Hermaphrodite Thinking

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Abstract

Hermaphrodite thinking is a metaphor that calls into question commonplace assumptions, about the way things exist or to what categories we assign them, reminding us that all such categorizations are provisional. They exist not as perfect descriptions of things but as often-useful tools or technologies that come with the obvious cost of limiting the ways in which we think. The paper discusses two striking examples of such thinking, the 19th-century Western theory and practice of reading the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, as a semiotic network of nodes that takes the form of types and figures of Christ, and the 21st-century description of digital texts.

Kew words: Biblical typology, Digital Texts, Inter-media, Non-duality,

In the following pages, I use the metaphor 'hermaphrodite thinking' to refer to those manners and modes of thought that combine what appear to be diametrical opposites. In particular, I shall discuss two striking examples of such thinking (or thought-forms), one from the 19th, the other from the late-20th and 21st, — the 19th-century Western theory and practice of reading the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, as a semiotic network whose nodes take the form of types and figures of Christ, and the 21st-century description of the way all forms of digital text exist in a networked computer environment. Both examples call into question assumptions on how certain people or entities exist in time and in relation to other people or entities. After explaining each example, I shall relate it to a number of material and other contexts that explain how such thinking became not only possible but also necessary.

The existence of the hermaphrodite is the embodiment (pun very much intended) of the Derridean challenge to the idea of gender opposition, if not to the idea of gender difference. The implicit claim of the hermaphrodite, in other words, is not that male and female do not exist, but that treating them as binaries, as diametrically opposite categories, is absurd, since any careful examination of male and female reveals that the beings assigned to such categories share similarities as well as differences, both physiological and psychological. The hermaphrodite, in other words, reminds us how much we take convenient thought forms, *topoi*, or technologies of thinking, as eternal verities instead of the provisional, contingent thought-forms that they are.

Another way to put this is to point out that the hermaphrodite embodies Derridean deconstruction, here not used in its now-common meaning as little more than 'destroy' or 'analyze.' Jacques Derrida, who is perhaps best understood less as a philosopher than as a Zen master, clearing away impediments to thinking and feeling, made an important point when he coined his trendy term. For Derrida an act of deconstruction reveals the illusory nature of binary oppositions that clutter our thinking, such as male/female, red/green, Caucasian/Black, and, of course, the book-as-object and the book-as-text, the latter existing separately from its physical instantiation. Derrida reveals such oppositions to be nothing more than provisional thought-forms that occasionally prove useful but sooner or later mislead once they become accepted as objectively real. Take male/female, looking with a Derridean eye, we quickly realize that it actually comprises not an objectively real opposition but two things that exist as parts of a spectrum. Therefore, opposing any two things, such as designers of traffic lights so usefully did with red/green, becomes merely a convention which only works in a specific context for a specific purpose.

Derrida attacked common binaries, such as presence/absence and inside/outside, particularly as we use them in reference to books. In *Dissemination* (1972; English translation 1981), he uses his characteristically teasing, in-your-face method to deconstruct our foggy ideas about them. Everyone knows books often have forewords and prefaces, sometimes afterwords, too, but we all know, don't we, that such things are *really* not part of the book? "Really?" asks Derrida, who gives his preface multiple titles: "Hors Livre" (outside the book), "Outwork" (as in a fortification), "Hors D'Ooeuvre" (not really the important part of the meal, you know), "Extratext" (something that's . . . what?), "Foreplay" (we haven't arrived at the real sex, yet). "Bookend" (a physical object that holds up books-as-objects, or one that brings books to a close), "Facing" (façade, something, one might add, Ruskin thought might lead architects into fakery) and finally the familiar "Prefacing" (note: an action, not a textual category).

Derrida playfully reminds us of something we all too often forget or ignore: We don't have very good words to explain how visual and verbal texts work. For instance, when Vergil, Dante, and Milton allude to *The Iliad,* we cannot explain in what sense Homer's text is *in* or *inside* these works (as in intertextual allusions, mental images, etc.), nor can we explain in what sense Greek and Roman statues are in (or not in) Renaissance sculpture.

The fascination with the hybrid does not only concern matters of gender, since the principal 19th-century Anglo-American method of reading the Bible stands in relation to past and present, Old and New Testaments. Thus, my first example concerns how Biblical typology can be historical and a-historical, simultaneously, within time and outside of it. The hermeneutics of biblical typology derives from the basic assumption that sacred history, as recorded in scripture, is a divinely created semiotic network in which a series of fragmentary, fragmented anticipations of Christ exist both as historical persons and as partial anticipations of his dispensation. For example, Noah and his ark (*Genesis* 6–9) functions as a Christ's type because he saves the children of God from

destruction. Melchizedek (Genesis 1-4), who saved the wounded with bread and wine, anticipates Christ's sacrifice and the sacrament of communion. Aaron (*Exodus* 4-7), the high priest, prefigures Christ as head of his Church.

