

# *This Mortal Vehicle*

"Instinct, that voice of God that is obeyed by all animals." - Kant [quoted Gaylin 1994:36]

There is a prophecy that before the messiah will come there will be a sign; a pure red heifer will appear to be sacrificed; the ashes from its burnt offering must be used to purify those who would rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. A reference made in a lecture by Slavoj Žižek reminded me of a news story from several years back about the collaboration between a group of ultra-orthodox Israelis and an American Pentecostal minister who are attempting to call forth the messiah through genetic engineering. These groups are not trying to produce the messiah himself, but more modestly, if one can call their plan modest, they are leveraging the skills of the American, a successful cattle breeder—putting science into the service of religion— to produce the pure red heifer through genetic engineering. [Wright, Cran & Loeterman, Bronner, Žižek 2006a, 2006b]

While the reasons for producing this perfect heifer might have been 'understandable' to Paul of Tarsus, the means used to do so could be made possible only with the discoveries of Crick and Watson; and what they found certainly would have confounded this man who opposed the word to the flesh. Within the flesh itself we now know lies a curled manuscript written in a burning alphabet of nucleobases with only four letters, GATC. While one might see in this discovery the realization of John 1:14 "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," whenever and however they became divided, today it is science, not the messiah which threatens to collapse the split. There is reason to see this collapse coming from all directions, digital technology, implants, virtual reality— but it is the decoding of the genome which perhaps is the most obvious realization of flesh becoming word.

The real implications of this collapse will begin when our consciousness, structured by the word, returns to structure the flesh itself with genetic engineering, to write rather than merely to read the flesh— to willfully change our capacities and instincts. Computer

scientist Vernor Vinge [1994] has proposed that once human beings enhance themselves through implants, technology or genetics these advances will quickly become exponential as enhanced minds accelerate the rate of enhancement itself. A moment will come (he proposes a time-scale of as little as twenty to fifty years extrapolating from Moore's law) when the slow arc of human-technological integration will go linear. Such a collapse would represent the end then of what we might consider, in retrospect, as the Pauline age, the age of body as nemesis of the pure lawful word. This singularity holds the possibility of transforming our bodies and our minds, the foundation of human life—representation, communication, sexuality, morality, and mortality—by making the flesh the embodiment of the law itself.

This proposal of a singularity implies four possibilities worth considering. The first, the singularity is a chimera, in which case all worry is for naught. The second, the structure of the singularity is pre-determined by its contents, there is nothing we can do to shape it, or if we could it is so obscured from our field of knowledge (with our puny un-enhanced brains) outside the singularity it amounts to the same thing. The third, the shape and consequences of such a singularity are all a matter of chance, or any opportunity for shaping the structure of the singularity would be made in field where the order of complexity is such that, to our minds, choices would appear as random. The fourth, and what seems to me to be most likely, there is a degree of volition—how, when and why we enter the singularity will make some difference on its structure and its implications for human life. If this fourth is in fact the case, and as a matter of Pascalian wager it is really the only one worth considering, what would the capacity to choose mean in the face of such a choice and what insight would help us to understand the consequences of our choice. But might we ask, what law?

Here a reconsideration of the two movements that at first seem equivalent might be more productively placed in opposition: the 'word becoming flesh' to the 'flesh becoming word.' They can be thought of as the teleologies of religion and science respectively. If we accept this later as the telos of "becoming conscious" which Paul Ricoeur identifies in

Freud's project [Ricoeur 459] then Freud's famous *wo es war soll ich werden*, might be rewritten 'where the flesh was the word shall be.'<sup>1</sup> If indeed this movement is being literally realized through the technologies enabled by the genetic revolution, then Freud should also be our guide in realizing that the division between conscious and unconscious is never so clean and never *is* exactly where it *appears*. Half a meter of misplaced gauze might be enough prove this [Masson 116], but In his later social-historical work shows, this is doubly true on a collective scale— the unconscious always risks emerging in the space of reason. [Freud 1927, 1932]

## 1. the white lamb: telos zōēn aiōnion

Freud's flesh, however, is already like the flesh of genetics: it speaks, and this is true for the flesh of Paul as well.<sup>2</sup> After a volley of identification and disidentification in the preceding verses, in Romans 7:20, Paul dissociates himself from that element of himself which seem to compel him to violate the law. What is at stake in the renunciation of the flesh is not to denounce skin, muscle and bone in itself, but that this inarticulate, mute matter seems to make a demand. What, we might ask then, in the flesh could make such a demand? A provisional answer presents itself in "On Narcissism an Introduction" where Freud describes a similar individual, also at dual purposes, one who "carr[ies] on a twofold existence: one to serve his own purposes and the other as a link in a chain, which he serves against his will, or at any rate without any volition of his own." [1914:106] We will see that pairing these two conceptions of the flesh will bear fruit despite being a dead end.

