrates completely and fully the flesh and considers it to be a delightful garment and a beautiful adornment.⁷⁵

On occasions in *Liber divinorum operum*, Hildegard makes the conventional association between the feminine and what is weaker or lesser, speaking of the 'feminine' or 'womanish' weakness of the last days⁷⁶. Equally, what is masculine represents that which is - in theory - stronger and comparable with the dimension of soul within the body/soul continuum or the distinction between divinity and humanity:

Thus woman is the work of man, while man is a sight full of consolation for woman. Neither of them could henceforth live without the other. Man is in this connection an indication of the Godhead while woman is an indication of the humanity of God's Son.⁷⁷

What is certainly lacking in her writing, is the indication that what is lesser and humbler has no part in God's plan.

Hildegard saw nothing intrinsically evil in the material of the divine Cosmos or in the human form. And, in fact, her work on the Prologue manifests a much greater confidence in the

⁷⁵ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 146. Vision 4:105.

⁷⁶ See for example, Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 233. Vision 10:8. Also see, op. cit. 244. Vision 10:20.

⁷⁷ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 123. Vision 4:100.

potential of the lower, feminine and bodily element to co-operate fruitfully with its controlling partner, that Augustine's commentary on the same passage. However, the sense of an important distinction remains. In other words, in a writer so absorbed by the notion of macrocosmic/microcosmic correspondences, the deference owed to the male by the female appears, essentially, and within the creative wisdom of the Divine, the eternal illustration of divine/human relations.

Finally, it is interesting to note here, that Hildegard makes relatively little use, explicitly, of eucharistic themes within this passage. Hildegard was living and working at a time when, as Caroline Walker Bynum has indicated, many women, through irregular and sometimes dramatic eucharistic devotion and practice, were increasingly drawing attention to the corporeality of the Word as eucharistic food and drink. Some of these women saw the eucharistic elements as a symbol of Christ's bodily suffering. Such Christlike actions could be imitated and entered into through the ascetic practice of fasting, often combined with the frequent preparation of food for others⁷⁸. Summarising the main thrust of Bynum's argument, women of the medieval period sought to give meaning to their existence as women, by moulding the bodily and nurturing element with which they

⁷⁸ See Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, op. cit. 77ff.. Bynum draws attention particularly to the phenomenon of fasting accompanied by eucharistic fervour, which she argues was a particularly female food practice around this period, as opposed to gluttony, held to be more characteristic of men. "Stories of people levitating, experiencing ecstasy during the mass, or racing from church to church to attend as many eucharistic services as possible are usually told of women - for example, of Hedwig of Silesia (d. 1241), Douceline of Marseilles (d. 1274)"

were particularly associated in both domestic and religious culture. Sometimes this resulted in quite, to modern opinion, gruesome feats of self-starvation and torture. Nevertheless, it was an effective, visible and even *permissible* form of expression and religious ministry for women. Moreover, such practices succeeded to some degree, in challenging the logic of separation⁷⁹, compromising or breaching the barrier represented by the distinction between both divine and human, and between the Word and the flesh, that seemed to have been erected by theology that focused upon flesh as a sign of a troubling and woman-identified "Otherness" threatening a divine and masculine singularity. For example, the medieval period saw many examples of the phenomenon of *inedia*, in which it was alleged that (usually) women survived for long periods, simply on eucharistic bread and wine. Here then, God viewed as food⁸⁰ in the most literal sense, dramatically illustrates the powerful heterogeneity of the eucharistic symbols, as crossing or transgressing the divide between divinity and humankind.

⁷⁹ See, Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982. First published, Paris, 1980). 103. Kristeva is particularly concerned in this book with the concept of difference, including, of course, the key difference between male and female. She uses this expression in the context of describing attempts made by religious practices to maintain definitive separations, and defend the 'clean and proper' boundaries of both individuals and communities.

⁸⁰ See Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, op. cit. 116. Bynum notes, for example, the experience of a thirteenth century woman, Ida of Louvain. She "... experienced bizarre sensations of eating when no food was present. She recieved the "food of spiritual reading" into her stomach, felt the eucharist slip down her throat like a fish, said to the other nuns before communion, "Let us go devour God," and found her mouth filled with honeycomb whenever she recited John 1:14: "Verbum caro factum est".

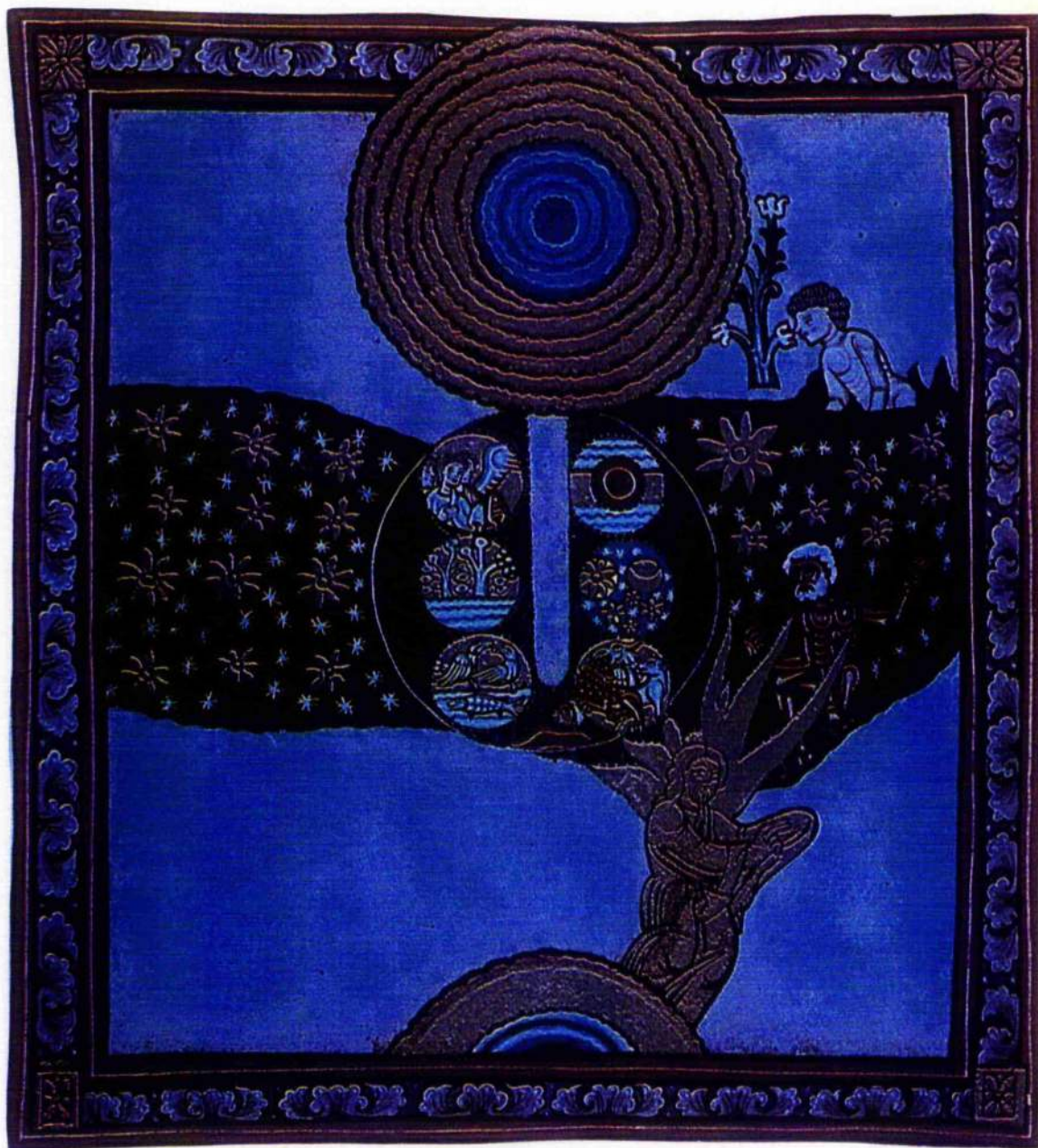


Illustration from Scivias.
Eibingen MS,
Brepols, Turnhout, Belgium. c. 1165

Hildegard's eucharistic theology is present here in the *Liber divinorum operum*, implicitly in the incarnational themes of the whole work. In *Scivias*, Hildegard describes the daily consecration of the Eucharist in terms of a daily Incarnation, a repeated process brought about by the Holy Spirit descending like a mother bird and hatching the chick with its warmth⁸¹. This much gentler vision of a sacramental rather than a sacrificial Eucharist accords much better with the sapiential themes of *Liber divinorum operum*, as a whole, in which Sapientia/Wisdom creates and then sustains through the mystical human form of Word Incarnate. The conundrum remains however. Sustaining flesh is accounted for. The excess of its disturbing associations with sin and death and unconsecrated heterogeneous, unseparated materiality is not.

3. 2 The Missing Virgin.

In the first of Hildegard's three major visionary works, *Scivias*, there occurs an account and an illustration of a vision which encapsulates something central both to Hildegard as a medieval woman and as a theologian. God the Trinity, symbolised by fire, flame and a blast of wind, offers Adam a shining white flower⁸²

...hanging upon the flame like a dew drop upon a blade of grass. The man scented its fragrance with his nostrils, but did not taste it with his mouth or touch it with his hands. So, turning away, he fell into thick darkness from which he was unable to rise.⁸³

⁸¹ *Scivias* II. 6. 36.

⁸² *Scivias*, II, 1, Eibingen ms.. See Newman, Barbara, op. cit. 169.

⁸³ *Scivias*, II, 1, Eibingen ms.. See Newman, Barbara, op. cit. 168.

As Barbara Newman has remarked, Hildegard has, effectively, "altered the legend to replace the sin of taking a forbidden fruit with the failure to take a mandatory flower"⁸⁴. It is suggestive in its refusal to blame the woman (Eve) for the man (Adam)'s failure. And of course, as Newman also notes, it is undoubtedly a prefiguration of the annunciation to the virgin Mary. Adam refuses the sensual pleasures of the lily of obedience. Mary - and Hildegard - grasps them and holds on tight.

Amongst the various significant female figures in Hildegard's work as a whole, the virgin Mary frequently represents the crucial importance of obedience - perhaps more illuminatingly seen, in this case, as in a sapiential sense, as the positively creative co-operation brought about through the gift of and through Sapientia/Wisdom as the Holy Spirit. In *Liber divinorum operum*, the virgin Mary speaks "... of herself as God's handmaid ...". She "... believed the messenger of God and wished matters to be as he had stated"⁸⁵. And, for Hildegard, her agreement was crucial. The Word Incarnate, through the creative co-operation of divine love, wisdom, church and virgin, encompasses the whole of creation, Christ himself and his Church. And yet, the burden of Hildegard's sapiential, synergetic theology is, over and over again, that nothing is done or created without a, co-operative obedience or agreement, identified with one or other of the female figures within Hildegard's works. It becomes, as it were, a

⁸⁴ Newman, Barbara, op. cit. 168.

⁸⁵ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 20. Vision 1:17.

aspect of the divine itself - divine Wisdom, divine Love, the Mother of God, the divine Mother of all souls.

It is then, slightly surprising to discover within the short commentary on Jn 1:1-14, that the Virgin Mary, introduced to 'flesh out' the Johannine vision of Incarnation, appears rather conventionally, as the guarantor of the Word's exceptional purity, in unmistakably Augustinian tones:

Thus he became in an unusual way a human being who was not like any other.⁸⁶the Word of God adopted flesh from the unfurrowed flesh of the Virgin without any flame of passion⁸⁷.... he was conceived by he Virgin through the fire of the Holy Spirit. To that end there was no need of the sex act of a man in the same way as every other human being is begotten in sin⁸⁸ ...

Here creative obedience is subordinate to a more cultural notion of purity or to the need to prove a miraculous divine power that overrides the natural order. Once again, the Augustinian sleight of hand is in evidence: Mary, through the richness of her associations with what is material, earthly and belonging with the created world⁸⁹, guarantees the humanity of the Incarnate Word. Yet that which lies beyond the margins of divine masculine reason, the uncontrolled, anarchic overabundance of fleshly desires, and the inexplicable horrors of death and decay, are excluded in this specific context beyond and outside reason's virginal purity. So that the

⁸⁶ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 139. Vision 4:105.

⁸⁷ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 146. Vision 4:105.

⁸⁸ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 147. Vision 4:105.

⁸⁹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 20. Vision 1:17.

Word, "born of the Virgin Mary and without sin"⁹⁰ may shore up the boundaries against these abominations.

And yet, and at the same time within this short commentary, Hildegard's understanding of co-operative obedience as an aspect of the feminine divine itself is perhaps still reflected in her understanding of the very first verse of the Gospel:

In the beginning of things, God's will opened itself up to the creation of nature. Without such a beginning God would have remained within God without revealing God. For the Word had no beginning at all.⁹¹

4 Conclusions.

Some of the reasons for the recent revival of interest in Hildegard's work are fairly straightforward. Here is a woman who is not submerged or silenced within a patriarchal culture. In an age when even women from wealthy and influential families were rarely educated, and were certainly discouraged from speaking openly on religious matters, Hildegard published and preached. In an age when it was unusual for a woman to participate in public life, Hildegard maintained a correspondence with popes, bishops and secular rulers. Her writings and correspondence reveal a rich complexity of orthodox theology and vividly creative metaphor and images including female figures of divine

⁹⁰ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 137. Vision 4:105.

⁹¹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 131. Vision 4:105

authority. In an age of some misogyny⁹², Hildegard maintained her independence and apparently got what she wanted, by a mixture of tough realism and the astute, if genuinely pious, management of what she saw as her gift from God - her visionary experiences.

When readers focus attention on the specifics of her biblical interpretation within *Liber divinorum operum*, a more complicated picture emerges in which there is a detectable fault-line running through her whole theological approach. On the one hand there is an orthodox commitment to the sovereignty of (masculine) Word as divine reason, holding the excesses of human (body and soul) irrationalities and lusts at bay, excluding the troubling differences and heterogeneity suggested by gender and generation. Hildegard's expresses a fundamentally Augustinian preference for virginity, where sensual delight is said to lead to disgust and death⁹³. It could be said that within this work, Hildegard expresses a distrust of what lies beyond the definitions of patriarchal Christian

92 By 'misogyny' I understand the sense in which attitudes towards women are derived from a form of dualism found in antique as well as medieval philosophical and scientific traditions, whereby woman functions as an incomplete male or as an inferior partner in reproduction. Such attitudes reinforced a theological - fundamentally Augustinian - understanding of women as inferior because she is symbolically associated with flesh and with the roots of sin in rebellious physical and bodily appetite. Undoubtedly such attitudes were evident in arguments against allowing women a place in church leadership or in the evangelical activities of mendicant orders, in the work of, for example, Aquinas and Bonaventure. See for further discussion, Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* op. cit. 216ff..

93 See for example, Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 96. Vision 4:19: " ... if at times the body succumbs to the desires of the flesh, disgust will usually ensue..... delight drives me onto a treadmill. I do the deeds of death".

orthodoxy. Within the first part of *Liber divinorum operum*, there is expressed a need to maintain order and balance within the human form of the cosmos. Reason banishes all disorder, even within the seductive, dangerous human sex organs⁹⁴. On the other hand there is a vision of (feminine) Wisdom as the substance of creation and Incarnation and as its very energy.

Julia Kristeva's late twentieth-century critique of Christian theology sets out to identify, amongst other things, those procedures that she believes, subjugate all definitions of pleasure to its own and then prohibit it. She uses the term '*jouissance*' to refer to a total joy or ecstasy that includes but is not exhausted by a definition of genital sexual orgasm that serves the symbolic order structured according to the needs and self-understanding of men rather than women.

Hildegard's work is full of references to joy and the expression of apparently blameless sensual pleasures.

Within the first part of *Liber divinorum operum*, for example, she claims that the Incarnation is the cause of sheer joy⁹⁵, and that the Word considers the flesh - an ambiguous term within the work - to be a 'delightful garment and a beautiful adornment'⁹⁶. An interesting question then to ask of the theology of Hildegard, focused on this significant text, is whether these expressions of material and bodily joy and pleasure within her work, represent a different key, a more truly feminine *jouissance*, in which the humanity of the

⁹⁴ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 71. Vision 3:12.

⁹⁵ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 79. Vision 3:19.

⁹⁶ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 147. Vision 4:105.

Incarnate Word has become something in which we may recognise the full challenge of heterogeneity represented by symbols of woman and the feminine to the logic of Identity or separation. Does Hildegard's sapiential theology go some way towards articulating a heterogeneous *jouissance* that may deconstruct a divine economy constructed within the (masculine) symbolic order of the Christian Churches simply to serve the needs and anxieties of men?

One of the central convictions of Kristeva's philosophy is that women have a need to enter into the (masculine) symbolic order somehow, and will seek to do this, even if it means compromising their own joys and pleasures. She sees that historically, and particularly within the history of the Christian Churches of the west, women have chosen the paths of martyrdom, publicly adopted virginity and, more usually, motherhood as ways to enter this symbolic domain and achieve some degree of *jouissance*. She believes that none of these paths are wholly satisfactory for women⁹⁷.

Nevertheless she points out that these paths towards joy and pleasure were much more clearly laid out and integrated into our culture during the period of the Christian past in which the cult of the virgin in all its variety flourished, and that the loss of these traditions of the feminine divine has been a great one.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Kristeva, Julia, "About Chinese Women" in Moi, Toril (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986). 146.

The joys and also the sensual pleasures - Kristeva's *jouissance* - expressed within this medieval work, are still largely associated with the modes of self-sacrifice or motherhood. It has to be said that Hildegard's use of the notion of 'greenness' often given expression in highly sensuous terms, does clearly have some relationship with fertility and growth. And here of course the earth itself takes on some fairly obviously maternal characteristics as fertile and nourishing:

From the gentle layer of air moisture effervesces over the Earth. This awakens the Earth's greenness and causes all fruits to appear through germination, and it also bears aloft certain clouds containing all that is superior, just as they, in turn, are strengthened from on highIn the warmth of the rising sun, this air causes to descend upon the Earth a dew that the Earth exudes like honey in a comb. And this honey at times melts away in the east wind's gentleness to a rain that brings refreshment⁹⁸

But it can at least be said that in interpreting the first 14 verses of John's Gospel in the light of strongly sapiential themes, Hildegard taps into an extremely rich Incarnational tradition that has the potential at some points, to challenge the inherent tendency of interpretation to adopt a view of humanity that marginalises women and the feminine and refuses to engage with the forces and energies of which culture has made them the symbol, in terms of exclusion or prohibition. And, of course, Hildegard is herself still somewhat troubled and ambivalent in this respect, unwilling

⁹⁸ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 84. Vision 4:7.

altogether, and certainly within her theological work to shake off this logic of separation represented by the dangerous lusts of the flesh. At the same time, she has attempted to define the human nature of Incarnation in terms of a co-operative dependence between elements that, whilst preserving the hierarchical, and culturally gendered cast, become even the shape and model of the inner economy of the divine. In other words, she recognises this co-operative duality as a characteristic of God's work in Incarnation. Thus Hildegard is not drawn towards a rejection of body in favour of soul, because body and soul working together in agreement are the type of God's activity, the opening up of God's will to the creation of nature⁹⁹.

The essentially hierarchical nature of this duality is of considerable importance to Hildegard herself, since, on the basis of her own symbolic identification as a woman within the inferior term - as she said of her self "*..ego paupercula feminea forma..*"¹⁰⁰ rested the basis of her paradoxical authority and freedom within medieval society. It is perhaps, above all this paradoxical freedom that deconstructs, for her, the myth of virginal obedience, elevating her rather to the position of Wisdom, the principle of active generation within the divine itself.

⁹⁹ Cunningham, Robert (trans.), op. cit. 131. Vision 4:105.

¹⁰⁰ Pitra, J.-B. (ed.), *Analecta Sanctae Hildegardis in Analecta Sacra* Vol. 8 (Monte Cassino, 1882). Epistola 2.

**The Shining Garment of the Text.
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.**

4

**Riddles for Feminist Readers.
Martin Luther's Sermons on the
Prologue, 1537.**

1 Setting the Scene.

In the *German Mass* of 1526, Martin Luther (1483-1546) suggested that the Gospel of John should be the text expounded at preaching services held on Saturdays and it is from his own sermons on the Gospel of John, preached in Wittenberg on Saturdays from 7 July 1537¹, that we have a text of his commentary on the Prologue of John's Gospel². He was at this time 'filling in' for Dr. Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus, the pastor in Wittenberg, who was temporarily engaged on a mission to the Church in Denmark.

2 Luther and the Prologue.

¹ See Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), Trans. Martin H. Bertram, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4*, Luther's Works, Volume 22 (Saint Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1957). ix ff..

² It should be noted, of course, that the commentary referred to throughout - unless other wise noted - is the result of a long process of collection and editing by those who respected and valued Luther's insights and therefore wanted to preserve them. In between Luther's sermons on John 1-4 and a modern reader of the St. Louis (1957) edition of Luther's words in English, stand the original transcribers of his sermons, a sixteenth century German editor, John Aurifaber (d. 1575), a nineteenth century German edition (*D. Martin Luther's Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar, 1883 ff.) and translator, Martin Bertram.

In the eleven exegetical sermons on the Prologue of John's Gospel³, preached during 1537, Luther's key preoccupations quickly emerge. The Johannine text is first and foremost for Luther, a statement of Trinitarian orthodoxy:

From the very beginning the evangelist teaches and documents most convincingly the sublime article of our holy Christian faith according to which we believe and confess the one true, almighty, and eternal God. But he states expressly that three distinct Persons dwell in that same single divine essence, namely, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father begets the Son from eternity, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, etc. Therefore there are three distinct Persons, equal in glory and majesty; yet there is only one divine essence.⁴

Luther tries to show how God's creative activity, his Word, is related to the historical person of Christ⁵, without suggesting that this Person is merely God's creation⁶, how Christ can be both fully divine and yet also participate fully in creaturely humanity⁷ and how these truths may be understood only by the faithful and believing, and not by any exercise of human

³ Sermons 1-11 cover the text of Jn 1:1-18. See Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit..

⁴ See Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 5-6.

⁵ See, for example, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 14: "This is the text that establishes the divinity of Christ ... He is not to be counted among the angels; but He is the Lord and Creator of the angels and of all creatures"

⁶ Note Luther's challenge to the Christology of Arius, recounted in Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 18-19: "And in order to dupe the people and deceive them with cunning speech, to blind them to his blasphemous lie, he declared that Christ was the best and the most glorious of all creatures"

⁷ See Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 22: " ... if Christ is divested of His divinity, there remains no help against God's wrath If He is deprived of His humanity, we are lost again. This is what the heretical Manichaeans did. In high-sounding phrases they declared: "God is so holy, pure, and immaculate that it is impossible for Him to assume the nature of a creature, even that of an angel..."

reason⁸. Luther's sermons certainly attend to the scriptural themes of this passage. But the reader has to reckon with these sermons as a form of defensive polemic - against the heretics of the Christian past⁹, against the traditions of scholasticism in which Luther was educated as a student¹⁰

⁸ See Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 21: "We can never grasp and comprehend this article of our salvation and eternal welfare with our human reason. But we must believe it, steadfastly adhering to what Scripture says about it, namely that Christ, our Lord, is true and natural God and man, coequal with the Father in His divine essence and nature".

⁹ See Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 7 - Cerinthus; 17 - the Jews and Moslems; 18 - Arius; 21 - Manichaeans; 67 - a whole list: "Marcion, Ebion, Novatus, Manes, Arius, Pelagius, Mohammed and finally numberless sects and factions in the papacy".

¹⁰ Luther was educated at the Cathedral School at Magdeburg, at Eisenach, and later at Erfurt University (1501-5). At Erfurt, in common with students throughout Europe, he studied the work of Aristotle and the scholarly disciplines of the quadrivium - music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. The Arts Faculty at Erfurt University was committed to a form of scholastic scholarship called the *via moderna*, associated with nominalism. Nominalism was a movement within late medieval thought which questioned assumptions, widespread in the earlier medieval period, of a Platonist nature, about the separate existence of abstract universals, apart from the individuals in which they were identified. Nominalism relied largely on the critique provided by Aristotle, whose work had been reintroduced into Europe through the commentaries of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274). Nominalists, such as William of Occam (d. 1349) Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358), and Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420), took the view that it is the human intellect that produces abstractions, based on the sensory perceptions of unique entities. In other words, sensory perception of reality does not lead directly to the cognition of universal realities. This view they formulated in response to what they saw as a dangerous tendency in scholasticism to argue for the objective reality of certain mental constructs - a failure to understand mental constructs as models. The danger they perceived was that highly speculative and ideological patterns of thought were too easily reified, stifling intellectual freedom. But such ideas naturally enough also problematised neo-Platonic visions of God as a pre-existent reality. Aquinas had integrated his understanding of Aristotle into his vision of Christian faith, arguing that Aristotelian reasoning and faith could be genuinely partners. For Luther, however, nominalism simply formed the background to his own reliance on faith in God's Word *rather than* reason. Luther was soon applying to the works of Aristotle, the critique of reason that nominalism legitimated or even required. In 1518 he broke with Jodokus Trutfetter, his professor at Erfurt, because Trutfetter saw Luther's attacks on Aristotle as fundamentally misguided. Luther's response was along the lines - much in keeping with the principles of nominalism - of a later (1520) statement: "I demand arguments not authorities. That is why I contradict even my

and as an Augustinian monk¹¹, against the contemporary Church of Rome¹², or, as Luther would have it, "the blasphemous Roman see"¹³, and even against those fanatical "schismatic spirits" who carried their opposition to Roman Catholic practices so far that they thought faith could survive without any structures at all¹⁴.

2. 1 The Saving Word.

It has to be said that Luther is not preoccupied in his sermons on the Prologue with arguments about Christology in the technical or intellectual sense of how exactly divinity and humanity may be 'held together'¹⁵. Rather, he is concerned

own school of Occamists, which I have absorbed completely." (*D. Martin Luther's Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Abteilung Werke* (Weimar, 1883). Vol 6. 195, 4f.

¹¹ Having gained his degree as Master of Arts, Luther's original intention was to enter the higher Faculty of Jurisprudence at Erfurt, and prepare for a career in the Law. Instead, on 17 July 1505, he entered the monastery of the Augustinian Hermits at Erfurt, apparently after making a vow, during a terrifying thunderstorm near Stotternheim, to become a monk should his life be spared. As a monk, Luther caught the attention of Johann von Staupitz, vicar general of the Augustinian Observant congregation. Luther was encouraged to continue his academic studies in Theology and was ordained priest in 1507. Staupitz also required him to take on lecturing at both Erfurt and Wittenburg Universities, whilst he prepared for his doctoral degree.

¹² See for example, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 65: "St. Francis, St. Dominic, all the popes with their monks and nuns and priests should hide their face and extinguish their light. For if they make themselves the true Light, and not Christ then they shed no more light than manure in a lantern. This may give off a stench, but it does not give off light".

¹³ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 58.

¹⁴ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 48: "It takes toil and trouble to engender faith in people by the God-ordained means of the preaching ministry, absolution, and the Sacrament."

¹⁵ See, Lienhard, Marc, Edwin H. Robertson (trans.), *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), op. cit. 29-30. Lienhard argues that Luther's earlier Christology was significantly influenced by 'Occamists' such as William Occam, Jean le Charlier de Gerson, Pierre d'Ailly and Gabriel Biel. In what was perhaps an attempt most of all to preserve the true humanity of Christ, these theologians strove to make a radical distinction between the uncreated being of the Logos and the created being - between the two

with what the saving consequences of this union are for human individuals and, more importantly, how human beings have access to the Word in this saving way. Luther explains in the Prologue that the means to saving grace is revealed as the Word. The Word, in Luther's sermons, is defined as the thoughts of God's heart¹⁶, the internal divine conversation or dialogue. And this is further elaborated by analogy with powerful emotions, particularly love or anger¹⁷, such that a person may be entirely taken up and filled with such thoughts.

The same picture may be applied to God. God too, in His majesty and nature, is pregnant with a Word or a conversation in which He engages with Himself in His divine essence and which reflects the thoughts of His heart. This is as complete and excellent and perfect as God Himself. No one but God alone sees, hears, or comprehends this conversation. It is an invisible and incomprehensible conversation..... He brought all creatures into being by means of this Word and conversation. God is so absorbed in this Word, thought, or conversation that He pays no attention to anything else.¹⁸

This 'Word' is God's Word, and the Word of scripture and entirely unrelated to human reason. Human reason¹⁹ - "blind

natures. It is a union, in which the human existence subsists in the divine *persona*, but this human existence of Christ also has its own characteristic way of being - as, for example, in being able to die on the cross. Lienhard goes on to argue that Luther's Christology changes significantly in later life, the divine nature significantly overwhelming the human. Thus, for example, in the later controversies over the Eucharist, Luther attributed the principle of ubiquity - a property of the divine - to the human nature. (See, particularly the *Disputations* of 1539, for a Christology consciously opposed to Occamist ideas.)

¹⁶ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 10.

¹⁷ See, for example, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op cit. 10.

¹⁸ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 10.

¹⁹ Luther's disposition towards human reason seems here to diverge from that of Augustine. See, Rettig, John (trans.), *St. Augustine*:

Luther's attitude to 'the flesh' within these sermons is not hostile in any straightforward way. In fact, the implication of Luther's words is that the Word cannot act or guide the faith of any individual, unless it is first spoken - that is so to speak 'incarnate' or 'made flesh':

And now mark well the words of our text, which are intended to honor the external Word..... it was necessary for John to come with his external Word or testimony, to point at Christ with his finger, and to

Adam first, the victory would have been Adam's. He would have crushed the serpent with his foot and would have said: "Shut up! The Lord's command was different". Luther explicitly (Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 159) brushes aside scholastic allegorising interpretations of Adam and Eve as the upper and lower parts of reason here. He substitutes a rather more general assumption of male superiority (Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.) 151) "Although both were created equally righteous, nevertheless Adam had some advantage over Eve. Just as in all the rest of nature the strength of the male surpasses that of the other sex, so also in the perfect nature the male somewhat excelled the female." There is little sense or consistency behind Luther's analysis on this point, though his exegesis of the conversation between the serpent and Eve is subtle and compelling. Luther nowhere explains, for example, why Adam is unable to treat his wife as, he suggests, he would have treated the serpent. Why could not Adam have told Eve, similarly, to "Shut up!"? The answer is perhaps to be found in Luther's words on this text, elsewhere.

For example, Luther presents Eve's fault, in an "off the cuff" moment, not so much as disobedience to God's commandment, as in reversing the proper order of things by proving the stronger partner: "Never any good came out of female domination ...

God created Adam master and lord of living creatures, but Eve spoilt it all, when she persuaded him to set himself above God's will. 'Tis you women, with your tricks and artifices, that lead men into error".

Hazlitt, William (trans.), *Table Talk: Martin Luther* (London, HarperCollins (Fount Paperbacks), 1995). 335. no. 727.

Luther avoids misogynistic excess: See, Tappert, Theodore G. (trans. and ed.), *Luther's works: Table Talk* Volume 54 (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1967). 171. Luther waxes hot and strong against the suggestion that priests should not marry because of some objection to the "stinking putrid, private parts of a woman". This opinion, credited to the Cardinal Archbishop of Mainz, Luther describes as blasphemous: "That godless knave, forgetful of his mother and his sister, dares to blaspheme God's creature through whom he was himself born". (He rather spoils the effect by adding "It would be tolerable if he were to find fault with the behavior of women, but to defile their creation and nature is most godless".)

say: "That is He". There was no other means or method.²⁴

In this sense, Luther firmly links the saving effect of the Christological mystery to the 'incarnate' Word - the preaching, the external, oral 'fleshly' business of speech and action within some sort of earthly and physical community, the "God-ordained means" of engendering faith²⁵.

Thus there is no other means of attaining faith than by hearing, learning, and pondering the Gospel.²⁶

And yet, in so far as 'fleshly' relates to human consequence or autonomy, Luther cuts the ground from under the feet of critics and adversaries who take this necessary incarnation as the basis for elevating the significance of any human, 'fleshly' agency. The condition of humanity is dire²⁷. 'Flesh' - understood as the condition of being human, body and soul together, weak and mortal - is under the judgement of God because of the sins of the human race²⁸. Human reason is little more than idle speculation. Human rank, although ordained by God, affords us no ultimate comfort or advantage²⁹. And human saints have only one purpose - that of drawing attention to Christ. Thus, for example, John is not worthy of special honour since his only job is to draw attention to the light³⁰. Mary needs no special mention since

²⁴ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 48.

²⁵ See n. 14 above.

²⁶ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 55.

²⁷ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 133.

²⁸ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 111.

²⁹ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 101.

³⁰ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 49.

her one concern was the Incarnation³¹. Moses, and the laws he delivered too, must direct us to Christ³².

Luther's sermons on the Prologue reflect a tremendous and passionate conviction against any form of reliance on what is human, any 'fleshly' pride. He makes his listeners aware of just how radical is their degradation and helplessness as inheritors from human parents, and how inexpressibly glorious is their inheritance as children through faith³³. And he insists that the means to this faith is not through any human accomplishment but through the Word of the Gospel:

Therefore we should feel impelled gladly to give ear to this blessed proclamation; and if it were not so close at hand, we should even be willing to crawl on our knees more than a hundred miles to get it, and then engrave it deeply in our hearts for our assurance.... This is the proclamation of the Gospel. It is decidedly different from that found in the books of the philosophers, of the sages of the world, of the asinine pope, and of his scribblers.³⁴

Luther believes that God created the world within the cosmos³⁵. And to this extent, of course, the created world cannot be "vile slime", as he says the Manichaeans think it³⁶. But, significantly perhaps, he expresses little warmth for

³¹ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 109.

³² Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 147.

³³ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 87-102. See for example "Indeed, we would regard the world's riches, treasures, glories, splendor, and might - compared with the dignity and honor due us as the children and heirs, not of a mortal emperor but of the eternal and almighty God - as trifling, paltry, vile, leprous, yes, as stinking filth and poison. For this glory, no matter how great and magnificent it may be, is, in the end, consumed by maggots and snakes in the grave."

³⁴ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 101.

³⁵ See, for example, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 20.

³⁶ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 112.

that creation in these sermons. There is here no trace of Hildegard's regard for the sensual beauty and complex wonder of the created world or for the tremendous significance of the human form - Incarnation within the cosmic scheme as a whole. He does not, like her, present the reader or listener with any sort of map that could make her feel "at home" in this cosmos. What he perceives is more like a shining clue in some deep, dark and terrifying maze. And it is as if, beyond the acknowledgement in faith of God's creative goodness, Luther is sometimes overwhelmed by perceptions of human baseness and stupid self-complacency and visions of degeneration and physical decay that go beyond any simple Manichaean dualism³⁷. The Incarnation of the Word is necessary for our salvation but, otherwise Luther cannot find a way of acknowledging humanity itself as gift.

Is it possible then to judge between these two tendencies within Luther's sermons on the Johannine Prologue? Luther is undeniably on the side of a Christian orthodoxy that repudiates dualism and hatred of the God-created flesh. He knows that the spiritual strength of the Church is sustained through words and symbols shared within ecclesiastical

³⁷ In the Weimar edition of Luther's works (*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* Vol 1 (Tischreden, 1912-21) 47), Luther admits that, even as a young man, it was not sexual appetite that caused him the greatest torment. Many commentators concur that, far more harrowing for Luther, was the acute depression and anxiety that periodically afflicted him throughout his life and which he referred to as *Anfechtungen* (spiritual trials). The character of such attacks was specific: "...an unnerving and enervating fear that God had turned his back on him once and for all, had repudiated his repentance and prayers, and had abandoned him to suffer the pains of hell." (See, Steinmetz, David, *Luther in Context* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986).

structures and a responsible ordering of human relationships. But his passionate disgust and suspicion of human claims to consequence and autonomy is counter indicative, since the balance of worth is necessarily all on one side.

Given the long-standing associations that may be traced out between flesh, inferiority, sin and death - that is to say a particular view of humanity - and the symbols of woman and the feminine, it seems worth investigating what Luther' is doing more precisely at such places as these symbols enter into the interpretation of this key passage that he is proposing.

3 The First Riddle: The Absence of Christ's Mother.

Luther was born a Roman Catholic and surrounded by evidence of the honour, love and tremendous respect commanded by Christ's mother Mary. Alongside widespread popular devotion, medieval scholasticism developed more specifically theological debates. These debates concerned, most notably, Mary's virgin conception of God's Son, her agreement or co-operation with God in the Incarnation of the Word, her ability to mediate or even gain advantage with her Son on behalf of sinners and her own freedom from the consequences of original sin.

Thus the Church had taught Mary's Immaculate Conception³⁸ from the thirteenth century onwards and the understanding that she was not bound by death as the consequences of original sin³⁹ was implicit in a general acceptance - in the Roman Catholic Church from about the same time - of her bodily assumption into heaven. Faith in her perpetual virginity - before, during and after Christ's birth - was also widespread from the thirteenth century. Belief in the necessity of Mary's consent to the Incarnation, was a feature of Bernard of Clairvaux's Mariology⁴⁰, becoming influential from the twelfth century. The Catholic Church's rich Marian traditions stress the importance of Mary's co-operation with the divine plan for Incarnation. In medieval religious art for example, Mary is imaged as the container, or the bearer of Christ, or even as the celebrant offering the saving flesh of Jesus⁴¹. Inevitably she acquired status and significance within the redemptive scheme. A somewhat earlier figure, Germanus of Constantinople (c. 634-c. 733), is credited with

38 "... the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her Conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin." Papal Bull, *Ineffabilis Deus*. It should be noted however, that the Immaculate Conception was not finally formulated as a dogma of the Roman Catholic church until 8 December 1854. It was first defended by Duns Scotus (1264-1308).

39 See O'Carroll, Michael, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopaedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Rev. ed. Wilmington, Delaware, Michael Glazier Inc., 1983) op. cit. 58.

40 Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). See for example, his fourth homily, *Super missus est*. Here, Bernard speaks of "... the whole world on bended knees ..." waiting for Mary's response to the angel's words because the salvation of the whole human race depends on this.

41 See, for example, *The Priesthood of the Virgin*, French panel painting commissioned for the Cathedral of Amiens (c. 1437). Reproduced in Bynum, Caroline Walker *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, Zone Books, 1992) 219.

being the doctor of Mary's universal mediation. For example, in his second homily on the Dormition, Germanus writes:

No one is saved except through you, O Theotokos; no one is ransomed save through you, Mother of God [Theometros]; no one secured a gift of mercy save through you who hold God...⁴²

The figure of Mary as Mediatrix was soon adopted widely by the Church in the West.

Luther first broke publicly with both popular devotion and the Church's teaching on Mary in his *Sermon on Mary's Nativity*, delivered in 1522, arguing against her having any special merit not granted to other people. And from even before that time he was concerned to relegate Mary to a less significant place in the Church's life⁴³. He argued that it was far more important to give alms to the poor than honour to the Virgin. And he is, more than once, found lamenting that Marian piety had seemed to substitute worship and praise to Mary for the true worship of Christ himself⁴⁴. He came to reject claims that she could mediate or intercede with her

⁴² Quoted in O'Carroll, Michael, op. cit. 240.

⁴³ Note Warner, Marina, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, Picador, 1991). 96. Warner writes that in later years, Luther struck the feast of Mary's assumption into heaven (August 15) from his calendar. The Assumption was a powerful reminder of the unique status of the Virgin. In proclaiming that she was taken up into heaven, body and soul, it challenged her solidarity with the rest of mortal humanity. It re-emphasised the particularity of her relationship with her Son.

⁴⁴ See, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 136: "... Christendom neglected and, unfortunately, lost this chief fountain and source, which overflows with rich and full grace; and it substituted Christ's mother Mary for Christ, praying to her for grace..."

son⁴⁵ altogether, or that salvation rested in any sense upon her willingness to co-operate with God. Within his commentary on Jn 1:1-18, Luther implicitly castigates the sort of Marian devotion encouraged by Bernard of Clairvaux. - one of the very few Church saints, it should be said, for whom Luther had any time at all. In what is undoubtedly a reference to Bernard's image of ecstatic, mystical union with Christ - the kiss⁴⁶ - he comments with characteristic bluntness:

Oh, how many kisses we bestowed on Mary! But I do not like Mary's breasts or milk, for she did not redeem and save me⁴⁷.

What then, does Luther make of Mary in these sermons on the Incarnation of the Word? They were preached in 1537, fifteen years after he first broke openly with the Catholic Marian devotion that, for hundreds of years, had hailed her with a host of exalted - or extravagant - titles: Star of the Sea, Queen of Heaven, Mistress of the World, and Port of Salvation⁴⁸. What attitude towards this female character,

⁴⁵ See, for example, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 165. Mary appears here amongst other saints to whom the misguided believer might appeal for help in coping with the burden of sin. The exact phraseology of the translation strikes the modern reader as slightly bizarre! However, the mention of Mary's breasts is presumably intended to remind Christ of his own humanity, by drawing attention to the sense in which he too has shared the helplessness and dependence of a child: "Then we run to the saints, and we invoke the assistance of the Virgin Mary, saying: "Intercede for me before your Son; show Him your breasts!But is this not a hideous and terrible blindness?"

⁴⁶ See, Warner, Marina, op. cit. 128 ff..

⁴⁷ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 146.

⁴⁸ These titles are taken from an other attack on Marian devotion, *The Shipwreck*, composed by Luther's contemporary Erasmus of Rotterdam (d. 1536).

does he express? Does his treatment of *her* give the reader a clearer understanding of his fundamental attitude towards the *humanity* with which she is frequently associated?

