

Deconstructive Criticism: The Gospel of the ~~Mark~~

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role of central importance in Anglo-American literary studies, from a position on its margins.

Why this success? Derrida is most often associated with a particular interpretation of the intellectual history of the West, which at first glance hardly explains his influence on literary criticism. According to Derrida, Western thought has always been built on binary oppositions: soul/body, nature/culture, male/female, white/nonwhite, inside/outside, conscious/unconscious, object/representation, history/fiction, literal/metaphorical, content/form, primary/secondary, text/interpretation, speech/writing, presence/absence, and so on. In each pair, as Derrida notes, the first term is assumed to be superior to the second and has been forcibly elevated over it. All such oppositions are founded on suppression; therefore, the relationship between the two elements is one of subordination rather than equality.

We shall return to Derrida's interpretation of Western thought in due course, summaries of which can be misleading—for deconstruction is much less an exercise in abstract speculation or in historical reconstruction than a highly flexible strategy of reading. Derrida always writes best curled up inside some text or other, and the same can be said of Paul de Man, whose influence on American deconstruction has been second only to that of Derrida. Hence their interest for literary criticism, and for us.

Let us climb into our text, Mark, and begin to read. Mark will carry us deep into deconstructive territory. I shall point out some of the better-known landmarks of deconstructive criticism as we go along. These landmarks, or monuments, have inscriptions carved into them. Here are some that we shall encounter:

- "The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction" (de Man).
- "A deconstruction always has for its target to reveal the existence of hidden . . . fragmentations within assumedly monadic totalities" (de Man).
- "The text . . . tells the story, the allegory of its misunderstanding" (de Man).
- "It has been necessary to . . . set to work, within the text . . . , certain marks . . . that . . . I have called undecidables, . . . that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it" (Derrida).
- "I do not 'concentrate,' in my reading . . . , either exclusively or primarily on those points that appear to be the most 'important,' 'central,' 'crucial.' Rather, I de-concentrate, and it is the secondary, eccentric, lateral, marginal, parasitic, borderline cases which are 'important' to me and are a source of many things, such as pleasure, but also insight into the general functioning of a textual system" (Derrida).
- "Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all; it does not settle for methodical procedures, it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail; . . . it produces rules—other conventions" (Derrida).

What is deconstruction?¹ Article- or book-length answers to this question now run in their thousands across an astonishing array of fields—modern languages and comparative literature, mainly, but also philosophy, psychology, cultural studies, linguistics, anthropology, political theory, history, legal studies, art theory, architectural theory, film theory, even theology and biblical studies—a colossal body of introductions and applications perched precariously atop the shoulders of a slight but slippery body of "exemplary" deconstructive texts, those of Jacques Derrida in particular. Derrida, a French philosopher revered, sometimes feared, more in the United States than in France, and better known to students of literature than to students of philosophy, continues to occupy a

1. This chapter contains reworked excerpts from Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Our readings of Mark will shed some light on these inscriptions, even as the inscriptions shed light on Mark—although deconstruction is not all light reading, as we are already discovering.

Deconstruction reads with an eye and ear extended for the excluded, the marginal, the blind spot, the blank. To what features of Mark, then, might deconstruction be drawn as to a magnet? To features that have been repressed or subordinated throughout Mark's long interpretive history. And no element in Mark has been the object of more resolute cover-ups than 16:8, the verse most Markan scholars now believe formed the Gospel's original ending.

Demonic Reading: The Self-Deconstructing Text

Traditionally, Mark's symbol has been the lion. Mark's belly is bottomless, as we shall see. It devours the readings that we throw to it, ripping their pages to shreds. But Mark is a lion with at least four tails. Consider the Markan endings. First, there is 16:9-20, which scholars have dubbed "the longer ending of Mark." It is composed of three resurrection appearances of Jesus, followed by his ascension. Second, there is "the shorter ending of Mark," which amounts to a thumbnail version of the longer ending. On manuscript evidence, combined with other criteria such as vocabulary, style, and content, most Markan scholars now believe both these endings to be later additions. Was Mark's real ending lost in transmission, then (it would be the third ending)? Or did Mark actually intend his Gospel to end with 16:8: "And they [the women disciples] went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid"?

Deconstruction is scrupulously attentive to difficulties in the texts that it reads. Recent scholarship on the Markan ending has taken a similar line, dismissing 16:9-20 and the other variant endings as attempts to blunt the bite of 16:8. To seize on 16:8 as Mark's original ending is to risk being savaged by the lion. Mark 16:8 seems to be saying that the discovery of the empty tomb was never reported. But if it was never reported, how can *Mark* know that Jesus has risen?

Mark trails off before narrating "circumstances in which one could imagine something like the Gospel of Mark being narrated. The story *in* Mark's Gospel seems to preclude the telling *of* Mark's Gospel."² Mark's ending undercuts its beginning; it saws through the branch on which the book is perched. Outside the tomb, as the women flee and say nothing, Mark rips up its own birth record. In contrast to Matthew and Luke, each of which *begins* with a virginal conception (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:34-35), Mark *ends* with a virginal conception—its own. Its tomb becomes a miraculous womb.

2. Robert M. Fowler, "Reading Matthew Reading Mark: Observing the First Steps toward Meaning-as-Reference in the Synoptic Gospels," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1986 Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 14.

