

John and the resistant reader: The Fourth Gospel after Nicea and the Holocaust

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Summary

Modern readers of the Fourth Gospel can scarcely ignore the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this powerful text. Although its intense polemic against “the Jews” can be understood historically as a not unusual example of intra-Jewish sectarian animosity, its appropriation by Christians has made a sinister contribution to the Holocaust.

Furthermore, although the Fourth Gospel affirms of the disciple everything that it affirms of Jesus, it has served as the starting point for conciliar definitions on christology which have opened up a “divinity gap” between the reader and the central figure in the narrative.

An archetypal reading of this text makes possible an encounter with the author’s imaginal world, without being put off by the offensive rhetoric.

Opsomming

Moderne lesers van die Vierde Evangelie kan moeilik die *Wirkungsgeschichte* van hierdie kragtige teks ignoreer. Hoewel die intense polemiek teen “die Jode” binne die historiese konteks begryp kan word as histories ’n nie ongewone voorbeeld van intra-Joodse sektariese vyandigheid, het die teks se toe-eiening deur Christene ’n sinistere bydrae tot die Groot Slagting gelever.

Verder, hoewel die Vierde Evangelie alles ten opsigte van die dissipels bevestig wat dit vir Jesus bevestig, het dit gedien as die beginpunt vir versoenende definisies van Christologie wat ’n “Goddelike gaping” tussen die leser en die sentrale figuur in die verhaal oopgemaak het.

’n Argetipiese lees van hierdie teks maak ’n ontmoeting met die outeur se verbeeldingswêreld moontlik, sonder die gevaar om vervreemd te word deur aanstootlike retoriek.

In his article, “Kommunikatives Handeln in Gleichnissen Jesu”, H. Franke-möller (1982) has called attention to the danger of a growing cleavage between “history” and “literature” as the controlling paradigms in the study of the New Testament.

Archetypal exegesis rests on the conviction that the structure of the inner world has a universal character. Like the *a priori* categories of Kant, the archetypes are universal inherited possibilities. Like biological instincts, they direct all fantasy into its appointed paths. But these *a priori* biological norms of psychic activity only take on existence in concrete, individual images. In individuals, such images appear spontaneously in dreams and active imagination; in communities, they undergo a cultural process which transforms them into a symbol system of collective consciousness. The Christian symbol system is the product of innumerable historical factors, but its numinosity comes from its roots in “the kingdom within” of the unconscious.

Historical criticism reads the gospels in order to recover the “theology” of their authors and the history of the communities for which they were written. The “meaning” of a gospel is “explained” by “the intention of the author”, that is, a rationally conceived and rhetorically executed objective, which the modern scholar can infer by combining indications in the text with conjectures about the historical circumstances in which the text was written.

Structuralism prescind from both the situation in which the text was produced and the situation in which it is read. In the words, of J. Delorme: "À l'intérieur du système sémiotique de l'énoncé, l'énonciation n'est pas étudiée comme situation historique ou comme acte historique définissable, mais comme ce que présuppose l'énoncé, L'énoncé nous permettra de remonter à l'énonciation, par présupposition."¹

Both historical and structuralist readings assume an *objective* "meaning", distinct from "signification", the moment when the reader *grasps* the "meaning". Both historical and structuralist readings may be called "extraverted", insofar as "meaning" is sought outside the reader.

Archetypal interpretation is introverted: it understands the text to be the *mimesis* of the psychic processes which produced it, and it listens for resonances which the reading of the text produces in the psyche of the reader – *cor ad cor loquitur*. Archetypal interpretation is avowedly subjective, but it is not solipsistic. It attempts to formulate and to communicate the reading experience, while inviting others to share their experience of the text, which serves as a prism between the numinous world behind the text and the psyche of the reader.

My own interest in literary criticism was occasioned by what I felt to be the essential problem of historical criticism: by distancing the reader from the text, the historical *Fragestellung* frustrates the immediacy which is characteristic of religious literature (see Brown 1979, 1980).

Instead of being summoned to question and deepen the way in which he views himself and the world, the reader is allowed, and even encouraged, to take a detached, "objective" point of view: he analyzes what the author intended to communicate to the original readers; he himself does not stand within the hermeneutical circle.