One would perhaps at first, anticipate that Luther will give Mary scant mention, particularly since the Prologue itself does not mention her at all, as he himself notes:

John fails to mention Mary, the Lord's mother, with as much as a word.⁴⁹

But, in fact, Luther's sermons continue to refer to her frequently⁵⁰. Of course, Luther has an implicit understanding of the unity of scripture - the whole of scripture lies behind or supports conclusions drawn from a single Biblical text. In this sense, Mary's absence from the Prologue is immaterial, given its incarnational themes. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke in particular, fill out her story and her role.

However, undoubtedly feeling a certain *hostility* towards the pretensions of Mary's devotees, Luther appears to regard the absence of Mary from the Prologue as a cause for approbation and almost celebration! Her absence is worth mentioning. In the fourth Evangelist, Luther sees a man - and one with authority moreover - who has not substituted Mary for Christ. Here is a man who respects Luther's own teaching of

⁴⁹ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 109.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.) op. cit. 5-26. Mary is mentioned 13 times by name within the first sermon. A further reference in this sermon (Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 6), speaks of Gal 4:4: "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman..."

Christus Solus. The absence of Mary suggests his superior qualities, since:

.. the greater the men of God and the larger the measure of the spirit in them, the greater the diligence and attention they devote to the Son rather than to the mother⁵¹

The fundamental objection, expressed here is that Mary is nothing. A peerless Christ represents the only grounds of hope for eternal life⁵². John had the right idea. The absence of Mary is the perfect way of expressing her nothingness, her lack of saving graces. To honour her properly, Luther suggests in his *Exposition of The Magnificat*⁵³, she should "be stripped completely of everything and only be regarded in her nothingness, afterwards we should admire the overwhelming grace of God who looks so graciously on such a lowly, worthless human being"⁵⁴. The brutality of such a description is undoubtedly directed against ecclesiastical institutions composed largely of men. And these are men whom Luther no doubt perceived to be stupid and quite immoral in leading human souls, women and men, perilously astray. But the effect of this description is still very disturbing. The whole description approximates a little too closely for comfort, to the forcible humiliation of women in

⁵¹ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.) op. cit. 109.

⁵² See Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 65. Luther here distinguishes between fundamentally Biblical saints - John the Baptist at this point - and those canonized by the pope. These first should be revered. "But when compared with Christ, the true Light (and those mad barefooted friars compared their St. Francis to Christ, yes, even foisted him on Christendom in Christ's place), then their light is totally eclipsed in the comparison."

⁵³ 1521.

⁵⁴ Graef, Hilda, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* Vol 2, (London and New York, Sheed and Ward, 1965). 8.

order to shore up an anxious masculinity - divine or otherwise.

4 The Second Riddle: The Presence of Mary.

Readers note Luther's claim that it is commendable for John to omit all mention of Mary from his key incarnational text. Nonetheless, Luther himself keeps bringing Mary into his own work. If, in salvific terms, she is nothing, what exactly does she represent for him?

4.1 Mary as an Index of Humanity.

The majority of references to Mary in these sermons simply relate her to Christ's fleshly humanity, as in "Before Jesus Christ was Mary's Son and became flesh, He was with God⁵⁵", or "He was born as a true man from the Virgin Mary..."⁵⁶. But they are nevertheless an indication of Mary's theological significance. First of all then, Mary guarantees Christ's full and necessary humanity: "... the Son.... assumed human nature. He was born of the Virgin Mary."⁵⁷ And this belief in the humanity of Christ is as essential for our salvation as is a belief in the divinity of Christ, ..." If He is deprived of His humanity we are lost again.....if He were not true man, He could not have suffered and died to achieve our

⁵⁵ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 16.

⁵⁶ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 113.

⁵⁷ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 6.

salvation"⁵⁸. What guarantees this salvific humanity is the flesh and blood of Mary:

He must also be a true and natural son of the Virgin Mary..... He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, who came upon her and overshadowed her with the power of the Most High, according to Luke 1:35. However, Mary, the pure virgin, had to contribute of her seed and of the natural blood that coursed from her heart. From her He derived everything, except sin, that a child naturally and normally receives from its mother.⁵⁹

How more precisely does this work? Implicitly, Luther makes a distinction between Christ as Son of God and as son of Mary. Calling Christ the Son of God refers to human generation simply in the metaphorical sense. God as begetter and Son as begotten are metaphors or limited analogies. For example, he argues that this illustration or analogy of the nature of the Father's relationship to the Son soon breaks down because ...

... it fails to portray fully the impartation of the divine majesty. The Father bestows His entire divine nature on the Son. But the human father cannot impart his entire nature to his son; he can give only a part of it.⁶⁰

But for Luther, the relationship of Mary to her son, is less an analogy than a metonymy for his entirely distinct human nature. God is not literally a father. Christ cannot have derived his humanity from God then. Luther states quite baldly that Christ has no human father: "This was without the

⁵⁸ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 22-23.

⁵⁹ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 23.

⁶⁰ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 6.

co-operation of a man."⁶¹ Thus Christ's human nature - or what is definitively human - must come solely from his human mother. The Son's filial relationship to his mother is precisely an index of his humanity. And what Mary gives her Son, in the narrative of divine incarnation that Luther tells through brief, emblematic references to her, is a nature that is under the judgement of the law. In these cases, Mary is synonymous with nothing other than human nature through its association with sin.

Luther needs to demolish two possible lines of attack at this point: First he has somehow to deny, even if he cannot explain, that Christ cannot be fully human and remain untouched by the Augustinian legacy of inherited guilt that

⁶¹ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 23, n. 23. Luther appears to have believed firmly in Mary's virginal conception and perpetual virginity, although, with regard to the actual birth of Christ, he seems to have discounted the notion of a physical integrity *post partum*, such as was a part of a popular Catholic belief at the time and later established as Catholic orthodoxy at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Luther suggests something rather more naturalistic: "It was a true birth ... it happened to her as happens to other women, in full consciousness and with the collaboration of her body as happens at any birth; she was a natural mother and he was a natural son" (*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Abteilung Werke*, Vol 10 (Weimar, 1883). 1,1, 67,3).

Whilst Luther frequently refers to Mary as a virgin in these sermons, he just as frequently leaves the ascription out. Luther's main concern with Mary's virginity appears to be the absence of a human father, a man. See also: "God's Son was born of a woman i.e. not from a man, as all other children are born. Among all others, this man alone is born only of a woman. There is no emphasis on the fact that he was *born of a virgin*" (*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Abteilung Werke*, Vol 10 (Weimar, 1883). 1,1, 356, 19.)

There is however, some continuing ambivalence in his attitude towards virginity. Luther clearly objected to the *pretension* of sexual asceticism. That is, he thought it foolish and presumptuous for humankind to try to avoid God's commands in the simple, unassuming matter of marrying and bringing up children. However, he still associated physical virginity with wider cultural notions of purity. See Luther's response to popular discussion of virgin births. To have a child implies loss of virginity, and except within marriage, merits the description of 'whore'. Pelikan, Jaroslav, op. cit. 18.

his mother's flesh and blood represent. To the end of his life, Luther continued to affirm Mary's perpetual virginity and also her absolute purity at the moment of conception, even if he appears eventually to have abandoned the Catholic Church's understanding of the Immaculate Conception in its full sense⁶². However, it is clear that the impetus behind this conclusion has little to do with a desire to separate Mary herself from the negative associations of humanity. Luther gropes towards this most 'unreasonable' conclusion of orthodox Augustinian Christology that separates Christ's redemptive humanity from that which most quintessentially defines it as human - its commerce with the feminine-identified 'flesh'. Thus, very much as was the case with Augustine, 'flesh' has become for Luther a concept that represents the disturbing perception of a certain autonomous difference or "Otherness", but whose actual transgressive 'reality', is disguised and controlled by its transformation into a spiritual category of (feminine) valuelessness, vanity or even absence.

And, of course, any reference to Mary carries with it the implication - or risk - that feminine-identified flesh and blood might have some virtue or potency in themselves. Secondly then, references to Mary as an index of humanity are hedged about with qualifications and denials to this effect:

⁶² Luther preached on the subject in 1516 in a Latin sermon which differed very little from contemporary accounts (See Weimar edition, Vol. 1. 106 ff.. Commentators argue that after 1528 however, he no longer believed in this. See Graef, Hilda, op. cit. 11. n. 6.

.. if Christ were merely a human being like you and me ... [h]e could not have overcome devil, death, and sin; He would have proved far too weak for them and could never have helped us. No, we must have a Savior who is true God and Lord over sin, death, devil, and hell.⁶³

The identifying sign of divine potency is the absence of sin:

..if we are to be saved from the devil's power....it is imperative that we have an eternal possession that is perfect and flawless.⁶⁴

The corresponding sign of humankind, stripped to its bare essentials in a *theological* sense becomes the presence - or in an Augustinian sense - the inheritance of that flaw.

In conclusion, it appears that Mary is being used metonymically to stand for the whole of sinful human nature. Mary's theological significance takes on the customary associations of the female gender with flesh and sin and by implication, the judgement, under which an innocent Christ suffers and dies⁶⁵.

4.2 Biblical References to Mary.

Staying for the moment with the absent mother, made present within this commentary, Luther's reading of Mary of Nazareth within the synoptic Gospel accounts is revealing in what it selects, and what, in this way, it excludes. Luther

⁶³ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 21

⁶⁴ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 22.

⁶⁵ See, Lienhard, Marc, op. cit. 168: " To be human is to be accused by the law which can never be completely fulfilled. Without doubt, Christ fulfilled it perfectly, but in order to be entirely at one with us, he has like us submitted to the "punishment and the penalty of the law".

respected scripture as God's Word and the means to the mysterious, the miraculous generation of faith. However, it has to be said that in these examples⁶⁶, Mary functions like a penumbra around an eclipse. References to her invariably shed a partial light around her son, in a manner that we should expect, given Luther's strictures on her place in the theological scheme of Incarnation:

He is our Brother; we are members of His body, flesh and bone of His flesh and bone. According to His humanity, He, Christ, our Savior, was the real and natural fruit of Mary's virginal womb (of which Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to her in Luke 1:42; "Blessed is the fruit of your womb!").⁶⁷

But on the other hand, Mary's response, noted in the text of Luke 1:38 "Behold I am the Handmaid of the Lord", which might be used to emphasise the sense in which she gives her consent, is not featured in this commentary on John's incarnational text⁶⁸. She does not figure here then, as either an autonomous being or as a representative of a divinely co-operative *modus operandi* as for example Hildegard of Bingen refers to her. The text of the Gospels, is being brought under the control of Luther's own presuppositions in this way, whilst the resulting interpretation is being given the

⁶⁶ See, for example, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 17, for Simeon's words to Mary (Lk 2:34 ff.); 23, for the account of the conception of Jesus (Lk 1:35); 23 & 38, for Mary and Elizabeth's conversation concerning the birth of John the Baptist (Lk 1:39 ff.); 73, for Mary's reactions to Jesus' disappearance in Jerusalem (Lk 2:41 ff); 74 for Christ's subsequent obedience to her (Lk 2:51); 74 for Mary's status as the wife of a carpenter (Matt 13:55, Mark 6:3); 110 for Christ's words to his mother at Cana (Jn 2:4).

⁶⁷ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 23.

⁶⁸ There are two references to the Annunciation within this commentary on Jn 1:1-18. However, both of them focus on the message of the angel rather than Mary's response to it. See Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 109, 113.

authority that scriptural quotations naturally attract. In saying this, I do no more, of course, than restate the argument within modern feminist hermeneutics, that powerful 'malestream' theological controls on biblical interpretation, such as Luther imposes on the Marian texts of Luke's Gospel for example, have to be contested.

The specific relevance of this interpretative practice here however, is that this is not simply an interpretation of Mary within the Gospel of Luke, but that Luther uses this particular and selective interpretation of a Lukan Mary to 'fill out' his understanding of her signatory absence in the Prologue of John's Gospel. This absence, however good for Luther in the sense that it cuts the pretensions of Marian devotion and theology down to size, is still, clearly, disturbing. It is perhaps, filled with the possibility of many competing Marian figures or the equally unsettling prospect of her absence. By means of the selective use of scripture, then, Luther defines this absence, by imposing upon it, an authoritatively sanctioned and manageable view of Mary the mother of Christ, which is in line with his own theology of the absolute subordination of humankind.

4. 3 The Invisible Presence of Mary.

Luther did have some regard for Mary, Christ's mother. He thought her faith and humility, exemplary⁶⁹. And for Mary,

⁶⁹ Note sermon on the Magnificat. Her faith and humility are exemplary but no cause for pride. "...his concept of Mary's humility is such a tribute to God that all merit on her part is excluded ..." See O'Carroll, Michael, op. cit. 227.

the "poor little orphan" the child of no consequence, Luther feels no scorn, and perhaps even some tenderness⁷⁰. But in this mode, of course, Mary does not threaten the uniqueness of Christ's salvific role. She is placed in the same relation to him as every other human being. Her humble bearing towards her son is exemplary, but it does not thereby make her more virtuous or exalt her above others.

In these sermons on the Prologue, Luther draws a picture of a woman who is not there as an ordinary woman and whose indistinguishable ordinariness is a mark of Christ's own "inexpressible humility"⁷¹ in taking on flesh, the condition of common humanity⁷². Luther is not especially interested in Mary's exemplary humility here in his sermons on the Prologue. But he could be said to be interested in her lack of consequence in so far as this deflates the claims of Marian devotion or exalted Mariological metaphors and images. In commenting on Jn 1:10 - "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not" - Luther writes:

⁷⁰ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 162 (Commentary on Jn 2.)

⁷¹ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 111.

⁷² Luther appears to define this common humanity in terms of the whole spectrum of emotional and physical need and expression - although, in the context of these sermons, for example, he never suggests explicitly that Christ shared the common lot of human sexuality or sexual appetite. See, for extended analysis of such a 'common lot' Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 73: "... He ate, drank, slept, awakened, was tired, sad, and happy. He wept and laughed, hungered, thirsted, froze, and perspired. He chatted, worked, and prayed. In brief, He required the same things for life's sustenance and preservation that any other human being does. He labored and suffered as anyone else does. He experienced both fortune and misfortune..."

It is as if [John] were to say: "The very same child that lies in the manger, takes its mother Mary's breasts, and later becomes subject to her, is the Life and the Light of man, yes, is God, the Creator of all things; for the world was made through Him."⁷³

The wonder is that God chooses to live this unassuming life with a plain carpenter's wife⁷⁴, and not that this woman, Mary, nurses and then disciplines the Christ child as he grows up in the way of humankind.

Luther's desire to make Mary ordinary may have been a reaction to what he saw as the errors of the Roman Catholic Church and of popular Marian devotion. The Church read her consent as a metaphor for synergy, a form of necessary co-operation in redemption between God and humankind. Popular devotion made Mary herself seem potent. But in addition, it may also be true that Luther was offended by her failure to conform to the cultural norms for women that he favoured.

Luther's assumption in all he writes, says and preaches, is that men and women - ordinary men and women - should marry and have children. This is God's plan for humankind, and one which he followed himself⁷⁵:

⁷³ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 74. See also, ibid. 113, "His mother nursed Him as any other child is nursed"

⁷⁴ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 74.

⁷⁵ Luther married Catherine of Bora, a former nun, on 13 June, 1525. The couple had six children from 1526-1534. The Luthers seem to have loved their children very much, grieving deeply for the two daughters who died in childhood. Oberman's account of the Luther's marriage makes it clear, however, that it was the cause of considerable public scandal at the time, and undertaken, at least initially, with a deliberate theological purpose that must have put some considerable strain on actual relations between Martin and Catherine. As letters and *Table Talk* reveal, however, the marriage appears to have

On what pretence can man have interdicted marriage, which is a law of nature? 'Tis as though we were forbidden to eat, to drink, to sleep. That which God has ordained and regulated, is no longer a matter of the human will, which we may adopt or reject with impunity...⁷⁶

Women of the Lutheran Reformation were expected to marry and exercise their religious vocations⁷⁷ within the limits of a domestic life⁷⁸. Since women were for Luther ideally domestic creatures, who kept to their place⁷⁹, he did not see them in general as autonomous individuals within society, so much as part of the furniture:

Marrying cannot be without women, nor can the world subsist without them. To marry is physic against incontinence. A woman is, or at least should be, a friendly, courteous, and merry companion in life, whence they are named, by the Holy Ghost, house-honours, the honour and ornament of the house, and inclined to tenderness, for thereunto are

developed into a warm and supportive relationship. See Oberman, Heiko A., op. cit. 272 ff.

⁷⁶ Hazlitt, William (trans.), op. cit. 335, no. 728.

⁷⁷ See, Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1987). Bynum writes about the blossoming of women's religious communities during the medieval period, in which women were offered not simply an escape from domestic danger and drudgery, but also the opportunity to affirm their femininity and celibacy in terms of a religious ideal (Bynum, Caroline Walker, op. cit. 20): "Set apart from the world by intact boundaries, her flesh untouched by ordinary flesh, the virgin (like Christ's mother, the perpetual virgin) was also a bride, destined for a higher consummation. She scintillated with fertility and power"

⁷⁸ It should, perhaps, be noted that the scope of women's domestic work in pre-industrial societies in the West tended to be broader than that of modern women. Catherine Luther bridged the gap between her husband's income and annual expenditure on a large house, children and innumerable guests, by managing a farm, large garden, pig-breeding and beer-brewing and by taking in lodgers. See, Oberman, Heiko A., op. cit. 280.

⁷⁹ Luther was reported as saying "Men have broad and large chests, and small narrow hips, and more understanding than the women, who have but small and narrow breasts, and broad hips, to the end they should remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children" William Hazlitt (trans.), op. cit. 334.

they chiefly created, to bear children, and be the pleasure, joy, and solace of their husbands.⁸⁰

In the sermons, Luther is certainly trying to align a normative view of womankind with his description of Mary as an ordinary wife and mother. It is not just an ordinary woman he sketches out briefly within these sermons, but the outline of an ideal mother who is both nurturing and authoritative. To this extent, Luther does something familiar. He makes Mary an exemplar. She is not just a mother, but a 'good' mother. At the same time, the metaphorical dimensions of her motherhood are diminished. She has no more authority outside the domestic sphere than Luther's own wife. Her breasts and her milk are the ordinary means of suckling a child so that it may be fed and grow. 'The Son of God, who is "suckled and carried in her arms", will be cherished and nurtured by Mary "as any other mother does her child".⁸¹ Mary's breasts and milk, are given none of the metaphorical enrichment of Catholic traditions that made Mary, Mother Church herself, nursing the faithful or penitents with the milk of healing, knowledge and bliss⁸².

Luther understands becoming flesh, as the Word's participation in, or even consumption of, divinely instituted motherhood and female domesticity. That is, he sees the Word as entitled to the same domestic comforts as any sixteenth century man or man-child might wish for! But

⁸⁰ Hazlitt, William (trans.). op. cit. 335. No. 726. (Dream on Martin!)

⁸¹ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 112.

⁸² See, in particular, Warner, Marina, op. cit. 192 ff..

Luther's unease or discomfort with this female figure still reveals itself in two particular ways. First of all, he denies Mary, any extraordinary *status* in recognition of her exemplary motherhood. Mary's love for the Christ child - as presented here in Luther's sermons - is simply 'ordinary'. Luther wants to interpret this maternal loving here in the light of divine humility that condescends to accept from a woman, a place within the context of human life. Perhaps it is that maternal love is a dangerous area for Luther precisely because in the ordinary context of living, defined in cultural terms, it is actually something quite rare and extraordinary, making it appropriate as a representation even a trope of divine love itself, or even of a vision of transcendence beyond self.

The second sense in which Luther's unease about this ordinary woman is revealed, is of course, the fact that Mary is assumed to be, and is largely referred to as, a virgin. Luther's rebellion against the Catholic Church had included a truly ground-breaking rebellion against the imposition of celibacy on priests and religious. The mature Luther was sceptical about the religious value of extreme forms of asceticism including total sexual abstinence. He believed, somewhat in opposition to his Augustinian inheritance, that the sexual impulse had a God-given purpose, and spoke with refreshing candour of "... the passionate, natural inclination toward woman .." that, in marriage, is God's Word and work⁸³ - for

⁸³ See *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Abteilung Werke*, Vol 18 (Weimar, 1883). 275, 19-28. (1525.)

men. He certainly regarded many of the Fathers of the Church as far too preoccupied with abstinences⁸⁴, and thought virginity was not in itself, a particular virtue. And yet, even to support his own view of Mary as just an ordinary woman, he was not prepared to compromise the teaching of her virginity. The solution to the riddle must lie, as I have already suggested in the nature of Luther's theology as a whole. Mary's virginity is, for Luther, a theological mechanism which supports Christ's redemptive divinity⁸⁵ and power over death, as the inheritance of guilt. Given Luther's dismissive view of human reason, it is not too hard for him to set aside its evident lack in that respect. The consequence however of such theology, is to undercut whatever of autonomy or separate significance that this female character might have, and to turn her female 'flesh', body and soul, into what is effectively a metaphor for human sin and death.

4. 4 The Riddle of Rumpelstiltskin.

In the familiar fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin, the riddle set for the queen was to guess the name of a man who had once

⁸⁴ See, for example, Tappert, Theodore G. (trans. and ed.), op. cit.. There are various occasions in *Table Talk* when Luther attacks the fathers for their failure to say anything useful or appropriate about marriage, castigating Jerome, for example, for being a "real monk's warden" (Tappert, Theodore G., op. cit. 177), and dismissing him as "less profitable than Aesop": "I wish he had had a wife, for then he would have written many things differently ... If only Jerome had encouraged the works of faith and the fruits of the gospel! But he spoke only of fasting, etc." (Tappert, Theodore G., op. cit. 177).

⁸⁵ See, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 22: "... if Christ is divested of His divinity, there remains no help against God's wrath and no rescue from His judgement. Our sin, misery and distress are so enormous that they require a ransom too great for angels, patriarchs, or prophets to pay"

helped her in great danger, and now came to claim his reward. If she could guess his name, then she could keep her child. If she could not, the child was forfeit to him. Unfortunately for Rumpelstiltskin, the queen was resourceful and not above cheating. She discovered his name, and the industrious spinner left empty-handed.

To name Rumpelstiltskin was to limit his power, even the power to claim what was his due. Perhaps Luther felt that to leave potential without a name and outwith his own 'text', would have endowed absence with a power for subverting his theological position in relation to the Incarnate Word. The text of the Prologue could not be said decisively to rule out, for example, a view of the Word incarnate as a divine disguise or mask. It could not be said to exclude a vision of a synergetic Mariology in which the mother represents the co-operation of humankind and God for salvation. It is clear from the way in which he presents her here, that Luther wished to contest both these options. In order to claim that the Word was fully incarnate in human flesh he had to name a physical mother to all our fleshly abilities to hear and act upon the revelation of the redemptive Word in scripture. In order to deprive the fleshly humanity that she represented of any grounds for complacency or self-reliance then, he had to name one more (ordinary?) virgin mother! Finally, in order to turn away the threat posed by the "Otherness" that threatens the masculine singularity of Luther's vision of the divine, and of which Mary, as a woman, is a symbol, she had to relinquish her individuality altogether and be named as

nothing more than the (feminine) representative of a spiritual fault.

5 Finally, Yet Another Riddle: When is a Relationship not a Relationship?

Luther's public and passionate protest against the Catholic Church - echoed by many contemporary Christians - began, of course, with his rebuke of the papacy on 31 October, 1517 on the matter of 'Indulgences'⁸⁶. That he should have felt such anger and passion about this practice is unsurprising. He felt his own insignificance before God, and his own inability to fulfil God's law⁸⁷ so acutely. His anger

⁸⁶ The practice of granting Indulgences at that time, related to the remission of temporal punishment for sins already forgiven. This remission was granted by the Church on the basis of what it saw as the accumulated 'treasure' of superabundant merits accrued by Christ and the saints. Luther objected to the unscrupulous misuse of this practice, but more substantially, to the practice itself. He believed that it challenged the sense in which Jesus Christ was the sole source of salvation and assurance, and was also at fault in suggesting that the Church 'owned' this treasure. He argued that faith was pre-eminently a matter of having a relationship with Christ, the consequence of which was that the individual believer was transformed into the image of the Son of God because of a form of loving, suffering participation in the cross, unrelated to effort. His anxiety was that saving grace was thus cheapened and misrepresented as something to be achieved by a little effort, or even a little money. The actual occasion for this outburst was the preaching of J. Tetzel, who publicised the granting of Indulgences by Pope Leo X as a reward for contributions towards renovations at St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Oberman notes that barely two weeks after being posted, Luther recorded that his theses against Indulgences had circulated all over Germany. See, Oberman, Heiko A., *op. cit.* 191.

⁸⁷ Steinmetz description is powerful: "Luther felt alone in the universe, battered by the demands of God's law and beyond the reach of the gospel. He doubted his own faith, his own mission, and the goodness of God - doubts which, because they verged on blasphemy, drove him deeper and deeper into the Slough of Despond. Election ceased to be a doctrine of comfort and became a sentence of death. No payer he uttered could penetrate the wall of indifferent silence with which God had surrounded himself. Condemned by his own

was directed against the theological model that suggested salvation could be bought. Luther wished to dismiss all reckoning from the account of a divine/human relationship. For Luther, not only could salvation not be bought with money, there was nothing to be gained from good behaviour, or acts of piety and charity or anything pertaining to fleshly humanity at all. And there was no justification for the depth of God's love, demonstrated in becoming flesh.

With that word "flesh" the evangelist wanted to indicate this inexpressible humiliation..... we are not to assume that the evangelist used the word "flesh" lightly. Human reason cannot comprehend the magnitude of God's anger over sin. Therefore it does not fathom Paul's full meaning when he says that God had made Christ a sin and curse for our sakes (2 Cor. 5:21, Gal. 3:13)⁸⁸

The obligation to love and serve others could only be fulfilled by God's grace obtained through faith, so that living a moral and caring life was an indication of salvation rather than a precondition.

Luther then reads the Prologue as a hymn to God as creator but primarily as saviour, mediated and revealed above all, in the intervening time, through the Word of God in scripture. That Word, of course, has already appeared in the world - hidden within the human life of a man, plain and unassuming, enjoying no great reputation⁸⁹ for pomp, asceticism or messianic might. This hiddenness within the world, within

conscience, Luther despised himself and murmured against God." Steinmetz, David C., op. cit. 1.

⁸⁸ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 110

⁸⁹ See, for example, Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 54, 75, 77.

the body of a woman, Luther relates to divine humility which is itself an effective and unfathomable *saving* miracle. Hiddenness remains the divine *modus operandi*. In blindness and ignorance we 'know him not' (Jn 1:10-11), and, Luther argues, forever rush heedlessly after deceptive appearances. As one contemporary example he holds up the fraudulent holiness or sanctity presented by the monastic life⁹⁰.

But it is, of course, only the humility of God's Word, in becoming hidden as a man that has saved us and not the work or participation of humankind. And a theology that reduces all human potentialities to the state of dependence upon divine grace that Luther demands, is disturbing. In terms of a position that calls itself feminist, it is disturbing because of the suggestion that it is a divinisation and idolatry of the masculine sign of singularity that excludes and obliterates everything but itself.

To this extent, feminist commentators will note how Luther's sermons resist multiplicity. An alternative or co-operative creativity is ruled out by introducing a suitably subordinate mother figure. Moreover the multiplicity suggested by a more sacramental approach to the divine is also contested. Luther certainly taught that Christians should participate regularly and faithfully in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood. But the nourishing sacrament of Christ's flesh and blood is not a means to salvation. It becomes the occasion for

⁹⁰ Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed.), op. cit. 71.

contemplating, once more, the absolute singularity of God, confessing

... with heart and mouth, with ears and eyes, with body and soul that you have given nothing to God, nor are able to, but that you have and receive each and everything from him, particularly eternal life and infinite righteousness in Christ. When this takes place, you have made him the true God for yourself, and by means of such a confession you have upheld his divine glory ... ⁹¹

In the context of these sermons on the Prologue, when Luther comes to Jn 1:14, 'the Word became flesh', he is anxious to outlaw any suggestion of a potential and even potent multiplicity of aspects within the Eucharist. This is all dismissed as sorcery and abuse⁹². Neither elements nor gestures have significance without faith, itself the gift of God's grace. Just as blood lines, and family name have nothing to do with being a child of God (Jn 1:12-13), there is nothing of automatic potency or effect ascribable to the words or indeed to the form of the incarnation - a particular transformation. What is salvific is that "the Divine Majesty abased Himself and became like us ..." ⁹³. The hiddenness of Christ in the world, is elided with the humility of divine self-abasement:

This rejection of multiplicity reflects the view on Luther's part that humankind is not in any recognisably human relationship with God at all. As Daphne Hampson concludes, "Luther's achievement lay in his reconceptualization of the human

⁹¹ *Admonition Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Lord, 1530*. See, Lehmann, Martin E. (ed. and trans.), *Luther's Works* 38: *Word and Sacrament IV* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1971), 107.

⁹² Lehmann, Martin E. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 107.

⁹³ Lehmann, Martin E. (ed. and trans.), op. cit. 103.

relationship to God"⁹⁴. And this is, as Hampson says, to conceive of the nature of the human person in a way that is profoundly antithetical to any sort of relational interdependence or mutual support. As against any sort of interdependence, Luther's vision of the divine/human relationship is a matter of excess attenuating any form of human value independent of the divine. It is a devastating description of the divine/human relationship in the sense that it defines the human Other in terms of a total absence. And this is clearly reflected in Luther's configuration of the Incarnation in these sermons, where to represent the human nature of Christ, Mary's maternal feminine, is similarly transfixed within the Johannine excision.

6 Conclusions.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza draws attention to Mary's journey into the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth as a hermeneutical metaphor. That is to say, as an example of modern feminist practice, she allows the presence of these two women within scripture to suggest the parameters for interpretation. And what they suggest is two things: an arduous journey through the hill-country, "but also the joyous embrace of two women pregnant with the possibilities of new life"⁹⁵. What she sees within the hermeneutical process this

⁹⁴ Hampson, Daphne, "Luther on the Self: A Feminist Critique", in Loades, Ann (ed.), *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London, S.P.C.K., 1990). 213.

⁹⁵ Fiorenza, E. Schüssler, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London, SCM Press Ltd., 1994). 34.

suggests, is first a strenuous effort. She recognises, as much as Luther, that significance cannot be derived from scripture without reflection and study. But secondly she sees a divine initiative that is given form, expression and celebration also within the sharing community of women. This represents for her, the possibility of different communities sharing in the reading of scripture. And this is surely one of the most significant insights of modern feminist theology and biblical interpretation. It represents a different perspective to the sort of tempestuous and lonely monologism sometimes evident in theological traditions stemming from Luther's theology, in which the reading and worshipping community is frequently obliterated from sight and replaced by the existential encounter of the individual with his (sic) God. In Christological terms, feminist biblical critics and theologians strive to question this tendency virtually to obliterate the humanity of Christ by making it merely a quality or possession (innocent suffering, or 'inexpressible humility' for example) of Christ himself. They stress the sense in which, Christ's solidarity with both humanity and divinity needs to be understood as belonging to the interconnected life of the whole Person - divine or human. They ..

.. have sought to create a paradigm shift in feminist christological discourse from a "heroic individualistic" or "heroic liberationist" christology to a christological construction that privileges right relations, connectedness, mutuality, an "at-one-ment." This feminist christological discourse uses key concepts such as redemptive connectedness, power-in-relation, dynamic mutuality, erotic creativity, the language of lovers, mutual interdependence, passionate creativity, inclusive wholeness, healing

energy of existence, and the ontological priority of
relationality..."⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Fiorenza, E. Schüssler, *op. cit.* 50.

**The Shining Garment of the Text .
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.**

5

**De-mythologising (the Feminine) within
Rudolf Bultmann's Commentary on the
Prologue (Jn 1:1-18).**

**1 A View of Bultmann's
Theological and Exegetical
Approach.**

In his essay of 1974, "Preface to Bultmann"¹, Paul Ricoeur detects, in Bultmann's process of 'demythologisation', a crucially important hierarchy of levels, of both demythologising and of myth². By taking this into consideration, he claims that readers can avoid drawing the conclusion that Bultmann (1884-1976) is either inconsistent or doing violence to the biblical texts³. Ricoeur sees three different modes of approach in Bultmann's work; that of a

¹ Ricoeur, Paul, "Preface to Bultmann", in Ihde, Don (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1974). 381-401.

² See Ricoeur, Paul, op. cit. 390 f..

³ This is a view exemplified to some extent in Roberts, Robert C. *Rudolf Bultmann's Theology: A Critical Interpretation* (London, S.P.C.K., 1976). Roberts argues that Bultmann's view of mythology is contested even within the New Testament texts themselves, that in any case a scientific and a religious world-view may co-exist peacefully and that Bultmann's demythologised existential interpretation is therefore unnecessary. In my opinion, Roberts is somewhat uncritical of his own 'presuppositions'. See also note 8 below.

man of science⁴, that of an existential philosopher⁵ and that of a hearer of the word⁶. In each case, his priorities, so to speak, are different, as is his understanding of the nature of myth. But the centre or foundation of his position remains his own decision of faith, the making himself dependent on an act which determines him:

Consequently a circulation is set up among all the forms of demythologization - demythologization as work of science, as work of philosophy, and as proceeding from faith. By turns, it is modern man, then the existential philosopher, and finally the

⁴ By this, is certainly implied someone holding a modern scientific world-view in which, for example, we can "no longer believe in events which are inexplicable in principle by reference to the ordinary laws of nature" (See, Roberts, Robert C. op. cit. 140). It may in addition - within Ricoeur's essay for example - imply the sense in which Bultmann was prepared to engage in more generally 'philosophical' or 'theoretical' reflections on the doctrines and scriptures of the Christian Church. Thus, for example, Ricoeur speaks of Bultmann's realisation that it is necessary to enter into the hermeneutic circle. "...to understand the text, it is necessary to believe in what the text announces to me; but what the text announces to me is given nowhere but in the text. This is why it is necessary to understand the text in order to believe" (Ricoeur, Paul, "Preface to Bultmann", op. cit. 390.).

⁵ It has frequently been noted that Rudolf Bultmann was greatly influenced by the existentialist philosophy of his contemporary, Martin Heidegger:

"It was precisely because *Being and Time* was in part the issue of an attempt to formalise the structures of factual Christian life that it was greeted with such enthusiasm by Protestant theologians such as Bultmann (with whom it had in part been worked out during Heidegger's stay at Marburg). When Christian theologians looked into the pages of *Being and Time* they found themselves staring at their own image - formalized, ontologized, or, what amounts to the same thing, "demythologized." What *Being and Time* had discovered, Bultmann said, is the very structure of religious and Christian existence but without the ontico-mythical worldview that was an idiosyncratic feature of first-century cosmologies". (Caputo, John D., *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993). 173.)

⁶ By this term is suggested Bultmann's conclusion that Christian proclamation has the character of 'address'. For one discussion of this notion see Bultmann, Rudolf, *Glauben and Verstehen* III (Tübingen, Paul Siebeck, 1960). By this is implied the sense in which Christian proclamation is only truly understood in the form of an imperative, a demand on the hearer for a decisive response, by which s/he is judged.

believer who calls the shots. The entire exegetical and theological work of Rudolf Bultmann consists in setting up this great circle in which exegetical science, existential interpretation, and preaching in the style of Paul and Luther exchange roles.⁷

Ricoeur's description would certainly seem to me, to be a better analysis of Bultmann's project as a whole, than attempts to make it conform to a single pattern or theoretical approach⁸. Moreover Ricoeur's critical yet sympathetic analysis highlights Bultmann's insight into important hermeneutical issues in Christian faith:

Christianity proceeds from a proclamation. It begins with a fundamental preaching that maintains that in Jesus Christ, the kingdom has approached us in decisive fashion. But this fundamental preaching, this word, comes to us through writings, though the Scriptures, and these must constantly be restored as the living word if the primitive word that witnessed to the fundamental and founding event is to remain contemporary.⁹

2 Feminist Presuppositions.

⁷ Ricoeur, Paul, op. cit. 393-394.

⁸ In Roberts, Robert C., op. cit., it seems to me that the author takes Bultmann to task for just this tendency to move from level to level of approach, and in this way, seriously to misunderstand the sense in which Bultmann perceives the difficulties of both reading texts and understanding faith in the post-resurrection community. Roberts puts the whole issue down to the "a priori" metaphysical determination of Bultmann to divide the world into 'world' and 'existence', thereby *defining*, as it were, the whole realm of 'objective' experience as irrelevant to faith. What appears to be missing from Roberts' analysis is any critical appreciation or reply to modern theoretical understanding of 'objective experience' as *constructed* experience. See, for example, Roberts' discussion of Bultmann's claim that to speak about God, makes faith impossible (Roberts, Robert C., op. cit. 171f.).

⁹ Ricoeur, Paul, op. cit. 382.

Robert C. Roberts, writes with admiration of him, that "the trumpeters of social change have failed to send Bultmann scampering back to his study to inquire after God's gender or the color of Jesus' skin"¹⁰. To interpret it charitably, the remark is 'thrown away', intended, in 1976, to emphasise the sense in which Bultmann's work over fifty years displayed a certain consistency of purpose and seriousness of intention. In the United States of the mid 1970s, feminist theology was in its infancy, struggling to be heard, yet alone be taken seriously. Yet the bottom line of Bultmann's response to the Christian texts is the hermeneutical preoccupation of proclaiming Jesus Christ "the same yesterday, today and for ever". The question then that will be asked, by feminist theologians and theorists, of Bultmann's theology as a whole, and, for the purposes of this thesis, his reading of the Johannine Prologue, is, in what sense it conforms to or, conversely, interrogates the methodology or discourse of the patriarchal context.

3 The Addressing of (Wo)men?

The myth of the Pre-existent Redeemer come to earth (in the Johannine Prologue) is presented by Bultmann as confronting us *all*. Identifying a concrete history with a mythic story of redemption, prevents us - 'all the succeeding generations'¹¹ - from dismissing that history into the irrelevance of the past, or - perhaps - of an alien and incomprehensible culture.

¹⁰ Roberts, Robert C. op. cit. 9.

¹¹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (First published 1941. Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1971). 70.

This is the scriptural context of 'address'. What Bultmann calls 'address' is the occasion for faith. It is distinguished from general truths or statements derived, for example, from scripture and from dogmatic sentences and confessions as types or genres of communication¹². It refers to, rather than describes, a disposition in respect of any of these - what Bultmann calls *Angstbereitschaft* or readiness for dread¹³. Such address is self-authenticating - both unconditional and beyond human control.

Bultmann uses the expression 'address', to indicate the sense in which God's activity can only truly be detected by the individual who is directly addressed or encountered¹⁴. It is apparently unrelated to any characteristic human contingency of character, status or historical context. If understanding refers to the process of relating new information to what we already know and experience, the patriarchal context would be relevant of course. However, Bultmann argues that it can only become revelation as "an event that passes all understanding"¹⁵. He presents the Prologue as a mythical statement of revelation, as something that occurs "in the human sphere"¹⁶, but which responds to:

¹² See, for example, Bultmann, Rudolf, *Glauben and Verstehen III*, op. cit. 170, quoted in Roberts, Robert C., *Rudolf Bultmann's Theology* op. cit. 39.

¹³ Bultmann, Rudolf, "Bultmann Replies to his Critics", in Bartsch, Hans Werner and Reginald H. Fuller (eds.), *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, Vol I (London, S.P.C.K., 1964 (2nd ed.)). 205-6.

¹⁴ Bultmann, Rudolf, "Bultmann Replies to his Critics", op. cit. 196f..

¹⁵ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62.

¹⁶ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 60, 61, 62.

.. the knowledge that God does not confront me in my world, and yet that he must confront me if my life is to be a true life.¹⁷

Bultmann's use of personal pronouns here, reinforces the direct relevance of what the text is saying to every reader, every 'me'. The reader is apparently being encouraged to recognise that they are directly addressed by these Biblical texts. The theme is that no one can consider themselves in a position of neutrality. If they do this, regarding the Biblical texts as addressed, say, to one particular historical context, they will not understand what they are reading¹⁸.

Yet Bultmann, as Ricoeur notes, makes this claim in a hermeneutic context. It is his attempts to de-mythologise canonical scripture, by framing a question about human existence¹⁹, that leads him to make the claim that God's activity cannot be detected in scripture, but only in the existential encounter. Thus scripture - or rather, the interpretation of scripture - remains central to his enterprise, even though, for Bultmann, its *dynamism* comes from the situation of the individual encountered. And this is a situation which, according to Bultmann's theoretical position, does not lend itself to further interpretation:

¹⁷ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62.

¹⁸ On 'de-mythologising' see Bultmann, Rudolf, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 18, for a definition:

"This method of interpretation of the New Testament which tries to recover the deeper meaning behind the mythological conceptions I call *de-mythologising* - an unsatisfactory word, to be sure. Its aim is not to eliminate the mythological statements but to interpret them. It is a method of hermeneutics."

¹⁹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, op. cit. 191 f..

The decisive question is therefore whether man, when confronted by the event of the revelation, will remain true to his genuine prior knowledge of the revelation, whereby he sees it as an other-worldly event which passes judgement on him and his world; or whether he will make his own illusory ideas the criterion by which to judge the revelation, i.e. whether he will choose to judge the revelation only by these worldly standards and human values²⁰

If I am going to defend my own feminist position, I have to show at this point that Bultmann's view of existential encounter with the divine, whatever its theoretical status, is actually determined in some way by gender. It appears that the purpose of this particular description of address and encounter is precisely to rule out the relevance of mere human contingencies. The common assumption is, and in terms of orthodox Christian theology has always been, that gender is a mere contingency which may, eventually or in some ultimate sense, be transcended without substantial loss or damage to our essential redeemed humanity. However, to unpack the idea of a 'patriarchal context' a little, my feminist presupposition is that the hermeneut operates within a linguistic web of symbolism, whose structure is characteristically shaped by patterns of gender. Bultmann's interrelated notions of de-mythologisation and existential encounter, will not then, I would argue, be able entirely to escape the influence of these symbolic patterns.