Freud goes on to say that "The individual himself regards sexuality as one of his own ends; while from another point of view he is only an appendage to his germ-plasm, to which

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1. Of course science is supposed to refuse a telos, but I think it is more likely what we see here is the unconscious influence of Western monotheism on Western science than Ricoeur's conscious Catholicism or Freud's "Jewish atheism."
  2. Which is to say we are dealing with drives, representatives of instincts rather than instinct itself. see

he lends his energies, taking in return his toll of pleasure— the mortal vehicle of a (possibly) immortal substance." [106] If we consider Romans 7:20 and this passage from "On Narcissism" together for a moment, we might find the source of the renunciation of pleasure that permeates Paul's writing. It is not merely that sexual pleasure is the tool of the germ, the thorn in the flesh, the prick with which the driver controls the vehicle, it is sex itself which binds our consciousness to death. This split also divides sexual pleasure, the toll of 'germ-plasm,' from any instinctual impulse to sexual reproduction, an impulse we can assume would be reinforced by natural selection.

While in this process I think Freud has quite brilliantly identified the origins of the death drive and the compulsion to repeat, he doesn't seem quite able to come to terms with his own discovery. He seems instead to desperately back-peddle, to place the death drive as a primitive compulsion to stasis and to sexualize the asexual, speaking of the merging rather than splitting amoebas. [Freud 1920:58-84] By placing the origin of the death drive at the site of the divergence of sexual reproduction from the asexual things change dramatically. The pleasure principle becomes the older instinct, the drive toward numbness, and the one which ironically would thrust the individual toward self destruction— evidence? Choose your rock star. Marcia Ian seems to find something in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with which I with concur theoretically, but can only find only traces of upon re-reading Freud. Ian presents the death drive becoming an ego drive, in phrases like "the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion." Thereby, from this perspective, the death drive is what allows the individual create themselves, to provisionally unharness themselves from the flesh. The death drive is a principle of destruction—but unlike the pleasure principle—productive destruction, a drive toward termination, toward definition through (temporal) limitation. These two then appear as two possible engagements with the inevitability of our destruction, one which produces the individual the other which negates it. Taking mortality proper to begin as an organic consequence of sexual reproduction renders a deeper understanding of the in-

terconnection between libidinal energy, sexual pleasure and death. Access to libidinal energy is what is under contest between the vehicle and the germ.

If this remains unclear, perhaps it can be clarified by mobilizing two other terms to hold the place of 'germ' and 'vehicle.' In Greek there are two words for life, *zoē* and *bios* (ζοε and βιοσ), the former meaning life in general, the lives of all gods, men and animals; the latter meaning a particular mortal life. A theme which runs through Greek culture, from the tragedians, to Socrates death by hemlock is that through death one might deny *zoē*, the germ, its immortality and thereby give its value over to *bios*, to allow the individual to establish a meaning and value to their life as more than the vehicle of the immortal germ. Self sacrifice can be seen as a refusal of *zoē*, a refusal of the pleasure principle, with the intention that a *substitution* of value will occur, by refusing *zoē* value appears on the side of *bios* as the *meaning* of the sacrificial act. Witness the example of Antigone, setting aside the questions of gender in her story, but perhaps keeping in mind the sexing of asexual evolutionary biology is the site of emergence of both sex, death, and the individual as vehicle, that they are always doubled over each other. When we speak of one we are speaking of all the others. [Butler, Lacan, Irigaray, Jacobs] Following her death the chorus lists all that is lost with with it, not primarily experience, but marriage and children [Sophocles 1992:121], and this, it seems, is meant to be an equation. What she gives up in death must reappear elsewhere, what she refuses to give over to the germ as the value of life, of children, of sexual pleasure reappears elsewhere as the meaning of her life in adherence to an ideal. Likewise, when Socrates drinks the hemlock, is he not enacting a sacrifice which places the value of his life on the side of the ideal rather than the concrete, the lived, the enacted?