However, I have discovered that literary criticism does not necessarily provide an answer to my problem. It has become evident to me that there are quite different interests in the literary critical paradigm, depending on which "reader" is being considered.

For some, it is the *original* reader, whose reception of a New Testament writing can be reconstructed from what we know about Greco-Roman education, the social setting of the reader/audience, and the concrete historical circumstances of ancient readers and literary critics (see Beavis, 1987). For others, including myself, the response to the text by *contemporary* readers is paramount.

Concentration on "the reader in the text" only papers over these differences. For there *is* no reader in the text: the literary construct of "the implied reader" is not a reader at all and cannot mediate our divergent interests. In practice, this approach has simply perpetuated a historical perspective under different terminology: "the implied reader" is a reflection of "the intention of the author" projected back upon the text.

Those whose interest is primarily in the contemporary reader are not dismayed by the realization that this reader normally does not even know the linguistic codes used by the New Testament authors, and has access to the text

only through vernacular translations. After all, the New Testament writers were in the same situation with respect to the Hebrew Bible.

Furthermore, this indirect access to the original text has important hermeneutical significance. For where knowledge of the *linguistic* codes used in the original text cannot be presupposed, there must be serious doubt about the propriety of imposing the *semantic* codes which may have been shared by the authors and their original readers.

Here we touch upon a basic hermeneutical question: who is competent to interpret the Bible? Has the Biblical scholar succeeded to the position of the Church as the authoritative interpreter of scripture, or are we prepared to entertain the dangerous notion that anyone who is affected by reading the Bible thereby demonstrates his interpretive competence?

Ambiguity over "the reader" is not the only problem posed by the literary critical paradigm. "Narrative criticism", after all, is derived from the study of the modern novel, and its application to New Testament narrative, while technically possible, is not necessarily illuminating. The fact that certain key distinctions used in modern narrative criticism, e.g. the distinction between "implied author" and "narrator", have no application in gospel narrative should give us pause: is this model appropriate?

The New Testament is *neither* history *nor* literature, in the modern acceptance of these terms. Certainly, if one reads the Fourth Gospel with the expectations normally attached to modern fiction, one will be disappointed, despite individual passages of great narrative power (e.g. 9: 1-41; 18: 28-38).

In the Fourth gospel as a whole, neither the story nor the characters make any claim to realism. There is no pretense at dramatic tension; the outcome of the story is known from the beginning: "he came unto his own, and his own received him not" (1: 11).

The baffling breaks and discontinuities in the story are symptomatic of a broader problem: the episodic character of the narrative as a whole. Hardly any of the characters have a life of their own. Jesus, the Beloved Disciple and John the Baptist are simply projections of the narrator: his voice speaks through them all, with no discernible difference in style or content.

The "heavies" in the drama are shallow and superficially drawn. No knowledge is given to the reader of what actually makes them tick. They are simply stand-ins for the world, the flesh and the devil. In fact, the disappointing narrative is but a thin veil cast over a work of religious propaganda.

In reading a novel, "one temporarily takes leave of one's familiar world of reality and enters into another world that is autonomous in its own right" (Kingsbury, 1986: 2). But is such a "willing suspension of disbelief" really possible in the case of the Fourth Gospel?

Of course, modern novelists may also have propagandistic objectives, but, to be effective, they must move the reader by the way they tell their story. That is why one may become thoroughly engrossed in a Dickens novel, for example, even though the particular social evils against which he was writing are a thing of the past.

As the expression of an ancient "speech act", the Fourth Gospel has a pragmatics altogether different from that of a work of literature, where the

notion of a “speech act” does not seem adequate (Van Dijk, 1976: 37). The success of a literary work does not depend on the reader’s ability to infer the intention of the author. For such a work is detached from the author at the moment of its completion, so that its pragmatic effect is not subject to the author’s intention. It is in the public domain and is measured against something outside the author.

Literary interpretation is not the restoration of some originally intended message. The change effected in the reader is not necessarily equivalent to the change intended by the writer. Within the range of possible interpretations, determined by the semantic structure of the text, the reader may freely choose those he prefers, i.e. those “truths” which obtain in worlds accessible to him.

The pragmatics of the Fourth Gospel, on the contrary, is similar to that of a letter: it is a practical written communication which takes the place of practical spoken communication. When the fourth evangelist declares: “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (20: 31), we hear the author’s intention every bit as clearly as when Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel” (1 Cor. 15: 1). We know we are listening in on a past communicative act, in which the narrative is totally subordinate to the author’s express purpose.