²⁰ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62.

Bultmann's insistence on the existential encounter as outside any sphere of human controlling, outlaws certain conclusions. That such an address is 'beyond human control', makes it impossible to reduce the encounter²¹ to anything within the computation of works or deserts. It seems once more radically dissociated from cultural or historical contexts. All human significance is collapsed to the point of disappearance, except in the need for response seen as obedience. But it is characteristic both of the Western logic of presence and of the operation of phallogocentric discourse in general, that this metaphor for self as authentic existence is expounded in terms of love as obedience to God, bringing in its wake, loss, self-immolation²² and absolute dependence:

.. the man of faith who loves understands that he first receives his existence from the thou; if the particular claim of the thou that stands before me were completely eliminated, then I would no longer be I.²³

To be sure, the 'thou' in question is not 'God' but the neighbour of the biblical text, but as this scenario is perfectly coherently interpreted as illustrative of divine encounter, there is little formal difference to be made between them. And this is, in many respects, exactly the symbolic function of woman and the feminine understood by feminist theory:

²¹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, op. cit. 203-204.

²² Bultmann, Rudolf, *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London, S.C.M. Press, 1955). 176: "The real act of love is fundamentally difficultas I give myself away in it, and attain my being only by losing it in this act".

²³ Ogden, Schubert (ed.), *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York, The World Publishing Company, 1961). 101.

phallogocentricity entails the notion of masculine normativity and feminine derivativeness.

Feminist writers, of course, are particularly sensitive to the sense in which formal external authorities have been invoked to justify the brutal intimidation of women or the most degraded forms of male self-interest and the notion of obedience, as it is elaborated within Bultmann's work, should certainly not be confused with simple conformity to formal or external authority. Nevertheless, as I read it, Bultmann's understanding of obedience - describing a proper human disposition towards the divine - is still very obviously related to a view of this relationship which is structured according to a gendered symbolism which functions in accordance with phallogocentric pretensions. Thus, for example, in *Jesus And the Word* (1926), it is clear that autonomous humanity disturbs Bultmann far more than arbitrary divinity. And the elimination of that disobedient autonomy is achieved, within Bultmann's writings, by absorption within the perspective of the divine - or faith. Faith is the action of relinquishing autonomy, when 'addressed'. Only so, it would seem to me, can such commands become "intrinsically intelligible"²⁴.

And here the idea of obedience is first radically conceived. For so long as obedience is only subjection to an authority which man does not understand, it is no true obedience; something in man still remains outside and does not submit, is not bound by the command of God ... In *this* kind of decision, a man stands outside of his action, he is not completely obedient. Radical obedience exists only

²⁴ Bultmann, Rudolf *Jesus and the Word* (London and Glasgow, Fontana, 1958. First published 1926). 77.

when a man inwardly assents to what is required of him, when the thing commanded is seen as intrinsically God's command; when the whole man stands behind what he does; or better, when the whole man is *in* what he does, when he is not *doing something obediently*, but *is essentially obedient*.²⁵

And formally, surely, there is little difference between being - as believer - grasped by the love of God, and becoming - as a woman - for the gratification of a masculine narcissism. This is, once again, the very pattern of phallogocentrism: the delusion that what is represented by the symbols of woman and the feminine can be represented without significant distortion or remainder, within a desire for masculine singularity.

In answer to such a characterisation of address and encounter that reflect the symbolic function of gender, feminist theorists argue that the feminine defines the masculine and remains in a clear sense essential to it even if only in its abnegation.

Feminist theory resists the movement towards human absence or the disappearance of the human element of the divine/human encounter, suggesting perhaps also a clearer or more defined view of how hermeneutics and the role of the text is to be understood with relation to this divine/human encounter.

²⁵ Bultmann, Rudolf *Jesus and the Word*, op. cit. 77. Within the Commentary on the Prologue, this understanding of obedience is elaborated, I believe, in terms of the overcoming of offence, discussed below.

4 Selection as a Form of Gendered Interpretation?

In his commentary, Bultmann sees the Logos, the Revealer, as presenting to each individual reader within the Christian community²⁶, the same sort of personal challenge²⁷, in this narrative, as is found within the New Testament in general. In *Jesus and the Word*, a relatively early statement of his approach to the Synoptic Gospels for example, he says:

When we encounter the words of Jesus in history, we do not judge *them* by a philosophical system with reference to their rational validity; *they* interpret our own existence.²⁸

As Ricoeur's man of science, Bultmann appears to address himself to the argument of those who would dismiss the whole of the Christian revelation on the grounds that it is contained within documents that have little claim to historical accuracy²⁹ or even to literary consistency. In response, he certainly seems to suggest that the mythological form of certain Biblical passages, such as the Johannine Prologue, does not need to be consistent with all other mythological passages in the Bible, to be important or significant. Which is to say, not so much that he understands the same universal truth to

²⁶ Bultmann, Rudolf, *Existence and Faith*, op. cit. 70.

²⁷ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 61-62, 66.

²⁸ Bultmann, Rudolf, *Jesus and the Word*, op. cit. 16.

²⁹ It has been claimed by some, that what drew Bultmann particularly towards the existentialist philosophy of Heidegger, was the critical historical work on the New Testament which drew attention to an overwhelming sense of eschatological expectation within the texts, that contradicted the emphasis of earlier liberal critics and theologians on the exemplary ethical nature of the historical Jesus and his teachings, and which, historically at any rate, appeared to have been disappointed.

underlie all the mythological expressions within the New Testament canon, but that they may all mediate the same challenge to the human reader in the perplexities of human existence.

So, how does Bultmann select his material? This selection should indicate more precisely, how he views his hermeneutic questions within the overall priority - that is, the framing of the question of human existence³⁰. He implies that the constructions of the Prologue and the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are all "evidently mythological"³¹. He includes, within this description, both "the concept of the pre-existent Son of God who descended in human guise into the world to redeem mankind" and the view of Jesus "begotten of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin"³². So we have, in the Prologue and in theory at least, simply one incarnational narrative that may address us all equally as a direct existential confrontation with the divine. And it is not enough, for Bultmann, to distinguish this as a text exclusively for Samaritans or Christian Gnostics or any other group that might have been responsible for, or influential in producing this Gospel. Moreover, this implies that not every specific characteristics of the myth is essential for the hermeneutic enterprise, since different incarnational myths are presented

³⁰ Bultmann, Rudolf, "Bultmann Replies to his Critics", op. cit. 191-2. "I think I may take for granted that the right question to frame with regard to the Bible - at any rate within the Church - is the question of human existence".

³¹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, op. cit. 17.

³² Bultmann, Rudolf, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, op. cit. 17.

as virtually interchangeable in terms of their revelatory suitability.

And yet Bultmann, in common, it must be said, with many other theologians, finds more mileage in the concept of the Word of God made flesh, than in the Son of Mary or David. There is an implicit preference for theologising based on the Prologue of John's Gospel as an incarnational narrative and model, over against the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, for example, or Mark's option of secrecy and silence. In Matthew and Luke, the mythological narrative appears to make Incarnation a more co-operative venture between God and humanity, represented by a number of human individuals including women. Of course it has already been said that Bultmann does not make any explicit claim for the superiority or inferiority, as a vehicle of revelation, of the Prologue over the other mythical accounts of the Incarnation within the canon. It is clear however, that for Bultmann the concept of the Word of God is a key one, perhaps because of the strong symbolic affinity between word, language and proclamation.

The Word of God is what it is only in event, and the paradox lies in the fact that this Word is identical with the Word which originated in the apostolic preaching which has been fixed in Scripture and which is handed on by men in the Church's proclamation;³³

It bridges the gap between divine revelation and the proclamation of the Church with an elegance and economy

³³ Bultmann, Rudolf, "Bultmann Replies to his Critics", op. cit. 209.

that the more diffuse birth narratives do not possess. (What they do possess is a more overt suggestion of sexuality, kinship and incarnational dependence upon human co-operation.) To conclude then, Bultmann appears to believe that the proclamation of the Church, which is the Word of God, addresses all readers of scripture. The existential moment of decision for faith, cannot be - it would seem - conditioned by a choice of scriptural passage, any more than it can be dependent upon any effort of will or 'work'. And yet, Bultmann's theological choices are very far from indiscriminate. There is a process of choice, of symbols and analogies and particular canonical passages under way in his own interpretation. So, how does this affect the concept of de-mythologisation as a hermeneutic venture in Bultmann's work? How is the unconditional address to be related to the specifics of proclamation, given that his work, in itself, expresses a particular hermeneutic dependency or circularity, related for example, to Lutheran traditions of Pauline interpretation?

5 De-mythologising (the marginalised mother).

When we come to the specific case of the Prologue, there is some indication that de-mythologisation, as a hermeneutic tool, is also quietly sabotaging Bultmann's interpretation of revelation and eschatological judgement in terms of existential address and individual response. Let us consider the quite distinctive mythological description of divine

Incarnation found within the Johannine Prologue. Bultmann argues that it is substantially borrowed from Gnostic philosophy and religion, coloured by Judaic speculations about Wisdom³⁴, and by the strongly monotheistic conceptions of the Jews³⁵. One way, of course, in which this Johannine statement is distinctive, is in its failure to make reference to the woman - the mother who figures prominently in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke and within the tradition of the Christian churches.

If we understand myth, not *simply* as the pre-scientific cosmological myth³⁶, but as something that speaks of self-understanding and the experience of limit³⁷, and which aims at what it does not say³⁸, which is surely implicit in Bultmann's whole project of de-mythologising, then we may perhaps suggest that such absences or 'aporia' are, in some sense, bound to be significant. Let us consider, then, how Bultmann himself de-mythologises the mythological statement of 'becoming flesh' (Jn 1:14) in terms of an otherwise absent mother.

In his commentary on the Prologue, of course, there is some incentive for Bultmann to leave the figure of the mother out altogether. Quite clearly, she does not appear in the

³⁴ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 22.

³⁵ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 33: "... all polytheistic conceptions and emanationist theories are foreign to the text".

³⁶ See Bultmann's delimitation of this in "New Testament and Mythology" in *Kerygma and Myth*, op. cit. 1 f..

³⁷ See, Bultmann, Rudolf, "New Testament and Mythology" in *Kerygma and Myth*, op. cit. 10.

³⁸ See Ricoeur, Paul, "Preface to Bultmann", op. cit. 391.

Johannine text of the Prologue in any explicit sense, as Luther noted four hundred years or so earlier in his sermons on this text. And, whereas a mother figure sometimes plays a part in the Gnostic mythology³⁹ which Bultmann believed to underlie this passage, she is not invariably present. And yet, again like Luther before him, Bultmann cannot leave her out of his understanding of 'becoming flesh' altogether. It is as if, finally, Bultmann cannot demythologise this maternal absence, except in terms of making the absence a sign of her presence under the heading of 'flesh' following a fundamentally Augustinian process of symbolic representation in gendered terms.

Whereas the text of John's Gospel at this point speaks of the Logos becoming flesh, Bultmann views the real/historical parents as the *terminus ad quem* of the divine Logos. The protective, objectifying scriptural mythology of Incarnation, that modern man, according to Bultmann's first characteristic statement of programmatic de-mythologisation, believes anyway to be obsolete⁴⁰, suddenly breaks down. "The Revealer is nothing but a man"⁴¹, leads Bultmann straight into a consideration of being a man as a quintessentially generative notion having to do with real/historical parents. Bultmann understands "ο λογος σαρξ εγενετο" (Jn 1:14), to imply the full humanity of the Revealer, and he has already committed himself to a particular index of humanity:

³⁹ See Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit., 72, note on "Μοϋϋ".

⁴⁰ Bultmann, Rudolf, "New Testament and Mythology" in *Kerygma and Myth*, op. cit. 3.

⁴¹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62.

For they know his father and mother (6:42; 7:27f.; 1:45) and therefore take offence at his claim to be the Revealer (10:33); they cannot tolerate the 'man' who tells them the truth (8:40)⁴².

It is in this context, of course, that Bultmann cannot do without a mother. Whatever understanding of the precise relationship between God and Logos lies within the Johannine text or the Gnostic myth from which Bultmann says it takes its shape, he commits himself to the model of human generation as the de-mythologisation of the flesh/absent . And yet quietly introducing this figure of a mother into his commentary, he seems not to register any sense of unease about her absence from the text. The reason for this lack of concern appears to lie in Bultmann's understanding of flesh - 'σάρξ' - at Jn 1:14.

Bultmann would have it ,that this mythical narrative presents us with a vision of divine Incarnation that serves and challenges every individual "me". This sense of challenge in Bultmann's interpretation however, depends on a set of dualities, divisions between divine and human, past and present, real and mythological being broken down. From a feminist perspective we might note here, that whilst patriarchal culture typically marginalises the concerns of real, different, individual women making them silent and invisible, symbolically, woman and the feminine serve a vital

⁴² Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 63.

constitutive purpose within such cultures as the lower term within a dualistic hierarchy of value.

So, what Bultmann seems to have done here, is to have responded to what he sees as the absence of a term within the mythic narrative of Incarnation in the Prologue, filling the gap by interpreting 'flesh' in terms of what is surely a re-mythologising in which a series of symbols with unmistakably gendered complexion play their part. First of all, of course, there are the real/historical parents who embody the reality of material sexuality and generative kinship, but then there are also a series of symbolic equivalents which give the undeniably contingent physicality of this interpretation, a particularly transgressive⁴³ caste or evaluation. Bultmann - in common with many other interpreters it has to be said - refers, for example, to a more general understanding of this concept within the Gospel of John:

Σαρξ in John refers to the sphere of the human and the worldly σαρξ stresses its transitoriness, helplessness and vanity.⁴⁴

Bultmann then, brings together the notion of the 'humanity' of the Revealer in terms of his having parents in an arguably generative sense⁴⁵, with the notion of 'flesh/σαρξ' as the

⁴³ I want, by this word, to indicate more, the sense of a certain limitation or indication of difference, rather than any more specifically formulated expression of a moral/ethical sensibility. Ref - Kristeva - 'Transgression'

⁴⁴ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62.

⁴⁵ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62, note 4: "To see the *εἰς τὸν κόσμον* as a miraculous process, that is as a physiological miracle, is to do violence to the main theme of the Gospel, that the Revealer is a man. Moreover 1.45; 6.42; 7.27f., show that the Evangelist knew or wished to know nothing of the legend of the Virgin Birth".

worldly sphere, associated with transitoriness, helplessness and vanity⁴⁶ and distinguished clearly from the divine sphere - πνευμα⁴⁷. And in terms of the narrative that Bultmann constructs in this way, we see that this effectively restricts the mother within the real/historical human sphere of flesh/σαρξ - of transitoriness, helplessness and vanity - whilst in narrative terms, both father and son are able to move between the worldly and the over-against-the-worldly, appearing as both real/historical and divine/mythic.⁴⁸

What certainly appears to be happening here is that Bultmann is employing a fundamentally gendered symbolism to represent the opposition of the human sphere to the divine in the process of defining human authenticity. I believe that this symbolism reflects Bultmann's attempts to define authenticity within human existence in terms of divine masculine singularity, excluding the Otherness of which woman and the feminine are the symbols⁴⁹. It is particularly difficult to track the moves he makes, of course, because they are framed in terms of his commitment to a demythologised Word made flesh, who is so defiantly 'fleshly'. But the drive of his argument is still towards exclusion, and moreover towards the exclusion of whatever it is that woman and the

⁴⁶ This word translates the German, 'Nichtigkeit', vanity in the sense of worthlessness or nullity.

⁴⁷ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62.

⁴⁸ See, Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 71.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Moi, Toril, *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York, Routledge, 1988. First published, 1985). 167. Moi discusses the marginal position of the symbolic woman within patriarchy, as representing, to a certain extent, the threatening chaos, against which they also figure as a protective boundary.

feminine have come to represent so disturbingly within patriarchal reading contexts.

Thus the human sphere is symbolised by 'σαρξ' in the Prologue. Now, according to Bultmann, this is not to be regarded as equivalent to 'σκοτος' - darkness - which is the condition of being *at enmity* with God. (To interpret 'σαρξ' in this way would, of course, bring him face to face with the issue I am trying to raise in this thesis when it came to reading Jn 1:14a: "The Word became flesh..." .) Bultmann argues then, that 'σαρξ' is simply the condition of being worldly rather than divine. Bultmann has further defined 'σαρξ' in terms of the transitory, helpless and vain.⁵⁰

However, if I follow Bultmann's own directions at the point in his commentary on the Prologue, where he refers to the Johannine meaning of 'σαρξ' ⁵¹, I see that he also refers readers to the use of the same word at Jn 3:6 and Jn 6:63.

Bultmann's characterisation of 'σαρξ' in terms of 'transitoriness, helplessness and vanity' - characteristics that do not have particularly strong links with the rest of John's Gospel⁵² - is shown in his commentary on Jn 3: 6, to belong unambiguously to the project of de-mythologising in terms of a polarity between authenticity and nothingness:

...'σαρξ' refers to the nothingness of man's whole existence; to the fact that man is ultimately a

⁵⁰ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62.

⁵¹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62.

⁵² 'ωφελεω' - to profit, gain advantage, prevail. This appears, in the negative sense (in vain, of no avail), at Jn 6:63, describing flesh, and at Jn 12:19, when the Pharisees acknowledge their powerlessness against Jesus' charismatic effect on the world ('ο κοσμος').

stranger to his fate and to his own acts; that, as he now is, he does not enjoy authentic existence, whether he makes himself aware of the fact or whether he conceals it from himself. Correspondingly 'πνευμα' refers to the miracle of a mode of being in which man enjoys authentic existence, in which he understands himself and knows that he is no longer threatened by nothingness.⁵³

At Jn 6:63 ('the flesh is of no avail...'), Bultmann excises 'σαρξ' from the text altogether, on the grounds that it has been added at this point to support a removal of the scandal or offence of Jn 1:14⁵⁴, in favour of a sacramentalised interpretation of a shocking and revelatory moment (Jn 6:53 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you'.). This indeed is one very clear example of the way in which Bultmann appears extraordinarily sensitive to the radical implications of Incarnation as a breaking down of a rigid separation between the divine and the human, that encourages idolatry, and limits the sense of human responsibility. On the other hand, it is set up in terms that immediately reimpose rigid separation between authentic human response to the divine, and the inauthenticity of human existence without God which is still symbolically feminine, that is to say characterised as transitoriness, emptiness and vanity and crucially *devalued*. Bultmann's new rigid separation between authenticity and inauthenticity is, I believe, partly the product of a prevalent and persistent symbolism within phallogocentric structures, and represents the desire for a new masculine-identified

⁵³ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 141.

⁵⁴ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 237.

singularity as against the recognition of human existence as lived within a context of feminine-identified multiplicity, which embraces embodiment as well as language and law, and cannot and indeed should not be ultimately resolved.

In terms of Bultmann's own existentialist interpretation of the Prologue, there is little ground, I think, on which to make a clear distinction between 'σαρξ' as indicative of a worldly sphere of transitoriness, helplessness and vanity that is somehow neutral or potentially redeemable, and 'οκοτος' as indicative of an outright opposition. And I should argue, that 'σαρξ' and 'οκοτος' are equally indicative of the nothingness that threatens⁵⁵. After all it is not the 'σαρξ' of the Word that saves humankind, but humankind's response to the revelation it represents. And in terms of feminist analysis and theory, I should also argue that such a conclusion is predictable given the persistence and prevalence in mythology and symbolic representation of a particular male anxiety in terms of the female or maternal, the potentially overwhelming Other.

6 An offensive Gospel

'Flesh' is given one other indexing quality within Bultmann's commentary on John's Gospel, which appears at first glance to evade and indeed to challenge the imprint of the rigid and gendered separation that, I have argued, he reimposes through his project of de-mythologising Jn 1:14: 'And the Word became flesh..'. This quality is its offensiveness. To

⁵⁵ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 141.

register the offence of the gospel is the "event of the revelation"⁵⁶. And the offence is produced by the Revealer's "sheer humanity"⁵⁷, by his inability to be recognised as Judge and Revealer except by the eye of faith. There can be no purely objective recognition because there is no objective duality. Thus the Revealer becoming 'flesh' is not to be understood as gracious humility in accepting fleshly limitations, but as it were, a challenge to the common categories of divine and human which are used to resist the immediacy of the demand that is being made of each individual. To see the Revealer as Divine in contradistinction to what is human lets 'me' off the hook. 'I' insulate myself from the existential demands of the Revealer by excluding the Revealer from the sphere of the human.

Bultmann's radical commitment to the humanity of Christ should not be mistaken. And he is ready to abandon the safety net provided by any sort of body/spirit dualism

.. the $\delta\omicron\xi\alpha$ is not to be seen *alongside* the $\sigma\alpha\rho\xi$, nor *through* the $\sigma\alpha\rho\xi$ as through a window; it is to be seen in the $\sigma\alpha\rho\xi$ and nowhere else. If man wishes to see the $\delta\omicron\xi\alpha$, then it is on the $\sigma\alpha\rho\xi$ that he must concentrate his attention, without allowing himself to fall a victim to appearances. The revelation is present in a peculiar *hiddenness*.⁵⁸

He is ready to take tremendous, as it were, theological risks in defence of this hiddenness:

⁵⁶ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 62.

⁵⁷ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 63.

⁵⁸ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 63.

... the incarnation is not understood as the decisive revelation-event. Accordingly in the Johannine portrayal of the incarnate encounter the Revealer there is no attempt to present him as a visible figure...⁵⁹

However, the sense of 'offence' produced by this humanity, could be said to be dependent upon the reversal or obliteration of a primary distinction between human and divine which thus, so to speak, re-inscribes the gendered hierarchy in a negative sense. Or to put it another way, Bultmann warns against what he calls the "pietistic misunderstanding"⁶⁰ of the Gnostic construction of the Revealer becoming flesh, as an act of condescension, but there is a sense in which the offence cannot be seen as *offensive*, unless we first accept the boundary or distinction between the divine and the human, and this, as has been argued is already constructed by Bultmann in culturally gendered terms. It seems Bultmann wants to argue for the dynamic operation of a powerful liminality⁶¹ at this point. If the liminality of the Incarnation is indeed structured in such gendered terms, understanding its offence comes to be inscribed within a phallogocentric, culturally acquired sensitivity to a male 'descent' into the female sphere. The hierarchicalism he appears to want to bypass would be getting in by the back door.

⁵⁹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 66.

⁶⁰ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 66.

⁶¹ "... a moment of suspension of normal rules and roles, a crossing of boundaries and violating of norms, that enables us to understand those norms..." See Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, Zone Books, 1991). 30. Here, Bynum is referring to liminality, defined after Van Gennep, as an aspect of Victor Turner's social drama approach to history.

Bultmann seems able to account for the overcoming of its offensiveness in a purely scientific sense, for example, by references to "eye-witnesses" who become the σκανδαλον for future generations⁶², but not in terms that address the semiotic implications already noted. Thus, he admits that our knowledge that this man is the Logos, must "come from elsewhere"⁶³. In other words, although the Incarnate is in very truth a man like any other, being a man like any other (wo)man is not *in itself*, enough. There must still be the element of surplus, constructed, I would argue in terms of a fundamentally gendered symbolism. I understand Bultmann to claim that this 'surplus' is located in our existential "encounter", the authenticity of which is determined by the overcoming of offence. This is the disposition of obedience, of allowing oneself to be loved by being remodelled to play a particular role within a divine economy. And, of course, this is the very disposition required of woman and the feminine within the phallogocentric economy of patriarchy too:

For χάρις and ἀληθεια describe God's being; not "in itself", but as it is open to man (in his receptivity) and in its activity towards man: they refer, that is, to the benefits in which God (or the Revealer) abounds, and which he bestows *on the believer*. [my emphasis]⁶⁴

7 Seductive or Intimidating Otherness?

⁶² Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 70.

⁶³ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 66.

⁶⁴ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 73.

Bultmann is concerned with issues of self-understanding - of identity. For self-understanding comes in choosing who to be⁶⁵, a process which reflects the possibility of a wrong choice, defined in terms of refusing knowledge of our creatureliness⁶⁶. Human creatureliness is contrasted with the "absolute otherness" of the Logos:

The Logos has become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. That is to say: in the person and word of Jesus one does not encounter anything that has its origin in the world or in time; the encounter is with the reality that lies beyond the world and time. Jesus and his word not only brings release from the world and from time, they are also the means whereby the world and time are judged. ⁶⁷

We judge, assess, understand what we are, in relationship and contrast to what God is. To evade this particular dualism is equivalent to "self-glorification"⁶⁸. And yet it is also described in terms that are marked by the presence or absence of power. God's inaccessibility or otherness is described as lying beyond man's control⁶⁹, or his desire to turn God into an object of our knowledge⁷⁰. Human weakness and false understanding is an inability to "master" ourselves and the illusory desire to "gain control over" oneself and God⁷¹. This is the content of "self-understanding" and "true

⁶⁵ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 47.

⁶⁶ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 47.

⁶⁷ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 32.

⁶⁸ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 64.

⁶⁹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 81.

⁷⁰ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 81.

⁷¹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 81.

knowledge" of oneself⁷². In other words, the sense in which God and humankind are different or other - and this is the content of true self-understanding - is seen in terms of the imposition or acceptance of mastery or control of the one by the Other. And those who are judged are the spiritually blind and the poor⁷³, tolerated if they know their place, but to be sentenced should they imagine themselves spiritually rich and healthy. Again, although it is used in an inverted sense, here is the language of inequality, the structuring of spiritual worth on the basis of an extremely patriarchal hierarchy of values, placing God in the realm of the rich, the healthy and the powerful and humanity in general in the space usually occupied, culturally, by women, children, slaves, barbarians⁷⁴, and invalids.

So, the incarnation is presented as a strategy in this particular game of power. It guards against the desire to control God. The invisibility of God in the Incarnation is held by Bultmann to frustrate the desire for power, but faith called forth in this way is also cast in the mould of capitulation, however positive a concept he claims it to be⁷⁵. In this context, then, it is interesting to note, that Robert C. Roberts identifies physical nature - with its strong and persistent association with woman and the feminine - within the context of Bultmann's

⁷² Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 81.

⁷³ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 81.

⁷⁴ See Fiorenza's diagrammatic mappings of Patriarchal Greek Democracy in Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, *But She Said : Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992). 116-117.

⁷⁵ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John*, op. cit. 81.

preoccupation with controllability⁷⁶, as having a relatively insignificant role to play in Bultmann's theology as a whole, and that as "something like a paradigm of the controllable"⁷⁷.

8 Suspicious Conclusions.

Historically, it would appear that Bultmann's interest in existential philosophy, coincided with his conclusions that liberal Protestantism had tended fatally, to dilute and colonise elements of New Testament theology with values and features of fundamentally nineteenth century liberal rationalism, exemplified in the oft-quoted 'Jesus of History' School of theology⁷⁸. As early as 1926 he was writing in his introduction to *Jesus and the Word*:

Accordingly, this book lacks all the phraseology which speaks of Jesus as great man, genius, or hero; he appears neither as inspired nor as inspiring, his sayings are not called profound, nor his faith mighty, nor his nature child-like. There is also no consideration of the eternal values of his message, of his discovery of the infinite depths of the human soul, or the like.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Roberts, Robert C., op. cit. 29-30: "The concept of controllability is fundamental to Bultmann's concept of the world and is capable of explaining most of the other features almost directly." Thus, Roberts argues that physical nature, general truths, the past and qualities of the soul, are all in some sense seen by Bultmann as within human control, and according to his own analysis of Bultmann, constitute the dichotomy of World as against Existence as potentiality to be.

⁷⁷ Roberts, Robert C., op. cit. 38.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Macquarrie, John, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought* (Rev. ed., London, S.C.M. Press, 1971), 84 f., on work of W. Herrmann, T. Haering, J. Kaftan and A. Harnack. Of Harnack he writes: "Adolf Harnack (1850-1931) ... stresses the ethical side of Christianity, reduces doctrine to a bare minimum, and has come to be regarded as the typical exponent of liberal Protestantism." 88.

⁷⁹ Bultmann, Rudolf, *Jesus and the Word*, 1958, op. cit. 8.

This tendency, he believed to be partly the consequence of failing to face up to the extent to which the New Testament texts constituted a mythology, and were not directly available to readers or interpreters in a modern scientific culture. Methods derived from the History of Religions school of interpretation, made it impossible for him to regard these texts as even largely historical. Thus, Bultmann is revealed in this sense to be very much the man of modern scientific culture, who does not seek simply to set his up his theological position against such culture, but equally does not wish to lose its 'edge' its critical distinctiveness, its dynamism.

The philosophy of Martin Heidegger (b. 1889-1976) in particular, then, gave Bultmann a platform from which to claw back the initiative, because its concentration on a certain human inwardness could be related to the business of interpreting the biblical texts, in a way that was, substantially unrelated to whether or not these texts were historically/scientifically verifiable. De-mythologisation, the hermeneutic procedure he adopted, provided Bultmann with the cover he needed to develop a scientific method of rigorous biblical textual criticism that might satisfy what John Riches refers to as his 'cultured despisers' ⁸⁰ whilst apparently, still allowing him to accord an ultimate authority to those texts. Thus, for example, in relation to the eschatology of the New Testament, Bultmann wishes absolutely to concur that any realistic expectation that the world might be coming to an end

⁸⁰ Riches, John K., *A Century of New Testament Study* (Cambridge, Lutterworth, 1993). 57.

shortly after the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion would have been absolutely disappointed. For the modern reader, however, the eschatological force of such expectation was rather to be associated with the existential eschatology of readiness for address or encounter with God.

To return, at the end, to Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur, in distinguishing between differing levels of de-mythologisation and myth in Bultmann's work, draws attention to what I see as the problem with Bultmann's approach for modern feminists. Bultmann is, in a sense, aware of more than one level of demythologisation; there are cosmological myths, composed of 'pictures' and 'symbols', for example⁸¹ that may be interpreted into non-mythological language, but Bultmann also recognises in theory, that we may use mythological language because - at least provisionally - we have no other⁸². In addition, his own fear of objectifying religious language and concepts, itself draws attention to the sense in which there is also a real problem with 'non-mythological' language.

⁸¹ Bultmann, Rudolf, "On the Problem of De-mythologising" (1952), in Ogden, Schubert M. (ed.) *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (London, S.C.M. Press, 1984). 100. Bultmann argues that 'symbols' and 'pictures' must be interpretable non-mythologically since the notion of their having a point at all entails this.

⁸² Bultmann, Rudolf, "On the Problem of De-mythologising", op. cit. 100: Bultmann argues that mythological representations may be indispensable "... in a provisional sense insofar as truths are intended in them that cannot be expressed in the language of objectifying science. In that case mythological language provisionally expresses that for which adequate language must still be found. Thus the task that is set for thinking can be formulated in mythological language in the way in which this happens in the Platonic myths."

Ricoeur argues that the problem with Bultmann is that there is no reflection on language in general, but only on "objectification". The sense in which language is itself a form of control is missing:

It is striking that Bultmann makes hardly any demands on this language of faith, whereas he was so suspicious about the language of myth. From the moment language ceases to "objectify", when it escapes from worldly "representations", every interrogation seems superfluous concerning the meaning of this *Dass* - of this event of encounter - which follows on the *Was* - on general statements and on objectifying representations.⁸³

My contention, is, with Ricoeur, that Bultmann's work is far from done, though again, with Ricoeur, some of its conclusions and presuppositions seem highly suggestive and useful to feminist attempts at biblical interpretation. However, as Ricoeur notes:

A theory of interpretation which at the outset runs straight to the moment of decision moves too fast. It leaps over the moment of meaning, which is the objective stage, in the non worldly sense of "objective". There is no exegesis without a "bearer [teneur] of meaning", which belongs to the text and not to the author of the text.⁸⁴

At this point occupied, as it were, by Bultmann's own exegesis of the Johannine text of the Prologue, my own analysis has suggested a tendency to re-mythologise in the terms of a symbolism of gender. This gender symbolism has frequently been 'objectified' within patriarchal culture in terms of values and political actions that affect women as a class.

⁸³ Ricoeur, Paul, op. cit. 395.

⁸⁴ Ricoeur, Paul, op. cit. 397.

The aim of Bultmann's hermeneutic is, surely to enable the reader to be 'addressed' or 'encountered'. Phrased in this way, the problem for him is revealed, since, in Ricoeur's words Bultmann above all else wants to proclaim that

What "lays claim to me" comes to man and does not proceed from him.⁸⁵

Ricoeur argues that what Bultmann needed to do and substantially failed to do in using Heidegger, was to address himself like Heidegger, to the philosophical task of the question of being, as the primary work. In exercising a hermeneutic of suspicion⁸⁶ then in reading Bultmann, reading the text of John's Gospel, it seems that 'being' which is brought to light here, is still substantially occupying the place set up by cultural patriarchy and its phallogocentric constructions, including that of the divine in relation to the human.

⁸⁵ Ricoeur, Paul, op. cit. 399.

⁸⁶ See, Ricoeur, Paul "Religion, Atheism and Faith" in Inde, Don (ed.) *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, North Western University Press, 1974). 442. Ricoeur hones his defence of a Kantian-like notion of the will and of the 'subject', against those current philosophies which challenge the ideas. This process he undertakes with "an attitude of suspicion and cautious critical scrutiny". Examining these ideas by referring closely to the work of such notable critics of Kant, as Nietzsche, Freud and Marx. The phrase has been taken up by would-be feminist hermeneuts as similarly a means of determining how far it is realistic and profitable to maintain a distinctively feminist method of interpreting the bible, against those who apparently see no need to do so.

**The Shining Garment of the Text.
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.**

6

**A Second Glance at Adrienne von Speyr
(in the English Language).**

1 Mystic or Masochist?

Today, Adrienne von Speyr is not very much known or read, certainly in the English-speaking world. She was born in Switzerland in 1902 and died there in 1967. She qualified and practised for a period of her life, as a doctor. She was married twice, first to Emil Dürr, a professor of history at the University of Basle, and, two years after his death in 1934, to his successor at the University, Werner Kaegi. But she would undoubtedly have seen the most substantive work of her life in terms of spiritual direction, mystic contemplation and the foundation of a secular religious community, the Community of St. John,

... a form of life that seeks to follow the inner essence of religious life (vows, celibacy, etc.) but in an entirely hidden way, without external supports, while being fully engaged in the secular world of work.¹

In 1940, at the age of 38, she suffered a heart attack from which she seems never to have completely recovered. Her

¹ Oakes, Edward T., *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York, Continuum, 1994). 3.

condition was soon aggravated by diabetes and increasingly, by arthritis, that eventually brought her work as a doctor to an end. In the same year as she suffered this first debilitating heart attack, she met Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), the Catholic theologian, who was at that time, a member of the Society of Jesus and a student chaplain in Basle. Von Balthasar became her friend, preparing her, at her earnest request, for entry into the Roman Catholic Church in November 1940. Subsequently he worked with her, both as confessor and amanuensis, and as co-founder of the Community of St. John, for which work, he left the Society of Jesus in 1950². It is largely due to his efforts that a proportion of her work has been translated and published in English³. He was in no doubt about her various charisms, and was, in his own mind at least⁴, deeply indebted to her theological insights, writing in 1984 that:

... I want to try to prevent anyone after my death from undertaking the task of separating my work

² Von Balthasar writes of von Speyr's involvement in this decision: "But truly superhuman strength was demanded of her by the part she assumed in the responsibility for persuading me to leave the Jesuit Order when it became evident that it would be impossible to carry out within the framework of the Society of Jesus the mission with which we had been charged in founding the new community." Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1981). 43.

³ Von Balthasar was, clearly disappointed by a general lack of interest in von Speyr's work: "Although at the time of Adrienne's death thirty-seven of her books were in print, and thirty-four of them available in bookstores, up to now no one has taken serious notice of her writings." Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* 11-12. In his book about von Speyr, von Balthasar includes a comprehensive bibliography of all her works, both published and in manuscript form. Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*, op. cit. 102-111

⁴ See Oakes, Edward T., *Pattern of Redemption*, op. cit.. Oakes believes that in his preoccupation with von Speyr, " ... we have before us the single most telling factor responsible for Balthasar's isolation from the rest of twentieth-century theology....". 4.

from that of Adrienne von Speyr. This is not in the least possible, either theologically or in regard to the secular institute now underway.⁵

From 1942 onwards, von Speyr experienced the *stigmata* - visible and sensible marks of Christ's crucifixion in her own person - a phenomenon first noted in the thirteenth century, most famously in the case of St. Francis of Assisi, and subsequently reported in every century up to the present one⁶. She confessed to having had a mark under her left breast, from the age of fifteen, and long before her conversion to Catholicism, following a vision of Mary - the Mother⁷ of the Lord. But the regular experience of the wounds in the hands, and - invisibly - of the crown of thorns around her head, together with the intense experience of an interior suffering, and passage through hell, did not commence until her fortieth

⁵ Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *Unser Auftrag* (Einsiedeln, 1984). 11.

⁶ Ian Wilson lists the best attested cases in an appendix in *The Bleeding Mind: An Investigation into the Mysterious Phenomenon of Stigmata* (Paladin, 1991). The majority of reported stigmatics have been women.

⁷ This is how von Speyr refers to her in relation to her own spiritual economy. "Statements About Herself", *First Glance at Adrienne*, op. cit. 156.

year⁸. Her experience of the stigmata was particularly acute during Holy Week, each year⁹.

It is perhaps, unfortunate that there should be so little written about von Speyr¹⁰, since von Balthasar's frankly hagiographic account of her life and thought¹¹ is at all points strained to present this in an exemplary light. There is much within her writings, and the picture of her that he presents, however, that is seriously off-putting. And this is clearly a common reaction. For even von Balthasar felt called upon to defend her:

In the totality of Adrienne's theological work there are individual parts that can, if taken out of context, occasionally alienate. Readers of her works are urgently requested not to lose sight of the whole of the theology on account of individual statements. The inner coherence of all the parts will become that

⁸ She seems also to have undergone some sort of experience of 'bi-location', whereby she had experience of places which she had never actually visited. Von Balthasar reports that she 'travelled' in this way particularly in a mission to re-invigorate the spiritual lives of members of religious orders, but also supporting and praying with prisoners in concentration camps during the war, or praying in forgotten churches. He says that this 'travelling' continued into her final years when she was herself physically weak, becoming a tremendous drain on her own inner resources. See, Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 39 f., 45. A comparable report is made of the stigmatic Padre Pio, whose 'bi-locations' have been, in one or two cases, confirmed by those to whom he appeared. See, Wilson, Ian, *The Bleeding Mind*, op. cit.

⁹ Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*, op. cit. See especially 33-37.

¹⁰ German readers might pursue, for example, Albrecht, Barbara *Eine Theologie Des Katholischen*.

¹¹ See, for example, Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 47: "... the influence of grace was so pronounced in her, the supernatural dimension in no way effaced her natural individuality: rather it underlined it. But it is one thing to see this individuality and another to described it in words, for the magic of her personality can be expressed in almost no other way but in paradoxes and by uniting apparent extremes...."

much more obvious the more one concentrates on this whole.¹²

2 A Modern Feminist Reading Context.

To characterise von Speyr as a mystic is useful from my perspective, since it provides a clue as to why she represents something both arresting and repellent. In so far as mysticism represents a tendency towards experience of God that lies beyond intellect or rationality, it finds itself in sympathy with those feminist approaches that,

... argue that there are distinctive 'female' forms of reasoning and that 'neutral' standards of rationality are male biased.¹³

However, in so far as mysticism also entails absorption within or consumption by an absolute divinity, feminist analysis offers some criticism. In particular, it draws attention to the dangers of amplifying the capacity of patriarchal culture - including its religious forms of expression - to define every life and every quality of life according to the specific needs and anxieties of its male priests and patriarchs.

In 1: 4 Life & Death and Light

Just as human words have been accounted vacillating and lying¹⁴ on their own without God's *imprimatur*, in comparison with the creative word of God, so the fruitfulness of life as understood in God is compared with life exemplified in humankind on its own terms. God's eternal life "is the fullness of life, and consequently perfect peace, power and authority, the absolute affirmation of being and becoming."¹⁵ In

¹² Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *Unser Auftrag*, op. cit. 12-13.

¹³ See, Humm, Maggie, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (2nd. ed. New York, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), 236.

¹⁴ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word: A Meditation on the Prologue of St. John's Gospel* (London, Collins 1953), 31.

¹⁵ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 36-7.

contrast human life without that divine superfluity, is striving and growing and dying. Human life on its own is an anxious affair characterised by poverty and need¹⁶, and in all this, von Speyr's deluded human hero- or anti hero - becomes once more the victim of a divine violence, "flung to the ground by the power that surpasses all things"¹⁷.

2.1 Devotion and Consumption

To challenge, as it were, the mystic understanding of an ecstasy of abasement before God, for example, bear in mind the - albeit highly rhetorical - writing of Mary Daly about the degradation of women's lives and bodies in *Gyn/Ecology*:

If the general situation of widowhood in India was not a sufficient inducement for the woman of higher caste to throw herself gratefully and ceremoniously into the fire, she was often pushed and poked in with long stakes after having been bathed, ritually attired, and drugged out of her mind. In case these facts should interfere with our clear misunderstanding of the situation, Webster's invites us to re-cover women's history with the following definition of *suttee*: "the act or custom of a Hindu woman willingly cremating herself or being cremated on the funeral pyre of her husband as an indication of her devotion to him [emphasis M. D.]." It is thought-provoking to consider the reality behind the term devotion, for indeed a wife must have shown signs of extraordinarily slavish devotion during her husband's lifetime, since her very life depended upon her husband's state of health. A thirteen-year-old wife might well be concerned over the health of her sixty-year-old husband."¹⁸

Of course, von Speyr herself, would hardly have wished to make any direct comparisons between the God she believed demanded her loving obedience, and the cultural demands

¹⁶ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 37

¹⁷ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 38-9.