To adopt the terminology of Paul de Man, Mark by its ending "simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode," its strategies of argumentation and persuasion.³ For de Man, every literary text turns on such moments of self-division, one hand stealthily withdrawing what the other had straightforwardly extended. This process yields the following formula: "The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction."⁴ In short, texts deconstruct themselves. The text will always have anticipated any deconstructive operation that the critic might perform on it. For de Man, this self-deconstructing drive in texts is to be explained with reference to language. Because language is a bottomless quicksand of rhetorical figures (such as metaphor), it is fatally unstable. This assumption of instability dictates the task of deconstruction: "A deconstruction always has for its target to reveal the existence of hidden . . . fragmentations within assumedly monadic [i.e., unified] totalities"—such as texts.⁵

Introducing *Allegories of Reading*, his most important work, de Man explains that his inclusion of Proust and Rilke among the writers he will deal with is dictated in part by their stubborn resistance to his way of reading: "One could argue that if *their* work yields to such [readings], the same would necessarily be true for writers whose rhetorical strategies are less hidden"⁶—Mark, for example? In large letters across its chest Mark flaunts that admission of self-division that only the most skilled reading can coax from so much modern literature. Thus we can say that, given the unusual degree of openness with which Mark at once asserts and subverts its own rhetorical stance, it is exemplary of the self-deconstructive text, and to that extent of literature in general.

On the inside Looking in

If the Markan lion has at least four tails, it also has more than one set of teeth. Scarcely less daunting than its ending is its baffling use of the term *parable*. Here is a second set of jaws into which we can feed a deconstructive reading.

Between the parable of the Sower (4:3-9) and its interpretation (14-20) is Mark's so-called parable theory. Jesus' listeners question him concerning the parables, to which he responds: "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven" (4:11-12). Now, the expression, "so that they may indeed *see* but not perceive," coupled with the expression, "for those outside *everything is in parables*," suggests that "parable" in Mark (*parabolē* in Greek) may mean more than just a traditional teaching device taken over by the historical Jesus. The term may encompass Jesus' enigmatic

3. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 17.

4. *Ibid.*, 205.

5. *Ibid.*, 249.

6. *Ibid.*, ix.

ministry as such, a fusion of word and deed. Indeed, some scholars have gone on to suggest that given Mark's many startling features, not least its paradoxical ending, the Gospel as a whole can be said to function parabolically, parable being a type of paradox.

Contrasted as they are with "those outside" (4:11), Jesus' disciples must be insiders (cf. 3:31-35). And whereas outsiders are expected to see but not perceive, hear but not understand, insiders are, by implication, expected both to see and to perceive, to hear and to understand. But do they?

Mark's parables discourse ends on a reassuring note: "privately to his own disciples he explained everything" (4:34). Yet Mark's next episode, the calming of the storm, has Jesus rebuking his followers for their lack of faith (4:40). Later, following the first feeding miracle, we read that the disciples "did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:52; cf. 3:5). More damaging still is the third boat episode, which elicits the following outburst from Jesus: "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet *perceive* or *understand*? Are your hearts hardened? *Having eyes do you not see and having ears do you not hear?*"—like the outsiders of 4:11-12. He ends: "Do you not yet understand?" (8:17-18, 21; cf. 7:18).

Corresponding to these three boat scenes are the three misunderstandings that follow Jesus' three predictions of his suffering and death. In response to the first prediction, Peter reproves Jesus and is sharply rebuked in turn: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men" (8:32-33). Following the second prediction, we learn that the disciples "did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him" (9:32). Afterward they argue among themselves about which of them is the greatest (9:34). Following the third prediction, two of the disciples request seats of honor from Jesus, to which he replies: "You do not know what you are asking" (10:35 ff.). To all this must, of course, be added Judas' betrayal of Jesus (14:10-11), the other (male) disciples' desertion of him at his arrest (14:50; cf. 15:40-41), Peter's threefold denial of him (14:66-72), and the women disciples' confused flight from the tomb (16:8).

Right to the end of the Gospel, then, the insiders are on the inside looking in, as though they were in fact outside.⁷ The secret of the kingdom has indeed been presented to them (4:11), but although they are poised before it they cannot penetrate it. Between seeing and perceiving, hearing and understanding, something intervenes, something that also keeps those whom the Gospel *explicitly* designates outsiders outside, something it calls *parable*: "for those outside everything is in parables." What distinguishes disciples from outsiders is that disciples long to be inside, to *be* the insiders they are said to be.

The obscurity of Jesus' parabolic words and deeds does not suffice to explain the depth of the disciples' ignorance. When Jesus begins "to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected . . . and be killed, and after three days rise again," thereby administering the fatal blow to their faltering understanding, the narrator adds: "And he said this plainly [*parrësia*]"

7. See Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 27, 46-47.

(8:31-32). It seems that the mystery of the kingdom can meet only with misunderstanding (at least for now), whether parabolic or plain speech be used to express it.

Indeed, all of Jesus' speech and all of his actions in Mark quickly reduce to "parable", once they become vehicles of this mystery. "For those outside everything is in parables"—but for those "inside" also, who in consequence are neither fully inside nor yet fully outside. Like the seed scattered by the sower, Jesus' parabolic speech falls ineffectually on rocky ground, unable to take root in the "hardened" hearts of the disciples. Precisely at this point, however, it begins to take root in the texts of Jacques Derrida.