Aligning Paul's split to this one would seem to be reinforced by the function of blood sacrifice through the Judeo-Christian tradition. Of course central to this is Jesus' own crucifixion, but the primary metaphor tied to this event is the sacrifice of the paschal lamb [1Cor5:7]. In the passover tradition which coincides with the crucifixion, we can take the

sacrifice of the male lamb before sexual maturity as a substitute for the male child. In the first passover of Exodus 12, when the angel sees the blood on the lintel he passes over the houses of the Israelites while executing the male children of the Egyptians. The blood sacrifice of the lamb clearly stands in substitute for the sacrifice of the male child.<sup>3</sup> The connection I want to make here is to the sexual prematurity of the lamb with Jesus' crucifixion, presumably without having fathered children. Magdeline conspiracies aside his death represents a refusal of this germ— and in this refusal to stake out the meaning of life beyond instinct, beyond animal life, a refusal, rejection or mastery of zoē.

Curiously however, when we read Paul in the original Greek these terms are reversed. Paul does not identify the offending flesh with zoē, or the life of the spirit with bios. In Romans 7, it is the life of the spirit, not the genome which is eternal, and yet it is rendered in Greek as "zōēn aiōnion".<sup>4</sup> From a contemporary perspective, one could be persuaded a pre-scientific, pre-genetic Paul has simply mistaken the fact that the germ-plasm, what we would call the truly immortal zoē is responsible for the instinctual pressure, the pleasures of the flesh he attempts to resist. This is reinforced by the fact Paul, breaking from Jewish tradition, saw all life, all creation all flesh as fallen, not just man, the sons of Adam who bore the mark of sin. [Romans 8:22] Why for Paul would this 'all life' not fall on the side of zoē rather bios?

The only answer which makes sense is that what we see in Paul is not the simple valuation of bios over zoē, it is the production of a *second* zoē. One might say that Paul's life of the spirit is a second zoē, a second life, a second nature. But by what means is this second zoē produced? What element of human world has this quality of immortal value?

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3. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year

4. 22 nuni de eleutherōthentes apo tēs amartias doulōthentes de tō theō echete ton karpon umōn eis agiasmon to de telos zōēn aiōnion 23 ta gar opsōnia tēs amartias thanatos to de charisma tou theou zōē aiōnios en christō iēsou tō kuriō ēmōn

## 2. the golden calf: ça parle– mais ça n'écrit

The answer would lay at the beginning, which is to say in the word. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." If we say the second zoē comes into being through the word, and this word is the 'word become flesh' I would argue that we must understand the enfleshed word not as the word of the breath, not as the spoken word, but the written. It is only with writing that we come to understand the life of the word separate from the body, from the presence of the speaker, the logos is not equal to the abstract absent god of the Hebrews until or except it is written. Without writing there can be no law, before writing law was simply to obey the strongest one that can see you, obey the voice of the most powerful in earshot. Only with writing do the powerful project their power by being everywhere. It is with the separation of the word from the voice through writing that we find the distant father, the dead voice that lives on.<sup>5</sup> In *The Essence of Christianity* Feurbach identifies the sacralization of the word as fulfilling those theological mysteries of making the human life speak beyond death, fixing moments of the past from the destruction of time, making moments of the future appear now, constructing a sense of the infinite and everlasting:

"The word is the light of the world. The word guides to all truth, unfolds all mysteries, reveals the unseen, makes present the past and the future, defines the infinite, perpetuates the transient. Men pass away, the word remains; the word is life and truth..."

It is impossible to think of Judaism without writing, it comes into being, is synonymous with the covenant of Moses. The written word is fetishized, there are laws and prohibitions around the written scrolls of the Talmud, despite the second commandment they contain, they are treated as idols, as if they were in themselves god. If Freud proposes that Moses might be an Egyptian nobleman in order to make him an adherent to the religion of

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5. This is in marked contrast to Derrida's [1972, 1976] conception of the phallogocentric. I would hope it might be possible to reconcile this if we might think that spirit is the emergent property of the voice, and is associated with bios, the individual. Polytheism, ancestor worship and the like, projected back onto zoē. Monotheism emerges through a reworking of this split in the form of the second-zoē through writing.