¹⁸ Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology* (London, The Women's Press, 1991). 116.

laid upon young Indian widows. But the associations with what is overbearing and in some sense unwelcome are, within von Speyr's reflections on the Prologue of John's Gospel, just strong enough to remain disconcerting:

Word and fire are one, and we are drawn to the flame to be utterly consumed. The word and the demand are one, and understanding the word we take everything upon ourselves in order to fulfil its demand ...

At first the word which God addresses to us looks harmless, like a human word. But instantly the fire within it begins to stir, insatiably embracing everything, demanding everything, consuming everything.¹⁹

2.2 Confession as Striptease?

Within the modern feminist reading context, reservations about von Speyr's religious disposition are inevitable. For example, there are numerous references to the nakedness of the Christian before God, particularly in relation to confession²⁰. The stripping-down von Speyr appears to demand - either of herself or the reader - in regard to God, is one-sided; passionately irrational and gloriously self-abandoned. But it is also clearly intoxicated with the divine (male) gaze:

I have the feeling that the entire confession stands within the framework of a demand whose dimensions are no longer within my view at all my truth is taken up into the greater truth of God. If God should demand of me that I confess that I am avaricious

¹⁹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 18.

²⁰ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 55.

(which to my knowledge I am not), then I would confess it. And I would do this also for the reason that the concept of avarice has at this moment been infinitely expanded and no longer has anything in common with my narrow concept of it. When God looks at avarice, things become evident in it which I had not as yet perceived. And in this nakedness even I see something of what I had no seen until now. It is as if I had a birthmark somewhere on my body where I could not see. God, however, can undress me and tell me, "There is a spot which you must confess".²¹

Nakedness represents lost innocence²² so that being 'clothed' - like Adam and Eve, rejected from Eden, becomes equivalent to a form of darkness - resistance to God:

... with people one does not love one wraps oneself up in a sort of artificial darkness. One intentionally displays one or other aspect of one's self, one clothes oneself in armour. This armour is, of course, useless against the light of God, for his light penetrates our artificial darkness all the same.²³

Clearly for von Speyr, nakedness is a powerful, evocative symbol of revelation and surrender. But for modern feminism, it also has more disturbing associations with the invasive voyeurism of a culture that, as a matter of course, dresses and undresses women at will.

3 Opening Some of the Doors.

²¹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 174.

²² Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 175.

²³ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 54.

Reading von Speyr's meditations on the Prologue of John's Gospel is every bit as difficult as they said it would be!²⁴. It is extremely self-referential and uniformly serious. For all that von Balthasar speaks of von Speyr's cheerfulness and appreciation of the amusing²⁵, there is not the slightest hint of humour or the remotest indication of self-irony in this text. The theology is intense, both in tone and construction, and aside from one or two central analogies, there is not much in the way of metaphor or illustration to aid reflection. I am therefore suggesting a series of analyses and intertextualities, as a way of weaving this interpretative text into patterns that will, hopefully, be in some sense fruitful and significant, both in relation to the biblical text and to von Speyr as (female) reader.

3.1 The Symbolism of Gender.

Von Balthasar gives the readers what is, perhaps, an important key to the text in question, by reminding them that the *hierarchical* symbolism of gender is of great importance to von Speyr. It is not simply present in her work, but a conscious element of her whole theology. Metaphors of surrender and of Marian obedience, of abandonment and of nakedness are constituted and exist within this context:

Adrienne praised virginity in many places in her works; of course she always saw it (in a Marian way) in a functional relationship to obedience. But she

²⁴ See Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 11-14, 248-249. See Oakes, Edward, *Pattern of Redemption*, op. cit. 4.

²⁵ Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 47.

equally understood the sexual relationship between man and woman - and, in fact precisely in the highest possible opposition of their functions and attitudes, with no leveling of differences - which she described in the Pauline sense as a *magnum mysterium*: "I mean this in reference to Christ and the Church" (Eph 5:32).²⁶

In other words, this identification, both of Marian obedience, and of the Church with the 'other' gender in a fundamentally hierarchical relationship, implies that what she has in mind is the underlying relationship of Creator to creature. This relationship has to be, if not necessarily beneficial, certainly beyond creaturely question. The problem for the majority of feminists who might try to engage seriously with this theological text, as it stands, would be, I imagine, that it appears to have already 'sold out' to the forces of phallogocentric mythology that divinises the *sign* of masculinity. All attempts to mitigate the harshness of this distinction, for example, through the implication that the woman (Mary)'s consent is necessary, are formulated in terms of a derivative non-masculinity. *All that is left* for humankind, is the role of passivity, of acceptance, impressionability, of being created, under the *sign* of the feminine. And in this respect, von Speyr's work appears to be determined by the vision of God and of redeemed humanity that is strongly singular and essentially masculine.

This is precisely what feminism in all its forms most passionately contests, because its trace may be found in all

²⁶ Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 95.

the brutal cruelties and unnecessary burdens that have been laid for centuries on the backs of actual women. Audre Lorde (1934-1992), the black American poet and critic, makes it clear how in so many situations, giving assent to anything is dependent upon a freedom to choose - at least in the sense of accepting or rejecting. God's mother chooses to let God use her and to make her suffer. Five-year old Lorde, like so many other black Americans, like so many women, had no choice. She had to suffer the disgust and hatred her blackness engendered in the white woman she sat next to on the train²⁷. There are, in Lorde's work, many reference to the experience of being the object of hatred. In her work, avoiding the crushing negativity of such experience, unchosen in any sense, means using her anger to maintain a constant vigilance, and a constant denial of the definitions of other. To fail to do this is, she believes, is to fail to survive in any meaningful sense at all. In a poem called "Black Mother Woman"²⁸, Lorde, remembers the "myths of little worth" and the "nightmares of weakness" with which her mother was daily assailed and forced to suffer. Lorde's angry refusal to be made to suffer the definitions of others, stands in stark contrast to von Speyr's acceptance of the overwhelming definition of God. In a life dedicated to resistance. Lorde writes:

²⁷ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom CA., The Crossing Press, 1984). "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger". 172.

²⁸ Lorde, Audre, *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old & New* (London, Virago Press, 1993). 100-101.

America's measurement of me has lain like a barrier across the realization of my own powers. It was a barrier which I had to examine and dismantle, piece by painful piece, in order to use my energies fully and creatively.²⁹

For Lorde, the definitions of others, when fuelled by anger and hatred, block the energies and prevent people from growing or flourishing. Von Speyr's answer would undoubtedly be that God's definitions cannot be fuelled by anger and hatred. However, she would need to prove that the motivations of God are at all times distinguishable from the motivations of those - largely men - who have had in the past, the power and the responsibility for interpreting and defining God's Word. And this, I believe, she fails to do convincingly in her work.

3.2 Formal Analogies as Models for Divine Activity.

The Prologue: Jn 1:1

The first chapter of her meditation sets out the sense in which God and word are beginning and fulfilment. And yet this is a progression that is constantly being re-enacted, as the word takes different forms or concretises in different ways - in the Church and sacraments, in scripture, "When God takes away what a man holds dearest..."³⁰ And from the beginning, there is a sense in which von Speyr sees fulfilment as a pattern or arrangement of joy and suffering³¹.

Within von Speyr's text, there are a number of formal patterns or models of divine activity; beginning and fulfilment, or beginning, centre and fire for example³². In her meditations on the Prologue of John's Gospel, von Speyr

²⁹ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit. 147.

³⁰ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 16.

³¹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 17.

³² See, von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 11-20.

frequently uses the analogy of marriage and generation to describe divine activity and at the same time, authorise the proper functioning of human relationships. The analogy concentrates on the formal, theological features of marriage within the Roman Catholic Church, in which love has *already* been constructed as divine activity within a symbolically gendered, hierarchical context. This reference to married love and generation then, is more of a poetics of theological analogy than anything else. That is to say that it functions less as a hermeneutical tool or imaginative metaphor, and more as a celebration of marriage as related mimetically to divine activity³³. This perhaps accounts for the sensation one has that von Speyr's view of marriage, sexuality and parenthood is, both highly prescriptive, and, in a contingent, human sense, curiously unformed within this text.

Similarly, I would argue, that for von Speyr, the 'introduction' of the absent mother into the Prologue, is formally related to a particular kind of Marian obedience and suffering, understood in parallel to Christ's obedience and crucifixion. As mother/woman, she lives out of a centre which is formally and *theologically* related to conception and suffering³⁴. Thus, for example, the mother of God is

³³ Given von Balthasar's insistence that his theological approach was at one with von Speyr's, it would seem likely that she would share his understanding of analogical thinking. Whilst this is a vastly complicated concept, it is above all, clear that, "all striving towards and all experience of God must assume rather than prove the relationship to God ..." Przywara, Erich, *Polarity* (Oxford, O.U.P., 1935). 36.

³⁴ Von Balthasar recalls that von Speyr once had a vision of a woman, whose characteristics she related, at his suggestion, to the woman clothed with the sun from Revelation and whom von Balthasar told her represented both the mother (Mary) and the Church. In this vision,

described in terms of the conception of her child - her very "being as a woman" is that of victim from the start:

At the foot of the cross is the *Mother of the Lord*, who participates in the sacrifice. Though in her case the sequence is lived in the reverse order. She gives her consent at the foot of the cross; the birth of the child in Bethlehem is the consummation of the sacrifice; and when the child was conceived in Nazareth she was already the victim given to God. This end is already in her beginning. Her whole destiny as a mother is sealed and consummated in conceiving; she lives *from* the cross, while Christ, being man, lives in the opposite direction, *towards* the cross.³⁵

Theologically then, a woman has a particular vocation *qua* woman. There are two forms of life for individuals within the Church: the priesthood and marriage. A woman's lack of choice in this matter, is balanced, as von Speyr sees it, in her particular participation in a "hidden priesthood, standing as she does next to the priest, like Mary next to John beneath the cross"³⁶, characterised by unlimited devotion to the community, poverty and selflessness, producing a gracious, transformative effect.

The analogical mode of von Speyr's theology is again illustrated in her treatment of the sacraments as love objectified: "... God desires the love between him and man to have this form"³⁷ And the risks of this approach are perhaps

von Speyr recalled assisting at a birth - something with which as a doctor, she was familiar. Her interpretation of the woman's cries was that "in labor she suffers in advance a portion of her Son's suffering". See Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 92-3.

³⁵ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 55.

³⁶ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 98.

³⁷ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 83.

nowhere more apparent. Von Speyr's sometimes repetitive insistence upon our forlorn condition and the grace and superfluity of God, assails the flagging spirits of readers unaccustomed to her fundamental disposition. Thus, for example, in her description of the sacraments as love she, not unreasonably, suggests that love needs to be enacted and given some concrete form. But the suggestion that 'caritative' love is somehow more overflowing and infinite in its consequences³⁸ than 'sensual' love surely amounts to little more than the statement of a general presentiment of sensuality and sexuality as something always potentially greedy for its own fulfilment³⁹ within a fundamentally hierarchical vision of the relationship between body and spirit. That the institution of sacraments reflects this greed, this appetite just as much, is reflected in her comments that they make us thirst for more. But the word 'thirst' is itself likely to drown in its own canonical sanctity in reflections on the text of John's Gospel, and is moreover, all set about with predictable conditions:

It is the sacraments that make and keep love healthy, so that is always thirsty for more, not for the sake of augmenting itself (which would only lead to an egotistical attitude imprisoned in the I) but for the sake of belonging increasingly to God.⁴⁰

Jn 1:2

Von Speyr's Trinitarian concept of God, is fundamentally a formal analogy of love between a woman and a man resulting in the birth of a child. This 'Trinitarian' family history is, for von Speyr, a description of the movement referred to in the Johannine Prologue from

³⁸ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 85.

³⁹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 83.

⁴⁰ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 83.

God/Word in the beginning (Jn 1:1-12), to Word in the world (Jn 1:3-18). The love of the Father and the Son constantly flows in a circle between them. The Spirit bursts open the circle forcing their love for each other to find new directions that nevertheless continually refer back to a union, as originating love. This is also clearly related to von Speyr's whole devotional approach, whereby there is no rest or standing still, but an endless succession of new initiatives and outcomes. The Son returns to the Father in joy, and there is a new beginning in the Holy Spirit.

.. so too the child appears between man and woman. For it is the child which enables the love between man and woman to become eternal movement, transforms the seemingly complete into a true beginning, and bursts open the circle that threatened to close - and it is also the child that reveals the supernatural character of love as grace by pointing to its divine origin (for the child is a gift of God).⁴¹

This choice of analogy is revealing, in that it marks the first point at which von Speyr, like so many other commentators, brings the woman, absent from the text, back into the interpretative picture. The fruitfulness of love is characterised as the conventional and feminine fruitfulness of pregnancy and birth⁴², but the sense of painful violent parturition is also never far away, nor is the parallelism between crucifixion and labour. Moreover, in *The Word* the figure of the mother of Jesus is paradigmatic for the Church in her openness to God and in the fruitfulness that is the result of such openness:

Before she conceived, Mary seemed perfectly open to God, and the incarnation seemed to mark the limit of her possibilities. But in fact these were infinitely expanded: she become virgin and mother simultaneously, and fulfilled the being of woman beyond all expectation. Moreover the birth of the Son did not limit her vocation as mother, but sowed a beginning beyond all hope, her call to universal motherhood.⁴³

The mother's unquestioning but essentially passive assent, becomes the highest virtue and it is called 'freedom'. In von Speyr's terms, of course, the mother's assent to God is liberating - it is a saying yes to the most fulfilling relationship which is, by definition, sustaining and fruitful because, formally speaking, God is the highest good

⁴¹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 26.

⁴² Note too that she adds a homily on grace to her analogy. It seems, leaping somewhat inconsequential from the meditative point of her theme, to have returned the reader to the sphere of spiritual instruction. We are suddenly thrust into the consciousness of someone who wants or has wanted a child, and is reminded that its conception is not within the human gift. Perhaps she is speaking to herself.

⁴³ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 26-27.

imaginable. Analogical thinking, of course, as Edward Oakes puts it, "begins inside the act of faith"⁴⁴.

Von Speyr introduces the mother into the Prologue. Re-introduces her, we might say, into the incarnational narrative of John as paradigmatic of both the loving reciprocity and the loving outreach of the Trinitarian God and of the Church in relation to God. She has made the Incarnation dependent upon her assent, her 'yes', and she has likened this 'yes' to the assent and to the obedience of Christ himself. For von Speyr, it comes quite naturally, in reading the Prologue of John's Gospel, to see the mother there. Clearly, the mother of God, the handmaid of the Lord, whatever her scriptural sources, is integral to von Speyr's understanding of the nature of God's relationship with the world. It is a relationship which cannot do without 'the mother'. It goes without saying, however, that 'the mother' is strictly defined under the *sign* of the feminine.

Jn 1:6-8

John the Baptist represents for von Speyr, the neighbour through whom "I" come to know God⁴⁵. The man sent from God becomes the image of the Word, and the model for the Christian life⁴⁶. That is, his life formally reflects the nature of divine 'mission'; the Incarnation. Above all this mission is characterised by 'fluidity' - almost unpredictability - "the ever-new message is always opaque and formless, and neither Church nor individual understand it fully"⁴⁷. It is a restless readiness for ever new challenges. And, as it is only through the consent of Mary that the Incarnation became an actual, human mission, so - says von Speyr - it is only through contact with the Mother of God that John's becomes a human mission. Thus she draws, once again, the human involvement of the divine word into a formally feminine vision of mission as openness, readiness, acceptance of God's word.

Jn 1:9

The light that enlightens every man is understood by von Speyr to represent the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. For von Speyr they represent the objectivity of love for another, which does not (divine)/should not (human) remain "concealed in the private sphere of the I"⁴⁸:

.. they preserve love from the danger of exhausting itself in a private and subjective world" ⁴⁹

With communion, von Speyr once more returns to the realm of "purely one-sided prodigality"⁵⁰. With confession, whilst she

⁴⁴ Oakes, Edward T., *Pattern of Redemption*, op. cit. 35. This occurs in Oakes' discussion of the influence of Erich Przywara's discussion of analogy on the work of Von Balthasar.

⁴⁵ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 73.

⁴⁶ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 74.

⁴⁷ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 78.

⁴⁸ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 82.

⁴⁹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 83.

⁵⁰ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 91.

expressly denies that its purpose is to become preoccupied with sins, the abasement, the exposure continue apace. Confession in the Church leads back to the Father through the cross - suffering and exposure combined:

The way back to the centre of the Church is a return to the centre of the Father. Into the burning light of the Father. Whether the sinner comes from the outer darkness or was already in the light, he will certainly be consumed and burnt by the inmost light.⁵¹

3.3 A "wonderful, indisputable secret"⁵²: Stigmata as Intertextuality.

As a third interpretative key, or possible 'arrangement' of the textual symphony, I would suggest that von Speyr's *stigmata* might itself be viewed as a form of intertextuality. It has to be said from the start, that it is hard to do this without, so to speak, incurring the - posthumous - displeasure of Von Balthasar who anticipated attempts to illuminate von Speyr's writing in terms of "depth psychology"⁵³ and heartily deplored any such attempts. I would not, however, claim that this intertextuality could make her work 'understandable' in any fixed or final sense. It does, however, offer insights to the critical reader.

The phenomena collectively described as *stigmata* are regarded from the perspective of psychoanalysis as symptoms of 'conversion-hysteria'. Hysteria is widely understood as a general form of psychological disturbance. It is expressed

⁵¹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 90.

⁵² This is a quotation from Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1981). 29. Von Balthasar says that after a vision of Mary, the fifteen year old von Speyr had a small wound under her left breast, "....it was a sign that physically she belonged to God..."

⁵³ Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 11.

within individuals in many different forms and has different ways or mechanisms of operating, for example, by repression and, or, by conversion:

Conversion consists in a transposition of a psychical conflict into, and its attempted resolution through, somatic symptoms which may be either of a motor nature or of a sensory one Freud's sense of conversion is tied to an economic approach: the libido detached from the repressed idea is transformed into an innervational energy. But what specifies conversion symptoms is their symbolic meaning: they express repressed ideas through the medium of the body.⁵⁴

In other words, the particular somatic symptoms depend upon the richness or intensity, for the individual concerned, of its associations - its semiotic, archaic connections with infantile motivations. As Nitza Yarom writes in her study of the first documented stigmatic, St. Francis, such symptoms are not incompatible with a high level of competence, vision and energy, and indeed human compassion, all of which, von Speyr seems to have possessed in good measure⁵⁵. But it does have to be said, even on the evidence of the little published about her and generally available in English⁵⁶, there are

⁵⁴ Laplanche J. and Pontalis J.-B., *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (London, The Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1985). 90.

⁵⁵ See Yarom, Nitza in *Body, Blood and Sexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study of St. Francis' Stigmata and their Historical Context* (New York, San Francisco, Bern, Baltimore, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Wien, Paris, 1992).

⁵⁶ For the purposes of this brief study, I have referred only to von Balthasar's recollections of his conversations with von Speyr, together with her own statements about herself, collected, translated and published in the same volume, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*, op. cit. A brief and necessarily somewhat impressionistic comparison between these accounts, and the extended analysis of St. Francis, published by Nitza Yarom in *Body, Blood and Sexuality*, op. cit., reveals several parallel elements to those that, Yarom argues, led to the development of this characteristic form of conversion hysteria in

indications that her disposition and experiences are at least potentially explicable in terms of a serious form of psychological disturbance⁵⁷.

Von Speyr's experience of the wounds of Christ's crucifixion⁵⁸ is relevant to a discussion of her interpretation of the Prologue of John's Gospel, because it illustrates something both central and apparently contradictory within von Speyr's work, which relates closely to the theme of the Word made flesh. Von Speyr accepted, apparently, quite unequivocally, the hierarchical relationship between flesh and spirit, which appeared to belong to each other in terms that, once again, are

the case of St. Francis. Amongst these are undoubtedly a sense of deep-seated conflict with her parent/mother (See, von Balthasar, *First Glance*, op. cit. 24-25, 27, 32, 122,132), serious sickness in youth (von Balthasar, *First Glance*, op. cit. 123), some evidence of difficulty with common sexuality (von Balthasar, *First Glance*, op. cit. 29, 160?), and the distancing of family through public religious conversion (von Balthasar, *First Glance*, op. cit. 32), that brought some significant relief to interior tensions.

⁵⁷ Both von Balthasar's recollections in *First Glance*, and the autobiographical sketch "Statements About Herself" included in that volume, make many allusions to factors within her life, and particularly during her childhood and youth that might have contributed to the development of hysterical symptoms in someone so clearly intelligent and sensitive as Adrienne von Speyr. Von Speyr's extremely poor health as a child, and her closeness to death as a young girl, her mother's strictness, lack of affection towards her, favouritism of her older sister and vehement objections to her daughter's choice of career, her love for her father who died during her teenage years, her delicately alluded to difficulties with sexuality within marriage, the death of her first husband and her conversion to Roman Catholicism in spite of the disapproval of her family, her childhood visions of the saints, constant fantasies of helping the poor and needy, and her self-inflicted penances on their behalf, her sense of being very special from her earliest days, and her increasing physical immobility in middle age, are all factors that might be paralleled in the annals of Freudian analysis, or in the characteristic descriptions of other stigmatics.

⁵⁸ Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 34-35. Von Balthasar describes how von Speyr was 'prepared' for this experience a year before it actually occurred: "... by an angel who stood by her bedside at night and said most earnestly: Now it will soon begin. During the following nights she was asked for a consent that would extend itself blindly to everything that God might ordain for her..."

described by formal analogy with the sacramentality of Catholic marriage as itself the form of divine, Trinitarian love. In Catholic marriage, the sacrament is not imposed from without by any sort of priestly intervention but belongs to the love between a man and a woman:

The whole sphere of body and spirit is open to Catholic man, and neither of them is forgotten. There is on the one hand the balanced harmony between the two whereby the centre of gravity in a life, in a marriage, may at one time, and during a particular phase of life, be more in the spirit or more in the flesh. Both are in order within the frame-work of the subordination of the flesh to the spirit. And then too, since the word was spiritual in its incarnation and since we must reach the Father through the incarnate word, there is also the possibility that in the place of this balanced harmony - marriage - the centre of gravity may be entirely transposed into the spirit. Then the flesh may be absorbed into the spirit and almost forgotten, or it may be utterly separated from the spirit, and borne as a burden on earth, a penance, a thorn that we must bear with us, - and the rebellion of the impulses and the struggle with them lasts a life-time. The whole breadth of these possibilities is embraced in the fact that the Lord was in the flesh, and that he was so in pure love.⁵⁹

The issues of Incarnation, and the hierarchical balance between flesh and spirit in both Christ and every believing Christian are thus controlled by a formal analogy with divine love in the Trinity, whereby flesh is subject to spirit, but nevertheless, so to speak, holds its place as the *expression* of that divine love. What, however, von Speyr seems to have embodied in her *stigmata*, rather than conceptualised in her

⁵⁹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 136-137.

words, was precisely the theological intuition that the Incarnation has to represent a radical challenge to this hierarchy. Whatever the particular history of von Speyr's hysterical symptoms - I am assuming, of course, that hysteria is a plausible explanation - they convey, for her, a double burden. I believe that it is possible to say, for example, that for von Speyr the *sign* of the crucifixion - her *stigmata* - is transgressive in the sense that it causes a fraction in the cultural and crucially, the religious structures within which she, as a woman, understands herself as 'subject'. Within these structures, woman and the feminine and their symbolic equivalents - body, humanity-not-divinity, incarnate divinity, bride, mother, death, debility and the status of victim - have become over determined as forms of passivity and suffering. This stigmatic *transgression* is transgressive, because its primary effective reference is to the male and authoritative Christ as Word. Thus this transgression is also, and for von Speyr quite literally "crucially", empowering, because it enables her to 'speak' the word - not simply spoken in her dictation⁶⁰ to von Balthasar or published in books, but written visibly, displayed, branded on her body; the mark of ownership and power.

This is dissemination of the Word with the undeniably divinely masculine authority of Christ, because she bears his scars and wears his name on her suffering (female) body⁶¹.

⁶⁰ Von Balthasar recalls that as von Speyr's health deteriorated she gave up writing in favour of dictation to him as her secretary. See Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 37.

⁶¹ See Revelation. 22:4-5. It seems that the book of Revelation had considerable significance for von Speyr.

And of course, without this suffering, she could not otherwise speak, given her own acceptance of the fundamental hierarchical division of divine gender economy, and her fundamental formal definition of woman within that economy. In other words, she has invested *heavily* in this gender economy, in terms of her own spiritual disposition towards God. And the *stigmata* allows her a way of getting around this bondage to silent passive subjection and obedience, whilst still affirming its validity in terms of a largely hidden suffering.

To reiterate then, in theological terms, and concentrating here upon her reflections on the Prologue, she becomes the word of that Prologue made, through her crucifixion/*stigmata*, flesh, that is, *female flesh*; passive and suffering, the symbolic representation of humankind - particularly as taken up by Christ himself on the cross, but also by his mother in labour and mourning. But, of course, as transgression, this is a double-edged sword for her. In order to be word - to be able to proclaim authoritatively within structures that demand absolute obedience - she must be also passive, painful suffering flesh and partake of the common lot of both woman and the flesh, as obedient and compliant within patriarchal structures whether familial or ecclesiastical⁶².

⁶² One of the, perhaps, more disagreeable and counterindicative aspects of von Speyr's life and experience for this reader, is to be found in connection with her apparently insatiable demand for penance. According to von Balthasar, von Speyr, would give him instructions concerning her own penitential exercises, and then "under obedience" forget all about this programme. Then he would impose these exercises on her, "with authority". He was clearly uncomfortable with such practices, and it is hardly surprising when they read in a formal sense very like a form of sado-masochism: "As

It is perhaps for this very reason, that confession in particular, takes on, for her the - itself crucifying - role of drawing together the physically unavoidable and emotionally crushing imperative to proclaim a faith, and the straight jacket of submission to authority which had yet in a fundamental sense, enabled her to validate the divine seal within her own silent, suffering, female body. It cannot be surprising either, that consciously at any rate, she found the *stigmata* highly disconcerting - von Balthasar says she prayed over the years that the marks might become less visible⁶³ - but not less painful. In other words, it is not surprising that she sought to hide the wounds, and yet to reveal, indeed *display* the inner suffering and the hiddenness to her confessor⁶⁴. Again, it does not seem to me at all surprising that she lived out her days after 1940 in a state of increasing debility. She was herself, as it were, perhaps bound to become the incarnation of divine suffering and female passivity. She had, according to the conflictual *theological* pressures working upon her, to reconcile and do justice both to God's divinely ordained gender economy, according to which woman and the feminine represent the passive,

part of the "program", moreover, it was often necessary for me to turn myself into "sheer authority" in my behavior towards Adrienne. Every "dialogue-situation" was excluded - by a corresponding agreement of Adrienne's soul - so that it became experientially clear that the obedience of the Church can and at times must have all the reality and the relentlessness of the Cross itself". Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 69-70.

⁶³ Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 35.

⁶⁴ There is some indication, that von Balthasar found von Speyr's insistence upon certain forms of penance following confession somewhat disconcerting. It sometimes appears that his co-operation was rather unwilling. See, for example, *First Glance*, op. cit. 45.

obedient and surrendering, the Marian⁶⁵, disposition of humankind towards God, and also to the actual virility and potency of his Word, hidden in a secular world. I believe then, that one could say she became a quite brilliant exponent of a certain sort of mystical, and Johannine theology, an embodied proclamation of the Gospel as a hidden crucifixion, in the world, but not of it. And in the light of this intertextuality, it also becomes more acutely obvious why von Balthasar speaks of the frightening intensity of her experiences and, so to speak, her need of courage.

Jn 1:3

Within the third chapter, von Speyr's tendency to move from meditation to direction is more marked. God's word is creative, his *modus operandi* is dialogic. However, this 'dialogic' is based upon a proper attentiveness, and von Speyr takes to task any reader who fails to account for this, in tones reminiscent of the school-room:

God does not desire man's self-made word, he does not want man to 'express himself'. Man should not suppose that God depends upon him and wishes to be informed about him. What God wishes to hear is simply the answer to his word. Naturally the whole person may, and even should, be contained in the answer, but the whole person only interests God in so far as it is the answer to his word.

The severity of tone continues through the chapter. Added to this is the perhaps rather sentimental vision of the innocent child, whose babblings are apparently untouched by desire and selfishness⁶⁶ (or Freudian analysis!) and the dying Christian, faced with the sobering prospect of death, who has forgotten himself again and returned to the first stammerings of infancy. Otherwise, she dismisses all our words as vacillating utterances, except as sanctified by Christ. And yet, and at the same time, the word - understood as in some sense the blue-print - of each individual, remains within the compass of God's word, and she

⁶⁵ See by way of definition, Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *First Glance*, op. cit. 51: "She is infinitely at the disposal of the Infinite. She is absolutely ready for everything ... Coming ... from man, it is also the highest achievement made possible by grace: unconditional, definitive self-surrender"

⁶⁶ It should be noted that she never gave birth herself - at least as far as her published works or works about her allow us to say, she never gave birth to a live child. Her second husband was a widower and already had a child or children, but again, it is not clear how far von Speyr took responsibility for them upon herself which may in some way account for her tendency to slightly sentimental generalisations about children in general.

anticipates purgatorial sufferings if 'his' words do not accord with that word:

There, in fire, he will lay aside his irresolution and his vacillation and conform to God's thought; he will have to learn to love through the painful expansion of love until he becomes one with his word deposited in God. ⁶⁷

Jn 1:13

Von Speyr's definition of Jn 1:13 is in many ways revealing. Within the human economy there is a clear dualism as between the impulsive, instinctual drive for satisfaction, associated with pleasure and generation, and the spiritual man who is looking for devotion⁶⁸. In a distinction that is Augustinian in tone, procreation, properly ordered in marriage produces a child different or other than a child of pleasure, but there is still no relationship between such a procreation and the child of God, born of God. Von Speyr describes the birth of the child born of God, in terms of its hiddenness and secrecy before the 'majority' of men⁶⁹, and then follows an extended description of this 'man'. After that birth:

... he knows that he is saved, but no longer knows who he is. He is a man whom God has overwhelmed.⁷⁰

The experience is distressing⁷¹ but momentous. The Man Born of God bursts open the framework of tradition against the Church's initial resistance:

At first the Church regards a catastrophe of this order as a misfortune, until she has learnt through the blessings it brings, that God has revealed himself. Until she gradually comes to see that her forms only retain their vitality and life if her tradition and framework are from time to time burst open.⁷²

This violent unseen birth results in an overwhelming trauma, a jarring of the whole person. People born in this way become out of step with the Church and the community, altered in their expectations and vision, sometimes psychically and even physically weakened:

But the man of whom we are speaking looks upon his work as straw, only fit for the fire. His faith takes the form of impossibility, his love the form of unattainability. But the fire of the impossible is his very life, and it makes him creative. This does not mean to say that everything will

⁶⁷ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 35.

⁶⁸ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 126.

⁶⁹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 127.

⁷⁰ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 129.

⁷¹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 131.

⁷² von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 134.

work out well, and that all the consequences of his experience are willed by God. The gulf between feeling and doing is perhaps all too great. Men who have been buried alive, or barely escaped from a burning house, bear the wound permanently in their soul. For the rest of their lives they bear the stigma of the catastrophe. For ever after they are left trembling, and that may often be a hindrance for much that is good.⁷³

The power God gives to become his children is seen as radically unsettling and demanding for the individual and also disturbing for the whole community which may find such people very hard to cope with. And yet they offer the rest a sight of God, "God reveals himself through the opening created, and generations of men live on that revelation"⁷⁴

Yet even the effects of the volcanic upheaval von Speyr envisages are restricted within traditional theological and spiritual limits. The theoretical possibility of bursting through traditional spiritualities and theological presupposition is belied in von Speyr's writing on the Prologue, by the imperialistic moves she seems to make to conquer even this territory of new possibilities. Those who are empowered to become God's children (Jn 1:13), are, characteristically thrown into contemplation of their own unworthiness, the distance separating them from God, the thought of all that has not been done⁷⁵. But whilst they may be spiritually shell-shocked, wounded in their souls, and "an unbearable member of the community"⁷⁶, the explosion originates in God, and for this reason, the Church by the apparently painless procedure of "gradually coming to see"⁷⁷, sails on re-formed, re-invigorated and blessed by the blood-letting. The variety of human differences has been reduced to the one inconceivable crushing difference between God and humankind, as defined within Christian patriarchy, a relationship within which there is no room for negotiation or change.

Jn 1:14

The Incarnation is understood, in its normality and comparability to our own existence, to consist initially in having an earthly mother. The divine analogy of Christian procreation and birth is once again invoked.

The word became flesh means, finally, that Christian parents in their sacramental marriage not only beget the body and flesh of their child. The child of Christian parents is also born and begotten of the spirit, of the

⁷³ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 131.

⁷⁴ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 133.

⁷⁵ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 130.

⁷⁶ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 134.

⁷⁷ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 134.

sacramental word of their marriage. So that even before it is baptised, it is a different child from the child of pagan parents.^{7 8}

It is, I believe, confusing and misleading to regard this as a description of a human child, since its implicit understanding of sacramentality assumes the prior enactment of the divine Incarnation. It is rather the analogical description of divine Incarnation, of sacramental word made flesh. And that is a fairly concise description both of her own stigmatised predicament, and perhaps of her own family romance⁷⁹.

3.4. The Uses of the Erotic.

In many ways, what Audre Lorde wrote about the erotic and about poetry is sharply opposite and yet also apposite in any discussion of von Speyr's 'psycho-theology':

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic, within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in

⁷⁸ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. . 138.

⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud's essay called "Der Familienroman der Neurotiker" first appeared in a series of brief papers during the years 1907-9, having to do less with neurotics than with the general context of child/parent relationships. It was initially something of a plea for candour and honesty, particularly in sexual matters. It outlined his theory that in liberating themselves from the authority of parents, children first experience a variety of dissatisfactions - sexual rivalry, a desire for revenge and retaliation for example - with their parents and then commonly express this dissatisfaction in fantasies which consciously or unconsciously, replace parents with more exalted figures - Lords of the Manor or Emperors for example.

our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.⁸⁰

Von Speyr's writing is characterised by an excess and explosiveness, that would seem to have its roots in the erotic impulse as Lorde sees it, to experience the empowerment of great joy and connection:

God is love because he is the fulfilment. He is all this to us in the sacraments which pour forth grace and exhaust themselves in love. But when everything is resolved into love, it enters the mystery of explosive unity. Prior to love everything is disjointed and cannot become one those who are born of God are touched by the surpassing mystery of the unity of love - infinitely above distinctions and beyond notions.⁸¹

Within von Speyr's framework of faith, however, the Roman Catholic Church is the bride of Christ, whose sacramental libido, so to speak, is expressed through the eroticism of obedience, and suffering. Arguably, what von Speyr seems to have internalised in a very specific way, is this erotic dynamic. What distresses Lorde, is the sense in which, within our western culture we refuse to look the need we have for sharing deep feelings in the face. Instead, we conspire to look away. For Lorde, the erotic belongs to the context of sharing and empowerment. And as she notes:

To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex . When we look the other way from

⁸⁰ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit. 58. "Uses of the Erotic".

⁸¹ Ibid. 127.

our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse.⁸²

The relevance of this criticism to the work of von Speyr, is that, in some ways, she might be seen to have treated Scripture, Church and sacraments, especially the sacrament of confession, as objects of her own erotic satisfaction, without "sharing in the satisfying" without discussion without argument without question, simply "under obedience". Arguably, the tremendous and crippling knowledge of her own undeniable secret, was the 'looking away' from what she was doing in refusing to look - in making it impossible to look - beyond the means of her own satisfaction.

The crux of the problem for me then, is a sort of potential misuse or misdirection of eroticism, a blindness at best, an obscenity at worst. Once again, Lorde is to the point. She explains her understanding of the erotic - it is the power that comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another⁸³, it is the underlining of a capacity for joy and it is empowering. But she also points to the way in which it has been commonly restricted within certain limits and deeply feared, because once we recognise our need and capacity for joy and deeply shared communion, this becomes a lens through which we examine all aspects of our lives:

And this is a grave responsibility, projected within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the

⁸² Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit. 58. "Uses of the Erotic".

⁸³ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit. 56. "Uses of the Erotic"

shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.⁸⁴

Jn 1:5 Light shining in the darkness

God, she concludes, is the light shining in the darkness. This is not simply enmity towards God, or even what is not God, but rather it is, itself, the divine mystery of love, "a shell, a veil, a hiding place for the essential mystery, as a protection for its love"⁸⁵. Von Speyr seems here to be speaking with reference to human loving. For the human lover to seek to know too much appears to indicate a lack of trust and respect - an impious unwillingness to be deprived of anything, including knowledge. The source of the analogy is, for von Speyr, to be found in God: the darkness is necessary because "the light needs it in order to flow on eternally, in order to have still more space to penetrate, conquer and measure"⁸⁶. Thus, darkness becomes the necessary mystery of those we seek to love.

In her meditation on the darkness of Jn 1:5, von Speyr taps into another powerful symbolic equivalent, in terms of the sacrifice, that has considerable relevance for her own stigmatised body. This is understood in terms of the life (incarnation/consent), crucifixion (surrender/consummation) and descent into hell (emptiness and death, victim given to God) of Christ. This is strongly associated in a reversed form, to the sacrifice, seen as the conception, the birth and the faithful vigil of Christ's mother.⁸⁷ Finally, darkness is understood by von Speyr in terms of the mutual abandonment of Father and Son, "the period in which the most secret mystery of their love is fulfilled. Their estrangement is a form of their supreme intimacy."⁸⁸ In this the Holy Spirit becomes witness to that dark night, guarantor, as it were, of its validity.

There is a curious parallel current in the work of Lorde and von Speyr at this point. In her call for a disciplined attention to our feelings⁸⁹, Lorde is talking about the bringing to birth of poetry:

..this is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are - until the poem - nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt...⁹⁰

These ideas, poetically expressed then, generate the light "by which we scrutinize our lives" and which have "a direct hearing upon the

⁸⁴ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 57.

⁸⁵ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 53.

⁸⁶ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 52-53.

⁸⁷ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 55.

⁸⁸ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 61.

⁸⁹ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit. 37. "Poetry is not A Luxury".

⁹⁰ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit. 36.

product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives"⁹¹. In her meditation on the Prologue of John, with its rich attention to the metaphor of light and darkness, von Speyr sees "disciplined attention" to the voice and light of God as the guarantee of 'fruitfulness' in the life of the Christian believer and within the Church.⁹² Lorde equally scrutinises the distillation of experience, the feeling of rightness, as the grounds for a further poetic product. Lorde clearly has some appreciation of the searing quality of intimate scrutiny, but still couches her thoughts about poetry as actively birthing "thought as dream ... concept, as feeling... idea, as knowledge..."⁹³ von Speyr sees the divine light as primarily overwhelming:

... we soon have enough light, it is more than we can bear. We always cry out for more life,... but we are shy of more light because it overwhelms us⁹⁴
And to be able to cope with the life God reveals she presents her readers with an increasingly unresisting passivity to that overwhelming light:

When God reveals one aspect of his life to us, he creates more room in us, an opening for something greater. But even if we were entirely open, if there were nothing left in us to be expanded, we should still be completely shut in and imprisoned compared with him..... Nevertheless there will be nothing humiliating in learning more and more about him, because his very being is the 'ever more', and our apprehension of God will be a growing capacity to allow ourselves to be filled by the abundance of his light.⁹⁵

For Lorde, the creation of poetry is a necessity of survival because it forms the quality of light by which we see how to act politically. For von Speyr, the light of the Word, is revealed to us only by passive contemplation, described in highly sensuous terms. It is radiated like the beauty of someone we love⁹⁶, it is something in which to bask⁹⁷ or bathe⁹⁸, and it is something graciously offered and poured out by God⁹⁹, regardless of whether it is gathered up or not.

5 Conclusions.

⁹¹ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit. 36.

⁹² von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 48.

⁹³ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit. 36. "Poetry is not A Luxury".

⁹⁴ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 46.

⁹⁵ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 49.

⁹⁶ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 46.

⁹⁷ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 45.

⁹⁸ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 47.

⁹⁹ von Speyr, Adrienne, Alexander Dru (trans.), *The Word*, op. cit. 47.

In describing Adrienne von Speyr's work as 'psycho-theology' - an admittedly very curious expression - I wanted to be able to make reference to her extraordinary stigmatic symptoms. Understood as a form of conversion hysteria, they point to the development of subjectivity during childhood and adolescence. Whilst it seems to me that the available information is suggestive, I am not qualified to make a judgement in this respect. However, as a form of intertextuality and as a reading of the Prologue of St. John, that takes into account - at least theoretically - of the unconscious as well as the conscious motivations of commentators, it seemed to me well worth investigating as a form of theological interpretation. It has to be noted that, in effect, von Speyr manipulated the analogical theology that so suited her own disposition - the conviction that her suffering mirrored in an objective sense, the feminine dimension of divine love - to her own advantage, demonstrating in her own flesh as word, the most radically authoritative challenge to any absolute or final hierarchy as between body and spirit, or thus to any hierarchy of gender.

That her sincerity was absolute, in every conscious sense, goes without saying. That she felt compassion towards the suffering of others and believed that her own sufferings might - objectively - mitigate theirs, is indisputable.

Ultimately, however, there is a sense in which her interpretation was questionable. The price she paid herself - and the price she demanded of others, not least von Balthasar - in suffering was, arguably, demonically over inflated in a

world already choking on suffering. And ultimately, her interpretation might still be seen as a form of what Audre Lorde calls "looking away", a disguised form of erotic satisfying, a perversion which is an abuse of feeling. So that whilst one might say that such experience comes under the heading of what Caroline Walker Bynum has described in the context of medieval spirituality, as a particular attempt to both gain power and give meaning¹⁰⁰, von Speyr's intriguing reading practises are not really such as a modern feminist reader could seriously wish to imitate.