The Written V(oice)

Earlier we noted Derrida's contention that Western culture is established upon a series of hierarchical oppositions. One opposition in particular has been of special interest to Derrida. In the West, the spoken word has almost always been privileged over the written. But what could be more *natural* than to privilege speech? As I speak, my words appear to be one with my thoughts. My meaning appears to be fully present both to me and to my hearer. At such moments, the voice appears to be consciousness itself, presence itself: voice, presence, truth. In the West, speech has always been the model not only for every form of presence but also for every form of truth. All the names used to express theological or philosophical fundamentals have always been inseparable from the idea of presence: God, being, essence, existence, and so on—the list is very long.

Writing, in contrast, cut off at its source from the authorizing presence of a speaker, has often been thought to threaten truth with distortion and mischief. As lifeless written marks in place of present living speech, writing has seemed to be an inferior, if necessary, substitute for speech. An orphan, no sooner born than set adrift, cut loose from the author who gives birth to it, writing seems fated endlessly to circulate, if not from foster home to foster home, then from reader to reader. And the reader can never be sure of properly grasping what the author intended to say. Authors have a way of being absent, even dead, and their intended meaning can no longer be directly intuited or double-checked through question and answer, as in the face-to-face situation of speech. Writing defaces speech.

Derrida approaches the speech/writing opposition by asking, What if the alien, the parasite, were already within? What if speech were already the host of writing?⁸ Let us extend his question to Mark: What if *Jesus'* speech were inhabited by writing? What if it were haunted, infected, afflicted by it? It is time we returned to *parabolē*.

8. His argument is complex and need not concern us here. I have already summarized it in my *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 157-59, 132-33.

Jesus as a Man of Letters

Effective speech, as commonly understood, is marked by the presence to the hearer of the speaker's intended meaning, whereas writing, traditionally, is the errant medium, its meaning cut adrift from the consciousness of its producer. Mark's text perverts this "normal" relationship of speech to writing. Take, for example, Jesus' three passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). They can be regarded as some of Jesus' clearer statements in Mark as far as the reader—and the narrator (see 8:32a)—are concerned, whereas they are impossibly obscure as far as Jesus' immediate listeners are concerned. Between speech and hearing, something intrudes. Like a blade it severs the circle of understanding, the intimate circle of exchange ("looking around on those who sat about him in a circle. . ."; 3:34) within whose circumference Jesus' voice *should* circulate, coupling with the ears of his disciples, breath to flesh and nothing between.

Sliced through, Jesus' speech is unable to reach its mark. It falls to the ground and is picked up wrongly. It is as if Jesus were *writing* instead of *speaking*, as if his disciples were *reading* instead of *listening*. The severing blade can only be re(a)d; it makes no sound. Silently it makes its cut, forcing Jesus to write without a pen. And the blade appears to be wielded by Jesus' own Father, who wills that the disciples' ears should not yet be impregnated with understanding (cf. 6:52; 8:17-18).⁹

Should not Jesus himself be a father? Traditionally, the speaker is father to his speech. Unlike the written word, the spoken word is able to reach its target easily because it has a living father, a father who is present to it, who stands behind it, making sure that its aim is straight. Jesus cannot be such a father to his speech. The blade of his own father has cut off that possibility, severing the "natural" bond that should exist between thought and voice, meaning and sound.

Jesus must write upon the dark field of the disciples' understanding, although not in luminous letters. "The alphabet of stars alone does that," as the poet Mallarmé somewhere says. But if the disciples' understanding is dark, it is due to the inky blackness of the letters it must soak up—blue-black letters that release little light.

If John's Jesus is modeled on the *spoken* word ("In the beginning was the word [*logos*]"), Mark's Jesus can be said to be modeled on the *written* word. Not only does Jesus "write" in Mark; he is himself a species of writing—literally, because we know him only through the written letter. Jesus is a man of letters.

Like Jesus who drifts from misunderstanding to misunderstanding across the surface of Mark's page, writing has always been a wandering outcast, drifting from (mis)reading to (mis)reading. At least since the time of Plato, writing has also been read as an orphan or delinquent:

Once a thing is put into writing, the composition . . . drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but

9. Note the passive constructions ("hardened" [*pepōrōmenē*]) in 6:52 and 8:17c (contrast 3:5), which seem, to me at any rate, to imply divine agency, especially in light of such texts as Exod 4:21ff.; Luke 9:45; 18:34; and Rom 11:7-8.

equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not to address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help.¹⁰

However, "the specificity of writing [is] intimately bound to the absence of the father," as Derrida observes.¹¹ The present writer is always absent. The orphaned word must circulate without its parent's protective presence, vulnerable to mishandling and misreading. Without its father, it is, in fact, "nothing but . . . writing."¹² As letter, Mark's Jesus is "delivered into human hands" (9:31; cf. 10:33). As writing, he is penned to the cross, cut off from his Father ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"; 15:34), and exposed to the casual violence of any reader who happens by ("Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha!' "; 15:29 ff.). As writing, Jesus is crucified, stretched out on the wood, the rack, the reading frame. Mark's Jesus does violate the common law of writing by finally uniting with his Father. But even then his status remains more that of an inscription than of a spoken word (or *logos*), marked as it is by absence ("He has risen; he is not here"; 16:6) and exposure to the accidents of (mis)reading ("they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid"; 16:8).