In addition to such typological people, this conception of sacred history also includes a wide range of divinely signifying objects or events. Thus, the scapegoat described in Leviticus (subject of a painting by the Pre-Raphaelite W. Holman Hunt) takes on the sins of the God's people and thereby prefigures one key aspect of Christ. In the same way, the rainbow serves as a covenant-sign, a contract fulfilled in Christ, and the precious stones used on Aaron's breastplate and the tabernacle prefigure aspects of heaven. Not all well-known types make much sense. One of the more bizarre ones, the brazen serpent, derives from the part of Exodus in which God sends a plague of serpents to punish the Israelites who had worshipped the Golden Calf. When Moses begs God to save His chosen, deeply ungrateful and unfaithful people, He commands them to pray to Him while looking at a brass image of a snake, which represents their idolatry. Because this brazen serpent was placed on a pole (usually depicted in religious iconography as a T-shaped cross), interpreters took this incident to prefigure the Crucifixion, which makes little sense since the snake in the Bible is a symbol of Satan, becoming here a prefiguration of Christ. According to preachers, scripture guides, and family Bibles, all these examples are part of an elaborate divine semiotic structure of events.

The challenging, puzzling aspect, of such types and figures of Christ lies in their sharp juxtaposition of apparently opposed categories, such as real/figurative (or symbolic), present/future, history/prophecy, and most challenging, the concatenation of individuality (and the responsibility that comes with individuation), conveying the apparently contradictory idea that the individual participates in some essential meta-historical scheme that has such power that it would seem to nullify individuality and free will. According to 19th-century preachers that discuss types, individuals like Moses, Aaron, or Melchizedek who function as types, participates in the so-called gospel scheme.

In each case, an individual person, or to be more precise, an action of an individual, such as Moses striking the rock (*Numbers* 20:11), is both in itself a historical fact while at the same time containing a fragment or fragments of gospel history -, in this particular case at least three, varying depending on the individual interpreter. Thus, in St. Paul's interpretation, Moses striking the rock stands a divinely sanctioned prefiguration of the sacrament of baptism, and this explains the frequent pairing of this act of the Old Testament, with John's baptism of Christ. Far more common, at least in the 19th-century, are two other readings of this (supposedly) historical act. For many, Moses striking the rock functions as a divine reminder that the old dispensation, the moral law, must strike the bearer of the new, that is, Christianity and the new Testament, the Church, its hierarchy, and its rituals and laws. In addition, a third, simpler interpretation occurs again and again in poetry from Donne, Vaughan, to Wordsworth, where the stricken rock prefigures the heart of each individual believer, and where pain, sorrow, and

tribulations are understood to have been sent by God not just as test or punishment (we are back to the assumption that some events have multiple meanings, some of which occur outside objective human time) but also as an awakening, a quickening, of the believer. Moses striking the rock, in other words, here prefigures the virtually infinite number of times and ways God brings grace to the individual believer— a subject found not only in countless sermons and hymns but also in paintings, such as Holman Hunt's *Awakening Conscience*, and poems such as Wordsworth's *Excursion*.

Such emphasis on the historicity, the facticity, of the type derives from St. Augustine's reaction to his earlier Manichean materialism that allowed no room for either spirituality or the spiritual meaning, that is, the metaphorical meanings of the text. Augustine's movement toward his mother's Christian faith, which his *Confessions* present as a perilous voyage to a new homeland in the manner of *The Aeneid,* ended with his belief that both the book of the world and *the* Book, the Bible, necessarily had such a double existence, only one part of which the non-believer can ever access. Augustine, certainly one of the most influential figures in the development of Christianity, arrived on the scene when a battle raged over the nature of the Old Testament: One party urged that believers should adopt the Greek approach, which we see in Hellenic interpretations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* and allegorize the events the Old Testament relates, thereby treating the narrative as a now-useless husk to be cast away once the kernel of Christian truth reveals itself (Robertson, 58). In contrast, the other group, who followed the Judaic approach to scripture, urged that the Bible was literally true, so that one had to understand it in multiple senses or on multiple levels. Augustine, the reformed materialist, tipped the scales in favor of this second approach. Ricoeur's monumental study of the relationship between temporality and narrativity, *Time and Narrative,* devoted to interweaving of history and literature, also finds its impetus in a question posed by St. Augustine in the *Confessions*'s famous Book XI meditation on time. The fusion of the two worlds is, for Ricoeur, at the heart of human condition,

Anyone who has seen the opposed figures of Ecclesia (Christianity, the Church) and Synagogia (Judaism, the Old Law) on the west fronts of medieval cathedrals and in their stained-glass programs has noticed one effect of the belief in typological interpretation of scriptures. When compared to the 19th-century interpretations of biblical typology, those of the Middle Ages rarely take the subtle, elaborate form found in Dante's explication of this mode of thought. More often they take the form of simple opposition. Medieval applications of typology, we might say, so assume, indeed so take for granted, the essential historicity of the Old Testament that they rarely emphasize it. 19th-century typology often does emphasize the importance of the literal or historical level, and I assume it does because it comes from a unique period in Western history, a time when Lockean empiricism had lead to both historicist emphases upon the uniqueness of individual places and events, and the practice of writing and reading fiction increasingly involved the assumptions of realism. The assumptions in other words, that we can only understand reality — and also produce the reality effect — by turning away from Johnsonian neoclassical generalizations to specific information about dialect,

clothing, and setting. This empiricist and historicist emphasis upon verifiable detail produced the characteristic 19th-century approach to typology while, perhaps ironically, eventually leading to its abandonment.