According to the logic of actions, the change intended by means of an act of communication is always envisaged in a given state of affairs, i.e. a particular situation occurring at a particular time (Van Dijk, 1976: 41). In written (indirect) communication, there is usually only a short lapse of time between the production and perception events. Now when persons other than those to whom such a communication was addressed read and interpret it, no practical interaction in the actual world between writer and reader is possible.

The lack of mutual accessibility of the worlds of the writer and the worlds of the reader reduces the set of possible presuppositions, so that the pragmatic effect can no longer be restricted to what the writer intended to achieve with the original readers. On the other hand, the explicit expression in the text of the author’s purpose inhibits the modern reader from approaching it simply as a work of literature. In short, it may be as inappropriate to compare a Hellenistic βίος, such as the Fourth Gospel (see Aune, 1987: chapter 2), with the modern novel as it is to compare it with the modern biography.

Modern readers are not included in the “kommunikatives Handeln”, of which the Fourth Gospel was *once* a part. Frankemölle’s (1982: 74) expression, “textgewordenes (emphasis mine) Element einer Kommunikations- und Interaktionsgeschichte”, has the same fictive quality as “the reader in the text”. The Fourth Gospel is a “track”² or trace of a *past* communicative act.

How, then, are we to experience the reality of Paul’s affirmation: “Whatever was written in former times was written for *our* instruction” (Rom. 15: 4)? I believe we must abandon the “metaphysics of presence” (Derrida) and accept *our own* present situation as the starting point for interpretation.

Then, perhaps, the Fourth Gospel can refract the projections of the reader into an experience of illumination.³

As N. Frye (1982: 28) has pointed out, "The essential idiom of the Bible is clearly oratorical", and this is as true of the Fourth Gospel as it is of the letters of Paul. The trouble is that the rhetoric of the Fourth Gospel has an unintended effect upon the modern reader: "Quel effroyable ton!" (Frye, 1982:28). Although the Johannine Jesus' dialogues with his disciples, or with a prospective disciple (4: 7-26), can be sensitive and empathic, his exchanges with his enemies are really monologues, without any genuine interaction: disembodied "truth", not understanding, is the objective.

This phenomenon reflects the historical situation of the Johannine community, which was no longer on speaking terms with the Jewish synagogue.⁴ This situation, in turn, explains the strident anti-Judaism of Jesus' declamations, which climax in the charge that the Jews are children of the devil (8: 44). On a recent tour of East German sites connected with Martin Luther, I became aware of a parallel to Johannine anti-Judaism. The bitterness of Luther's anti-papal rhetoric reflects the pain of his personal situation, in which he found himself under ecclesiastical excommunication. Though sub-Christian, the "tu quoque" retort is often the only defence of an alienated and marginalized individual or community.⁵

The historical critic may therefore assess the anti-Judaism of the Fourth Gospel as a reaction by the community of the Beloved Disciple to the (perceived) threat of Jewish persecution. The modern reader, however, must recognize the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of these dark passages during the much longer period of Jewish-Christian relations when the shoe has been on the other foot (Reinhartz, 1986). Although Christian anti-Semitism never envisaged the extermination of the Jewish people (O'Brien, 1986: 56-57), the Holocaust would have been inconceivable apart from Christian hostility to Jews.

The anti-Judaism of the Fourth Gospel is the flip-side of the high mathetology of the work: virtually every statement which the fourth evangelist makes about Jesus is also made about Jesus' disciples. Just as Jesus is brought into the sphere of the divine, so the Johannine disciples are united, through him with God, so that "the world" can no longer touch them. But the psychological inflation which accompanies this one-sided identification with the divine brings with it a deep sense of inferiority,⁶ which, since it is unconscious, must be projected onto a scapegoat.

Although the Jews have been the visible victims of this psychology, the damage done to Christians has also been devastating. Identification with the world above and repudiation of the world below splits the human psyche and cuts it off from the unconscious sources of growth and transformation. The self-deception of the "righteous" is evident to anyone turning on the television set on a Sunday morning.