Mark's Jesus can therefore be read on the model of the written mark (and what is Jesus in Mark but a series of written marks, a marked man?). But Jesus' status in Mark prefigures Mark's own status. Mark's Jesus is a "writer," himself inscribed in a text, but so inscribed as to prefigure the fate of that text. Mark's own destiny as a writing is foreshadowed in the way it writes up the story of Jesus.

Mark is gradually folding back on itself as we read it. Not only is it a writing about Jesus but also it is a writing about writing. In addition, it is a writing about reading, a writing, which, as it retells the story of Jesus, also foretells the history of (mis)reading that the story will generate. As de Man puts it, "the text . . . tells the story, the allegory of its misunderstanding."¹³ This itself is a story that deconstructors tell time and again.

Mark's Poisonous Cure for Ignorance

Reading writings *on* writing by Plato, Rousseau, and Mallarmé, Derrida finds that the terms used by each writer to describe writing—*pharmakon* in Plato,

10. Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. R. Hackforth (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 275d-275e.
11. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 77.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 136. Cf. de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 205.

supplement in Rousseau, *hymen* in Mallarmé—have a contradictory, double sense. (To take the simplest example, the Greek word *pharmakon* means both *poison* and *cure*.)

What of Mark? Mark is not explicitly about writing, of course, but a speech deeply marked with the traits of writing does figure in it, as we have seen. Interestingly, Mark himself has a term for such speech. He calls it *parabolē* (“parable”), a term whose peculiarities we must now examine more closely.

Parabolai in Mark are a partition, screen, or membrane designed to keep insiders on one side, outsiders on the other. Outsiders are those for whom “everything comes in parables,” parables that they find incomprehensible (4:11-12). At the same time, *parabolai* rupture that membrane, make it permeable, infect the opposition with contradiction; those who should be on the inside find themselves repeatedly put out by Jesus’ parabolic words and deeds. Appointed to allow insiders in and to keep outsiders out, parables unexpectedly begin to threaten *everyone* with exclusion in Mark, even disciples seeking entry. Deranged doormen, parables threaten to make outsiders of us all.

Derrida remarks of the *pharmakon*, the *supplement*, and the *hymen*:

It has been necessary to analyze, to set to work, *within* the text of the history of philosophy, as well as *within* the so-called literary text . . . , certain marks . . . that . . . I have called undecidables, . . . that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term¹⁴

—that is to say, without ever neatly resolving the contradiction.

Like *pharmakon* and the other “undecidable marks” that Derrida lifts from the texts he reads, Mark’s *parabolē* refuses to be laid to rest within the narrow framework of a classic binary opposition—here, that of inside versus outside. *Parabolē* turns language inside out like a pocket, threatening to empty it of its content(s). *Parabolē* takes a voice that issues from the intimacy of an inside, from the interiority of a speaker, Jesus, a voice that *should* easily be able to leap the gap separating it from the ear of the hearer, and turns it into an unincorporable exteriority. Too blunt to penetrate the ear, it cannot fit inside. “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” cries Jesus (4:9; cf. 4:23), but nobody has ears big enough.

Parabolē unsettles speech. It inhabits the oppositions of inside and outside, speech and writing, but only that it might disrupt the order of the house, rock the foundation in which these oppositions are embedded, shake the (bed)frames so as to keep the interpreters restlessly turning over. *Parabolē* positions itself between opposing terms, apparently to pull them apart, all the while sowing confusion between them.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 42–43, his emphasis.

Parabolē is prudent. It inflicts a grievous wound on common sense, but takes care to leave it untended. It stays away from the pharmacy, the *pharmakon*. It is wary of the cure that might turn out to be a poison.

Yet it is not as though the outsiders in Mark never get a look in(side). Jesus is identified as Son (of God), not only by God’s self (1:11; 9:7) and by the narrator (1:1), but also by the demons (3:11; 5:7; cf. 1:24, 34) and by the centurion at the foot of the cross (15:39). But although the demons do have inside information on Jesus, they can hardly be said to be insiders. Among the human characters, only the centurion, a Gentile and hence an outsider, is allowed to look inside (“Truly this man was God’s Son!”). The women disciples do advance steadily toward the inside (15:40–41, 47; 16:1 ff.)—until *parabolē* leaps out to greet them from the interior of the tomb to drive them back outside: “And they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them . . .” (16:8). But what of the Syrophenician woman (7:24–30)? Or Bartimaeus (10:46–52)? Assuredly they have faith, but would they accept that Jesus must suffer? And until we know that they would, can they be said to be insiders? In short, there are no insiders in Mark who are not at the same time outsiders.

The contradiction prevails until the end and beyond. Mark 16:7 does seem finally to promise the long-deferred establishment of the insiders *as* insiders: “he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” But 16:8, the Markan nonending, parablelike in its demolition of conventional expectations, threatens to leave the disciples stranded yet again in a twilight zone that is neither fully inside nor yet fully outside.