¹⁰⁰ See Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, California, London, California University Press, 1987) 208 f..

**The Shining Garment of the Text.
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.**

Part II

7

**'Which Came First - the Chicken or the
Egg, the Word or the Words?'
Towards a Feminist Transformation.**

Only the one who is sent can reveal the one who has sent him.¹

**1 Some Introductory Remarks to
Part II.**

In the course of this study so far, I have read a number of different interpretations of a single biblical text and found them all, to some degree or other, determined by the tendency to collapse all traces of woman or the feminine within the Prologue, into either descriptions of emptiness and absence or evil and moral failure. I think that the women readers amongst the five figures analysed, probably go farther towards valorising feminine-identified images or modes of action than the men. In the case of Hildegard von Bingen, for example, there are striking references in her

¹ Käsemann, Ernst, *The Testament of Jesus* (London, S. C. M. Press, 1968), 23.

extended commentary on Jn 1:1-14, to the female figure of divine, creative Wisdom. Moreover, Hildegard's incarnational theology, as read within part one of *Liber divinorum operum*, embraces the whole of creation, in its earthly and bodily materiality as well as in its ultimate subjection to divine judgement, as a divine revelation. And Adrienne von Speyr makes the principle of co-operative obedience, of consent, comparable to the obedience of Mary in accepting God's son within her body, a characteristic of the Trinitarian economy itself. And, perhaps, these women go even further by literally embodying the Word in the physical and bodily symptoms of migraine attacks and stigmatic suffering which accompanied their personal experiences of the divine.

However, even Hildegard's theology is still strongly coloured by an Augustinian anxiety about 'fleshly' desires that were particularly associated by him with genital sexuality. Moreover her female figures are maternal and virginal, not autonomous or sexually active. Divine revelation and physical incapacity and pain seem linked within the religious experience of both women, compromising the expression of an undoubtedly heightened bodily and physical sensibility. And finally, of course, neither Hildegard nor Adrienne von Speyr appear willing or able to abandon the hierarchical and gendered vision of the divine in relation to humanity, closely related to the hierarchy of masculine over feminine values, roles and modes of existence in general. This vision is projected, by both women, upon humankind in relationship to God, giving divine accreditation to the hierarchy of

ecclesiastical structures and making it normative for male and female living in general.

I would say that the three men whose work on the Prologue I have dealt with in detail, demonstrate a similar anxiety about divine embodiment and the challenge to the singular, spiritual identity of the divine that this constitutes at one level or another. It would be quite unfair to these commentators, not to recognise that they wrestle to find this embodiment a central role within their work on the Prologue. In all three cases, however, it seems to me that they finally resolve the difficulty raised by the fleshly Incarnation of the Word by, in some way or another, re-imposing a hierarchical division between Word and flesh as a means of supporting a singular standard of divine perfection or human perfectibility. Thus Augustine ultimately finds no place for the irrationality of human desires, and particularly that of embodied sexual desire. He takes the view that subjection to such irrational desires is the central and identifying factor of human life apart from God. In other words, ultimately, it is dangerous to any sort human perfection. Luther attempts to obliterate the significance of human being, except in so far as it is defined as the consequence of faith in the divine. And finally, Bultmann, in obliterating the separated divinity of Jesus' existence in favour of a revelation of the divine through his sheer humanity, still seems to me to relate the significance of the Word's fleshly Incarnation largely to its role in a 'divine' rescue mission. In other words I do not believe that

Bultmann's reading of this passage evaluates human existence, in itself, any higher than a number of other interpretations that are far more equivocal than he is about the humanity of the Word. Without or outside the existential and unmediated encounter with the divine, human existence - its traditional relationship to woman and the feminine faint but still traceable - continues to be regarded as transitory, empty and vain. And even if we may say that Bultmann allows us to describe the supercharged existence of the human creature who has responded to the divine address, as being entirely within the sphere of existence that is human, the divine/human distinction is still being used by him to describe a hierarchy of values that designates the negative pole as *human* flesh without divine Word, and the positive pole as *divine* Word made flesh.

2 Part II - The Possibilities of New Readings?

The aim within this second part is to find new readings of the Prologue of John's Gospel, that recognise the traces of an 'Otherness' symbolised by woman and the feminine without copying into the interpretative text, the devaluation of this feminine-identified 'Otherness' that is evident in all the readings examined so far. In these three attempts to read the Prologue self-consciously as a feminist critic, I continue exploring the model of interpretation as a collaborative effort between text and reader. I want to 'try on' this textual garment in order to see whether it might be read to fit and suit women readers as well as men.

In view of my analysis that existing readings of the Prologue tend to give support to 'phallogocentrism' - seeing the feminine as merely part of the definition of masculine and trying to derive all meaning from a single, masculine transcendental truth or essence which necessarily excludes or devalues the feminine - one natural route for me to take would be deconstructive criticism of the text. Deconstructive analysis proceeds by resisting or turning on its head, any pre-determined scale of values or priorities, such as masculine over feminine, or divine over human. Thus, for example, a biblical text might be interpreted by focusing on the so-called 'minor' characters rather than the character of Jesus or the Word. The main thread of the argument in two of the following three interpretations is deconstructive. In this first interpretative variation, my focus is on the figure of John the Baptist, rather than the Word, as the Revealer. In the second variation, the focus is the despised 'flesh' of Jn 1:13 as opposed to that of the glorified 'flesh' of Jn 1:14.

But finally, given my underlying commitment to interpretative multiplicity, I have attempted to give one reading of the Prologue that is not so much deconstructive as constructive, or even, to some extent, structuralist. I read the Prologue as a description of the human self or subject, in Julia Kristeva's term, *en procès*. This makes sense in so far as becoming a human subject or self would appear, by common agreement, to be the theme of the Johannine text. This third reading does have a deconstructive element. Kristeva's fundamentally

psychoanalytic discourse of the developing subject accounts for the drive towards singularity that I have detected in a series of historical readings, in terms of a (masculine-identified) realm of symbol, language/articulation and law/control which is constantly under threat from the feminine-identified realm of the semiotic. The semiotic realm is concerned with bodily rhythms and drives, with desire and satisfaction having their origins in the pre-linguistic relations of an infant with its mother. A violent and necessary division is made between the two, driving the maternal, so to speak, underground. However, Kristeva continues to maintain the autonomously creative and even 'salvific' potentiality of this abject maternal in constantly breaching and breaking down the boundaries of the order of symbol and law. In this way, whilst she accounts, within her theoretical framework, for the persistently negative evaluation of the maternal feminine, she does not thereby adopt it.

3 A Feminist Critique of the Prologue.

3. 1 Rhetorical Mythology.

In this first reading I want to do two things. First of all I shall describe the patriarchal myth which I believe existing interpretations of this passage have supported. In other words, I want to describe what might be called the 'rhetorical mythology' which I believe underpins much patriarchal interpretation of this passage. I define 'rhetorical mythology' as a mythological narrative which is reproduced in

individual interpretations of authoritative texts, for example passages from scripture, and then used rhetorically, to persuade readers to support its instantiation within the institutions of the wider culture, including those that regulate any further reading of scripture. The particular mythological narrative I relate to the interpretation of the Prologue of John's Gospel, is undoubtedly based on a close reading of the text. But I want to argue that it is not the *only* narrative to be found by reading the text. Secondly, then, I want to begin the process of identifying a new mythological narrative, in order to challenge both existing interpretations of this passage and the myth it has cherished.

3. 2 The Rhetorical Myth of Patriarchy: Divine (Masculine) Self-sufficiency.

I believe that the issue of much concourse between this text (Jn 1:1-18) and its interpreters is a broadly mythic summary of God's self-sufficiency in creation and disinterestedness in undertaking human salvation. This is the story told, to an extent, by all the commentators whose work on the Prologue I have looked at so far. Whilst the mythological narrative certainly concerns divinity in relationship with humankind, I am also arguing, of course, that it is closely related to a common understanding of the relationship between male and female.

Typically then, the relationship between divine and human is asymmetrical: God's mission is central to concepts of human history and self, but the creation and self-understanding of

humanity-in-the-world cannot define what is meant by God's mission. In a formal sense then, humanity lacks all autonomous value or relevance. This asymmetrical pattern clearly mirrors what modern feminist theory describes as 'phallogocentricity' in which the feminine is simply defined in terms of a masculine view of it, having once again, no autonomous value or relevance. The feminine becomes symbolic of an absence or lack (of the masculine or masculine sign - in Lacanian terms, the phallus)². However, the more formal sense of lack, or absence or of emptiness, associated with woman and the feminine is elaborated within the patriarchal context in terms of a matrix of connecting associations with bodily desire and materiality, death, decay, and sexuality, which is given a negative construction. These descriptions appear to function, more or less effectively, as the means to articulate and control a disturbing presence, whose necessity is perceived but still resisted - expressed rather neatly in a (sexist!) colloquialism on the subject of women: "Can't live with them! Can't live without them!"

In this context, Ernst Käsemann³'s reading of the Gospel of John(1968), is interesting and relevant. Käsemann concluded that the unorthodox and docetic implications of the whole of the Fourth Gospel were clear and unmistakable:

I am not interested in completely denying features of the lowliness of the earthly Jesus in the Fourth

² For a discussion of this pattern of phallogocentricity, see, for example, Grosz, Elisabeth, "Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity" in Gunew, Sneja (ed.), *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* (London and New York, Routledge, 1990).

³ b. 1906.

Gospel. But do they characterize John's Christology in such a manner that through them the 'true man' of later incarnational theology becomes believable? Or do not those features of his lowliness rather represent the absolute minimum of the costume designed for the one who dwelt for a little while among men, appearing to be one of them, yet without himself being subjected to earthly conditions? His death, to be sure, takes place on the cross, as tradition demands. But this cross is no longer the pillory, the tree of shame, on which hangs the one who had become the companion of thieves. His death is rather the manifestation of divine self-giving love and his victorious return from the alien realm below to the Father who had sent him.⁴

Käsemann argues then, that the Gospel of John is not, in a straightforward sense, a text about incarnation in the flesh at all, but the narrative of divine glory revealed in the world. This reading of the Prologue reproduces in a very vivid way, the myth that I am claiming lies behind much traditional interpretation of the Prologue. This mythic construction enables the divine to condescend to humanity without needing to become involved in or compromised by the condition of humankind, disturbingly symbolised by woman or the feminine. God lays claim to divine (masculine) self-sufficiency, omnipotence and self-containment⁵, whilst a prevailing fear of death and dissipation continues to be located within the symbolic matrix of male-defined concepts

⁴ See Käsemann, Ernst, op. cit. 9-10.

⁵ This is, of course, to place the argument within the context of current debates about self and subjectivity, in which it is held that Selfhood, in terms of both individual and community identity, is defined in terms of a significant reaction to, and frequently, a rejection of Otherness. See in particular, Anderson, Pamela Sue, "Wrestling with Strangers: Julia Kristeva and Paul Ricoeur on the Other" in Hunter, A. & A. Jasper (eds.), *Talking It Over: Perspectives on Women and Religion 1993-5* (Glasgow, Trinity St. Mungo Press, 1996).

of female gender and sexuality, including, of course, human flesh and humanity as a whole (male and female) in its relationship to the divine.⁶

What Käsemann seemed to read in the Gospel of John was the representation of an absolute exclusion of the human 'Other', exalted as the principle of divinity. All that is revealed is the Revealer, the non-embodied self-sufficient masculine subjectivity of the divine. As Raymond Brown puts it, against Bultmann, Käsemann "sees not so much that the Revealer is only a man, but that God is present in the human sphere"⁷ All the rest is the mere placental garbage of the defining and banished feminine. This is the stuff of feminist nightmares!

However, of course, Käsemann does not claim that this radically docetic interpretation of the Prologue and the Gospel of John could be acceptable as a teaching of the Christian Church. He makes these claims about the text, in the course of an argument against his scholarly colleagues, whom he accuses of interpreting the text rhetorically to support a particular theological position. He seeks to convince his colleagues in 1968, that historical criticism had been domesticated in the service of theological conservatism. In fine, and rhetorical style he declares that

⁶ In this context, such a symbolic matrix would incorporate male as well as female identity, since in hierarchical relationship to the divine, all humanity would, symbolically, become identified with the feminine.

⁷ Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland, Doubleday, 1966). 35.

The 'happy ending' is not merely wishful thinking, but the condition tacitly agreed upon for the historical-critical enterprise, and even satires of this technique of transformation would offend against good manners. The Gospel of John is the favourite playground for such practice.⁸

Käsemann's reading is in many ways, persuasive. After all, it is quite possible that the author of the Gospel viewed Christology in a far from 'orthodox' manner. In the final analysis, however, Käsemann's reading seems to be open to the criticism that it is rhetorical in the sense that it is driven by his desire to reconcile the docetic and unorthodox text with its canonical authority in order to produce an ending which is 'happy' in so far as it supports his own position. For example, he raises most acutely the question of how the unmediated encounter between believer and glorified Word, in which he believes the Gospel's 'kerygma' to consist, can be reconciled with the necessary mediation of the Gospel itself as somehow authoritative. This point is itself germane to the feminist argument. Within a gendered vision of the divine/human relationship, the mediation of the Gospel as a text written and expounded by embodied human creatures, can become the focus for an argument about the necessity of human agency. Käsemann however concludes that John's Gospel is only the medium of a demand⁹ that we "continually surrender ourselves anew to the Word of Jesus" and evaluate every church "in the light of the one question, do we know Jesus?"¹⁰. It is, he claims, the demand and our faithful response to it

⁸ Käsemann, Ernst, op. cit. 8.

⁹ Käsemann, Ernst, op. cit. 77.

¹⁰ Käsemann, Ernst, op. cit. 77.

that matters. Moreover, the very fact that John's 'church' produced this naïvely docetic Gospel, is itself indicative that, for Käsemann at least, the kerygmatic core in some sense transcends the text - he suggests that 'unorthodoxy' can function in a dialectic sense, balancing what he argues are, 'no less dangerous extremes'. So, although he appears to have regarded the rhetorical mythology of a docetic Johannine text as 'unorthodox', his own rhetorical reading seems to be leading back in the direction of a divine Word to which humankind has little to contribute except in the sense of a spiritualised reception. That is to say, his work is moving towards the vision of a self-sufficient divinity which he himself has already argued, can be read in an authoritative biblical text. And his final concluding words place this docetic rejection of the feminine symbolic, that is the humanity of the Word, at the service of that (rhetorically constructed) phallogocentric totalitarianism by stating that the purpose of John's Christological proclamation, and perhaps also the earthly Jesus, is to call us "into our creatureliness"¹¹, a word which identifies us entirely in terms of our relationship to what we are not, that is, the Creator.

Käsemann is not proposing any alterations to orthodox Christology on the basis of his reading of the Johannine text, and yet curiously, he appears to have doubly inscribed it with a patriarchal myth of divine self-sufficiency. (Is he representing or resisting orthodox Christian teaching here?)

¹¹ Käsemann, Ernst, op. cit. 78.

4 Rhetorical Readings for Woman and the Feminine.

In order to transform interpretation of the text, then, I believe that feminist readers need to steer clear of this rhetorical myth of divine (male) self-sufficiency or presence - if they can. It seems potentially fruitful then, to read the Prologue (Jn 1:1-18) from a point of 'focalization'¹² other than that of God, Word or narrator, whose undeniable presences within the text, lend themselves to what might be called phallogocentric tendencies within orthodox traditions of interpretation.

4. 1 Re-reading "In the Beginning..."

Orthodox traditions of interpretation, begin at the beginning of the Prologue with 'ἐν ἀρχῇ...' ('in the beginning ...') and frequently link these words to that other famous opening

passage in Genesis 1:1. Raymond Brown writes:

In the Beginning. In the Hebrew Bible the first book (Genesis) is named by its opening words, "in the beginning"; therefore, the parallel between the Prologue and Genesis would be easily seen. The parallel continues into the next verses, where the themes of creation and light and darkness are recalled from Genesis.¹³

However, though the theme of creation is clearly referred to at this point, it is not developed within the mainstream of

¹² The term 'focalization' is used in the sense proposed by Mieke Bal in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, University of Toronto Press, 1985). 100 ff.. Bal uses the term 'focalization' to distinguish 'visions' of a passage, from any overtly narratorial voice or vision.

¹³ Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland, Doubleday, 1966). 4.

modern critical scholarship in terms of a reflection on the nature of the Word's humanity *in the world*. Commentary on the Prologue tends to devote attention rather to the relationship between God and the human Word, than to the role of Word in creating humanity and humanity in the world (Jn 1:3)¹⁴. It is much more to do with laying out the parameters of the discussion, beginning with the absolute fundamental of God. In other words much critical scholarship at this point, is preoccupied with emphasising the *presence* of God and Word. Raymond Brown, for example, agrees with Rudolf Schnackenburg that 'beginning' as it occurs in the Prologue of John's Gospel, has little to do with temporality, and indicates rather limitless divine dominion:

This is not, as in Genesis, the beginning of creation, for creation comes in vs 3. Rather the "beginning" refers to the period before creation and is a designation, more qualitative than temporal, of the sphere of God....¹⁵

The phrase "in the beginning" contains no reflection on the concept and problem of time.The phrase does not mark the coming into existence of the created world. It expresses the being of the Logos as it was before the world. That which already existed "in the beginning" has precedence over all creation...¹⁶

¹⁴ It should be noted that Lindars, Barnabas, op. cit. 82, sees Jn 1:1 as a possible reference to Proverbs 8:22 and that Schnackenburg, Rudolf, *The Gospel According to St. John, Vol. I* (London (Burns Oates Ltd.) and New York (Herder and Herder), 1968). 228, 233, assumes a reference to Wisdom traditions. Brown, Raymond E., op. cit. however, makes no reference to this passage at this point.

¹⁵ Brown, Raymond E., op. cit. 4.

¹⁶ Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 232.

Barnabas Lindars sees the Prologue as providing the cosmic setting¹⁷ for the entry of the Word into the world and points to the past continuous tense of 'ἦν' (Jn 1:1: 'In the beginning was the Word...'), distinguishing this, as descriptive of the "virtually timeless", from the historic 'ἐγένετο' of Jn 1:3 and 6 (Jn 1:3 translated as: 'all things were made through him..'; Jn 1:6 translated as: 'There was a man sent'). Once again, the emphasis is laid on such timelessness as descriptive or somehow predicative of divinity.

Mark Stibbe is a reader who uses many of the insights of modern literary criticism and theory in his work on John's Gospel. He too draws attention to the reference to Genesis 1:1 at Jn 1:1. He is rather more interested in the intertextual implications of relating the narratives of Genesis and John, than either Brown or Schnackenburg, for example. But even Stibbe seems preoccupied with the Prologue as marking out the context, the presence of God in an authoritative sense when, for example, he draws attention to the role of the narrator's voice within the text:

From now on the relationship will be one of an omniscient narrator communicating with a privileged reader.¹⁸

Readers should believe what they are being told. Certainly, none of the readers referred to so far, seems at all inclined to

¹⁷ Lindars, Barnabas, *The Gospel of John* (London, New Century Bible Commentary, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1972). 76.

¹⁸ Stibbe, Mark W. G., *John* (Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1993). 22.

doubt that readers - real, intended or implied¹⁹ - are being addressed in a very straightforward manner indeed, about the absolute presence and authority of God the Word.

It seems to me, however, that 'In the beginning' is reminiscent of the tradition of folk tales, in which the teller, by a description that in itself appears to be making claims in terms of time and space, simply loosens the tale from any particular temporal or spatial moorings: 'Long ago and far away, there lived' , or 'A man once....'. The effect is to make the story more universal in its application, or perhaps more relevant to a whole host of different listeners. And, of course, it also alerts the listener or reader to the possibility that the following tale never actually happened, or never happened quite like this! Of course, the persistence and popularity of folk tales are not based on claims to authority in the same way as canonical scripture. Folk tales, at first glance, do not appear to impose the same task on the reader. And, of course, the word 'ἀρχή' ('beginning') used within the Johannine text²⁰ as a whole, could easily seem to bear the impress of something rather more portentous than a conventional literary device for getting started. On the other hand, "In the beginning ..." as it occurs at the opening of the creation myths within the book of Genesis, seems to operate in precisely this sort of folkloric manner.

¹⁹ See above, Chapter 1, 27, for a definition of these various concepts.

²⁰ c.f. Jn 2:11, Jn 6:64, Jn 8:25, Jn 8:44, Jn 15:27, Jn 16:4.

If the 'implied readers', the hypothetical 'target' readers within the mind of the author(s) of this Gospel are equipped with all the correct cultural, theological and literary apparatus necessary for understanding what that mind intended to convey within the text, actual readers are very frequently not so provided. This does not mean that they will not be able to find some significance that is rooted in the text, although it might well be unpredictable if the intention of the author is regarded as the only reliable guide to its meaning. I should like to explore the idea of reading the Prologue, from the beginning, in this more oblique and folkloric sense, particularly for the benefit of actual readers, and women, who may be suspicious of absolute presences and especially disinclined to treat this text as authoritative for them.

'In the beginning' (Jn 1:1) itself then, I would suggest, may perhaps be read in a different way from the interpretation that says it is a reminder that God is foundational, the grounds as much as the means of creation. In its reference to the Hebrew Bible, it is also a reminder that the arduous work of creation - humanity in the world - narratively speaking, led God directly into a risk-laden relational exercise with two different human beings (female and male), involving delegation (Genesis 1:28) and trust (Genesis 2:15-17) since God could not himself, apparently, live in or tend to the world. Such an interpretation may or may not lie within the realm of 'authorial intention'. Nevertheless the Prologue may yet perhaps be read as the narrative of a similar risk-laden enterprise; not the proclamation of God's self-sufficiency and

ineffability but of dependence on human desire and imagination. This then is an attempt at transforming a myth of patriarchal self-sufficiency brought to birth and nurtured through interpretation of the Prologue.

4. 2 Framing John the Baptist: An Alternative Point of Narrative Focus.

If the narrator's authority is in question, the reader needs some other clues to the significance of this passage.

Luke 12:13-21 tells the story of the Rich Fool. The man is a fool, not because he is rich, but because he is complacent. He has it all worked out and sown up. His death, according to the text (Lk 12:21), is God's judgement on the wrong use of his riches. But it is also the punch line of the joke: "He forgot that he wasn't going to live forever!"

Some have chosen to read the first five verses of John's Gospel as the incomparable poetry of a devout believer²¹. And so it may be. But what if all those inclusivities, that seek to contain or reduce to the darkness of non-existence what lies outside God/Word, are read as the setting up of human complacencies or dangerous illusions about cosmic or symbolic certainties, that, like the Rich Fool's plans, are about to be blown away, necessarily abandoned and submerged in the confusion of human imagination and desire?

²¹See for example, Lindars, Barnabas, op. cit. 77. Raymond Brown indulges in similar 'purple prose' in Brown, Raymond E., op. cit. 18.

To propose this reading, is, of course, to have recourse to irony as a focus for interpretation. It is a commonplace of modern literary biblical scholarship that the author of John's Gospel is an accomplished ironist. The reasons why he (sic) should be so described are not really very hard to discover, given certain ground-rules about how to identify irony. G. W. Macrae²² defines irony in John's Gospel as a form of literary device to be largely, though not entirely, distinguished from humorous (satire), Socratic (dialectic), Sophoclean (tragic irony), or modern 'metaphysical' irony (a modern ironic vision ...? Nietzschean Hilarity....?²³). Macrae, amongst other commentators²⁴ limits Johannine irony to something that is relatively straight-forward:

...Johannine irony is first of all dramatic irony in that it presumes upon the superior knowledge of the reader to recognise the true perspective within which the Gospel's assertions are ironical.²⁵

However, what Macrae sees Johannine irony to have in common with modern metaphysical irony is the view that "the world itself and the symbols it uses are ambiguous"²⁶. Macrae draws the readers' attention to the trial scene, and to the figure of Pilate:

..he may represent.. the state faced with the option of yielding to the world or confronting the issue of the

²² Macrae, G. W., "Theology and Irony in the Fourth Gospel", in Stibbe, Mark W. G. (ed.), *The Gospel of John as Literature* (First published, 1973. Leiden, New York, Köln, E. J. Brill, 1993). 103-115.

²³ See Jasper, David, *Rhetoric, Power and Community* (London, The Macmillan Press, 1993). 1-13.

²⁴ See, for example, Duke, Paul, D. *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta, GA, John Knox Press, 1985).

²⁵ Macrae, G. W. in Stibbe, Mark W. G. (ed.), op. cit. 107.

²⁶ Macrae, G. W. in Stibbe, Mark W. G. (ed.), op. cit. 109.

source of its own authority, or he may represent the Gentile faced with the option of a decision when confronted with Jesus. In any case, Pilate plays the role of an ironical figure.²⁷

The sort of irony that I am interested in exploring in my reading of the Prologue, however, is closer to modern metaphysical irony, and cannot really be contained within descriptions of what Paul Duke calls 'communicated irony'²⁸, as it were to gloss Wayne Booth's understanding of 'stable irony' within literature as a whole:

If there were victims (and there usually were) they were never the implied author (whatever victimized masks he assumed in passing) and they did not include the true implied reader; the reader and author were intended to stand, after their work was done, firmly and securely together.²⁹

This would have to refer to the kind of irony within John's Gospel that was transparent to any reader accepting the claims of Christian belief.

Nevertheless, it appears to me that interpretation in a more metaphysically ironical mode, can be justified and may be revealing for readers who are disturbed by the insistent authoritative presences to which traditional interpretations of this passage tend to give expression. Appropriately enough, if I treat the claim of these verses (Jn 1:1-18) as if it were made ironically, what first breaks up the balanced poetic text (Jn

²⁷ Macrae, G. W., in Stibbe, Mark W. G., 1993. op. cit. 110.

²⁸ Duke, Paul D. op. cit. 19.

²⁹ Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1974). 233.

1:6)³⁰ is the appearance of a man, John. John is just an ordinary man ('ανθρωπος' - 'man' as a generic masculine, not man as opposed to woman) like any other Adam, Elijah or Samson. His nature whether fleshly or divine is not at issue (nor yet is his gender). He does not come in for the scandal-sheet treatment of Jn 1:14: 'The Word became flesh ...'. But I am told that he is sent from God ('..αποσταλμενος παρα θεου' Jn 1:6). And I am reminded that, whatever I tell myself about cosmic certainties, from the human perspective, all there is to work on is the human stage. God may or may not be creator and sustainer of human life but I do not observe this cosmic activity unmediated. Without the human apostle, messenger, witness (reliable or otherwise) midwife or match-maker, I cannot get into the place or frame of mind to believe (Jn 1:7) or see (Jn 1:8). No one can get *themselves* born even the first time, yet alone the second.

So the punch line to the joke, the point of the irony would be that however grand - or totalitarian - our vision of God, we are first and foremost, related to God through each other as teachers, guides and lovers. And inherent within that realisation, is the notion that human relatedness is itself, God-defining.

But you still might need some further convincing that focusing on John the Baptist in this passage, is an interpretative procedure that has much to commend itself! It is not entirely

³⁰ See Brown, Raymond E., op. cit. 3-4. John the Baptist's contribution to the Prologue is understood as an interruption to the extent that these verses are parenthesised.

unprecedented. In his work on John's Gospel³¹, Sjef van Tilborg argues that John the Baptist's relationship to Jesus in the text has, until recently, been given less attention than is actually warranted because of

...the (almost) exclusive focus on the historical reconstruction of the baptiser-movement(s). The studies which explicitly treat John the Baptist ... are all historically oriented. The texts of the Johannine Gospel are, therefore, exclusively or mainly seen in so far as they can have possible informative value for such an historical reconstruction.³²

But, narratively speaking, Tilborg argues that John's words have a priority over the words of Jesus, or that as the Evangelist tells the story, he (sic) gives John's relationship to Jesus (especially Jn 1:15-36 and Jn 3:22-36) an affective even formulative dimension:

[John] is in a certain sense 'the teacher' who brings his 'disciple' to the marriage; he is present at the feast as the most important guest. The happiness he experiences is a kind of evaluation; there is complete inner agreement. That John (the Baptist), then, uses the same words as Jesus has used before shows that, between these two friends, we have *μία ψυχή δύο σωμασιν ενοικουσα*, one soul inhabiting two bodies: the Aristotelian ideal of friendship³³

My reading of the role of John the Baptist is related to Tilborg's in its implicit promotion of the significance for the figure of Jesus, of relational contexts within this Gospel. But I would push the significance of John the Baptist, for example,

³¹Tilborg, Sjef van, *Imaginative Love in John* (Leiden, New York, Köln, E. J. Brill, 1993).

³² Tilborg, Sjef van, op. cit. 59-60.

³³ Tilborg, Sjef van, op. cit. 77.

further. It appears that John the Baptist's relationship to his hearers is defined by the narrator as that of witness (Jn 1:7, 15) and also facilitator (Jn 1:7). Yet John's own description of the role he plays in relation to his listeners is, at this point in the Gospel, riddling and largely a matter of denial. 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me"' (Jn 1:15). He says that he is not the Christ (Jn 1:20), and answers, "I am not", when the priests and Levites ask if he is Elijah (Jn 1:21). His association with prophecy is ambiguous. At Jn 1:20-21 he denies that he is the prophet³⁴, and yet his answer to the insistent interrogation of the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem, makes reference to prophetic scripture (Isaiah 40:3), "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness 'Make straight the way of the Lord' as the prophet Isaiah said" (Jn 1:23). At Jn 1:28 ff., he finally and explicitly accepts the description of witness to the Son of God and role of facilitator. But a note of ambiguity remains "I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptising with water, that he might be revealed to Israel" (Jn 1:31).

I would argue then, that the man John materialises (Jn 1:6), to challenge the closed system of Jn 1:1-5, with the reminder he presents of the significance of human work, both in the struggle to understand and to interpret divine commissioning (whether his own or Jesus') for his listeners. In other words,

³⁴ See Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 289-290, on the identity of 'the prophet'. He agrees that the precise designation of this term is difficult to pin down, since 'there were in fact various ideas current among the people about the coming of a prophet in the days of salvation'. He suggests, however, a stronger connection with the prophet of Deut 18:18.

this narrative of John the Baptist bears witness - John speaks first as if to authorise Jesus - to the crucial, or even prior significance of human participation (Jn 1:29-34) for divine revelation.

Of course, the theme of subversion, of challenge to the ways of the world's knowledge, reception, belief and culture (Jn 1:9-13) is subsequently and most explicitly attached to the figure of Jesus in this Gospel. But within the Prologue, and arguably throughout the Gospel, this is a figure whose humanity is far more ambivalent than that of John (Jn 1:14 a & b). And certainly, here at the beginning of the Gospel, the narrator makes some differentiation between bearing witness to the creative (Jn 1:10), regenerative (Jn 1:12,13), culturally radical (Jn 1:13) light/Word, and the agency of the Word/Son of the Father, understood as something particularly invested in Jesus (Jn 1:14-15). Yet the narrative of the Prologue weaves these two stories of witness and agency together in systematic interdependence. Thus, Jn 1:18,19 seems to bear interpretation along similar lines as at Jn 1:5,6, and Jn 1:14,15. Whatever the narrator speaks of certainty and assurance, the witness of John the Baptist is its conclusion, and indeed at Jn 1:15 and Jn 1:19, also the resolution and definition of an otherwise invisible or inaudible divinity (Jn 1:10,11 and Jn 1:18). Even if, following Tilborg, I take Jn 1:18 as part of John the Baptist's own words, and I construct the divine as self-enclosed autism: "No one has ever seen God/ ... No one has ever seen God the only Son/God, who is in the bosom of the Father" (Jn 1:18), it seems that the revelation of God by the

Son: " he has made him known" (Jn 1:18), is not enough. At Jn 1:19 we read "And this is the testimony of John". Again, in terms of the narrative, John's gradual revelation of his own role and that of Jesus (Jn 1:20, 21, 23, 26, 27, 29-34), functions perhaps as an ironic parallel, characterised by elusiveness, ambiguity and slow development, to challenge the explicit far less nuanced understanding of Jesus as divine light/Word presented by the narrator in Jn 1:9-14, and at Jn 1:15-18.

4 A Rhetorical Myth of Feminist Interpretation: God as Desiring and Inarticulate.

What does this all represent? I propose that it may be seen as belonging to the sense in which, in the words of George Macrae:

Johannine irony shares the view that the world itself and the symbols it uses are ambiguous.³⁵

The irony that appears outwith the point of view of the narrator then, is for me, the derisive, riddling chicken and egg motif. Which came first, is more fundamental, divine word or human witness to it, divine glory or human vision of it: And of course, it would have to be situated outwith, and beyond the point of view of the authoritative narrator, because the joke or riddle is precisely, I am saying, the ironic overturning of any attempt to man-handle the opening "In the beginning was the Word" into a mere manifestation of stifling religious and

³⁵ Macrae, George 'Theology and Irony in the Fourth Gospel', in Stibbe, Mark W. G. (ed.) *The Gospel of John as Literature*: op. cit. 109.

intellectual singularity. By introducing the Baptist and his witness, the authority of the narrator is questioned and undermined, the narrator is revealed as the construction of imagination and desire, both in structural authoritativeness and imaginative scope. But equally, it becomes possible to read the narrator's words as a commentary on the words and actions of John the Baptist (Jn 1:7-8). After all what possible reason should we have for listening to words which do not in any sense, reflect the fecundity of our imaginations or the richness of our desires? They work together. John is unworthy even to untie the thong of Jesus' sandal (Jn 1:15, 27), and he ranks after Jesus, but without his witness, how should the readers and listeners know, in a world that otherwise knows him not, how to read the actions and words of a man who ends up being executed?

I am reading the text of the Prologue, in order to reveal a God who is necessarily dependent upon the materiality (Jn 1:14) of both word (witness) and flesh (glorified presence), in order to enter into relationship with humankind. It is, after all, only those who receive and believe in the light, whom the divine light is able to empower (Jn 1:12). This is an implication, of course, of an orthodox Christian position but it demands a much stronger reading of dependence, in which the patriarchal mythology of cosmic presence and divine (masculine) self-sufficiency is not, so to speak, permitted to 'mark the cards' - determine the limits of 'dependence' - before the game begins.

Once again, Sjeff van Tilborg's work is suggestive:

....embedded in the imaginary reality of the story as told, the main character of the narrative creates an imaginary world in which he and God appear in a father-son relationship which is accessible only from the imagination of the main character, from the fantasy, the imagery and desires of Jesus.³⁶

What Tilborg suggests, albeit tentatively, is that embedded within this Gospel is the narrative of Jesus' self-exploration. This, I believe, illustrates rather well, the implications of my own ironical reading of the Prologue. Tilborg's reading of Jesus as divinely accepted humanity is perceptive and persuasive. His Jesus is left entirely on his own to draw his own conclusions about who he is and what he is doing. His cards are unmarked. And, of course, within the narrative of both Prologue and Gospel, his divine authority is derived finally, not from pre-knowledge, or signs, or from his own words, all of which might be understood to belong to the narrative of Jesus' own self-exploration and self-reflection, but from the agreement, affirmation or witness of his friends³⁷ including, John the Baptist.

I want at this point to return to the Prologue and suggest that readers could derive from it a mythology to challenge divine (masculine) presence and self-sufficiency. The new myth would relate to a divine desire for birth and for deliverance from inarticulateness that, in effect, can only be achieved through relatedness and mutual dependence. In other words, the Prologue, could perhaps be better read as the epilogue, the

³⁶ Tilborg, Sjeff van, op. cit. 22.

³⁷ Jn 1:29,35, Jn 1:45, Jn 2:5, Jn 6:68, Jn 11:27, Jn 20:28

conclusion of a narrative in which divine authority is ultimately only able to be articulated through the witnessing words of human women and men.

6 Women Readers?

And what has this reading to do with feminist theory or the concerns of women readers? (Chicken and egg is a nicely feminine metaphor - both in its relationship to maternal birthing and nurturing, and in its relationship to domestic slavery!) The challenge from a feminist perspective, is to open out the varieties of acceptable human relatedness that may bear fruit (or bring to birth) in terms of a human understanding of God, as opposed to beginning with a notion of God defined according to the values of patriarchal culture, and using that to limit still further, the types of relatedness that can be seen as potentially God-defining or revealing. Thus, it might become the task of the feminist biblical critic at this point to create from his or her imagination and desire, an interpretation of the Prologue that sees John the Baptist as the proto-incarnate, lending fully human authority to the embryonic divine.

Of course, it might be said that though he is introduced (Jn 1:6) in the Greek of the first century as generic (*ἀνθρωπος*) and not gendered man (*ἀνὴρ*), John the Baptist still bears the imprint of a wider patriarchal definition of generic humanity as normatively masculine. My attempts, as it were, to restore the absent mother in terms of John the Baptist's necessary human priority might appear questionable, given that he is male.

But, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues, that we should not, perhaps, be deterred from deactivating "masculine/feminine gender contextualization in favor of an abstract degenderized reading"³⁸ provided, of course, that we remain aware that non-feminist readers may well try to reactivate this contextualisation. Here, in other words, we should, as readers, recognise John the Baptist as potentially representative of humanity in both its male and female forms and expressions. And in narrative terms, in any case, this interpretation of John the Baptist as a birthing and incubating human, male mother might appear to circumvent some of the more divisive hierarchialising tendencies of orthodox Christian theology. In contrast to the presentation of Jesus' mother in the Gospel of Luke, where divine dependence on humankind is, as it were, signified in Mary's acceptance of the message sent to her (Lk 1:38) and of the child in her womb, this necessary dependence in the Prologue is expressed in terms of the giving of a message. The necessary human relatedness refers to a divine need for words and language, and not simply an empty space waiting to be filled up.

7 Conclusions.

If, speaking rhetorically, this Prologue can be seen as the ironical delimitation of God as desiring and inarticulate divinity, rather than as a mythological tale of pre-existence, cosmic closure, or (masculine) divine self-sufficiency, then it is perhaps no longer so important that the first instance of

³⁸ Fiorenza, Elisabeth, Schüssler, *But She Said* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992). 200.

revealing relatedness is in the witness of a man, since there are other witnesses too, some of them women³⁹. The narrative priority of John (ἄνθρωπος) is still disturbing however. This interpretation - as potentially deconstructive of hierarchical dualism between male and female - depends on the underlying identification of the dualisms of divine/human and masculine/feminine in which the divine/masculine and the human/feminine are seen to be mutually dependent. But its implications for relations between male and female have to be formulated quite carefully.

It would be quite simple for such an interpretation to be understood as implying an extremely inequitable mutuality, when the concepts of equity and mutuality are defined, say, in terms of the values of patriarchy. Thus, the biblical texts already contain many instances of the symbolic identification of the divine/human relationship in terms of marriage. Such a relationship undoubtedly reflects elements of interdependence but very often they are interpreted in terms that embody, for example, typically male anxieties about female infidelity or the dangerous 'Otherness' of women⁴⁰.

It is for this reason that a reading of the narrator's commentary in the Prologue that entertains the possibility of an ironic focalisation, or point of view, is important to my argument. What the narrator bears witness to is the

³⁹ Most notably, of course, Martha of Bethany, Jn 11:27

⁴⁰ See for example, Bal, Mieke *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987). Especially her analysis of the Samson narratives, Judges 13-16.

ontological status of the divine, but it is, at the same time a narrative of faith. In terms of the stable, communicated irony of the text, it is faith that things are not as they seem. It is then a reflection of human desire for certainty. And the reason that I believe this description may be charged with irony, is indicated in the pattern of this text (Jn 1:1-18) as a whole, by the insistent interruption of a human witness into passages in which it would seem, were the Prologue simply concerned with stating the ontological truth about a self-sufficient divinity without irony, no further witness would be actually required. The implications of this irony then, for the issue of identification between divine/masculine and human/feminine, is that it is able to relativise or destabilise certainties described within the passage as pertaining to the divine. Mutual dependence itself, lies revealed within the realm of desire and not ontological certainty. There is everything still to play for.

So, on this interpretation, is our theological existence
...delivered up to the impulses and whims of the
moment, no longer knowing anything except what can
just as well be found outside the canon⁴¹?

Does it make sense to talk about being misled into the tyranny of arbitrary interpretations⁴²? My anxiety is evident. And yet, there are again some nuances of interpretation that seem appropriate to note. The implicit violence of canonicity - whether in terms of scriptural texts or of their interpretation - is no better an extreme. The combination of canonical texts

⁴¹ Käsemann, Ernst, op. cit. 77.

⁴² Käsemann, Ernst, op. cit. 77.

and canonical interpretation has nourished some powerful configurations of the world, humankind and God that arguably continue to serve predominantly patriarchal values and culture. These, I believe, have to be questioned. Given the understanding of interpretation that I have adopted, the product of the interaction between text and interpreter/reader, need not conform to any one particular form of rhetorical mythology, though it cannot exist without any. What authorises or guarantees such interpretations is, fundamentally the relations of power exercised by the interpreter/reader. Like the inarticulate divinity of my rhetorically constructed interpretation of the Prologue, the text is, of itself, entirely mute and powerless. Which is to leave the final responsibility of not turning the text into a whore (male or female), with those who, so to speak, pick it up.

**The Shining Garment of the Text.
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.**

8
**Flesh Insights on the Prologue of John's
Gospel.**

ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν.

Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο.....
John 1:12-14.

1 A Second 'New' Reading of the Prologue.

In this chapter, I want to give a second reading of this biblical passage that also recognises the traces of an 'Otherness' within the patriarchal context. This 'Otherness' is, as I have already said, very often symbolised by woman and the feminine, carrying a devalued sense. Again, within this chapter, my method could be broadly termed 'deconstructive' in the sense that I concentrate on the more obviously devalued sense of the term 'flesh' at Jn 1:13, as the key to its significance within the incarnational statement of Jn 1:14: "And the Word became flesh".