The high christology of the Fourth Gospel, its high mathetology and its anti-Judaism are therefore all interconnected. But Johannine christology has a *Wirkungsgeschichte* of its own. Although Gnosticism demonstrates that Christianity is capable of being interpreted mythologically, it is the doctrinal

interpretation of the Christ event which has won the day, and, in this development, the Fourth Gospel played a crucial role. As the starting point for the conciliar definitions of Nicea and Ephesus, Johannine christology (divorced from mathetology) has contributed to the formation of a dogmatic system of "sacrosanct unintelligibility" (Dourley, 1984: chapter 2) which continues to separate Christian faith from personal experience.

If interpretation is to be a moral act, the modern reader who is aware of these issues will need to interact with the text of the Fourth Gospel. Indeed, this is what the nature of the reading process itself demands. W. Iser (1972: 279) observes:

The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader.

Let us consider a specific text, John 3, in which the christology, mathetology and anti-Judaism of the Fourth Gospel are all in evidence. Nicodemus' nocturnal visit to Jesus (1–2) suggests the invincible ignorance associated even with a well-disposed "ruler" and "teacher" of Judaism (1, 10). His "fides miraculorum" (2) reveals an earth-bound perspective and explains why he misunderstands (4) the saying of Jesus (3), which any disciple will immediately grasp.

The Johannine irony (Culpepper, 1983: 165–180) is in the service of a contemptuous *Besserwisserei* (Isaac, 1964). Nicodemus is fleshly; the Johannine disciple is spiritual (6), born from above, like Jesus (3), and hence capable of understanding the way of the spirit (8). The Johannine community, like Jesus, is privy to heavenly things (11, 13), whereas the earth-bound Jew does not even believe earthly things (12) and is therefore already judged (18). Rejection of Jesus is ultimately the result of moral turpitude (19–20).

A quarrel between the disciples of John the Baptist and a Jew (25) parallels the interchange between Jesus and Nicodemus and serves as the occasion for John's witness to his own subordinate status in relation to Christ (28). Is John, therefore, "of the earth", even though he bears witness to "the one from above" (31)? In any case, refusal to accept the Son makes God a liar (32–33), with consequent exclusion from life and the punishment of God's wrath (36).

What "convergence" can there be between such a text and a twentieth-century reader, to whom such rhetoric must be deeply suspect? The problem seems insoluble, if the transaction between text and reader is at the level of conscious, rational thought. But what if, in the reading process, other parts of the self come into play that transcend the purely intellectual and operate at a level far deeper than conscious knowledge?

For the Swiss psychologist C.G. Jung "the purpose of Scripture is not primarily to inform the mind, but, to borrow a phrase from D.H. Lawrence, 'to change the blood'" (Rollins, 1987). It is the archetypal material in the Bible which explains its continuing power over those with neither an ecclesiastical nor a scholarly interest.

John 3 is a veritable tissue of archetypal polarities: above/below, birth/

rebirth, water/spirit/flesh, spirit/wind, earthly/heavenly, ascent/descent, serpent/eternal life, God/world, belief/judgment, light/darkness, evil/truth, bride/bridegroom, increase/decrease, words/spirit, Father/Son, life/wrath.

The tendency of the rhetoric is to separate the opposites, but if the modern reader, like Nicodemus, can resist the temptation to one-sided identification with the world above and can acknowledge the contradiction (2: "how can these things be?"), he can overcome the rational incompatibility of the opposites by drawing out of the depths of the unconscious a *tertium quid*, as yet unknown.

Archetypal interpretation is "religious" in the etymological sense: it links the reader back to the archetypal past which has been transmitted through the human psyche since the origins of the race, but which remains unconscious. Such interpretation provides a balance for the rationalism which characterizes both the literary and the historical paradigm.

Even the best attempts at explanation are only more or less successful translations into another metaphorical language . . . The most we can do is to *dream the myth onwards* and give it a modern dress. (Jung, 1980: 160)

The rhetoric of John represents the surface structure of the text; beneath the rhetoric lies the deep structure of an archetypal world out of which the text has arisen (Brown, 1985) and which it is still capable of reflecting.