Mark as Stripture

For de Man, as we saw earlier, the literary text unravels itself. But the critic is not a mere passive witness to this self-undoing. *The critic, while appearing to comprehend a literary text from a position outside or above it, is in fact being comprehended, being grasped, by the text.* He or she is unwittingly acting out an interpretive role that the text has scripted, even dramatized, in advance. He or she is being enveloped in the folds of the texts even while attempting to sew it up. For me, this is one of deconstruction’s most intriguing propositions and one that biblical scholars have yet to come to grips with.

Take the fleeing young man in Mark 14:51–52, for example, and the ways in which scholars have tackled him. The passage reads: “And a young man followed [Jesus], with nothing on but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.” In the 1909 edition of his commentary on Mark, Henry Barclay Swete cited with approval the hypothesis of “many recent commentators” that the fleeing young man of 14:51–52 is none other than the evangelist himself.¹⁵ The episode would then

15. Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indexes*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids, Kregel Publications, 1977), 354.

be an autobiographical recollection, amounting to the author's personal signature within the text.

Commentators today accord little credence to this hypothesis. What fascinates me, however, is the way a discredited hypothesis such as this one hits the mark in one sense while missing it in the sense in which it was aimed. However poor their marksmanship as conventional historians might be, those who ventured to describe Mark 14:51-52 as an authorial "signature" deserve excellent marks for their aim. The flight of the naked young man would be an uncannily apt signature left behind by the author, a glimpse of the author's vanishing behind.

The scene is one of uncovering, of unveiling. It says that if you attempt to grasp Mark—and among the "crowd with swords and clubs" that advance on him, do we not detect a detail of Markan scholars armed with the tools of critical analysis?—you will be left holding the cloth, the covering, what has been added to make him seem respectable, while he slips away naked into the night.

"They seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked." Is not criticism itself a form of denuding?¹⁶ Clearly scholars have but one thing on their minds. They are always eager to undress a work, to expose an original content concealed beneath secondary revisions, for example, as in their handling of Mark's (rear)ending. Denuding, undressing, exposing, unveiling: these are the prurient gestures of scholarship in search of truth. Add the interpenetration of cloth, textile, and text (*text* is from the Latin verb *texere*, "to weave"), and the disrobing of the young man can be read as having text and critic as its theme: the text at the moment when the critic, seeking to arrest the movement of its meanings, lays rough hands on it, exposing the truth of criticism as a form of denuding, and denuding as a form of violence. Criticism (st)rips the page.

The undressing is accidental in our scene: those who seize the young man intend only to arrest him, not to strip him. But an accident is what we are here to investigate—the accident through which the now discredited hypothesis identifying the young man as "Mark" lays bare a truth it did not reach for: the truth that criticism is a fantasy of violent possession instead of the young man's true identity, the truth of criticism instead of critical truth. Where do we ourselves lie in relation to this truth? In attempting to pronounce the truth of this scene, what have we effected? A denuding of criticism as denuding? If so, we ourselves stand exposed. The text has slipped away, having stripped *us* on its way out, and whether it flees naked or clothed we cannot say. The more one appears to be the master, "the more one presents one's rear."¹⁷

At issue here are the pretensions of one form of communication (criticism) to speak authoritatively on behalf of another (literature). What if both these modes of communication were hopelessly entangled to begin with? Criticism sets out to subjugate literary language, enlisting language in order to do so.

16. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 415–19.

17. *Ibid.*, 453.

Small wonder if language revolts. In the course of that uncivil war, curious knots, complicities, and contradictions come about. These knots, nets, and traps have been a source of particular fascination for deconstruction.

The Gospel of the ~~Mark~~

"I do not 'concentrate,' in my reading. . . , either exclusively or primarily on those points that appear to be the most 'important,' 'central,' 'crucial,'" Derrida explains. "Rather, I de-concentrate, and *it is the secondary, eccentric, lateral, marginal, parasitic, borderline cases which are 'important' to me* and are a source of many things, such as pleasure, but also insight into the general functioning of a textual system."¹⁸ The "eccentric," "marginal," "borderline" hypothesis identifying the fleeing young man as the evangelist Mark turned out to be an intriguing commentary on the system of Markan criticism itself, no less so for being unintentional. Of course, the episode in question (the flight of the naked young man) has always been a celebrated crux in Markan studies. It is time we strayed farther into the margins.

Mark's theology is commonly said to be a theology of the cross, a theology in which life and death crisscross. Jesus' crucifixion: having cross-examined his dyslexic disciples ("who do people say that I am? . . . who do you say that I am?"), Jesus declares, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:34-35). In Mark, the signature of the disciple can only ever be that of a crisscross or Christcross, which my dictionary defines as "the figure or mark of a cross in general; esp. that made in 'signing' his name by a person who cannot write" (*OED*). But a person unable to write is generally unable to read, and in Mark, the disciples, generally at cross-purposes with Jesus, are singularly unable to read. Jesus must speak cross words to his puzzled disciples (8:33; cf. 8:17-21).

A cross is also a chiasmus, a crosswise fusion in which the order established in the first instance ("whoever would *save* their life will *lose* it") is inverted in the second instance ("and whoever *loses* their life . . . will *save* it"). Central to Mark is the fact of the crucifixion, a fiction structured like a cross or chiasmus.