2 Word Become Flesh.

2.1 'Σαρξ': A Disturbing Concept.

Within the Prologue, Word ('λογος') is acknowledged as creative and powerful in an ultimate sense (Jn 1:3 "...all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made...."). But then at Jn 1:14, Word becomes flesh ('σαρξ'). I believe that it must be recognised that the attitude of Christian readers to the concept of 'σαρξ' has always been extremely ambivalent. Whether 'σαρξ' implies a quality of material sensuality, an attitude of fundamental opposition to God, or even a reference to the earthly sphere that is only a source of sin if the Christian trusts in it alone, I believe that these definitions rarely if ever, escape entirely from negative connotations. There is, then, at first glance, some cause to balk at this verse, Jn 1:14. And, of course, there is also some interest in the fact that this passage has retained its place at the core of a canonical text. So what exactly is going on?

Divine Incarnation as a theological concept, has always disturbed Christian thinkers and readers, in spite of fifth century efforts to resolve difficulties by bringing in the doctrinal formulation of Christ's two natures¹. And it seems to me that this sense of unease or anxiety, both for Christian thinkers in general and for readers of John's Prologue, has a good deal to do with the phallogocentric context in which interpreters are trying to define meaning or truth by

¹ The definition of the Person of Christ agreed in Chalcedon at the Fourth Oecumenical Council of 451 was of two natures - divine and human - which were inseparable but not confused. It was a decision drawn up in part against the teaching of Eutychus (373-454) that the humanity of Christ was not consubstantial with the rest of humankind, which orthodox Christians took to imply the impossibility of human redemption through Christ.

excluding, marginalising or devaluing - as feminine - whatever they cannot articulate or control.

Some feminist analysis identifies the determination² of the divine Word as being essentially masculine. On this basis, it makes sense to argue that the anxiety generated by a doctrine of divine Incarnation is related to the perceived dangers of contaminating and confusing the singular masculine identity of the divine, with feminine-identified flesh and thus setting up some sort of unavoidable multiplicity. This multiplicity, would then challenge the very identity of God as essentially different from humankind and, crucially different in the sense of an ascription of value - being good for example.

The reason for the symbolic identification of 'flesh' as feminine has clearly to do with the bodily and material site of human sexual desire, fragility and subjection to death. Feminist writers and commentators argue that the roots of the association lie in perceptions of woman as connected with male sexual desire, but also with birth and nurturing³ and also

² For a treatment of the masculinity of orthodox Christian teaching about God, see, for example, Irigaray, Luce "Divine Women", in *Sexes and Genealogies* (London, Routledge, 1993). "... man has sought out a unique male God. God has been created out of man's gender. He scarcely sets limits within Himself and between Himself: He is father, son, spirit. Man has not allowed himself to be defined by another gender: the female. His unique God is assumed to correspond to the human race (*genre humain*), which we know is not neuter or neutral from the point of view of the difference of the sexes." Op. cit., 61-62. Irigaray's point in this essay, is that women cannot find their own 'divine' potential by contemplating such a uniquely masculine divinity.

³ See, for example, Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London, S.C.M. Press, 1983), especially, chapter three, "Woman, Body and Nature", 72-92.

with sickness and death. Women, traditionally, are those who deal with the very young, the sick and the very old. These associations are then extended, to the sometimes terrifying power of an uncontrolled nature, which deals out life and death, as opposed to male-identified institutions of culture and law by which that power is, to some extent, tamed⁴.

These sort of associations are illustrated, for example, in interpretations of the myth of Adam and Eve. In one example, from Philo's commentary on *Genesis*, Philo argued that before the creation of Eve, the bodily component of Adam was kept under the control of his spiritual self, but that her creation represented his separation into soul and a lower self susceptible to sexual desire, which ...

... is the beginning of iniquities and transgressions, and it is owing to this that men have exchanged their previously immortal and happy existence for one which is mortal and full of misfortune.⁵

And within the Church, the story of Adam and Eve has sometimes been debased into an aetiology of evil, with Eve as scape goat:

You are the Devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of

⁴ See, for example, Sherry Ortner's influential essay (1972) "Is female to male as nature is to culture?", reprinted in Rosaldo, M. and L. Lamphere (eds.), *Woman Culture and Society* (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1974).

⁵ Philo, *Commentary on Genesis*, 46, 53. See Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London, S.C.M. Press, 1983). 168 ff.

your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die.⁶

So, finally, what I am suggesting, is that the incarnational text of the Prologue is itself representative of a multiplicity that interpreters find exceptionally difficult to cope with, and which in interpretative practices, they have usually sought to disguise or confine, by claiming, when it suits the argument, that a feminine-identified 'flesh', rather than an extremely negative category or even the absolute lack of any value to the point of exclusion, is really a category of relatively benign neutrality. However, I would go on to suggest that a reading of the Incarnate Word in terms of a radical and gendered difference retains sufficient coherence to challenge readings that would resolve the difficulty into yet one more form of divine masculine singularity.

2. 2 'Σαρκῆ': A Neutral Concept?

I have argued then, that 'σὰρξ' is invariably read as somehow or other negative, and that it is associated with the symbols of woman and the feminine, which, within the phallogocentric vision, constitute the definition of what is to be valued positively - that is to say that whatever is male or masculine-identified, is defined by its not being, or its being superior to, whatever is female or feminine-identified. However, some readers might still need convincing that this view of genuinely represents the use of the term in the Prologue. Some commentators, for example, have argued that the

⁶ Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum* 1.1.

concept of 'σαρξ' is essentially neutral - capable of being *both* corrupted *and* redeemed. They might say that to think otherwise, is to fall into a dualism that has never been a part of orthodox Christian anthropology.

The word 'σαρξ' is probably associated most strongly within the New Testament, with the Pauline and "duetero-Pauline" literature. This - rightly or wrongly - has not had a "great deal of street credibility with feminists"⁷. Not unnaturally, feminists tend to be disturbed by a commonly perceived 'Pauline' attitude towards women. This is seen as an attempt to reduce women to the troubling objects of male sexual appetite - marry or burn⁸ - or to align their role within the early Church to their role within the broader patriarchal societies of the first century world - covering their heads⁹ and keeping silence¹⁰.

In a recent study of Pauline¹¹ literature, however, the Jewish writer, Daniel Boyarin, argues that the word 'σαρξ' does not

⁷ West, Angela, "Sex and Salvation: A Christian Feminist Bible Study on 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:39", in Loades, Ann (ed.), *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London, S.P.C.K., 1990). 72.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 7:9: "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion".

⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:5: "... but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonours her head" (i.e. her husband).

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 4:12: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent." It should be noted that few modern biblical critics would account this text as part of the original or authentic Pauline material in the New Testament. (Susanne Heine even goes so far as to claim that the pastoral epistles - of which 1 Timothy is one - are, because of the attitudes towards women that they evince, self-evidently beyond the pale of Christian praxis. See Heine, Susanne, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* (First published 1986. London, S.C.M. Press, 1987). 153.)

¹¹ This is a convenient form of reference to a collection of epistles preserved in the New Testament and typically regarded as substantially

have to be read in a way which supports this popularist conception of Pauline misogyny! He believes that 'σὰρξ' belongs within a complex body/spirit framework, which combines a number of oppositions¹². But Boyarin also believes that this apparently dualistic framework does not necessarily imply that Paul regards 'σὰρξ' or its symbolic representation in terms of woman and the feminine as inherently evil.

According to Boyarin's reading of this Pauline material then, 'σὰρξ' functions - *within* a context of a common, persistent and widespread western dualism¹³ - in a broadly figurative or allegorical sense. The Pauline material constructs an opposition - in which 'σὰρξ' is one term - that is rhetorical, illustrative and illuminating. Yet this opposition is not something to be energetically reified. That is to say, in using 'κατὰ σὰρκα' ('according to the flesh'), Paul "refers to an ordinary level of human existence that is, to be sure, lower than that of the spirit but not by any means stigmatized as being evil, venal, or without reference to God".¹⁴

the work of one author. It does not imply any particular theory about who 'Paul' was.

¹² See, Boyarin, Daniel, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1994).

78. First of all, for example, he describes a biblically attested opposition - one that can be read within the Christian Old Testament as well as the New - between, for example, 'in the flesh' and 'in the heart'. Then he outlines another opposition between 'the letter' and 'the spirit'. Finally there is the very Hellenistic opposition - much more unambiguously related to platonic dualism - of 'outer' and 'inner'

¹³ See Boyarin, Daniel, op. cit. 85.

¹⁴ Boyarin, Daniel, op. cit. 72.

Perhaps it is possible then, to argue that readers may understand 'σαρξ' within the Prologue of John's Gospel, in the same way. That is to say, perhaps the narrative makes a theological argument - a statement of a hierarchy of values: 'Σαρξ' is a *neutral* lower term. Divine 'λογος', and human 'σαρξ' represent a hierarchy of values belonging to a fundamentally metaphorical context in which metaphors refer to spiritual realities, not material qualities. Thus 'λογος' becoming 'σαρξ' would indicate a gracious summation, a glorious scooping up of the human into the divine without implying anything about the value of actual bodies.

In a passage that is reminiscent of Paul's discussions of the claims of Torah¹⁵, gifts of grace and truth (Jn 1:16,17) are associated, in the Prologue, with Jesus Christ, in a form that seems to hint at an opposition of a similar nature between the gifts of the Word that are associated with true - inner - vision and revelation, and those received through Moses and, as it were, the outer, letter of the law. In the Prologue, as in the passage in 2 Corinthians, this gift of the law is contrasted with the grace and truth that comes through Jesus Christ, but not so strongly that it may not still be understood as gift, perhaps of a lesser or intermediary nature (Jn 1:17).

However, other oppositions within the Prologue featuring the concept of 'σαρξ', seem less amenable to analysis in these terms. At Jn 1:13, children born of God are contrasted with

¹⁵ See Paul's comments on the Law in 2 Corinthians 3, especially verse 7f..

children born of the will of the flesh. And in this Johannine context (Jn 1:13), 'σὰρξ' certainly *appears* to imply something beyond the merely rhetorical. Those who have been empowered to become 'children' of God, are clearly contrasted with the blindness and indifference of the rejecting world of humankind (Jn 1:10-13). They are distinguished emphatically from children born of the will of the flesh, in a sense that is similar to the sort of opposition suggested at Jn 3:5-6, which has consequences of the utmost significance for their ultimate destiny. There is an implication that birth in the flesh is not simply a lesser term, commended, like the Law as a gift¹⁶, but rather a term implying emptiness and having no positive significance at all. Without the spirit, no one will enter the Kingdom: '... ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ. τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σὰρξ ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστιν.' ('... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit'.)

In this chapter, I shall argue - against the broad direction of Boyarin's definition - that the predominant and underlying association of the word 'σὰρξ' in the Prologue, is with the symbols of woman and the feminine precisely in the sense in which they represent the devalued terms within any scale of

¹⁶ Raymond Brown reads Jn 1:17 in this way, linking reference to Moses here with what he describes as "honorific" references to Moses at Jn 1:14; Jn 3:14; Jn 5:46. See, Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John I-XII: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland, Doubleday, 1966), 16.

values determined by a phallogocentric context. In other words, it is not that the Pauline usage Boyarin suggests is dualistic in a simple misogynistic sense, but that gender and gender identification or association is being employed to mark value up (or down) across the board. In the case of Boyarin's analysis, moreover, by absorbing all the elements of signification within the flesh/spirit dualism into the figurative/ allegorical mode of better and worse rather than good and evil, the gender-identifying process may be clearly observed, since it has. in Boyarin's way of looking at flesh, effectively deprived the feminine-identified bodily and material aspect of flesh of expression altogether. This process seems actually more exclusive, than a simple spiritual/material dualism. That is to say that denying the relationship between 'flesh' and whatever, in the common dualistic terms of modern western culture, has been laid out as absolutely negative, could be seen as an attempt to eradicate the trace of the "Otherness", symbolised by the feminine, altogether in order to replace it with the male-defined 'female' sign of devaluation or valuelessness.

In summary then, a definition of 'σὰρξ' such as Boyarin offers within the Pauline material of the New Testament appears attractive because it offers some resistance to interpretative traditions that do play up the dualistic relationship of flesh and spirit to the disadvantage of actual women. Dualistic traditions of interpreting 'σὰρξ' as female-identified and in opposition to a male-identified 'πνεῦμα', have clearly supported the marginalisation and even demonisation of

women as representatives of an earth-bound, evil materialism. On the other hand, the attempt to neutralise the dualism by regarding the opposite term identified as feminine, as merely 'rhetorical' or 'allegorical' - a matter of outlining a hierarchy in a merely metaphorical sense - also runs into problems from a feminist point of view. It cannot escape the gender-identification which is still being employed to describe the comparative value of the two terms. Moreover, it ultimately fails to recognise the sense in which "Otherness" might represent an actual presence, albeit one that cannot be fully articulated or controlled.

2. 3 'Σαρξ' at Jn 1:13, and at Jn 1:14.

Commentators on John's Gospel have been forced to define the word explicitly within the Prologue, where its use at Jn 1:13 appears to be different from its use at Jn 1:14. The definitions of the word, and the reasons given for this apparent discrepancy, are instructive for a feminist critic and reader.

At Jn 1:13, 'flesh' appears to carry a negative inference, being - as it seems - related to generation, but clearly dissociated from the power to become, to be engendered as, children of God, who are: '...οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς ... ἐγεννήθησαν' ('born ... neither of the will of the flesh ...'). And yet, at Jn 1:14, 'flesh' is the very word used when the divine Word becomes human: 'Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο ...' ('And the word became flesh ...').

In a number of modern biblical commentaries, readers attempt to play down any contrast that might be perceived between 'flesh' at Jn 1:13 and 'flesh' at Jn 1:14. The reason for this appears to be related to a desire to protect the Word at Jn 1:14 from the suggestion that becoming flesh, actually draws the divine Word into a disturbing realm of the feminine-identified 'flesh' regarded as evil, as, at Jn 1:13, it might be seen to do. At Jn 1:13, Raymond Brown, for example, translates 'σὰρξ' in conjunction with desire 'ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς', ('..of the will of the flesh..') in such a way that he claims, like Boyarin in his work on the Pauline material, that 'flesh' retains a complexion of neutrality in parallel with the Hebrew expression, 'flesh and blood' that is said to be equivalent to 'man' rather than 'a man'¹⁷. Brown goes on to define 'σὰρξ' at Jn 1:14¹⁸, once again as a term representing the 'whole man', which is quite clearly distinguished from 'a man'.

Attempts then are made to disguise the more profoundly disturbing implications of flesh by a general trend towards

¹⁷ Since Brown was writing this in 1966, before self-consciousness about gender became more widespread in works of biblical criticism, it is not quite clear what this implies, but it seems to suggest some distinction between becoming human in a general or typical sense (assuming such an idea is coherent), and becoming a single particular - and presumably gendered - individual.

Feminist theory, in conjunction with various modern critiques of subjectivity, poses the question of what exactly 'being human' in this neutral sense implies. Most feminist writers and philosophers argue that, in the past, such expressions of generic humanity, being defined androcentrically, referred to the characteristic aspirations, problems and anxieties of men rather than women. See, for example, Beauvoir, Simone de, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972). 16. "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being."

¹⁸ Brown, Raymond E., op. cit. 12.

interpreting 'flesh' in the context of both Jn 1:13 and Jn 1:14 as belonging to a metaphorical duality which indicates simply a hierarchy of values. Thus, for example, Margaret Davies links Jn 1:12-13 to a reading of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-21). She argues that the narrator intends us to see that Nicodemus is making a mistake by taking Jesus' remarks about the need to be re-born, literally: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (Jn 3:4). But she goes on to suggest that Nicodemus' mistake is not really to interpret literally when he should interpret metaphorically, but to miss the significance of that metaphor which places greater value on the spiritual than on the physical or fleshly as suggested, she says, at Jn 1:12-13 ¹⁹.

However, Davies' interpretation of flesh at Jn 1:14 is related, in her words, to the particular human existence of the Word in his 'vulnerability and mortality'²⁰. From this description, it would appear that the utter futility of physical birth indicated at Jn 1:13 ought to be challenged, since it is a necessary part of the process of Incarnation. Her reading should perhaps be interpreted in the same light as that of Rudolf Schnackenburg. Schnackenburg reads the distinction between 'flesh' at Jn 1:13 and Jn 1:14 as a distinction between birth as a sexual and - as he implies by his references to the Book of Enoch²¹ - a

¹⁹ Davies, Margaret, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). 363.

²⁰ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 45.

²¹ See, Schnackenburg, Rudolf, *The Gospel According to St John, Volume One: Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1-4* (First published 1965. New York (Herder & Herder), London (Burns & Oates), 1968). 264.

defiling process, and the miraculous birth through God, that is perhaps to be linked to Christian baptism in apologetic or even polemical mode. When it comes to Jn 1:14, however, Schnackenburg contents himself with stating that 'σάρξ' here has no relationship with "the notion of flesh as sinful, inclined to sin or fettered by sin"²². Without explaining precisely why the implication of defiling sexuality and sin has been dropped, Schnackenburg describes the sense of 'flesh' in Jn 1:14 as the 'typical human mode of being'²³ characterised as a participation in transience and perishability²⁴, the "typically human mode of being, as it were, in contrast to all that is divine and spiritual". And here a quite definite distinction is made between 'flesh' understood as weak and 'flesh' understood as 'sinful', which Schnackenburg argues, is an inference which belongs to the theology of the Qumran sect and which comes to dominate Pauline thinking.²⁵ Both C. K. Barrett and Barnabas Lindars favour this sense in which 'flesh' refers to a contrast between humankind and God. And again, both appear anxious not to imply that there is any 'negative' implication. Of Jn 1:13, Lindars writes:

*the will of the flesh means the impulse of man's natural endowment, and so refers to sexual desire. There is no suggestion, however, that flesh is inherently evil; in biblical usage it is applied to the createdness, and therefore weakness, of human or animal nature in contrast with God (cf. Isaiah 31:3).*²⁶

²² Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 267.

²³ Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 267.

²⁴ Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 267.

²⁵ See Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 267. n. 171.

²⁶ Lindars, Barnabas *The Gospel of John* (The New Century Bible Commentary, Grand Rapids (Wm. B. Eerdmans), London (Marshall, Morgan & Scott), 1972). 92.

In a similar vein, C. K Barrett concludes that at Jn 1:13:

... σαρκί in John is not evil in itself (see the next verse), but stands for humanity over against God.²⁷

In summary then, these modern biblical commentators appear to want the word 'σὰρξ' to function as a reference to humankind, or to human existence in its absolute distinction from divinity and the life within the generation or gift of God. But they also wish to deny that it refers to any fundamental difference or distinction that would imply a really radical modification of the divine in order to make sense. In other words, I am asking whether this refusal to go beyond neutrality in defining 'flesh' is simply a blind? If humankind and human existence are insistently regarded as distinct and different from the divine life of the Creator Spirit to which we should aspire, how can humankind or human existence really amount to anything positive? The answer must surely be that to make such reservations any more explicit, would at the

²⁷ See Barrett, C. K., *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2nd ed. London, S.P.C.K., 1978). 164. So also Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. who sees Jn 1:13 as an emphatic, three fold description of 'the World' (Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 263), to be contrasted with the 'utterly supernatural work of God in creating children' (my emphasis). Ernst Haenchen, for example, sees Jn 1:12-13 as an insertion, which he attributes to the last editor, or 'redactor' of the text. These verses are simply an attempt to emphasise the point that one does not become a Christian by a natural process of procreation but by virtue of an act of God. Theological speculation is therefore seen to be unnecessary, caused simply by clumsiness. (See, Funk, Robert W. & Ulrich Busse (eds.), Trans. Robert W. Funk, Haenchen, Ernst *John 1. A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1-6*, (First published, 1980. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984). 118 ff..) Such an argument, apart from raising questions about the convenience of editorial additions for getting one out of a tight interpretative corner, does not address the substantive issue of how the meaning of flesh is to be taken, given its resonance in such differing contexts.

same time, raise some exceptionally difficult and disturbing questions about the nature of the incarnation- the Word become flesh.

3 'Σαρξ' and its Evil Associates.

If 'σαρξ' characterises something particularly defining about humanity, or the distinction between humanity and divinity, in what more precisely does this distinction consist? Barrett assumes that the Word could not become something 'evil'. But within the brief summary I have already given of some recent biblical analysis, there are traces of an anxiety that the word 'σαρξ' carries within it the possibility of a pejorative significance. This pejorative sense is not attached in the minds of commentators, to the apparently synonymous term, 'ἄνθρωπος' which appears repeatedly within the passage (Jn 1:1-18) as a whole. Commentators would undoubtedly have been spared embarrassment had this second generic term for mankind (sic) been used at Jn 1:14.

3.1 Why 'σαρξ'? Why not 'ἄνθρωπος'?

In answer to this question, my argument would be that the distinction between 'ἄνθρωπος' and 'σαρξ', is significant precisely because 'σαρξ' introduces associations, based upon the fundamental perception of an anomalous (dangerous/repulsive?), but also quite unavoidable (necessary/formative?) area of experience represented and symbolised by women and the feminine²⁸. Arguably, it is

²⁸ Interestingly, Daniel Boyarin draws attention in his 1994 study of the Pauline literature (*A Radical Jew*, op. cit.) to two of the metaphorical senses of 'flesh' allowed by the Bible and Jewish usage:

difficult to articulate this experience, because it must be done by means of the defining reverse, because it is the 'outside' or 'beyond' of the universe defined in phallogocentric terms. This universe of meaning achieves shape and form in relation to what is excluded, but not thereby altogether eliminated. Arguably, this exclusion is never complete or secure, and that is why there is always an anxiety attached to the use of 'σῶπξ' - the feminine-identified register of that unavoidable but excluded element - in conjunction with the Word.

4 The Prologue

4.1 Transcending Differences of Gender?

Perhaps however, there is a simpler method of reading the Prologue, and the particular summary of Jn 1:14 with its troubling juxtaposition of Word and flesh, in order to discover liberating interpretations for womankind? Perhaps the text is more directly and explicitly offering a critique of cultural forms oppressive to women. Taken as a whole, the text of the Prologue could be understood, as Daniel Boyarin understands the corpus of Pauline literature, to imply a theological vision with radical implications for *transcending* differences of gender ²⁹.

the penis (to be circumcised), and kinship. Whilst such usages do not have any automatically pejorative inference, it is notable that both the penis and the concept of kinship are necessarily related to the bodily roles of women and the symbolic difference of the feminine. See Boyarin, 1994. 67.

²⁹ Daniel Boyarin (op. cit.) argues that at 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, for example, Paul distinguishes between an androgyny on the level of the spirit, existing alongside the hierarchical construction of gender difference in contemporary cultural terms: "Another way of saying this is that Paul holds that ontologically - according to the spirit - there is a permanent change in the status of gender at baptism, but insofar as people are still living in their unredeemed bodies, gender transcendence is not yet fully realized on the social level. Perhaps, we

There may be grounds, for example, for reading in the Prologue, a radical challenge to cultural barriers such as those that have been set up on the basis of gender. Certainly, within the Gospel of John as a whole, a number of women play roles of central significance, as apostles and witnesses³⁰. Moreover, the new standard imposed in the Johannine community to which it is assumed, this Gospel has been addressed³¹, is one of belief and reception and a remarkably open 'generic' reading of the passage is possible in which :

There was a human being (Jn 1:6 'ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος' ('There was a hu/man...')), sent to witness to one who was already the life/light of hu/mankind (Jn 1:4 'φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων' ('... light of hu/mankind')), so that all/hu/mans (Jn 1:7 'πάντες'³²), might believe, every hu/man (Jn 1:9 'πάντα ἄνθρωπον' ('... all

might say, that final realization awaits the Parousia". 195. He argues that this vision had social consequences - women were undoubtedly pursuing active ministry within the contemporary church - but that the fundamental underlying dualism of his intellectual framework, as it were, 'took the pressure off' pursuing the issue in more practical terms.

³⁰ See, for example, the mission of the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:39), and of Mary Magdalene, known according to tradition as the 'Apostola Apostolorum' (Jn 20:17-18). (This tradition is thought to date back at least as far as the work of Hippolytus (c. 170- c. 236). See Haskins, Susan, *Mary Magdalen* (London, Harper/Collins, 1993). 65.) See also, Martha's confession (Jn 11:27).

³¹ For recent theories on the nature of the Johannine community, see the comprehensive account given by John Ashton in *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford, O. U. P., 1991). A summary of the general direction of his treatment is contained in the following quotation:

"The Fourth Gospel was neither a missionary tract destined for Jews or Gentiles nor a work of theology intended as "a possession for ever". In its present form, and in any recognizable earlier version or edition, it was written for the encouragement and edification of a group of 'Jewish' Christians who needed to assert their identity over against the local synagogue, which was almost certainly where the Christian group had taken its rise." Ashton, John, op. cit. 111.

³² nom. pl. masc. - leaves it open as to whether 'ἄνθρωπος' or 'ἄνηρ' is implied. However, the former perhaps is more likely, given a comparison with Jn 1:9 'πάντα ἄνθρωπον'.

hu/mankind')) being enlightened. We are assured that of this 'all hu/mankind'³³, those who have received and believed have the power to become children (Jn 1:12 'τέκνα' ('children')) not sons ('οἱ υἱοί') of God.

Indeed, it is possible perhaps to push even further in this direction, and to see in the Prologue, a *resistance* to the cultural barriers erected against women within patriarchy. And what gives such a possibility even greater plausibility, is the extended 'un-packing' of the notion of becoming children of God found at Jn 1:13³⁴. The children of God are not children defined in terms of blood or lineage, in terms of gender, or in terms of a man's³⁵ desire to satisfy or perpetuate himself. On this reading, the idea of a child/human, and thus also by implication, of a parent/God presented in Jn 1:13, may also be said to define a relationship that rejects specifically, some of the key culturally determined impositions on actual female existence. In other words, this relationship is not to be conditioned by the sort of ideas of biological determinism (Jn 1:13 'ἐξ αἱμάτων' ('of blood')) that have been employed to make women prisoners of their sexual biology, or by bourgeois patriarchal constructions based upon the acquisition of property and the need to possess it in perpetuity (Jn 1:13 'ἐκ θελήματος ἄνδρος' ('of the will of a man (sic.)')), or by the sorts of cultural definition, that turn women into a means of

³³ Jn 1:12 'οσοι' usually goes with 'παντες'/'παντα'. See Haenchen, op. cit. 118.

³⁴ It should be noted that there are a number of biblical critics who regard the verses Jn 1:12-13 as, possibly, editorial additions. See, for example, comments of Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 265.

³⁵ Jn 1:13 'ἐκ θελήματος ανδρος' - of the will of *man*, that is, *not woman*.

satisfying male sexual desire (Jn 1:13 'ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς' ('of the will of the flesh')). On this understanding of Jn 1:13, God's parenthood, and the childhood of the receiver and believer function together as a critique of the commonest forms of women's oppression within patriarchy.

Within this passage then, I have read a strong impetus to dismantle the sort of cultural barriers that might be seen as excluding women from the new community. By setting up a single standard or condition for inclusion (Jn 1:12) all other forms of selection are implicitly denied legitimacy - at least in theory. In its description of God's new children (Jn 1:13), this impression is reinforced. These are children related to a parent in a new way, and one that is not dependent upon the patriarchal cultural expectations that have, typically, fallen so heavily on the lives of women.

However, quite apart from the question of how 'liberated' the earliest Johannine community actually allowed its female members to be, there is another criticism that can be levelled against this reading. If this interpretation of Jn 1:12-13 is chosen as a model for human transcendence, and related to socially radical strains within the Christian reading tradition - by which term I include the texts of John's Gospel itself - it cannot altogether escape the criticism that it supports the fundamental normativity of a redeemed humanity as masculine. In Jn 1:13 human engendering - paradigmatically to do with women's biology, work and worth - is presented as irrelevant to the business of becoming God's children. Being

a woman, as generally defined within patriarchal culture, is no bar to becoming a child of God, but it carries with it absolutely no positive significance either.

4. 2 Difference

It may be more important to recognise the sense in which the Prologue continues to reflect an overriding symbolism of gender related to a concept of difference and implicated in the perception of hierarchies and the exercise of power within a patriarchal society. It is this overriding symbolism, I believe, that offers some explanation of women's many and *varying* experiences within the Christian communities to whose scriptural canon, the Gospel of John belongs.

Thus, what I am saying is that the above interpretation of Jn 1:12-13 in terms of social radicalism, still appears to operate within the same patriarchal and hierarchical frame of symbolic reference in which what is symbolically represented as associated with women and the feminine is given a lower value - or no value at all - in relation to that which is associated with men and the masculine. However, when an interpretation of 'flesh' Jn 1:12-13 in these hierarchical terms is taken in conjunction with 'flesh' as understood at Jn 1:14, something perhaps more challenging occurs.

A number of biblical commentators suggest that the word 'σάρξ' at Jn 1:14, represents a greater degree of palpability or reality³⁶, or a more convincing description of what it means to

³⁶ See, for example, Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 268 ff..

be 'a man among men, a person among persons'³⁷ than could be conveyed, for example, by the use of the word 'ἄνθρωπος'. I have argued, of course, that what gives it this greater density and weight is its associations with the symbolic 'feminine', and what that represents of sexuality, bodiliness, the maternal and the material, and also with death, all viewed with anxiety or ambivalence and yet recognised as structurally inescapable and unavoidable, because they represent the defining, reverse-side of the phallogocentric symbolic universe - that which such definitions *necessarily* exclude or devalue³⁸.

Within traditions of reading, the Prologue seems to partake of a certain dualism, in which there is a spiritual and a non-spiritual context. In becoming 'flesh' (Jn 1:14), the Word is - to imply no more - revealed in the world of spiritual darkness, characterised in the Prologue, by human sexual generation and kinship. The Word offers to those who receive and believe, an enrichment that is defined in opposition to this, as spiritual birth and the reception of spiritual gifts. And yet, to do this, the Word becomes 'flesh'. I believe that this entry into the sphere, already negatively constructed, represents a recognition of multiplicity within the experience of being human, and the inadequacy of dualistic boundaries or the common characterisation of dualistic spheres in terms of a symbolic hierarchy of gender within patriarchal contexts, to

³⁷ Haenchen, Ernst, op. cit. 119.

³⁸ To illustrate this notion in cultural terms, we may say, for example, that whilst in patriarchal societies the work and roles ascribed to women, tend to carry less status, these are nevertheless represented as an integral part of the social fabric, in terms, particularly of marriage and fertility.

contain or do justice to this multiplicity. In other words, the Prologue (Jn 1:12-14) functions whether 'narratively' (what the Word does/becomes) or in theological terms (what the Word constitutes) as a problematising of any differential hierarchy as, for example, between the bodily and the spiritual.

That this anarchic boundary-crossing feature of human experience, that perhaps prevents the hardening of patriarchy's symbolic arteries can realistically be read into Jn 1:14, as a summary of the Prologue, may perhaps be determined more precisely by examining the word 'σαρξ' through its links with bread and meat in Jn 6.

5 Eating the Flesh that is of No Avail.. Jn6.

5.1 Eucharistic Feeding/Spiritualised Feeding.

The word 'σαρξ' has one other major significance within the Gospel of John, which is in its relation to the body of Jesus that must be eaten (Jn 6:53). This is usually interpreted as a reference to eucharistic feeding³⁹. Feeding is, of course,

³⁹ Schnackenburg discusses the sense in which this passage (Jn 6: 26-58) has, at various periods of interpretative history, been understood to refer to Eucharistic feeding along a continuum from magical materialism - a view of the 20th Century rationalist, linking the words to the mystery cults of the first Christian century - to the sixteenth century views of the Reformers who, whilst not abandoning the sense of the real presence of the Lord in the Eucharist, laid great emphasis on the faithful disposition of the communicant, or to the sense in which such feeding is to be understood as related to the ecclesial 'body of Christ' and to the life of faith. Schnackenburg traces the eucharistic interpretation of Jn 6:53-58 back to the Fathers, including the Alexandrinians, Ammonius and Cyril. Clement appears to have favoured a reading along the lines of Philo's interpretation of the manna in the wilderness as a symbol of the Logos. For Clement, so Schnackenburg, the symbols of feeding, bread, flesh, bread, blood and

culturally related to the role of women, but also, as the discourse within Jn 6 appears to emphasise, to the nourishment of the body, and, within the metaphorical terms of possible readings of this chapter, nourishment of the soul or spirit.

In Jn 1:14, the Word becomes flesh - a term which is vigorously defended against the taint of some unspecified 'evil', which I have argued is ultimately related to the feminine, as a male-defined symbol of multiplicity or heterogeneity that challenges the singular masculine determination of God detectable within many reading traditions. In Jn 6, as in the Prologue, commentators resist interpretations that suggest the term 'flesh' has momentarily escaped from the determining significance of the spiritual which excludes or relegates the bodily as the lower term within a dualistic hierarchy.

In Jn 6:53 the flesh that is to be eaten to sustain life is contained by commentators within eucharistic descriptions which limit the bodily 'flesh' to a term within a context (the liturgical practice of the early Church) that has already promoted 'spiritualised' feeding and giving nourishment, because, as Ray Brown argues, only so could the apparently unavoidable implication of feeding on, or eating/drinking flesh and blood, be accounted 'favorable'⁴⁰. As at Jn 1:13, however,

milk all relate to the spiritual feeding of believers. Schnackenburg, op. cit. 65-67.

⁴⁰ Brown, Raymond E., op. cit. 284-5.

Jn 6:63 returns the reader to the more conventional and negative interpretation: "the flesh is useless"⁴¹.

These further references to 'σῶψ' occur in the course of a discussion between Jesus and sceptical 'Jews' following the discourse on the bread of life (Jn 6:35 'ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς' ('I am the bread of life...')). The discourse follows on from the sign of feeding the crowd by the Sea of Galilee with bread and fish. Within the Johannine text itself there is much that points in the direction of a metaphorical interpretation of the act of feeding: "Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life" (Jn 6:27), "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die" (Jn 6:49-50). Equally unambiguously, Raymond Brown comments on Jn 6:35

The ego eimi with a predicate does not reveal Jesus' essence but reflects his dealings with men; in this instance, his presence nourishes men. ⁴²

Moreover, Brown argues that the whole 'bread of life' discourse in Jn 6 is based upon the theme of the consumable, sustaining word from Isaiah 55:

Why do you spend your money
for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which
does not satisfy?
Hearken diligently to me, and eat
what is good,
and delight yourselves in
fatness,

⁴¹ Brown, Raymond E., op. cit. 295.

⁴² Brown, Raymond E. op. cit. 269.

Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an
everlasting covenant. (Isaiah 55:2-3)⁴³

C K Barrett summarises 6:22-27 thus:

Men are foolishly concerned not with the truth, but with food for their bodies. They must learn that there is a bread which conveys not earthly but eternal life, and earn it; yet they will not earn it, for it is the gift of the Son of man....⁴⁴

5.2 The Flesh that is of No Avail: Ernst Haenchen (A Classic Example of the 'Separation of Sources' Approach to Biblical Criticism.)

It is then, perhaps not surprising to find that some commentators have had considerable difficulty⁴⁵ in deciding whether Jn 6:51-59⁴⁶ can be genuinely Johannine, given that it appears so anomalous from the position of readers, including - apparently - the reader that is the text of the Gospel, who maintain an overall commitment to the "completely symbolic

⁴³ Brown, Raymond E. op. cit. 521.

⁴⁴ Barrett, C. K., op. cit. 282.

⁴⁵ Rudolf Bultmann regards 6:51-58 as an addition of the Ecclesiastical Redactor to introduce a non-Johannine sacramental theme. Raymond Brown agrees that the passage is an editorial insertion, but argues that it builds on truly Johannine themes. (Brown, Raymond E. op. cit. 286.) Brown also notes that E. Ruckstuhl (*Die literarische Einheit des Johannesevangeliums* (Freiburg: Paulus 1951).) believes the passage to be genuinely Johannine but on a similarly stylistic basis, Eduard Schweizer (*Ego Eimi* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck, 1939).) is not convinced.

⁴⁶ It is not possible to be definitive about the exact determination of the length of this troublesome interlude, since different scholars have different opinions about the exact length of the editorial insertion. Raymond Brown, for example, draws limits at 6:51 and 6:58. Ernst Haenchen makes 6:51b and 6:59 his cut off point. Schnackenburg goes for 6:51c-58.

attitude of the bread discourse in 6:31-51, which contrasts with the 'sacramental realism' of the eucharistic verses"⁴⁷.

Some commentators then have tried to eliminate the troublesome tensions altogether. Ernst Haenchen, for example, offers an extraordinarily clear cut explanation for the curious contradictions inherent in the use of 'σαρξ' in these passages, that employs a sophisticated theory of multiple sources and complex patterns of composition. He argues that the Gospel is substantially the work of a gifted and original theologian, whom he calls the Evangelist (capital 'E'). In this narrative of composition, the Evangelist's text, based on earlier material that has been his inspiration, is subsequently worked over by an editor of inferior talents and understanding, whom Haenchen describes as the redactor (lower case 'r'). Using this as a basic framework, he concludes that the redactor was at odds with the Evangelist. In Jn 6, he argues that the redactor, whom he castigates as a clumsy 'supplementer'⁴⁸ for introducing the same ambivalence in Jn 1:12-14, belonged to a community that was struggling to normalise its sacramental practice and theology. Naturally enough, the redactor wanted to give apostolic or evangelical authority to his own views. Given that the Johannine text appears either ignorant or - and this is Haenchen's own view - dismissive of the eucharistic traditions associated with the Last Supper, Haenchen argues that the interpolation of Jn 6: 51b-59 represents another attempt by this redactor to get his

⁴⁷ Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 57.

⁴⁸ See Haenchen, Ernst, op. cit. 118 & 118, n. 62.

own word in. He sees it as intrusive and ill-judged since it is clear to him that:

[n]othing depends on the flesh and blood of Jesus; his flesh and blood, isolated from his word and the Spirit that is imparted with those words, lack significance.⁴⁹

It is clear that Haenchen is labouring to produce an interpretation of the Gospel that does justice to its undoubted dualities⁵⁰ - such as clearly inspire the interpretative extremes of both docetic and existentialist theologies of the Word. But for him, Jn 6: 51b-59 is simply far too materialistic in implying the taking Jesus' humanity itself, into oneself through bread and wine⁵¹. In other words, for Haenchen, the 'palpability' of the Incarnation is not to be found within a 'naïve' sacramentalism, but the "sole important thing" is in recognising the *present encounter* with the message of Jesus⁵². And this is the interpretation he attributes to the Evangelist - whom he implies, we must understand to represent any genuinely *Johannine* (by which he implies 'authoritative') theology.

Haenchen's analysis of Jn 6 and its use of the word 'σάρξ' offers one persuasive solution to the difficulties of the contrasting evaluations of 'flesh'. But it achieves its end by acting in accordance with a fundamental preference for the spiritual over the fleshly (Jn 6:51b-59) which is removed from the authoritative, 'Johannine' text and transformed into the

⁴⁹ Haenchen, Ernst, op. cit. 298.

⁵⁰ See for example: Jn 3:6, 3:31, 4:10-15, 6: 48 ff, 8:23 ff

⁵¹ See Haenchen, Ernst, op. cit. 298.

⁵² See Haenchen, Ernst, op. cit. 299.

likeness of marginality and absence, in what might look like a classic illustration of interpretative phallogocentricity, understood as the centrality, not simply of the masculine sign (phallus), but of His voice (logos) in framing the subject. Haenchen's preference is not framed in baldly dualistic terms but relates particularly to the hierarchicalising tendencies within the symbolism of gender to which I have already referred. In other words, what happens in his account is once again, that, whilst recognising the bodily and material as unavoidable, it is still rejected as the site or locus of divine communication, which can result only from reading His - that is, man's - text.

In this way, perhaps, Haenchen aims to provide another layer of protection for the text as 'authoritative' - let us say rather conventional in a patriarchal sense - against the scandalous implication that the description of 'flesh' at Jn 6:53 might represent a challenge to the controlling hierarchical symbolism - an outbreak of anarchic boundary crossing!. Such an implication of the hierarchical reversal of the 'flesh' as a feature of the symbolic feminine, would be, arguably, at least as disturbing to readers as the literal suggestion of cannibalism⁵³ in this context.

⁵³ See, for example: "It should be realized that there is no suggestion intended of the horrifying idea involved in a literal interpretation. The choice of phrase is again *entirely controlled* by the tradition of Jesus' words at the Last Supper...." Lindars, Barnabas, op. cit. 268. *My emphasis*. Note too that at Jn 6:63, Lindars offers the following definition of the 'flesh' that is of no avail, within the common understanding of "the anthropology which [John] has received from Judaism": "...flesh here is the earthy part of man, man as he is by nature, his intellect remaining unilluminated by the revelation of God". (Lindars, Barnabas, op. cit. 273).

5.3 The Flesh that Must be Eaten.

There was a virulent campaign in the early church against the Gnostic dualities of Marcion and Montanus⁵⁴. And orthodox Christianity has always, at least officially, taken the line that the human body - male and female - is the creation of God rather than some lesser demiurge or demon. Such would appear indications that for the church, there was never any *absolute* duality as between spiritual and bodily. Yet readers of the Gospel of John have detected a strong preference for the spiritual and spiritualising interpretations. From the time of Clement of Alexandria, there have been those who wanted to categorise the distinction between John and the Synoptic Gospels as a distinction between 'the outward facts' ('τα σωματικά' - literally 'bodily things') and a 'spiritual Gospel' ('εὐαγγέλιον πνευματικόν')⁵⁵. And such a distinction is very readily seen in terms of an implicit hierarchy in which the bodily is inferior to the spiritual. Thus, one fairly recent commentator remarks in relation to Clement's distinction:

One could then interpret the Gospel of John as a supplement to the Synoptics, but if one took the relative values into account, the Gospel of John had the advantage since "spiritual" is certainly worth more than "the bodily".⁵⁶

⁵⁴ It was, for example, Heracleon, a disciple of the Gnostic, Valentinus, who first wrote an allegorical commentary on the Gospel of John. A mid-second century Gnostic movement was led by Montanus who saw himself as the Paraclete bringing the world to an end.