The kind of hermaphrodite thinking about which I am writing fully existed for a very short period in the history of the Bible: the belief in the existence of this particular kind of divinely inspired or created symbolic facticity required, in turn, the belief in the divine inspiration of scripture, and the belief that even in translation every word was absolutely true. The same interest in historicism and realism, however, destroyed the belief on the literal truth of the Bible in less than a century. First came the geologists, who proved to many that neither the biblical description of the creation nor the accepted age of the earth could be literally true. Together with them came the fossil hunters, who showed how much the biblical narrative omitted. Then philologists, who compared Hebrew to other semitic languages, showing that it was hardly the unique, supposedly divine language that many assumed it was. At the same time, early ethnographers' perception of the many similarities between the earliest periods of biblical history and the contemporary Middle East removed yet another supposed uniqueness of the scripture. Even devout missionaries in Africa ended up losing their faith in the literal truth of the Bible when Bishop Colenso began to organize a translation into Swahili. His Zulu translators, who were well acquainted with pastoral life, showed him that no one could possibly move the large numbers of animals that the Bible stated the Israelites had herded across a river. As he and his translators began to look into the matter of numbers he also realized the many inconsistencies of scriptural numeration, and concluded that many mentions of numbers, like one hundred thousand, just meant "a lot." And then, late to the game, came Darwin.

My second example concerns the hermaphrodite nature of electronic documents. These documents confront our sense of reality because they do not in fact exist 'as documents' the way other documents on paper, parchment, or stone do. What we call electronic documents, the electronic documents we *experience* (this is crucial), are virtual, which means in practice that they belong to the world or category of *as if*. With electronic digital computing writing for the first time becomes a matter of codes stacked upon codes, and not physical marks upon physical surfaces. Such digital texts belong to what the late Diane Balestri used to call soft versus hard media, which is to say they are always virtual and take the form of what we see on screen as a document only when software calls them up from a database and, following certain formatting rules, some provided by the software, some by the user, either in the form of style sheets or simple commands, such as spacing or adding a tab. The virtuality of the electronic document, which the fact that it exists in the form of codes rather than physical marks on a physical surface, also means that, since computer monitors and individual readers can increase or decrease font size of the formatted document as it looked when the author finished with it, an electronic document, even one presented as the simulacrum of a printed page, will rarely appear exactly as the author left it. Furthermore (to state the obvious once again), however much the electronic document resembles the printed page and

however many tines it may even become one when printed and therefore physically instantiated or embodied on the physical medium of the page, it still does not have the solid edges or borders of the print on paper document. This lack of boundaries means in turn that any electronic document can exist within several categories or documents at the same time, thus having literally the kind of multiple existences within its basic category of being that print docs can only in the imagination. That is, we can classify or imagine a particular poem as belonging to a category such as a genre or movement. But an electronic document whose authorial edges can be crossed by links and search tools actually does belong to multiple texts and multiple text bases. What this means in practice is that a document that its original author conceived and formatted as a chapter can function as a footnote or annotation in someone else's document. Or using either an online search tool like Google or Bing, or one locally — that is, on one's own machine — a document will leave its original context and become part of a set of texts indicated by a list. In other words, unlike physical documents and the texts they proffer, digital ones always have potential multiple identities and multiple borders.

I began this essay by pointing out that what I semi-seriously termed hermaphrodite thinking calls into question commonplace assumptions, assumptions about, say, the way things exist or to what categories we assign them. It also reminds us that all such categorizations are provisional. They exist not as perfect descriptions of things but as often-useful tools or technologies that come with the obvious cost of limiting the ways in which we think. Hermaphrodite thinking turns out to be especially important at this period of human history, which is one of those rare periods in which the ways in which we think, communicate, and record our thoughts has begun to be pervaded by new paradigms. For much of human history orality, that fundamental technology which makes us human, prevailed, and several millennia ago writing appeared on the scene, eventually having major effects. With the invention of printing from moveable type, many of our modern ideas of self, intellectual property, and literature changed radically, and by the middle of the 20th-century, the information technologies of speech, writing, and printing competed with a plethora of newer technologies, including photography, telegraphy, radio, cinema, and television. Nonetheless, however much as these new technologies pushed against old assumptions, most of us lived within and lived by the paradigm of print. With the appearance of networked digital information technology, such assumptions — which include those about the cost and speed of disseminating ideas, individual creativity, and ways of writing and thinking — no longer accurately, usefully describe much of what we do. Think, for example, the many web publications of scholarly journals that put the fixed, unlinked text online in the form of a PDF — a procedure rather like pulling an expensive automobile with oxen rather than taking advantage of its obvious functionalties. We turn away from the future when we see things only through though the lens of an inappropriate paradigm. We need more hermaphrodite thinking.

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