Chiasmus comes from the Greek verb *chiazein*, "to mark with the letter χ ," pronounced *chi*. And *chi* is an anagram of *ich*, which is German for the personal pronoun *I*, and the technical term in Freud (whose appearance here is anything but accidental) that English translators render as *ego*. And Jesus, who identifies himself to his terrified disciples in Mark 6:50 with the words *egō eimi* ("I am," or "it is I"), himself possesses a name that is an echo of the French *Je suis* ("I am"), the single superfluous letter being the *I* (or *ego*), which is thus marked out for deletion: "Father, . . . not what I [*egō*] want, but what you want" (14:36).

18. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 44, emphasis added.

To be marked with the χ , the cross, is painful, for *chiazain* also means "to cut." Another meaning of *chiasma* is "piece of wood." And the *chiasma* on which Jesus writ(h)es is a lectern as well as a writing desk. Dying, he opens the book to Psalm 22 and reads the opening verse: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" *Chi*, the first letter of *Christos* ("Christ"), is also the twenty-second letter of the Greek alphabet.

But *chi*, as *ich*, is also *ichthus*. And *ichthus* ("fish" in Greek) was an early christological acronym: *Iēsous CHristos THEou hUios Sôtēr* ("Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior"). Dragged from the muddy river in Mark 1:10 ("And when he came up out of the water . . ."), Jesus slithers across the surface of the text. Who can ever grasp him? Mark itself comes closest. Mark's plot-lines are fishing lines, as are the lines of its page. And its genre is that of the fishing manual: "I will make you fishers of men" (1:17). Caught and taught by these fishermen, Jesus' followers will be a school of fish.

But first Jesus himself must be caught ("they . . . seized him"; 14:46), and so Mark's book becomes a hook, a clawed fishhook or χ . From the four sharp corners of its page, Jesus-*Ichthus* dangles, gasping for air.¹⁹ At the end of the narrative line, Jesus writhes helplessly. His tale thrashes furiously as its climax approaches. But he is not yet in the net. As fish, Jesus will never be eaten; note that at the last supper (no fish supper) wine replaces the fish of the feeding miracles (6:38, 41, 43; 8:7; 14:23-25). Jesus can be eaten only as bread. In short, Mark is a standard (ev)ang(e)ler's tale about the one that got away: "he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him" (16:6).

But the clawed *chi* has cut a deep gash in Mark as well as in Jesus, one that never closes. As we have seen, Mark holds opposites in painful tension: inside/outside, speech/writing, presence/absence. And this takes place within a book whose ending ("they said nothing to anyone"; 16:8) precludes its ever having been able to begin. Now Derrida likes to put concepts "under erasure." He crosses them out, deletes them without erasing them, as in "The Outside ~~X~~ the Inside"²⁰—what better epigraph for Mark? These concepts are inadmissible in his text, yet indispensable to it (presence, being, origin, etc.). Does Mark, who speaks with two different voices, who writes with two different hands, who deletes though without erasing, not write his entire Gospel under erasure, under the sign of the cross, the *chi*, the chiasmus, the mark (X)? A writing that "marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke,"²¹ Mark can more aptly be written ~~Mark~~.

Faced with the mystery of Jesus, Mark can only (double) cross itself. Faced with the hit-and-misstery of exegesis, the critic can only repeat the gesture. One thing is certain, however: Mark is a cross-disciplinary text/book ("let them . . . take up their cross and follow me"; 8:34), which demands a cross-disciplinary reading.

19. To die of crucifixion was to die of asphyxia, frequently, the torso slumping forward in exhaustion until the contraction on the lungs gradually cut off respiration.

20. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 44.

21. Derrida, *Positions*, 193.

But the real double cross in Mark is the kiss that draws blood, the savage kiss of Judas that initiates Jesus' passion ("And he kissed him"; 14:45), the lewd X near the end of Mark's letter. Mark writes under the sign not of one but of *three* crosses, then: the cross of Jesus, coupled with the colossal double cross of Judas. The latter looms over the story almost from the start (cf. 3:19), driving its action onward and bringing it to an inexorable climax (14:10-11, 18-21, 43-46). This sign of the triple cross is marked by a threefold crucifixion: "And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left" (15:27). Jesus' cross, soon to become a book (Mark), is placed between two cross-shaped bookends.

In short, the author of this Gospel has scattered his autograph, his signature, (his) Mark in the text—a name he does not yet know is his; it will be assigned to him only after his death. This author's real name is lost to us. Originally the Gospel circulated anonymously, "Mark" only later being added to it. This name appears to have been stolen from certain neighboring texts (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37-39; 2 Tim 4:11; 1 Pet 5:13) that feature a (John) Mark who was a companion of Peter and Paul.

Did (John) Mark write the first Gospel? Most scholars today doubt that he did. However, the hypothesis that he did write it might not be altogether amiss. Like the reading that turns the fleeing young man into the author's signature, it seems to hit (the) Mark a stunning blow while missing it. And it is the striking, "other" logic of that mysterious hit that fascinates me—how, flying wide, it nonetheless connects with a truth that conventional historiography would not think to target. Miss-understanding's underestimated striking power has made an accurate miss-ile of an inaccurate reading.