⁵⁵ See Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.14.7.

⁵⁶ See, Introduction to Haenchen, Ernst, op. cit. 23.

Retaining the eucharistic emphasis on the flesh that must be eaten⁵⁷ (Jn 6:53), however, is a clear option, even within the context of modern biblical criticism. As Ernst Haenchen himself notes, there are biblical critics who are uncertain about dismissing this passage as one more editorial blunder⁵⁸. What I am suggesting is that retaining the uncomfortable and apparently contradictory associations of 'flesh' in Jn 6, as in the Prologue, ensures the reader maintains a certain sensitivity to what might be called 'embodied spirituality', rather than forcing him or her always and only to view the body and its needs, simply as a metaphor for something more spiritual and thus more profound. Such sensitivity includes the recognition of the multiplicity of human existence, which cannot be neatly divided, for example, between the bodily and the spiritual, any more than it can at all easily, reconcile the claims of both. And in terms of the text, the dissonance is marked yet more emphatically by the almost thematic instability of this word, this Word made 'flesh'.

5.4 Flesh Medieval insights

Recent work on the medieval period has revealed a far greater emphasis on the body and its significance than at almost any point before or since in the western world. Medieval anthropology, for example, clearly regarded persons- though described with sometimes quite radical duality - as in a very real sense both body and soul. It associated body with woman

⁵⁷ The word used is 'τρῶγῶ', which means to gnaw or chew, especially uncooked foods.

⁵⁸Haenchen, Ernst, op. cit. 297.

but also with God in imaginative - if to modern thinking, sometimes bizarre - visions of maternal love and physical signs⁵⁹. As the historian Caroline Walker Bynum notes:

Medieval men and women did not take the equation of woman with body merely as the basis for misogyny. They also extrapolated from it to an association of woman with the body or the humanity of Christ. Indeed, they often went so far as to treat Christ's flesh as female, at least in certain of its salvific functions, especially its bleeding and nurturing.⁶⁰

Thus body was not invariably either of negative or neutral value, but sometimes given *positive* significance in relation to the divine, as is, of course, clear in the case of Hildegard of Bingen. And it was clear too that in Hildegard's case, as in the case of a number of other women who were concerned with devotion to the eucharistic host as Corpus Christi⁶¹, that the emphasis on the materiality of Christ's body was a response to heresy, particularly that of the Cathars. A number of women mystics from the Low Countries who revered the body of Christ in this particular form of devotion, aimed to contest the Cathar view that the physical world was the creation of an evil God⁶². And, of course, it is not only medieval commentators who are inclined to deal with the perceived

⁵⁹ See Bynum, Caroline Walker, "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages", in Feher, Michel (ed.) *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* (New York, Zone, 1989). 171. She notes, for example, "stigmata, incorruptibility of the cadaver in death, mystical lactations and pregnancies, catatonic trances, ecstatic nosebleeds, miraculous inedia, eating and drinking pus, visions of bleeding hosts"....

⁶⁰ Bynum, Caroline Walker, *op. cit.* 175.

⁶¹ The feast of Corpus Christi was instituted in 1264 by Urban IV, largely in response to the influence of a devout visionary nun of Liège, Juliana (d. 1258).

⁶² Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1988). 253.

difficulty of 'flesh' in Jn 6:53, as too 'realistic' or bodily a concept, in terms of a polemical interest in combating docetism, as an unacceptable form of spiritualization at this point.⁶³

Moreover, within the medieval period, the very materiality of body sometimes achieved a positive significance in much the way that a modern critic such as Haenchen appears to find distasteful. Both the body of the devotee, and the body of Christ were seen as channels of direct communication with God. In cases of *inedia*⁶⁴, for example, the bread and wine of the Eucharist alone, apparently sustained physical life and well-being for periods of years at a time.

With this abandonment or violation of boundaries as between the bodily and the spiritual, it also became possible, in the iconography of the Church, to depict the body of Christ as a female body, representing his nurturative or life-giving role, although, it does have to be said without ultimately questioning the underlying gender hierarchy in which his masculinity remained unquestioned. Thus, for example, there are miniatures and panel paintings of the fourteenth century

⁶³ See, for example, Schnackenburg, op. cit. 67 who quotes the work of Eduard Schweizer approvingly: "...[he] says that in John's view the point of the sacraments is to bear witness to the reality of Jesus' incarnation, and that of the Lord's supper in particular is to secure the reality of the incarnation up to and including the crucifixion against any docetic attempts at spritualization."

⁶⁴ The claim - or the phenomenon - of being sustained physically over long periods of time, merely by the elements of the Eucharist. See Bynum, Caroline Walker *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, op. cit. for reflections on the phenomenon during the medieval period. For some modern reflections on and investigations of this, see Wilson, Ian *The Bleeding Mind: An Investigation into the Mysterious Phenomenon of Stigmata* (Paladin, 1991).



Fig 1
Quirizio of Murano (fl. 1460-1478)
The Saviour.

that show the Church effectively being born from the side of Christ crucified⁶⁵. Even more striking are the eucharistic images of Christ, offering the wound in his side and the blood pouring out, in visual parallels to Mary, offering her breast to suckle sinners⁶⁶ (Fig 1).

A Fourteenth century monk from Farne pursues the same theme:

Little ones ... run and throw themselves in their mothers' armsChrist our Lord does the same with men. He stretches out his hands to embrace us, bows down his head to kiss us, and opens his side to give us suck; and though it is blood he offers us to suck we believe that it is health-giving and sweeter than honey and the honey-comb (Psalm 18:11) ⁶⁷

Christian readers and interpreters of the biblical text from the twelfth to the fifteenth century in Europe, were then, apparently able to live with a much greater degree of fluidity between spiritual and physical, and indeed male and female, than can be observed today in western cultures. Of course,

⁶⁵ See Bynum, Caroline Walker, in Feher, Michael (ed.), op. cit. 176, fig. 2: Eve made from the rib of Adam and the Church from the hip of Christ (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale).

⁶⁶ See for example, Bynum, Caroline Walker, op. cit. 177, fig 3: Jacob Cornelisz, The Man of Sorrows, ca. 1510 (Antwerp, Mayer van den Bergh Museum); 178, fig 4: Unknown. The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin, ca. 1402 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters Collection); 179, fig 5: Mass of Saint Gregory, Spanish altarpiece, end of the 15th century (Spain, Parish Church of Viloido). Also see, Bynum, Caroline, Walker, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, (New York, Zone Books, 1992). 110, fig 3.10: Quirizio of Murano (fl. 1460-1478), The Saviour.

⁶⁷ *The Monk of Farne: The Meditations of a Fourteenth -Century Monk*, trans. a Benedictine nun of Stanbrook (Baltimore, Helicon Press, 1961) 64.

the bodies on which it focused tended to be women's bodies⁶⁸, which might then still be subsumed under the patriarchal framework of social and religious practice. However it undoubtedly gave bodily and female experience within that framework, a far greater significance in religious terms⁶⁹.

The point of this short digression into the medieval period is in the broadest sense, to suggest that modern commentators of this biblical text may be being constrained by more than the availability of archaeological or documentary evidence relating to the period in which the Gospel was composed. Twentieth century commentators find representations of Christ's body that conflate eucharistic and maternal symbols⁷⁰ bizarre, whilst they clearly seemed both helpful and acceptable in the twelfth of thirteenth centuries.

The passage in Jn 6 which describes Jesus' flesh as life-sustaining (Jn 6:53), and in which he calls on his followers to eat it, is absolutely in harmony with the piety of medieval

⁶⁸The first documented case of stigmata, for example, was Francis of Assisi, but the majority of subsequent cases of the phenomenon have been observed in women. See Wilson, Ian, *The Bleeding Mind*: op. cit.. Wilson lists cases of stigmata from the thirteenth century to the twentieth. The majority of all these cases are women, although the list is, admittedly, not comprehensive. Adrienne von Speyr, for example, does not figure in the appendix. (It is perhaps indicative however, of differing attitudes to these issues in the twentieth century, that the best known cases today - Francis himself and perhaps the modern figure, Padre Pio - are both men.)

⁶⁹ See Bynum, Caroline Walker, op. cit. 1989. 167-8. Here she refers particularly to the work of Peter Dronke, in, for example, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁷⁰ One particular symbol of Corpus Christi, was, of course, that of the Pelican "in her piety" (heraldically represented, for example, in the crest of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge). The Pelican pecks her breast and feeds her young with her own blood.

women, that saw Christ's body as food and those who denied that God became flesh and food in the Eucharist as the greatest heretics⁷¹. If Jn 6:53 might seem to some commentators, an intrusion of theology quite foreign to the Gospel as a whole, it would nevertheless have made perfect sense to those, who like certain of the nuns at Töss during the fourteenth century, had visions of Christ as food on a platter⁷², or to women such as Margaret of Cortona and Catherine of Genoa, who consciously substituted the Eucharist for the food they denied themselves in the course of long fastings⁷³. And of course, in terms of disputes about the 'real presence' of Christ in the eucharistic elements, Jn 6:53-56 is grist to the dogmatic mill. Rudolf Schnackenburg - a Roman Catholic scholar - for example, in summing up the discussion on the whole disputed passage (Jn 6:51c-58) writes:

All this is a long way from the later dogmatic issues and controversies, but even so it is impossible to deny the existence of the idea of a real presence of the incarnate and glorified Christ.⁷⁴

5.5 Beyond Eucharist

What is certainly true, is that the text at Jn 1:13-14, and at Jn 6:53-63 continues to bear witness to two apparently contradictory assignations for the term 'flesh' within this Gospel. This reading might be said to present as its focus, the contrast, unresolved as between the two readings. Within the narrative in Jn 6, the hierarchical symbolism of Spirit over

⁷¹ See, Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast & Holy Fast*, op. cit. 252.

⁷² See, Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, op. cit. 131.

⁷³ See, Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, op. cit. 140.

⁷⁴ Schnackenburg, Rudolf, op. cit. 69.

flesh, is challenged to the point of offence (6:60-61), and then, almost directly reaffirmed (Jn 6:63). Arguably, in spite of its relevance to medieval piety, the assumption of a eucharistic context for this passage simply seeks to subsume the scandal of this "somewhat animal banquet"⁷⁵ within a context of reflection, that already belongs within a patriarchal dualistic spiritualised and spiritualising tradition. This *contradiction* then, is seen as representation of the trace of the multiplicity which, within patriarchal culture, is symbolised in a framework of gendered hierarchies, as woman and the feminine. And, like Christ's flesh, it is necessary for life, but eludes categorisation within the existing symbolic framework.

6 Feminist Suspensions

Feminist theory that reads our western culture as 'phallogocentric', will inevitably regard these attempts to redeem the biblical text, with suspicion. The dynamic, radical shift that sympathetic or confessional interpretation claims for the New Testament as a whole, is frequently categorised as that which has the potential to create a society in which women - amongst other groups of formerly disadvantaged people - are no longer enslaved or denied autonomy. But I believe that this is not to reckon sufficiently with the impact of the gender symbolism, that pervades our thinking in the west. Forms of thinking that are phallogocentric cannot simply abandon that 'centricity'. It is definitive. It is

⁷⁵ Kristeva, Julia, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York, London, Toronto....Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1991). 11-12. Could the Eucharist itself be about ritual feasting as the symbolic representation/repression of a violence involving blood?

expressed in symbolic terms that inevitably devalue the feminine. To exist as body, whether suffering or enjoying, is to take the value accorded to woman or the feminine in relation to a masculine God or a divine masculinity. And in this sense, Jesus' sacramental or eucharistic flesh will be seen to belong to the same persistent model. In a eucharistic sense, Jesus' flesh ('σάρξ', 'βρωσις', 'ἄρτος') becomes precisely the means of satisfying the needs of others. Which means, effectively, within such a context, satisfying needs determined by men. It becomes as fleshly and feminine, a commodity, like a loaf of bread or the body of a prostitute or indeed, any possessed woman, a person/thing, de-humanised, body without life. Even more alarming, once again, humanity is configured as what is symbolically feminine, that is consumable, penetrable by violence, whether of the male organ or of the nails through the flesh, violently dismembered as a collection of parts, a means to life, but of itself, inanimate.

The catalogue of feminist objections continues! Clearly, within the medieval context, readers worked more flexibly with this framework of gender symbolism so that it was possible to avoid always and only identifying the feminine with women. In consequence, the Word made flesh was sometimes seen as nurturative and maternal in relationship to the divine. Equally women could be, so to speak, clothed with masculine authority. However, evidence of this sort of flexibility is not always easy to find. And certainly women working in the field of biblical criticism and the analysis of documents contemporary with the New Testament texts, have noted the

pressures already evident there to devalue or obliterate the work of women within the early Christian Church,⁷⁶ already frustrating any such attempts to clothe women with masculine-identified authority.

And finally, it remains true, that whilst there may be some evidence here in Jn 1 and Jn 6 for hinting at the configuration of the Word/flesh in terms of the nurturative maternal, this is only one fairly slender strand from the intertwining thread that makes up, even a phallogocentric definition of woman and the feminine.

6 Conclusions

I have suggested in the course of this chapter that the Incarnation described in summary in Jn 1:14 should be read with the disturbing contradictions of the word 'σαρξ' very much in the forefront of the reader's mind.

The word 'σαρξ' functions well as the lower term in a hierarchy which is controlled within a context of spiritual values (See, for example Jn 3:4 ff) and which has an overriding gender identification. As such, it indicates, at Jn 1:14 a divine humiliation and descent, a compassionate divine, masculine downreach towards a feminine humanity. It is assumed that it is only through God taking on this fleshly life that

⁷⁶ See for example, Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler "Missionaries, Apostles, Co-workers: Romans 16 and the Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History" in Loades, Ann (ed.) *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London, S.P.C.K. 1990). 57-71; Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979), on, for example, the figure of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Mary; Seim, Turid Karlsen *The Double Message*, (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1994), on Luke-Acts.

humankind may be saved or redeemed. And as a result, of course, salvation or redemption bears the character of a removal from the 'fleshly' order of being human into the realm of a divine and masculine, spiritual singularity.

However, in order to maintain this sort of reading, commentators must ignore the evident contradictions in the text where 'σὰρξ' does not simply indicate a lower order within a divine/human hierarchy, but something altogether darker and more threatening, something regarded as flawed and dangerous, that has a clear relationship, within the Prologue (and in Jn 6) to an actual, and necessary, bodily existence. And it is, I believe, the contradictions in the incarnational text which, so to speak, potentially deconstruct the edifice of the masculine singularity of the divine, and reveal an unavoidable paradox of the flesh in the texts of Jn 1 and 6, as something both necessary and yet perceived as worthless.

The Prologue of John's Gospel offers a quite startling vision of radical openness within the community of believers, but perhaps more significantly, by its double inscription of flesh as both essential for life and of no avail, it suggests the possibility of dismantling the far stronger walls constructed by the monolithic symbolic use of gender and its associations.

**The Shining Garment of the Text
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.**

9

In the Beginning was Love.

Every question, no matter how intellectual its content, reflects suffering. In our subject may lurk the suffering of religion as well as of rationalism, along with more strictly personal discomforts and anxieties. Let us try simply to be receptive to this suffering, and if possible to open our ears to meaning of another kind.¹

1 Introduction.

My final reading of the Prologue of John's Gospel, is, as I have already said, more constructive than deconstructive. My aim is to read this text as if it were the description of the human subject '*en procès*', employing as theoretical support, the work of French semiotician and theorist, Julia Kristeva.

1.1 The Prologue: A Theological Introduction.

Margaret Davies is a modern biblical critic with feminist sympathies². She describes the Prologue as a "theological

¹ Kristeva, Julia, *In the Beginning was Love* (First published, *Au commencement était l'amour: psychanalyse et foi* (Hachette, 1985). New York, Oxford, Columbia University Press, 1987). xiii.

² See, Davies, Margaret, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). 20 " ... women cannot overlook that the Fourth Gospel is one of many texts which has lent its authority to the subordination of women in societies where it has been read". Her solution is "...to deny the subservient role that the Gospel tries to foist on her, and to include herself alongside the male disciples as a fully responsible human agent."

introduction"³ to a Gospel that is a "theological" work⁴. Her understanding of 'theological', interpreted in respect of the assumed intentionality⁵ of the original author(s), seems related to a view of God as singular, transcendent divinity, underpinning and, as it were, guaranteeing all creation including humankind. I have been arguing that this characterisation of the divine belongs to a phallogocentric mind-set, which, seeking definition of *all* truth (including value and identity) in terms of transcendent, masculine singularity, excludes a defining "Otherness" which it symbolises in terms of a feared/devalued feminine. I have also tried to argue, along the lines of feminist analysis, that this commitment to singularity, whilst understandable, is always really at odds with the multiplicity to which I believe gender - masculinity and femininity and the difference between them - bear witness.

Of course, Davies does not claim to share the view of the divine that she describes in her analysis of the Prologue. However, interestingly, she adopts a form of 'inclusive' language in reference to God, so that God sometimes figures as "she" within her study of the Prologue. Davies argues that the Prologue contains a vision of God - a vision that is then elaborated within the Gospel of John. The God described within this Prologue is, first of all, transcendent. God exists "before and independently of the world"⁶ (Jn 1:1-2), and is 'other', "beyond

³ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 126.

⁴ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 119.

⁵

⁶ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 120.

the powers of human comprehension ... mysteriously different from anything encountered in the world"⁷(Jn 1:18). However, God is also revealed in the form of 'λογος' made flesh. 'λογος' is not God in herself but, nevertheless, God's expression of her purpose in creating and sustaining the world⁸. The word 'λογος' itself is "the term that connotes God's plan in creation"⁹ - a significance found in earlier biblical texts, for example, in Genesis and in the Psalms¹⁰. In becoming flesh (Jn 1:14) - an individual man - Davies suggests that the Gospel text reflects a sense of completion. "God's plan is instantiated"¹¹ for all to see, and fully revealed in Jesus. The whole significance of 'λογος' is concentrated into that event:

God has finally and fully communicated her purpose in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, andthe reader has no need to look elsewhere to find it.¹²

Lastly, this God is the Father (Jn 1:18) who is loving but also, in an absolute sense, authoritative¹³.

Davies' reading of the Prologue, in spite of the inclusive language, turns up little evidence of the sort of female presences or clues to a disturbing "Otherness" that I have been looking at throughout this study. She notes the arresting

⁷ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 120.

⁸ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 121.

⁹ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 121.

¹⁰ See, for example, in the Greek translation of the Septuagint, Genesis 1:3,6,9 etc., and particularly Psalm 33:6 "By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made ..."

¹¹ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 122.

¹² Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 122

¹³ Davies, elaborates the concept in respect to his only begotten son (Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 131f.), but also in terms of Israel's sonship and contemporary cultural understandings of, for example, the *pater familias* of the father in Roman society (Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 129 ff.).

resemblances between 'λογος' (Word) and the female-identified 'σοφία' (Wisdom)¹⁴ but also makes a clear distinction between them in this passage¹⁵. She argues, for example, that Jn 1:3-4 should be interpreted in terms that distinguish the Word Incarnate from the created cosmos and that exclude this as a means of divine illumination. This is in contrast to the interpretative direction taken by Hildegard of Bingen, for example, who understands the text to be laying a much greater emphasis on the light of the whole of creation¹⁶ which she views in terms of the work of divine Wisdom or Love, the feminine figure of Sapiientia or Caritas. Then again, Davies does not regard the absence of the mother of the Incarnate Word in this text, where only the presence of the Father (Jn 1:18) is made explicit, as significant. She does note, at Jn 1:14, that the reader is likely to be surprised. In other words, after the negative intimations concerning the flesh, contained in Jn 1:9-13, she clearly thinks that there are grounds for being surprised that the Word should still become 'flesh'. But she does not question the reasons for that surprise. 'Flesh' in Jn 1:14 is still glossed as a reference to "susceptibility, to injury, decay and death"¹⁷, bringing it within, what I have described as, the devalued or excluded feminine sphere of a phallogocentric symbolism. But Davies makes no comment on this issue.

¹⁴ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 82.

¹⁵ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 82.

¹⁶ See above, Chapter 3, *off*.

¹⁷ Davies, Margaret, op. cit. 127.

2 Julia Kristeva and the 'Sujet en Procès'.

Margaret Davies' unorthodox and even startling use of 'she', in order to describe the divine initiative narrated within the Prologue, does not seem then, on closer examination, to be an integral part of her analysis of this text. Though I want to acknowledge its clarity and usefulness, her analysis is not really designed to grapple with the issue of gender, and particularly female gender, as it is operating in a contemporary reading context. And in order to do this, as I have already indicated in the foregoing two alternative readings, a more fundamental change of perspective is needed, in which the Prologue has to be seen as more than a 'theological' introduction, if 'theology' is only to be related to the absolute presence of a transcendent being.

The theoretical work of Julia Kristeva is concerned with literature, with language, reading and writing and this would make her work of interest to anyone interested in textual interpretation. Furthermore, she is concerned with issues of gender and its relationship to the speaking, reading and interpreting subject. Kristeva's work was influenced at an early stage by the intellectual movement called structuralism and she continues to defend the value of the structures she identifies as 'masculine' - and particularly the symbolic realm of language - as essential. In this sense her approach remains contentious within the field of feminist theory as a whole, where she is sometimes regarded in the light of a collaborator with the phallogocentricity of all existing cultural

structures including the currency of language¹⁸. However I believe that the structuralist impetus of her fundamental 'framework', which does imply some sort of closure or exclusion or singularity, is always complicated and problematised by its stress on an equally essential multiplicity; a process she identifies as 'heterogeneity' and characterises as fundamentally irrational, but not thereby, either avoidable or of inferior value. What Kristeva constructs in the body of her theoretical work, is a description of 'subjects' who, as interpreters of their own lives, as of the texts they read, are involved in an intertextuality which is characterised by multiplicity. This multiplicity - or heterogeneity - is not limited to multiple elements within the linguistic/symbolic realm, but also involves the drives, the needs and pleasures of the embodied, speaking subject itself.

¹⁸ She has been accused of being fundamentally conditioned by her debt to Jacques Lacan. Lacan provided feminists with a way of explaining the operations of a patriarchal society and its systematic oppression or devaluation of women, which accounts for its characteristic persistence and resistance to change. For Lacan, this distinctive way of constituting and imagining the relationship of men and women, belongs to the very processes whereby human identity is first formed in infancy and childhood, and is locked into levels of subjectivity beyond the conscious control of individuals. Lacan recast Freudian insights in terms of language and signification. Language is the key feature within the Lacanian 'Symbolic Order' to which social law and exchange also belong. For a child to function adequately within society, they must internalise this symbolic order through language. Within this symbolic order, Lacan uses the word 'phallus' to describe that which represents for him, the internalised sense of difference between men and women. It is less a single word than a pattern of understanding. It characterises men as those in possession (of a penis), and women as those who lack, or who are, that which men possess. Moreover it also symbolises that which is the ultimate object of all desire. Some feminist theorists have strongly contested Lacanian analysis and its implication that women must either submit to the phallic symbolic order or lapse into feminine inarticulateness, seeing in his work, a prescriptive rather than a descriptive impulse - Lacan's arguments always tending towards preservation of the patriarchal *status quo*.

What I want to suggest is that the Prologue is read alongside the drama Kristeva describes, in psychoanalytic terms, of a human journey towards a life made possible, particularly through the imaginative interpretation of lives conceived as texts. In this case, the Prologue becomes, so to speak, the baffling text of the analysand's experiences, lived and dreamed and expressed creatively in literary form.

Imaginatively, then, I take on the psycho-analytical discussion. I attempt to create out of this difficult Johannine text, a delimitation of the divine as multiply, heterogeneously, masculine-and-femininely human, in order to make it make sense for me as both a woman and, in Kristeva's terms, a '*sujet en procès*.'¹⁹ I am, as it were, reading the narrative of the Prologue as it reflects my own journey as *sujet en procès*., thus, filling out the theological notion of divine 'Incarnation'. Moreover, I see this text as a meditation upon an originating love, that is to say the sort of love on which the creation and sustaining of individual human subjects is made possible. The human subject rises - as in Kristeva's view - at the source which contains its whole creative potential, that is, in

¹⁹ Diachronically, the narrative of the *sujet en procès* is a psychoanalytic drama, in which human individuals are released or pushed out of the realm of absorption with gratification and drives that are identified with the maternal, towards individual subjectivity - a sense of being a separate self - brought about through identification with the thetic, symbolic, paternal realm of language. Individual subjects, however, remain permanently unstable, permanently *en procès* "both biological organism and talking subject, both unconscious and conscious" (Kristeva, Julia, *In the Beginning was Love* . op. cit. 26.) Synchronically, the *sujet en procès* is the representation of an intertextuality between a series of symbols, languages and social codes, and a series of powerful bodily energies or drives which, from the unconscious, perpetually threaten and challenge, or alternatively free-up and lubricate the order of language, code and law.

undifferentiated absorption with the maternal. From there or then, subjectivity breaks out into a recognition of division or separation. But, it is, at once, part of the symbolic realm of language and culture and, at the same time, still motivated and driven by forces within a volatile, antithetical, semiotic realm - so to speak, returning to source. In a similar way, I suggest, the description of God in the Prologue begins in undifferentiated absorption with God, the site of creative potential, which waits for division into light and darkness, before realising that potential as separated and differentiated, perpetually struggling and sometimes suffering, embodied Logos. In other words, I see Kristeva's theoretical body of work offering me, as reader, the possibility of seeing the theological concept of Incarnation as it is taken from this text, as a description of the divine which integrates the symbolism of gender, but manages not to copy into that symbolism the hierarchical framework that necessarily devalues the feminine term.

And in this way, as reader, I am also enabled to resolve something of my own dissociation as both human subject in process and also as a woman, seeking to see myself within a text that has been largely interpreted in terms of a gender hierarchy that suggests, powerfully, the debasing of my own gender and thus of my very identity.

I believe it will help to clarify what I am trying to do if, at this point, I give some more extended account of what I believe to be the relevant areas of Kristeva's work.

2.1 Kristeva's Semiotic Project

Kristeva's earliest published works, are particularly concerned with linguistics and semiotics. They demonstrate a debt to structuralism but they are not uncritical of it. Structuralism, which began with Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1913)²⁰ introduced the perception - related initially to language - that signification occurs within structures or systems, and that it is the relationship between the signs within the system that is important, rather than the relationship between the signs and some external body, object or relationship. Kristeva's interest in the science of ideologies (semiology), follows on from Saussure's conclusions about language, and Claude Lévi-Strauss' related work in structuralist anthropology, but challenges it in some important ways.

These earlier theorists drew attention to the sense in which, the signifying practices (myths, rituals, moral codes) belonging to a certain culture or society, are related in a largely arbitrary sense to the motivations of that culture or society. However, Kristeva goes on to develop her own theory of 'semanalysis'. She is interested in the interior logic of such signifying practices - in other words, how one moves into signifying practice - and above all, in how such practices are the work of complex speaking subjects. That is to say, she sees language as a product of speakers who naturally straddle a divide between bodily drives and the creation of symbolic

²⁰ Saussure's lectures in linguistics, were collected and completed for publication by colleagues after his death: *Course in General Linguistics* (Paris, 1915).

relationships or language. In this, she distances herself from earlier structuralists, who focus on linguistic or cultural structures as homogenous and static.²¹

Kristeva, in distinction from a number of other modern philosophers, still finds the concept of the 'subject' useful. However, it should be remembered that this subject is never simply a static, relatively unproblematic 'subject' of consciousness - related to basically Cartesian categories of body and soul - but incorporates, what I have already called, a functional irrationality, something unspeakable and unknowable which is only seen in the effect of its dialectic with rational consciousness - that is to say in its break-downs or creative outbursts. This encompassing complexity, which cannot eradicate its own irrationality, Kristeva frequently refers to as 'heterogeneity'. This is a recognition of the role of that which escapes and then continually harasses the boundaries or defences of all our rational linguistic and symbolic projects. The concept of heterogeneity refers to the

²¹ See Kristeva, Julia, Margaret Waller (trans.) *Revolution in Poetic Language* (First published as *La Révolution du Langage Poétique* (Paris, Seuil, 1974). New York, Columbia University Press, 1984). 13. Kristeva writes critically of earlier attempts to contain and schematise language: "Our Philosophies of language, embodiments of the Idea (...avatars de l'Idée...), are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs. Fascinated by the remains of a process which is partly discursive, they substitute this fetish for what actually produced it. Egypt, Babylon, Mycenae: we see their pyramids, their carved tablets, and fragmented codes in the discourse of our contemporaries, and think that by codifying them we can possess them. These static thoughts, products of a leisurely cogitation removed from historical turmoil persist in seeking the truth of language by formalizing utterances that hang in midair, and the truth of the subject by listening to the narrative of a sleeping body - a body in repose, withdrawn from its socio-historical imbrication, removed from direct experience...."

unavoidable presence of all that remains in some sense, still in play, beyond or outside rational discourse, and capable of subverting or changing it. It represents what Kristeva calls the attempt to "go beyond the theater of linguistic representations...".²² In other words it represents multiplicity, contesting the logic of identity, and still investing significance in the materiality of a bodily, physical existence that evades the linguistic representations of rational structures. Kristeva's 'semiotic project', is centrally concerned with both texts and subjects, because it is an analysis of how signifying practices such as language exert their fragile control over the human subject in process.

In terms of this project she proposes an important *gendered* distinction between the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic'. The semiotic is related by Kristeva to the nourishing 'chora' - a pre-verbal space which precedes *any* form of subjectivity. It is a concept derived from Plato's *Timaeus* where the expression refers to an unstable and unnameable receptacle or space existing before the nameable form of the One²³. The semiotic is to be related to the *feminine*, to the archaic mother with whom the developing child is at first absorbed without any sense of distinction or difference, but simply in a preoccupation with primary motivations, sometimes referred to as drives. The *masculine* symbolic is correspondingly associated with the 'father of individual pre-history', Freud's

²² Kristeva, Julia, *In the Beginning was Love*, op. cit. 5.

²³ See, Anderson, P. S., "Introduction to Julia Kristeva *In the Beginning Was Love*" in Ward, Graham, *The Postmodern God* (Oxford, Blackwell, forthcoming). 2.

'*Vater der persönlichen Vorzeit*', who acts as the catalyst for developing an initial sense of difference and distinction, and which persists as the representative of the currency of social organisation and development, that is, pre-eminently language but also non-verbal forms of the symbolic - various codes or forms of behaviour. In developing this aspect of her theory, Kristeva has drawn on the psycho-linguistics of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), who followed and then re-interpreted some of the key ideas of Sigmund Freud. Thus Kristeva discusses human subjectivity in terms of a drama that involves, most significantly, the 'archaic' parents, mother and father. These parents are not the particular parents of any child, but rather reflect the primary functions or parental roles *vis à vis* the developing subjectivity of all children.

What semanalysis does for Kristeva in the development of the ideas of the semiotic and the symbolic, is to give her an analytical tool for constructing a view of human subjectivity - and of culture - that acknowledges, in a non-pathological, functional sense, the tensions and splits and irrationality of a postmodern speaking subject, whilst continuing to affirming the validity of some form of rationality.

2.2 Psycho-analysis

Kristeva's work as a whole is increasingly concerned with psycho-analysis. Psycho-analysis is, of course, a term coined by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) to describe a fundamentally therapeutic process. The theoretical basis of this therapeutic

process is, put very simply, that human behaviour is significantly determined by a collection of infantile drives, repressed within self-conscious adults, but still located within the 'unconscious', that are not available to the conscious 'rational' mind, but which nevertheless find expression in, for example, dreams, jokes, verbal puns and slips, as well as in a wide variety of symptoms, understood as pathological.

An important concept within Kristeva's work, belonging to her psycho-analytic discourse is that of '*jouissance*'. It comes, in Kristeva's writing, to represent the point at which the drive/desire-related economy of the semiotic meets, or rather breaks through, into the order of language and the symbolic. Kristeva argues that the meeting of the two, is continually accessible to developing subjectivity, through art, and literature and through moments of extreme pleasure, including sexual pleasure²⁴.

That the birth into the symbolic within each developing subjectivity, must be related to a break and a rejection of the (m)other/child continuum, is developed at length in Kristeva's concept of 'abjection', which complicates, explicates and darkens any easy conception of a simple, clean, once-and-for-all step into the symbolic order of language. In *Powers of Horror* in particular, Kristeva movingly and convincingly conjures up a vision of the horror of separation, "the

²⁴ In Kristeva, Julia, Leon Roudiez (trans.) *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York, London ... Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), the drama of a necessary but painful separation and the subsequent possibilities of meetings or - perhaps - reunions, is laid out in some detail.

immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be ..."²⁵. She describes, too, the corresponding horror or repugnance, which that separated, abjected, creates in 'me', like the gagging of food-loathing²⁶, that is characteristically, the response of a complex, developing and incorporated subjectivity:

But when I seek (myself), lose (myself), or experience *jouissance* - then "I" is *heterogeneous*. Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise. Thus braided, woven ('torsé, tissé ...') ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as *alter ego* points it out to me through loathing²⁷.

In terms of the psycho-analytic drama with which Kristeva describes, that which becomes abject is essentially identified with the mother. And herein lies the vital significance of the father - again not any particular father but the Freudian 'father of individual pre-history':

In such close combat, the symbolic light that a third party, eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject, the more so if it happens to be endowed with a robust supply of drive energy, in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Re-pelling, rejecting: repelling itself, rejecting itself. Abjecting²⁸.

²⁵ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982). 10.

²⁶ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 2.

²⁷ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 10.

²⁸ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 13.

Kristeva expands the individual drama in a synchronic sense, into something that is continually re-enacted. In *Powers of Horror*, for example, she considers the food laws of Leviticus in terms of an abjection, whose purpose is closely tied to the process of maintaining the identity of the people of Israel, as separated, clean and proper, from the rest of humanity, and particularly those contemporary pagan cults devoted to feminine deities. And yet, and at the same time, Leviticus is a text that speaks to the individual reader. In her most recent work, *New Maladies of the Soul* (1993,1995), she writes:

The Book of Leviticus speaks to me by locating me at the point where I lose my "clean self". It takes back what I dislike and acknowledges my bodily discomfort, the ups and downs of my sexuality, and the compromises or harsh demands of my public life. It shapes the very borders of my defeats, for it has probed into the ambivalent desire for the other, for the mother as the first other, which is at the base, that is, on the other side of that which makes me into a speaking being (a separating, dividing, joining being). The Bible is a text that thrusts its words into my losses. By enabling me to speak about my disappointments, though, it lets me stand in full awareness of them.²⁹

2. 3 Kristeva and Feminist Theory.

Some feminists are naturally suspicious of Kristeva's insistence on the necessity of fatherhood and law with a masculine index, and her identification of woman with motherhood and some aspects of the irrational and the heterogeneous. The irrationality - perhaps, simplistically, we can talk about the 'drive economy' that Kristeva believes incurs violent and

²⁹ Kristeva, Julia, *New Maladies of the Soul* (First published 1993. New York, Columbia University Press, 1995). 119.

creative effects in the subject's struggle to enter or stay within an order or rational framework of language and symbolism - is identified within her work with a feminine/maternal principle or relationship.

In one sense, however, it might be argued that her conclusions reflect a radically feminist analysis. It could be said, for example, that she shows how the feminine/maternal principle "spooks" the system of language and symbolism, seen as phallogocentric, that is dominated by the presence of the male sign. Julia Kristeva differs from Mary Daly however, who coined this expression³⁰ to denote the powers of women to combat male terrorism, not least in the extent to which she strongly resists the mythic tendency of many feminists to identify the feminine exclusively with women, either as a group or as individuals. The ongoing discussion within Kristeva's work of *human* subjectivity sees gender as extraordinarily significant and problematic, but no less so for men than for women.

Kristeva is no friend to sexist practice, but she is also highly critical of feminists who suggest a prohibition on all dealings with men, and, in her essay "Women's Time", she attacks the kind of response that

... refusing homologation to any role of identification with existing power no matter what the power may be, makes of the second sex a *counter-society*³¹.

³⁰ For a definition of 'spooking/speaking', see, Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology* (London, Woman's Press, 1991). 317.

³¹ Kristeva, Julia, "Women's Time" in Moi, Toril (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1986). 202.

The criticism levelled at this counter-society is that it simply reiterates the logic of any society, based on the expulsion of an excluded element, "a scapegoat charged with the evil of which the community duly constituted can then purge itself"³².

Kristeva shares Lacan's view that the development of human subjectivity takes place within the dynamic of the individual's acquisition and experience of language as the key element of the social or cultural order. For this reason she believes that all women and men need to find their place within this order. But, she rejects Lacan's claim that within that order, women will find themselves silenced anyway, excluded from language, except as symbolic concepts (- either as representations of something else (Liberty, Beauty...) or as objects of desire). She argues that women are themselves the space and possibility of any form of representation. What they represent is not simply a theoretical difference, but a theoretical difference 'with an attitude'! This difference has a *specific and material* index. It represents a crossing over, a transgression into that symbolic order, from a different 'order' that, precisely, cannot be represented as an 'order' at all, and which therefore, in a serious sense, cannot be adequately resisted. For Kristeva, the problem for individual women is determining how to participate in an existing socio-symbolic contract without continually being forced *personally* to represent or embody this difference.

³² Kristeva, Julia, "Women's Time", in Moi, Toril (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, op. cit. 202.

3 Reading the Prologue.

Superficially there seems little common ground between the awe-inspiring scope of the Evangelist(s)' claims in the Prologue and Kristeva's deliberate rejection of divine transcendence or the providential ordering of human lives within the "whole black history of the Church"³³. Kristeva presupposes that the nature of religious discourse is fundamentally concerned with illusion. Yet, of course, she does not believe that the creation of illusions is merely an invidious practise of self-deception. She relates the illusions created within religious discourse to the work of the imagination, which, in her work as a psychoanalyst, plays a literally 'vital' role in the process of practising to be human, of, so to speak, 'riding the surf' of our daily lives. As she notes,

... [i]n both religion and psychoanalysis a destabilized subject constantly searches for stabilization.³⁴

Of course, this reading of scriptural and theological narratives differs from one that could be given by any religious believer defined as a believer *in* transcendent divinity and a believer *that* transcendent divinity became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. But the points of confluence make suggestive, not to say, challenging reading. Does our theological understanding of Incarnation within the Christian tradition not come also from deeply rooted perceptions

³³ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 131

³⁴ Kristeva, Julia, *In the Beginning was Love*, op. cit. 19.

about human subjectivity, about what it means to be human? In other words, I suggest that the Word did not simply become incarnate, but that the myth of the Incarnation itself, quite apart from its 'political' ramifications within the early Christian Church's doctrine of the two natures³⁵, is in some ways representative of the drama of becoming - and remaining - human. The narrative of pre-existent unity, the appearance of the Word made flesh, a divided speaking subject and the ever poignant hope of revealing the Father - becoming like Him - reflects as a whole, an experience of being, as human creatures, radically split and yet, in a sense because of this, capable of holding together, of being creative, and of loving others.

3. 1 Jn 1:1-5: Separating Light from Darkness.

To test the thesis that some of the theoretical tools of Kristeva's analysis might be illuminating in reading the text of the Prologue, let me begin with the strong echoes of Genesis 1 within this Johannine passage. Raymond Brown notes the likelihood that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, would have been available to the author or authors of the Gospel³⁶. What more apposite quotation for the

³⁵ See, for example, Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (First published, 1994. London, S. C. M. Press, 1995). 22. Fiorenza argues that the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christology was an attempt to reproduce within divine/human relations the imperial ordering of the contemporary political world. "It shaped and was shaped by the imperial politics of meaning that legitimated kyriarchal domination and exploitation."

³⁶ Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John: I-XII* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland, Doubleday, 1966). 4.

opening of a new Gospel, a new scripture, than the opening words of the old book of the Law, it was bound (Jn 1:17) to supersede : "ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν ..." (Genesis 1:1, In the beginning, God made the heaven and the earth ...)? This is a description out of time, of 'before creation'. But although the spirit of God is there in the darkness (Genesis 1:2), descriptions that apply are translated in neutral or even negative terms as formless, unseen, invisible, unsightly³⁷. 'ἄορατος' (Genesis 1:2) and unfurnished, unprepared, unready, void, 'ἄκατασκευάστος' (Genesis 1:2). What begins, what happens in a positive and temporal sense (Genesis 1:4-5), is a separation, brought about by God's word "And God said, "Let there be light ... and God separated the light from the darkness"(Genesis 1:3-5).

In the Prologue, there is a similar pattern. The atemporal sphere is characterised by a duality that is, at the same time, inseparable and indistinguishable "... the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). In terms of Kristeva's psycho-analytic discourse, what lies 'in the beginning' before time, a symbolic concept that is unavailable to the very young child, is the intimate absorption - without articulation or sense of distinction, form or separation - of the child with its maternal, nourishing environment. And yet this is an environment which contains the seeds of a separation, a separation as dramatic as that between light and darkness (Genesis 1:3-5, John 1:4-5). What I am suggesting here is that

³⁷ See Brenton, Sir Launcelot Lee (trans.) *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament in Greek and English* (London, Samuel Bagster and Sons Limited). 1.

the pattern within both Genesis 1:1-5 and the John 1:1-5 is reflected also within the narrative of subjectivity which Kristeva constructs.

3. 2 Jn 1:5. Maternal Abjection: The Very Space and Possibility of Meaning.