One could compare the contrast which Wagner makes between the vocal line and the orchestra:

There (in the orchestra) the primal urges of creation and nature are represented. What the orchestra expresses can never be clearly articulated, because it renders primal feeling itself . . . (Stanley-Porter, 1987: 39)

Commenting on this quotation, O. Lee observes:

No wonder that when we are first exposed to Wagner our attention goes to the orchestra. It puts us in touch with the very depths of our unconscious feelings. (Stanley-Porter, 1987)

To ignore the "vocal line" of John, in favor of the archetypal orchestration, is an act of resistance. In his study, "The Breaking of Form," H. Bloom (1979) speaks of the reading encounter as a combat, out of which meaning is wrested. Reading springs from the will to clear space for the reader over against a menacingly strong text, and it is therefore not a polite process. Bloom mentions the Gnostic exegesis of Scripture as "a salutary act of textual violence, transgressive through-and-through" (1979: 6).

Resistant reading is a strategy used today in feminist literary criticism. It is "a self-defensive measure designed to clear imaginative space beyond the influential web of the traditional script" (Braun, 1987).

Archetypal interpretation, as a form of resistant reading, is more congenial to the poetics of the lyric than to the poetics of the novel, since the poetics of the lyric allows a role for intuition and subjectivity.⁷ Wittgenstein reminds us:

A poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language game of giving information.⁸

This suggests that whether a particular text *is* a poem or not does not necessarily depend on intrinsic features of the text, such as rhyme or meter. It may depend on whether the text is *read* as a poem.

P. Ellis's (1984) chiasmic reading of the Fourth Gospel is an example of how the poetics of the lyric can be applied to our text. In such a reading, narrative expectations are suspended, and the reader is free to interpret the work as a web of verbal correspondences, which relate different parts of the text with each other.

The poetics of the lyric subjects the language of the Fourth Gospel to a different teleology or finality from that of ordinary speech; its purpose is aesthetic, rather than informational:

Aesthetic creation is not, properly speaking, communication . . . In aesthetic creation, the art work has import in itself. It is not a signal to share information. It is ambiguous enough in its expression to be open to several, equally valid interpretations. The art work is polysemous. (Collins, 1983: 68)

Reading the Fourth Gospel as expressive, rather than communicative language makes the worth of an interpretation depend on its value to the reader, rather than on its conformity with some interpretive paradigm. The old idea of "edification" reclaims its rightful place in interpretation.

Moreover, once the archetypal dimension of the Fourth Gospel is recognized, the Johannine notion of κρίσις (3: 19) takes on a new actuality. For our conscious attitude to the archetypal world is anything but an academic matter:

Whatever explanation or interpretation does to it (the archetype), we do to our own souls as well, with corresponding results for our own well-being . . . A bad explanation means a correspondingly bad attitude (to the archetype). *But the ultimate sufferer is the bad interpreter himself* (emphasis mine). (Jung 1980: 160)

In our culture, where only the rational is valued, the one-sidedness of rational exegesis constitutes a serious danger, since it leads the reader to the fateful belief that he has "explained" the text.

Notes

1. From a handwritten "réponse" distributed by J. Delorme to the seminar on literary criticism of *Studiosorum Novi Testamenti Societas*, during the 1984 meeting.
2. Bloch (1971: 55) says: "What do we really mean by *document*, if it is not a 'track', as it were – the mark, perceptible to the senses, which some phenomenon, in itself inaccessible, has left behind?"
3. Nicholson (1984: 124) says: "Entry into the open and exposure to the world is a common point between all the appearances and all beings that, being illuminated, perceive. But our illumination is more than our appearance, for it is the light that falls on our interior projections."
4. S.A. Katz (1984: 65–66) suggests that patristic references to Christians visiting synagogues are incompatible with a literal understanding of the fourth evangelist's references to "expulsion" from the synagogue (9: 22; 12: 42; 16: 2). However, reference is being made to a particular community, not to a universal phenomenon.

5. Although Katz argues convincingly that “the *Birkat ha-Minim* was not directed solely at Jewish Christians when promulgated (or revised) after 70” (p. 73), he allows that “the Jewish Christians, who knew of the animosity against them and of the feeling that they were heretics, ‘heard’ the *Birkat ha-Minim* as particularly aimed at them” (p. 74).
6. C.G. Jung (1980: 180) says: “Conscious megalomania is balanced by unconscious compensatory inferiority.”
7. Much of Bloom’s work arises from his study of poetry.
8. In *Zettel* (Oxford, 1967), p. 28.

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