"Silently, laboriously, minutely, obsessively," like a thief in the night, the author (of) Mark has set his signatures in place. "In the morning . . . you find his name all over the place. . . . He is no longer there, but you live in his mausoleum or his latrines."²² The cross-stitching in this text is elaborate and delicate: from Mark who signs his name with the sign of the cross, also the sign of erasure, to Jesus who(se name—*Je suis*) is put to death on the cross (thereby erasing the *I* it contains), through an intricate pattern of crosslike marks, crosswise fusions, and irresolvable cruxes, all enacted in the shadow of a colossal double cross. To begin to unravel it is to take hold of a thread that leads not *out* of a labyrinth, but *into* one.

But whose labyrinth is it?

The Object of the Pun in Exegesis

Midway through "Plato's Pharmacy," his reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, Derrida stops to ask who the owner of the many meanings coursing through its corridors might be:

Like any text, the text of "Plato" couldn't not be involved . . . with all the words that composed the system of the Greek language. . . . We do

22. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 41-42.

not believe that there exists, in all rigor, a Platonic text, closed upon itself, complete with its inside and its outside. Not that one must then consider that it is leaking on all sides and can be drowned confusedly in the undifferentiated generality of its element. Rather, provided the articulations are rigorously and prudently recognized, one should simply be able to untangle the hidden forces of attraction linking a present word with an absent word in the text.²³

What is being called into question here is the power often attributed to authors—and nowhere more insistently than in biblical studies—to bend the language of texts to their will, to use language only and not be used by it, to keep its seething semantic potential at a controlled heat so that a unity of meaning can form in it, to prevent the text from boiling over with scalding force, spoiling the author's recipe. In reponse, Derrida gestures to a "textual unconscious," an unpredictable and hence uncontrollable excess of meaning that simmers within any linguistic production, ever ready to spill over.

The ways into Derrida's own labyrinthine writings are many—doors marked with the names of prominent German philosophers, for example (Heidegger, Husserl, Nietzsche, Hegel). A door no less serviceable, though less often used, is the one that bears the name of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud.

As the century that opened with Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* draws to a close, Freud's message still sits undigested in our bodies of writing. "It is essential to abandon the overvaluation of the property of being conscious," wrote Freud; "The unconscious is the larger sphere, which includes within it the smaller sphere of the conscious."²⁴

Psychoanalytic literary critics who take their lead from Derrida look to psychoanalysis not just for a new way of reading but also for a new way of writing—a reinvigorated academic writing that would take as its point of departure an observation implicit in early Freud, but neglected by Freudian literary critics, Freud himself included. *The unconscious is itself irreducibly "literary" in its workings.*²⁵ It is a realm of graphic images, startling associations, surrealist spectacles, and multilingual puns.

In some of his more experimental texts, Derrida would appear to be miming the movements of the unconscious, exploiting chance associations between words across several languages—associations traditional scholarship would disregard as inconsequential—performing interpretations that engage in textual congress with the *letter* of the text being read—its accidents of expression, the minute specifics of its style, the look of its words as well as their sound—as

23. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 129–30; cf. 95–96.

24. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 5:612–13.

25. Here I am echoing the views of Jacques Lacan, Freud's foremost French disciple. There is a strong family resemblance between the theories of Lacan and Derrida, although Derrida as the younger brother has tried to distance himself as much as possible from Lacan.

opposed to its content. (Needless to say, the firm distinction of form and content is the first casualty of these readings.) Clearly, my own reading of Mark has been increasingly colored by these performances—performances that do not easily reduce to methodological rules and principles. As Derrida himself has remarked: "Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all; it does not settle for methodical procedures, it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail; . . . it produces rules—other conventions. . . ."²⁶

Derrida's project in such writings (for example, *Glas*, *Signsponge*, *The Post Card*, *The Truth in Painting*) can be understood in part as an attempt to extend to the domains of philosophical and critical analysis Freud's pioneering explorations of dreams, slips of the tongue and pen, lapses of memory, and all the other "accidents" of conscious life that we ordinarily shove into the margins. At stake in such a project is the deconstruction of a cluster of oppositions that happen—not by chance—to form the foundations of standard academic writing, biblical scholarship included: rational/irrational, intended/unintended, essential/accidental, serious/trivial, central/marginal, content/form, idea/ornament, literal/metaphorical, primary text/secondary text, creative writing/critical writing. . . .

As with all such conceptual pairs (recall our opening discussion), the second term is thought to be inferior to the first. These hierarchies tend to be accepted as natural and self-evident, as though they had not been established at certain moments, as though they had no history. Fixed and frozen, they paralyze thought even as they enable it. But take, for example, the exclusion of homonyms or puns from the Western intellectual tradition. This exclusion can be traced back to such contingencies as Aristotle's strictures against homonyms and Plato's exclusion of poets from his ideal state.