The Word that is the light (Jn 1:4-5), may refer to the advent of the Word made flesh or to the enlightening presence of the Word before the advent of Jesus³⁸. But in either case, it shines in a darkness, a darkness - 'ἡ σκοτία' (Jn 1:5) - which is reminiscent of the darkness before creation - 'καὶ σκότος ἐπ'άνω τῆς ἀβύσσου' ('and darkness was over the deep') (Genesis 1:2). But although the darkness has never seized the light for itself, or taken possession (λαμβάνω - Jn 1:5) of it, the text does not suggest in any explicit sense that the darkness is removed or, in its turn, seized and possessed.

Καὶ Τὰς

Within the drama of developing subjectivity beyond the desire for and receiving of gratification, the child registers that there is not simply gratification but sometimes this is being withheld from her or him - that is, understood as enacted, but elsewhere. In terms of concrete experience, the mother wants something other than to gratify the child's wishes. This identification with maternal desire is primary - the first step. But along with the possibility this gives of

³⁸ The ambiguity centres on whether in Jn 1:9 'ἐρχόμενον' (was coming) in 'ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον' (was coming into the world...), agrees with 'φῶς' (light) or 'ἄνθρωπον' (hu/man). In other words, is this a light that enlightens every man coming into the world in a general and universal sense, or is it a specific reference to the incarnate Word about to become flesh? See Barrett, C. K., *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2nd. ed., London, S.P.C.K., 1978). 160f..

enacting a 'primary identification' with the maternal desire for the phallus, of learning about *agape* as opposed simply to *eros*, comes the possibility of recognising the maternal as other - as abject. Identification with maternal desire leads on to maternal abjection, that might very appropriately be described as darkness within a narrative of enlightenment.

Abjection, as Kristeva describes it, is all that, in recognising the sameness/otherness of the maternal, flings the *sujet en procès* into fuller identification with what is represented solely by

the father, and it is characterised by

... a sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.³⁹

Such an emergence is, Kristeva argues, crucial to the establishment of any sense of identity, whether personal or cultural, because it so forcefully propels away from the maternal, semiotic realm. But the consequences, life-long, do not move us in the direction of tranquillity. Abjection comes to mark a borderline that is always under threat. In an important sense, the establishment of the borderline gives scope for the emergence of the new, the ecstatic, the revelatory or salvific⁴⁰, into the realm of language and symbolism. It is a defence and a boundary but it does not serve the purposes of defences or boundaries that relate to permanence or solidity. It defends definition and, as it were,

³⁹ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 2.

⁴⁰ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 7ff..

shape only of the greatest fragility and it may be continuously breached and reconstructed, like a sand castle at the water's edge.

This non-object, this borderline is not there 'from the beginning', although it is a precondition for beginning. Abjection is one step along the route of developing subjectivity, but once established, becomes an unavoidable and indeed necessary sensitivity. What justification might there be then for interpreting the mysterious darkness of Jn 1:5, whose origins or provenance is not explained within this text, in terms of maternal abjection within the Kristevan *sujet en procès*?

The appearance of darkness (Jn 1:5), which does not come in the beginning of the text, is something of a mystery, in its implication, after the comprehensive claims of Jn 1:3 that 'all things were made through him...'. For then it suggests that darkness has an independent existence or exteriority, or even that it was made through God. And for many commentators, these conclusions are highly questionable. Thus, Ray Brown assumes that this darkness is a reference to the 'sin' of Genesis 3:6, not God's responsibility but the woman's⁴¹. C. K. Barrett deals with the problem by assuming, in a similar though less explicit sense that darkness here reflects the 'ethical' quality of all that is opposed to Jesus, the light of the world, and that darkness is in a simple sense, the correlative of light.⁴²

⁴¹ Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, op. cit. 8.

⁴² Barrett, C. K., *The Gospel According to St John*, op. cit. 158.

Barnabas Lindars' commentary argues that neither this text, nor the Genesis text to which it makes references, has to do with the *origin* of evil, but interprets the darkness of Jn 1:5 as any present threat to the fulfilment of God's purpose in creation⁴³. In other words, like Bultmann, this commentary assumes that the defeat of darkness in Jn 1:5 refers forwards to the rejections of human unbelievers in Jn 1:10 and 11.

It is however, difficult to read the first five verses avoiding completely, all cosmogonical reflection. The same inexplicable principle of evil or rather *exteriority to God* appears in the narrative of Genesis 3 in the shape of the serpent. In Kristeva's work, abjection is essentially the construction of an exteriority, a something out there, beyond - understood as abominable, a reversal of desire, what necessarily sickens or turns the stomach:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk - harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail pairing - I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me", who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within

⁴³ Lindars, Barnabas, *The Gospel of John*, (New Century Bible Commentary, Eerdmans Publ. Co. (Grand Rapids), Marshall, Morgan & Scott Publ. Ltd. (London), 1972). op. cit. 77.

the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself.
44

Abjection occurs as a result of a process of primary identification with the maternal desire for the phallus that initiates and strengthens the processes of repression - the law of the father - which in turn, allows the fragmented self⁴⁵ to constitute itself, albeit in extreme fragility, to function, to live. And it is interesting to note, in this context, the close association between light, life and Torah, that make, in the case of the Wisdom and rabbinic literature particularly, the study of Torah - law - life-giving.⁴⁶ In other words, the psycho-analytic drama of the *sujet en procès* concurs, at this point, with the veneration of the law attested within the culture of the Hebrew Bible and its interpretation.

To reiterate, abjection is an incident in a personal history, and yet it remains a fellow-traveller. And, it is a darkness (Jn 1:5) in the sense that it shades or blinds, covering over the pre-history of a fusion with the gratifying mother, with a series of more or less repulsive and repulsing associations, or symptoms that help to prevent subjects imploding or reverting, and yet porous enough to allow some of that drive energy to find expression in a creative zest for life.

⁴⁴ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 2-3.

⁴⁵ See, for Freudian understanding of fragmentation - life and death drives, the potential for controlling them and the necessity of dealing with the impact of external circumstances - in Freud, Sigmund *The Ego and the Id*, in Gay, Peter (ed.) *The Freud Reader* (London, Vintage, 1995). 656 ff.

⁴⁶ See, Barrett, C. K., *The Gospel According to St John*, op. cit. 157.

But the process of becoming or being a unitary subject is very often a painful one. What we let through into conscious forms of expression is not simply a form of *jouissance* - joy, pleasure, energy - but very often a memory of loss, expressed in depression and loss of motivation. Whether we look at it in terms of a single progression from the early infancy of human children towards the emergence of language, or whether we consider the myth of the Prologue as related synchronically to "the further trials set by the life process of the passions"⁴⁷, there is much loss here. In order to move or progress out of a pre-linguistic realm of repetitious sounds and recurring rhythms, before the abstraction of absence and time have been formed, into the world (Jn 1:9) of speech, symbolism and linear time, the *infans* or the developing subjectivity, must wait upon the emergence of a loathsomeness. There must be a darkness - abjection - before s/he can bear witness (Jn 1:6-8), speaking in the light, to the symbolic, linguistic and the communicative realm of the father.

The text moves on beyond the point of the Baptist's announcement to a passage that is expressive of alienation and disjointedness (Jn 1: 10, 11). The creator is not always or everywhere welcomed by the creatures. This new world, created from and by Word, excludes the darkness but cannot eclipse it altogether. Even if those who accept the Word, can become children of God.(Jn 1:12-13), some will not accept the Word. Something lies beyond the Word. For Kristeva, the analyst, the 'unconscious' is a good word for this:

⁴⁷ Kristeva, Julia *In the Beginning Was Love*, op. cit. 9.

After a lengthy process of remembering and self-discovery, the analysand learns to know himself, submerged though he is in the immanence of a significance that transcends him. That significance can be given a name: the *unconscious*. The analysand knows the unconscious, orders it, calculates with it, yet he also loses himself in it, plays with it, takes pleasure from it, lives it. Psychoanalysis is both objectification and immersion; it is both knowing and, through language, unfolding. It is an extraordinary effort to recast our whole intellectual tradition from its inception to its annihilation. On the one hand there is nothing (*nihil*) but the knowing subject; on the other hand I know that that subject derives from an alien significance that transcends and overwhelms it, that empties it of meaning.⁴⁸

3. 3 Jn 1:9-13. Identifying With the Father.

From Lacan, Kristeva has taken and adapted the important concept of 'the mirror stage', as a description of the moment at which the child first sees 'I', as in a mirror, and is able to fix on, and imitate, a specular structure as the basis for seeing herself as a subject. In other words it is the moment or stage in which she recognises that the image in the mirror is both what she is, and yet not her. It is complex perception. In Kristeva's terms, the mirror stage marks the threshold between the semiotic and the symbolic time. It lies between a time oriented towards the mother and preoccupied by drive energies, where there is no articulation of absence or thus, of the symbolic or the real, and a time dominated by Oedipal conflicts primarily directed towards the father.

What brings about this change? The site of this change is the presence of a third party, beyond the child/(m)other dyad. It

⁴⁸ Kristeva, Julia, *In the Beginning Was Love*, op. cit. 61.

is the possibility for the pre-subject, the forming subjectivity, what Kristeva calls the *infans*, to exercise an ability, a capacity - akin in some ways to the identifications of those caught up hysterically with the emotions of a crowd - to identify with a desire, not initially its own, for something beyond or outside its own immediate gratification. This is a wanting not simply to have, but to be like. Understood as akin to Freud's 'Father of individual pre-history'⁴⁹, identification with a desire for this object is the precondition of any human capacity to love. Maternal care for the child is always, Kristeva suggests, in danger of becoming a morbid form of self-absorption. The child may become, for the mother, a substitute for the ultimate object of desire which is symbolised by the phallus. The child - to a greater or lesser extent - is unable, in this situation, to move beyond gratification and the pull of drive energies, unable to make an identification with this first pattern of love. However, the mother's desire for an object of love *other* than the child, through what Kristeva calls the maternal desire for the father's phallus⁵⁰, is the possibility for an enlightening lesson of love.

In the Prologue, in a narrative sense, what emerges out of fusion and absorption between God and Word, is light associated both with God's illuminating separation (Jn 1:5), through its references to the Genesis passage (Genesis 1:4), and

⁴⁹ Kristeva does not resist the impetus towards a religious discourse in seeking to explicate this concept/symbol. She speaks of it as a 'godsend' (Moi, Toril (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, op. cit. 257), and of 'The father who brings a people into being through his love' (Moi, Toril (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, op. cit. 261) as an appropriate definition

⁵⁰ Kristeva, Julia 'Freud and Love: Treatment and Its Discontents' in Moi, Toril (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader*, op. cit. 256.

with life (Jn 1:4). This life-giving illumination is further linked, within the Prologue, to a capacity to become the children of God (Jn 1:12-13). And, to read this as a reflection of the desire to gain an intimate relationship with God, and even to imitate, mime that God's actions, and become like that God, attaining in some sense, that God's power and immortality, does not seem to push interpretation unduly into eccentricity at this point. What it does do, however, is to cut across the sort of dualisms relating to spiritual and physical birth, to which Jn 1:13 is commonly thought to refer⁵¹. In other words, if I use Kristeva's analytical categories, the significance of becoming God's child is simply transferred into the realm of the speaking subject which is *always and necessarily* at the intersection of conscious and unconscious motivations.

However, what the denials of Jn 1:13 "... not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man ..." do reflect, is a certain appropriate dissociation. The process of identification that Kristeva describes in the developing human subject, is directed away from the drive-related semiotic realm of maternal care and gratification that in cultural terms, has so often been associated with the flesh, with blood and with sexuality.

So, this is to suggest what, exactly? Kristeva's analysis is illuminating, even given her clearly stated objections to orthodox interpretation, such as seeing the God of the biblical

⁵¹ See, for example, Lindars, Barnabas, op. cit. 92.

text as having a transcendent existence⁵². It opens up the text to an interpretation in terms of two inter-linking narratives. First, there is a common human process, a life-giving process of identification with a father, leading to the capacity for language and love beyond self - agape . And secondly there is the mythological progress of Word's divinely gracious coming-to amongst human believers. And within this second narrative, divine Word follows the same process of identification, of coming to love beyond initial fusion and self-absorption through identification, through a desire to mime, to be and act like the Father (Jn 1:18). It is an interpretation that has implications for the Gospel as a whole, in which the identification of Jesus with his Father is a strong if implicit theme:

He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? Jn 14:9-10

3. 4 Jn 1:14. Lying Beyond the Word. Word/flesh: The Sign of Heterogeneity.

Within the Prologue, I believe that the sign of what unites Word with humanity and suggests, most clearly, the nature of a divine subjectivity, is the transformation of Word becoming flesh (Jn 1:14). The divine Word appears to take on the necessary heterogeneity of subjectivity. That is to say, divine Word associated so clearly within Christian ecclesiastical tradition, with the realm of language, symbolism and cultural

⁵² See, for example, Kristeva, Julia ,*In the Beginning was Love*, op. cit. 27.

order - the realm of the Father - becomes implicated in the functional irrationality, or heterogeneity of Kristeva's notion of subjectivity. And in this sense, the Word must also be involved in the maternal realm through abjection and also *jouissance*.

Kristeva argues that heterogeneity encompasses that which has the potential to be both threatening and nourishing. She believes that within Christian theology, it has become largely attached to a concept of sinning flesh⁵³, making the nourishing potential for *jouissance*, invariably perverse. She attributes this identification to the generation, within Christian theology, of the concept of sin that is an internalising of the notions of separation and impurity that, in the Judaic world of the Temple, were largely dealt with by external avoidance and purification. In other words, it is as if she were saying that Christian theology turned human subjectivity itself into the Temple, making it impossible ever to have the place clean and proper, since it was by its very nature divided in a way that was equally impossible for God. Even Christ must be regarded as the special case of body without sin⁵⁴, whose 'heterogeneity' can still, so to speak, only be shared by subjecting oneself to spiritualising remedies. The consequences were, she argues, unending guilt and a sense of self-defilement that cannot be dealt with since the only remedies offered are *linguistic* rituals - confession and eucharistic *formulations*:

⁵³ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 115.

⁵⁴ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 120.

.. abjection is no longer exterior, It is permanent and comes from within. Threatening, it is not cut off but is reabsorbed into speech. Unacceptable, it endures through the subjection to God of a speaking being who is innerly divided and, precisely through speech, does not cease purging himself of it.⁵⁵

As if to support this reading, Jn 1:17 seems to suggest the failure of Moses. Moses was pre-eminently identified with the Law of the Temple, the external laws of purification, and yet he could not see God's face (Jn 1:18) and live (Exodus 33:20)⁵⁶, whereas Jesus Christ/Word made flesh brings grace and truth and reveals the Father and makes him known.

However, Kristeva must admit that this absorption of flesh into Word, which she believes abandons the "inexorable carnal remainder"⁵⁷ by spiritualising the incarnation and attempting to disguise the sign of heterogeneity within a realm of linguistic representations - particularly eucharistic liturgies, and exegesis that stresses the metaphorical sense of nourishment as understanding - belongs to some extent, to *the history of Christian interpretation*. In this Johannine text, Logos/Word may certainly take its place within the realm of language that separates light from darkness and sets up an

⁵⁵ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 111.

⁵⁶ However, note that Raymond Brown argues that this does not have to be read as an implicit criticism of Moses: "There is no suggestion in John that when the Law was give through Moses, it was not a magnificent act of God's love. A contrast similar in spirit to that of John i 17 is found in Heb i 1: "God spoke of old to our ancestors through the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us through His Son". Brown, Raymond, op. cit. 16. Note too that this verse 17 is regarded by Bultmann, Käsemann and Schnackenburg, as a later editorial addition. Brown, op. cit. 16.

⁵⁷ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit. 120.

order that sustains creatures and pleases the Father creator. But I would argue that the text may be read against Kristeva's strictures, with Word settling for a truce with unformed darkness which it does not (cannot?) destroy (Jn 1:5). Moreover I believe that Word becoming flesh is still, in the Prologue, a powerful sign of the inexpressible heterogeneity which involves that Word with all the associations of the maternal body. And, it is abundantly clear, for example, that this particular scriptural association of Word and flesh has very much continued to alarm and perplex commentators⁵⁸. I believe that it remains possible then to read in this incarnational text, the sort of transgressive, boundary-crossing tensions and irresolutions that appear to me so characteristic of heterogeneity as Kristeva defines it.

What I am suggesting is that within this narrative of the Word, there is a reminiscence of the disquiet of human subjectivity, composed as it is, in terms of Kristeva's psychoanalytic drama, of conscious and unconscious, biological organism and talking subject. Kristeva proposes that it is necessary to live within this disquieting diversity, and possible, practically, to treat the sickness which it sometimes causes through psychoanalysis, as a form of imaginative interpretation:

Analysis gives me confidence that I can express all the parts of my being, and this confidence quells my narcissism and enables me to transfer my desire to others. I can then open myself up to the variety of experience that becomes possible with others who may be different from me or similar to me the discovery of an other in me does not make me

⁵⁸ See above, Chapter 8, where I deal with this issue in greater detail.

schizophrenic but enables me to confront the risk of psychosis, which is perhaps the only truly frightening hell.⁵⁹

Theoretically then, one may perhaps read the rest of the Prologue as the celebration of this achievement - to live as heterogeneous subjectivity, so to speak, revealing the Father.

4 Conclusion.

Julia Kristeva's theoretical work demonstrates the complexity of a working intertextuality. "In the beginning was the Word" becomes for her, a suitable echo or indeed a *summons* for an understanding of the whole analytical venture to which she is committed. It is echoed in the title of an essay, *In the Beginning Was Love*, that she wrote on psychoanalysis and faith. It evokes "the mobilization of two people's minds and bodies by the sole agency of the words that pass between them"⁶⁰ that constitutes the healing of psychoanalysis, the growth and life-restoring work of the analyst and analysand together within the context of transference love.

My analysis is an intertextuality along reverse lines, in which the narrative within the Johannine Prologue is illuminated or opened out by means of a reference to a narrative of developing human subjectivity which is all the more appropriate, I believe, in a text which has fuelled discussion about the divine Word becoming a human being. I think that to read the Prologue in the light of Kristeva's 'semanalysis',

⁵⁹ Kristeva, Julia, *In the Beginning was Love*, op. cit. 56.

⁶⁰ Kristeva, Julia, *In the Beginning was Love*, op. cit. 3.

offers readers a view of Incarnation which takes into account the multiplicity or heterogeneity - symbolised in terms of gender - that I believe to be a key feature of what it means to be, as any human subjectivity, 'incarnate', that is to say 'human'.

Moreover, returning to Margaret Davies' description of the Prologue as a theological introduction, this reading of the Prologue preserves the status of the text as, in some sense, a theological narrative, in spite of the reader's abandonment of the categories of divine presence or transcendence. For example, it offers some explanation as to why there appears to be no cross within the Prologue since that could be said - in terms of the whole Gospel - to be contained within the revelation of Incarnation itself, as a part of the process of dealing with abjection, the dark suffering of living. One could also say that this reading places the reader in relation to the text of the Prologue, created by other speaking subjects, as the analysand in relation to the, sometimes deeply confusing, text of his or her own life. The analysand/reader must then, imaginatively, construct a narrative for themselves out of this textual confusion, that accounts for, and to that extent heals, the painful dissociations to (by) which they are subject(s). And making imaginative sense of the text, is perhaps as good a way as any to understand the significance of divine glory and light.

**The Shining Garment of the Text.
Feminist Criticism and Interpretative Strategies for
Readers of John 1: 1-18.**

10
**Conclusion:
Can Women Read the Prologue?**

**1 The Context:
Phallogocentricity.**

This study has been a study of texts rather than a text. That is to say, it has not considered the Prologue of John's Gospel as a particular Greek version¹ or English translation², or as a document, transfixed at a single point - the point at which it was first written or read for example. What has interested and concerned me is the intertextuality of reading in a number of specific instances, notably within the exegetical or meditative readings of Augustine of Hippo, Hildegard von Bingen, Martin Luther, Rudolf Bultmann, Adrienne von Speyr and myself.

I believe readers 'put on' or interpret the garment of the text for their own particular and individual reasons and I have tried to show here, how these interpretations are indeed formed at the intersection of biblical text and interpretative

¹ I have used the Greek text edited by Aland, Black, Martini, Metzger and Wikgren, (Third edn, New York, London, Edinburgh, Amsterdam, Stuttgart, United Bible Societies, 1975).

² Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations in English are from the Revised Standard Version of the Old and New Testaments (London, Oxford University Press, 1971).

desire or need, by highlighting some of the similar and also some of the different themes and preoccupations displayed by readers.

However, in the case of the five historical readings of the Prologue that I consider in this study, I believe that individual reasons for producing a certain interpretation are all determined, to a considerable extent, by the phallogocentric context of reading. To characterise the context as 'phallogocentric', is to refer to a determination of singularity within the interpretative context, according to which, all meaning and value is determined in relation to a single transcendent notion of truth which is typically identified as masculine. Put schematically, this singular notion of transcendent truth - for example, a singular, masculine-identified divinity - guarantees an all-encompassing hierarchy of gendered values which can be seen to be operating within textual interpretations.

One classic feminist formulation of this analysis, drawn up by the French feminist writer, Hélène Cixous, lists a series of pairs as:

Activity/passivity,
Sun/Moon,
Culture/Nature,
Day/Night,
Father/Mother,
Head/Heart,
Intelligible/Palpable,

Logos/Pathos,

form/Matter,

convex /concave,

step, advance, semen, progress/ground - where steps are

taken, holding- and dumping - ground.

Finally Man is placed over a line of division, and Woman

underneath. Cixous concludes:

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized. If we read or speak, the same thread or double braid is leading us throughout literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflection.³

As the double braid is, so to speak, harnessed to a fundamental drive towards masculine singularity, male identity, male autonomy and male comfort tend to take priority. And one characteristic tendency of this analysis, illustrated within all five historical readings of the Prologue of John's Gospel, is the collapse of all references to woman and the feminine, and particularly their cultural associations with sexuality and the human body, into devalued terms or modalities.

But this feminist analysis also implies that phallogocentricity is caught up by the implications of its own logic. To determine a singular truth - of either identity or value - in masculine-identified terms, woman and the feminine inevitably become symbols of difference, the defining

³ Sellers, Susan (ed.), *Hélène Cixous Reader* (London, Routledge, 1994).
37. Reprinted from Cixous' essay, "Sorties", published in H. Cixous and C. Clément, *La Jeune Née* (Paris, Union Générale d'Editions, 1975).

'Otherness' and, moreover, the sign of a multiplicity that can hold no singular value. That is to say, the realm, which, by being different, defines a valorised (masculine-identified) singularity, is symbolised in the devalued terms of woman and the feminine. However, feminist theory also sees this realm of the excluded 'Other' as potentially deconstructive of the whole notion of singularity. In its defining relationship to the valorised realm of masculine-identified singularity, it represents an unavoidable multiplicity. However much the difference or 'Otherness', of which woman and the feminine are the symbols, is denied, disowned, avoided or anathematised and however much actual women are beaten, veiled, silenced or confined in response to anxiety about it, the multiplicity is unavoidable. And, in terms of my argument, this is arguably because human living is not simply conceptual, linguistic, spiritually singular, or dependent upon men. Human living is essentially multiple, bodily and linguistic, desiring and needing to gain nourishment and satisfaction, as well as articulation and control, and thus also dependent upon the devalued roles and qualities that are symbolised by and culturally associated with women and the feminine.

In the particular context of the Prologue, I believe that the effort of maintaining a defining identity as singular/masculine(=feminine) provokes a tremendous anxiety, which can be shown to be controlling the direction of textual interpretation away from the recognition of any form of multiplicity, whether this is expressed in terms of confusion and mixing of divine and human, or in terms of their mutual

dependence. The general tenor of the argument is towards a separation, in which that which is human is defined as feminine and either devalued or, symbolically, excluded

2 Five Historical Readings.

The text of the Johannine Prologue is an appropriate one to read, of course, since it is concerned thematically with the narrative of divine Incarnation, in which divinity and humanity are drawn together in such intimacy, that Christian tradition claims God became a human male individual. At the same time, this Christian tradition has continued to refer to the relationship between God and humankind in terms of a gendered hierarchy of value, implying the inevitable (feminine-identified) subjection of humankind to divine authority.

(i) **St. Augustine**, then, in reading this passage within John's Gospel, is always mindful of the feminine-identified carnality of the Word's human existence, relating it to the dust with which Christ the physician (Jn 9:6) mixed spittle, and healed the bodily ills of the blind man. To this extent he appears to recognise the necessity of this carnality - this trace of Otherness and defining difference. And yet, in the final analysis, he tries to make the Word's fleshly humanity both typical and representative, and, at the same time, a special case - untouched by the irrationality of desire in conception, or the contamination of birth that characterise every other human being in a negative sense. In other words, though he appears to recognise his need for the element of carnality in order to interpret this passage, he shrinks from it. In other

respects too, he appears to be skirting around the problem, trying to have his cake and eat it too. Thus, more positive references to the bodily, physical and material dimension of human living, are subtly re-drawn in this commentary within a spiritualised, metaphorical 'up-graded' context. Augustine draws attention to the bodily substances of spittle and to the physical conditions of blindness in a predominantly metaphorical sense, in order to make a point about spiritual blindness. Similarly, the image of Christ as nursing mother is compelling in its evocation of the divine maternal giving her children milk from her own body and yet, ultimately, it too is qualified as a reference to the needs of a *spiritual* infancy. Yet readers will be impressed by the sense in which Augustine apparently cannot entirely relinquish the carnality of the Word.

(ii) **Hildegard of Bingen**, writing about seven hundred years later, and several thousands of miles further north into Europe, is still very much influenced by the theology of Augustine, as indeed were most of her contemporaries in the Christian world. Hildegard appears to have registered the presence of the divine in her own life in visions and communications which were not simply spiritualised metaphors of divine influence and inspiration but to some degree experienced physically, as if in some acknowledgement of the fact that she was desiring feminine-identified body as much as the speaking subject of spiritual sensibility. Nevertheless, these physical experiences appear to have been pleasurable in an ambivalent sense, that is to say

often accompanied by such pain and incapacity that readers might interpret Hildegard's joy in them as perverse.

Nevertheless, and arguably because she was a woman, Hildegard appears to have been more open, than was Augustine, to the possibility that the bodily exuberance of sexual desire, for example, belonged within God's providential wisdom. Rather than concentrating narrowly upon the figure of Christ, she sees Incarnation in the broadest possible terms as divine Wisdom expressed in cosmic creation and every aspect of human existence as indicative of God's plan. And this clearly included desire for bodily satisfaction and nourishment, albeit controlled by a superior, if 'loving' spirituality. There is too, abundant evidence of Hildegard's own enjoyment of other sensual pleasures in colour, music, the perfumes of flowers and the contemplation of the fine clothing and bright jewels of her symbolic, and frequently female, divine figures. But in the end, the fundamental Augustinian framework of gendered hierarchy as between the sphere of desire and the context of spiritualised articulation tends to restrict her vision of divine embodiment.

(iii) Within the work of **Martin Luther**, on the other hand, the reader may understand a passionate desire to banish the Otherness against which his decidedly singular and masculine divinity is defined. Of course, Luther was notably less misogynistic and more sympathetic to heterosexuality within Christian marriage, than earlier Christian Fathers. He was, after all, an ex-celibate priest who married an ex-celibate nun and had six children! In his personal relationship with his

own wife, he appears a tolerant and loving husband who recognised his wife's value - at least to him and his children. However, objections to the cult of Marian devotion, to which he gives expression within his sermons on the Prologue, tell a possibly more revealing story. He rejects the many traditional roles of the virgin Mary - and particularly her role as intercessor, or advocate - at once inserting her within his interpretation as the maternal sign of a woman's place within a patriarchal family and devaluing her as the feminine sign of human depravity within Christian patriarchy. And it is possible, perhaps, to connect this absolute rejection of Mary's autonomous value, both to his rejection of women's autonomy outside marriage - for example, as celibate nuns - and also to his view of humanity as utterly without positive significance outside its undeserved and gracious relationship to God, of which Christ's Incarnation was the key element, in what looks like a bid, absolutely to exclude the traces of any autonomous 'Otherness'.

(iv) **Rudolf Bultmann's** interpretation of the Prologue is for me, in some ways, the most intriguing case. None of the other commentators I have dealt with in detail, appears to me to have had quite such an acute appreciation of the implications of Incarnation. And yet, ultimately, I believe that he still fails to evade the consequences of the phallogocentric context with its drive towards singularity. In terms of the analysis presented by feminist theory, the 'Otherness' of which woman and the feminine have been the most persistent symbols is located within the nexus of bodily materiality and

attempts to give this significance or meaning. Bultmann, I believe, to some extent appreciates this, recognising that the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, whatever its Chalcedonian references to dual natures that are not confused, cannot be interpreted from this Johannine text in a sense that implies any reserve or differentiation between the humanity of humankind and the humanity of Jesus, as a fully embodied, 'this worldly' creature. He thus resists the attempt to make Jesus different by sleight of hand as some other commentators appear to me to do, using the expedient of virgin birth or the absence of 'original sin'.

However, it seems to me that he still operates within the fundamentally phallogocentric context which devalues all it associates with woman and the feminine. For Bultmann, then, the Word's humanity consists in its subjection to all the feminine-identified, negative qualities - that is transitoriness, helplessness and vanity (*Nichtigkeit*) . Bultmann still regards human existence as ultimately problematic without reference to a singular transcendent truth, even if that truth is expressed in the Word's completely historical and material registration. If the Word has to become human, he has to be subject to the determination of humanity as a devalued form of existence. In other words, by abolishing the sense of the Word's divinity as a *separated form* of existence, Bultmann has not thereby abolished the differential between God and the Word's 'human' nature, which, in typically feminine mode, is still seen to be lacking. At the same time the possibility that the text of the Prologue might contain the sign of a

categorical difference - outwith and challenging the gendered hierarchy of values - represented by the conundrum of Word become flesh, is completely swallowed up and lost.

(v) Finally, **Adrienne von Speyr** within her commentary on the Prologue of John's Gospel, makes divine Incarnation burst out of the Trinitarian 'singularity' with all the bloody force of a human birth. And it is possible that von Speyr, as a doctor, had this particularly shattering and bodily event in her mind when she wrote of human heterosexual love and the birth of a child, as analogous to divine Incarnation, which represents the new direction of love, beyond the previous absorption of God and Word in love for each other. However, von Speyr's own absolute insistence on the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, seems to have trapped her, as a woman, within structures of silent and suffering, Marian obedience. In a curious sense, von Speyr's desire, expressed within her study of the Prologue, to be defined totally in relation to God's unfathomable will, is akin to the intensity of Luther's vision of human worthlessness in itself. Of course, von Speyr differs from Luther in her extreme asceticism and in her absolute conviction in the divine authority of the Roman Catholic Church, to command her obedience. It is possible to see von Speyr's stigmatic experience as the way in which she both fulfilled and evaded that demand for obedience, ultimately giving expression to God's privileged Word through her own suffering flesh. However, her interpretations of the Prologue remain, I believe, clearly bound within the terms of perversity in which

can be achieved only through pain and deprivation.

3 Challenging the Direction of Traditional Interpretation: Three Readings.

Feminist critics, hoping to make the garment of the biblical text fit or reflect the shape of its women readers better, may be encouraged by the inability of commentators altogether to eradicate the trace of an unsettling 'Otherness' that is, I believe, symbolised by woman and the feminine and located within a nexus of desire and materiality and the means of giving this significance. From Augustine's vision of desire that evades reason's control, through Luther's absent virgin mother, to von Speyr's reaffirmation of Marian obedience, the traces of this 'Otherness', symbolised by feminine-identified presences, persist. But, within the historical context, all these presences are still caught up in within the phallogocentric reading context, in which the process of finding significance for whatever woman and the feminine symbolise, is dislocated, reappearing in disguises such as loving obedience or pleasure through pain and deprivation. The interpretative conclusions of historical readers of this text, do not seem to me to allow any clear reflection of my face as an autonomous human, feminine subject. I am defined within these interpretative texts as a negative symbol, or even, not represented at all.

Therefore, in this second part of my study, I try to produce an interpretation of the same Johannine text, in which some attempt is made to disrupt the phallogocentric direction of historical reading contexts.

(i) A Myth of Divine Dependence on Humanity.

In my first reading, I deconstruct this text as, ironically, the source of a counter-mythology. Whilst no female figures are referred to overtly, God is situated, by my interpretation, within the context of inarticulate desire. The feminine-identified humanity of John the Baptist, as friend and witness, represents the articulation God needs. In other words, the divine Word is shown to be dependent upon this human being. In this interpretation, I attempt through a close reading of the text, to challenge the 'rhetorical mythology' of divine (masculine) self-sufficiency that I believe is constantly struggling, within traditional interpretations, to re-impose its limiting parameters on readers.

(ii) Flesh - Both Necessary And Of No Avail.

In my second reading, I interpret the double definition of 'flesh' at Jn 1:13 and Jn 1:14, in terms of a multiplicity that contests any drive towards singularity. In particular I read the doubly defined word 'flesh' within this text, against interpretations that reduce the sense of 'Word become flesh' to a mere spiritualised divine (masculine) condescension to a depraved (feminine) humanity. In a spiritualised scheme of this nature, the raw, nourishing, bloody and satisfying body is typically replaced by the suitably debased and dismal

condition of (feminine) humanity. The spiritualised 'condition of humanity', because it does not incorporate any suggestion of transgression - that is any crossing through the margins into the realm of the material, physical, bodily and non-linguistic - evades the heterogeneity and the positive trace of the feminine to which I believe Jn 1:14 may itself be read as witness.

(iii) A Narrative of Subjectivity in Process.

In my third reading I relate the Prologue of St. John's Gospel, in which divine Word becomes fully human, to the narrative of human subjectivity, described by philosopher and theorist Julia Kristeva. Kristeva's theoretical construction of human subjectivity '*en procès*' begins with an initial, and painful separation from what she calls the pre-linguistic 'semiotic' realm, preoccupied with desires and drives, and associated with the feminine-maternal. However, whilst Kristeva's description of this separation in terms of the maternal abject, suggests that this feminine-identified realm has to be resisted if living is to be bearable, she does not, thereby, automatically devalue this realm. The semiotic/maternal realm remains the locus of all our creative drives and energies, and in both an individual and a cultural sense, these energies constantly challenge the monolithic, singular and totalitarian impetus of the masculine/paternal identified context of the symbolic - that is, of language and law. In other words, together, masculine and feminine function together in terms of a necessary multiplicity.

Using Kristeva's theoretical framework, then, I read the text of the Prologue alongside Kristeva's psychoanalytic drama of a human journey towards life made possible. Just as the human subject begins in undifferentiated absorption with the maternal in the semiotic realm God begins in undifferentiated absorption with Word, although the potential for separation and for the creativity of that separation is already present. And just as human life is made possible in the tension between the symbolic realm of culture and language and the motivations of desire rooted in the semiotic realm of the maternal, so embodied Logos, so to speak, represents a vision of Incarnation that manages to avoid the usual devaluation of the feminine term that accompanies most traditional interpretation. In other words, whereas in traditional forms of biblical interpretation, the Word becoming flesh (Jn 1:14) is a descent or a humiliation or a mark of divine condescension, Kristeva's theoretical framework of human subjectivity challenges the hierarchical sense of the division, between symbolic (Word) and semiotic (flesh), whilst retaining the sense of separation. I believe that it is illuminating then, to see the Prologue as a mythic reflection of the difficult but necessary journey of all human subjects from initial fusion/confusion into a recognition of identity based upon difference and separation which does not have to be elaborated in terms of a hierarchy of values.

4 So, *Can Women Read the Prologue?* (But Why Should they Want to?)

I believe that, in the past, the *authority* of the biblical text has been strongly associated with the sort of institutional power that demands interpretative conformity and punishes alternatives, as deviant or heretical. And this is why my first reason for wanting to re-read this text has to do with challenging the singular, exclusive tendency of existing biblical interpretations by trying to create what Mieke Bal calls 'counter-coherences', in which close reading reveals multiple or deconstructive interpretations⁴.

But I have said that I want, if possible, to be able see my own face reflected within the biblical text. This could be seen as a thinly disguised wish to retain something of the perceived authority of the biblical text in order to justify either my own position or the text itself as still charged with "Good News". And, of course, this would be a highly questionable move from a feminist perspective. However, I believe that, beyond illustrating a series of basically hostile assumptions, I have still been able to find this text to some degree *significant*.

In order to illustrate the sense in which I understand *significant* here, let me refer very briefly to a recent example of biblical interpretation in a poetic - that is to say non-scholarly but not thereby non-critical - form. Irish poet and singer Christy Moore tells a story of creation that is related to the creation story/stories in Genesis, except that God is "She". She creates the universe and then, in a reversal of Genesis 2:

⁴See above, Chapter 1, 9 f., for a description of what Mieke Bal means more precisely, by this term.

21-22, draws a little man from out of her own ribcage and puts him down in Ireland. She instructs him (Genesis 1:28) to go forth and multiply, and sends him out - or he goes out⁵ - to demonstrate the Love of God - or interpret the words of God⁶ - by putting an end to whoring and drinking in Lullymore, before settling down to start the human race in Co. Kildare.

Christy Moore's poem/song implicitly challenges the account of Creation in Genesis for its bias towards a God who is always described as "He". It is also quite clear that within the strongly Roman Catholic context of his own background, the 'little man' (Adam/ infant Jesus?) drawn from within the ribcage of the feminine God, is reminiscent, not simply of Mary giving birth to her child, but of the iconography of the sacred heart of Mary, which links Mary's feminine/maternal suffering with eucharistic feeding .

But this 'God Woman'⁷ is not just the Blessed Virgin Mary. Arguably the purpose of the reference to Genesis is precisely to place her in some other role or symbolic space than the conventional Marian one. So the writer makes her act and commission, like the masculine Creator of Genesis, rather than submit like the woman of Luke 2:38. Not at all a remodelled male rib, she draws out of her own divine female body a male

⁵ In the fashion of folk and pop music, the words of the song written down, do not correspond exactly to the words sung at every performance. In this case, the words written down, do not correspond at all points with the words sung at the recording.

⁶ See note 5 above.

⁷ Moore, Christy, "God Woman", *Graffiti Tongue* (London, CNR Music, 1996).

GOD WOMAN: C. MOORE.

SHE SPENT SEVEN DAYS CREATING THE WORLD
THE SUN THE MOON AND THE STARS
THE PLOUGH AND THE MUCKY WAY
THEN JUPITER AND MARS
THEN SHE OPENED UP HER RIBSAGE
PULLED OUT A LITTLE MAN
SHE PUT HIM DOWN ON THE PLAINS OF KILDRARE
AND THE HUMAN RACE BEGAN

God Woman! God Woman!

DOWN BY THE EDGE OF CLONTARREY
HE BUILT A LONELY CELL
WHERE HE WENT TO CONTEMPLATE HEAVEN
AND DRINK FROM ST. BRIGID'S WELL
SHE SENT HIM TO THE MUCKY FIELDS
OF RATHCENS AND BALLINORE
SAILED HIM DOWN THE CHAND LARAL
TO THE TOWN OF WILLOWMORE
WHERE HE SMASHED UP THE BROADBILLS
SMASHED THE POISON SHILLS
INTRODUCED THE LOVE OF GOD (HIMSELF)
AROUND THE ST. FURRY HILLS.

GO FORTH SAYS SHE AND MULTIPLY
GOD MAM AND I WILL BEGOS
WHAT BETTER PLACE TO BEGIN THE RACE
THEN BELOW IN THE YATCH BOY. (C)

Ⓢ The place was visited, Dealings beg at Bannamore, Miltam, Newbridge, Co. Wicklow.

Christy Moore
Graffiti Tongue (London CNR Music
1996)

creature and then sends him away with tasks to complete. She is his female superior, commanding both his respect and his consent, "God Mam, and I will....". And arguably, this creation story really does manage to address some of the deeper implications of making God feminine. It is not just a matter of replacing "He" with "She". Her creating is an embodied creating. She does not fashion her male creature out of inert material but out of her own feminine body. And, within the realm of desire and the need to make sense of this, she fixes her divine displeasure not on notions of, for example, apostasy and idolatry that uphold the singularity of the masculine divine, but upon two examples of the exploitation of human desire, that is in prostitution and the misuse of alcohol.

Some elements of Christy Moore's engaging poem/song remain troubling. Some feminist readers might be troubled by the violence with which the creature destroys what his female God has disallowed. What, however, I find particularly relevant about this example, is the writer's unmistakable reference to the biblical text. Of course, he is not exact. There is a confusion of the two creation stories contained within Genesis, and he treats the details of the narrative with a considerable license⁸. But arguably, what he is doing is to criticise a particular tradition of biblical interpretation in a way that he could not do, if it no longer had any significance

⁸ For example, in Genesis 2:2, God finishes his creative work in six days and rests on the seventh day. And yet, even here, might this be, not so much careless reading as comment - after all, it is commonly said that "a woman's work is never done"!

for him at all - if it could no longer support what he had to say in any sense.

I conclude, finally, that it is perfectly possible to read the text of the Prologue from a woman-centred perspective. It is perfectly possible, that is, to subject it to feminist critical analysis. But more than this, I believe that I have also been able to some extent, weave a critical interpretation of the Prologue into the fashion of a creative dialogue, in a way, moreover, that does justice to the multiplicity or heterogeneity of the reader. I believe, for example, that in its statement of the central mystery of Christian Incarnation - "The Word became flesh" - is contained a potential for destabilising the phallogocentric context of so many readings of this passage in the past, which have compounded the identification of human depravity and vulnerability with women and the feminine in general. And I believe that it is also possible to find readings of the text that emphasise both the bodily and the inter-relational significance of human living as a means to understanding a divinely creative initiative.

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