For the serious scholar, puns and anagrams are jest a joke. Language should be heard and not seen. Deconstruction sets up camp precisely at such points and begins to excavate: where what is *written* (for example, "his story") is not identical to what is *heard* ("history), where writing flaunts an excess that is irreducible to speech, and where the history that enslaves writing to the voice begins to flounder before our very eyes (*history*, *his story*, *hystery*, *herstory*, *mystery*, *mystory* . . .).²⁷ Derrida has begun to forge a new academic writing that is no longer fixated on the ear and the voice. (Taste, smell, and touch figure in this new writing along with sight, but that is another story.) Homonymic and other associative clusters, moreover—recall the *chi*-cluster whose inky footprints we tracked through Mark—disrupt binary thinking. A thinking that lives in vertical, two-tiered, oppositional, hierarchical structures is necessarily unsettled by a nomad thinking that picks its steps through horizontal, single-tiered, associative, open-ended word clusters. Outside the city, with Plato's poets, on ground that traditional academe has long deemed a swamp, there is ample room for a

26. Jacques Derrida, "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," trans. Catherine Porter, in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 42.

27. *Hystery* comes from *hystera*, the Greek word for "womb." *Mystory* is a term concocted by the critical theorist Gregory Ulmer.

different academy that would house alternative approaches to reading and writing.

Mark's Nightmaze: Writ(h)ing on a Bed of Paper

What does Mark, or any other Gospel, have to do with the language of the unconscious, epitomized by the language of dreams? Quite a bit, as a matter of fact. Abstract expression is alien both to the Gospel and to the dream. Clearly, the pictorial language of a Gospel is not the abstract, propositional language of a theological treatise or scholarly commentary. A Gospel is more like a dream than a dissertation. "Abstract expressions offer the same kind of difficulties to representation in dreams as a political leading article in a newspaper would offer to an illustrator," notes Freud,²⁸ and what is true of the illustrator and the dreamer is also true of the evangelist. Like the cartoon, the dream or Gospel must render in concrete, pictorial terms a subject matter that is generally "colorless and abstract."²⁹ But biblical scholars and theologians are, for the most part, neither dreamers nor cartoonists, preferring to take a jackhammer to the concrete language of the Gospels, to replace graphic images with abstract categories.

Like dreams, Gospels pose special problems for interpretation. The concrete word-images of which they are composed—seed, water, bread, blood—are far richer in associations than conceptual terms (evangelism, baptism, communion, redemption). When our abstract conceptual language or our commonsense everyday language is displaced by a concrete pictorial language, our understanding falters, because a Gospel or a dream never, or almost never, tells us whether its elements are to be interpreted literally or figuratively—historically, for example (as a recollection of something that actually happened), or symbolically (as having a far looser connection with "reality").

Odd as it may sound, then, Mark is at least as close to the language of the unconscious (that of the dream, for example) as to the theological treatise or scholarly commentary. In consequence, Mark can just as easily be approached through a postcritical writing that would attempt to match its concrete parabolic style by miming it, as through a critical reading that, in getting Mark right (in putting down the riot), would attempt to rewrite it altogether in colorless academese.

The questions remain, How can scholarly writing on the Bible be put into communication with what is said in Genesis about a God who creates the names of the first man and woman through wordplay (2:7, 23; 3:20; cf. 4:1); or what is said in Exodus about a God who, in displaying himself to Moses, plays on his own name (3:14 ff.); or "what is said in Numbers about the parched woman drinking the inky dust of the law [5:23-24]; or what is said in Ezekiel

28. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 5:340.

29. *Ibid.*, 5:339.

about the son of man who fills his entrails with the scroll of the law which has become sweet as honey in his mouth [2:8-3:3; cf. Rev 10:8-10]";³⁰ or what is said in Matthew about a Jesus who founds his church upon a pun (16:18); or what is said in Mark about a Jesus who is both a writer and a writing and who, in a rite, bequeaths himself to his disciples to be (eaten as b)read: "analyze the corpus that I tender to you, that I extend here on this bed of paper"?³¹

FURTHER READING

General

- CULLER, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982. Perhaps the most widely used of the standard introductions to deconstruction.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. Three interviews with Derrida, often recommended as a useful port of entry to his thought.
- KAMUF, Peggy, ed. *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. Twenty-two selections (essays and book excerpts) from Derrida, each introduced by Kamuf, along with a general introduction.
- LEITCH, Vincent B. *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. Colorful, exuberant, and a mine of information.
- NORRIS, Christopher. *Derrida*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987. Focuses on Derrida's philosophical underpinnings and on the ethical ramifications of his thought.
- NORRIS, Christopher, and Andrew Benjamin. *What Is Deconstruction?* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. Two essays, lavishly illustrated: "Deconstruction, Post-Modernism and the Visual Arts" by Norris, and "Deconstruction and Art/The Art of Deconstruction" by Benjamin.

Biblical

- BLANK, G. Kim. "Deconstruction: Entering the Bible through Babel." *Neotestamentica* 20 (1986): 61-67. A literary critic explains deconstruction to an audience of biblical scholars.
- CROSSAN, John Dominic. *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus*. New York: Seabury Press, 1980. Three lively essays in which Derrida makes a number of appearances.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book." *In Writing and Difference*, 64-78. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Haunting, lyrical meditations on writing, Judaism, and the Bible.
- DETWIELER, Robert, ed. *Derrida and Biblical Studies. Semeia* 23 (1982). Includes an excellent introduction to Derrida by Herbert Schneidau and an essay by Derrida himself that circles the book of Revelation.
- JOBLING, David, and Stephen D. Moore, eds. *Poststructuralism as Exegesis. Semeia* 54 (1991). Includes Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel" (in English, despite the title).

30. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 231.

31. Derrida, *The Post Card*, 99.