Aten, the monotheistic sun god of the Egyptians, it is equally important in doing so to explain why he is literate. [Freud 1938] But I think these two end up the same, that monotheism is a hypostatization of writing, the monotheistic god is the remainder of the technology of writing— writing produces the voice of god.

Some proof of this may lie in the moment that the tablets, the first written law appears, when Moses descends from Mount Sinai. That the tablets themselves exist at the intersection of writing, the law, and the word of god speaks for itself. What I want to comment on however is that Moses arrival is not met with a scene of celebration, but rather with an episode which has puzzled scholars: the story of the golden calf. There are a number of incongruencies in the story of the gold calf which make it somewhat illegible as merely a prohibition on worship of idols, of other gods [Frankel, Lewy]. These lapses open up the space for another interpretation, the point of destroying the golden calf might not be the worship of other gods, but the prohibition of other technologies of representation. If the word *is* the monotheistic god, this is essentially the same thing, to represent god in any other form than the word, the written word, is to worship another god. Thus the first two commandments, 'thou shalt not worship other gods' and 'thou shalt not make graven images' amount to the same thing. God is the technology of representation, the written word itself.

We can see the power of writing in Paul's own epistolary form. Writing places the law outside the body of the speaker, outside of the physically threatening presence. Writing begins as a mnemonic technology, it fixes the unfixed voice, where debt once had to be remembered in the pain and scars of the body, the pound of flesh. [Nietzsche] Furthermore, the reading subject resides in two places, at the site of writing and the site of reading. Where speaking implies the making present of the absent object, writing doubles that, by making present the absent subject, the absent speaker. When we read it is 'as if' the words we read were our words. In conversational speech there is no question that the others voice is outside of us; but in writing, while the word may live its eternal life on the page, these are only

instructions which put the word of the other into our mouth. We become possessed by the writer, and so writing has a daemonic power. To read is in a sense to internalize the law whether what we read is Leviticus or the Crypto Anarchist Manifesto.

Jesus is of course, as Nietzsche says of Socrates, "the one who does not write." This functions according to a logic of representation parallel to that embodied in the sacrifice as the Paschal lamb or the transubstantiation of the eucharist. He is not a substitute for the lamb, he *is* the lamb, he is not the messenger of god (an angel, a prophet) he *is* god.<sup>6</sup> Were Jesus to write, he would be reduced to a messenger, he is not one who writes, he is what is written.

The [dialectic] revealed here is that writing both realizes the complete detachment of the voice from the body, but also constructs a second body. It both corporealizes the voice by making it material and re-essentializes—makes appear immediate and present—the spoken voice. As Mladen Dolar has argued in his analysis of the Shofar in Jewish ceremony, the body of the primal father, the threat of castrating *violence* reappears on both sides of the division of writing and speaking. [Dolar 1996] One is reminded that Socrates says in Plato's *Phaedrus*, that writing is a prosthetic for memory; where one would think it helps one to remember, it is in fact a way of removing what makes us remember from the flesh, allows us to forget in the flesh to remember on the page. In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche traces the production of memory back to the scarification of the body, to blood sacrifice, to castration. [Nietzsche] Nietzsche identifies the relation of the mnemotechnic of the written word to the paschal lamb, the sacrifice is a displacement of bodily punishment in relation to the law, not the written law, but the law of force of bodily punishment, prohibition through pain and death.

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6. I borrow this insight from Žižek's lecture "Why Only an Atheist Can Believe: Politics between Fear and Trembling." at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Nov. 10th 2006. Previously available on youtube but apparently pulled for copyright reasons.

According to Nietzsche culture has been a breeding project, a genetic project all along, a project "to breed an animal with the right to make promises." From this standpoint the introduction of genetic engineering would do little but improve the technology of breeding, but this turn changes the technology of reproduction into a technology of memory, a technology of the flesh into a technology of the word. What lays here at this intersection is almost unutterable, it is the termination of discourse, the production of meaning and its inscription, its tally and recording collapse into each other. Perhaps the only escape is to return to the source, to think of the relatively recent discoveries of Denise Schmandt-Besserat who found the origins of both writing and accounting in the construction of clay balls impressed with trade tokens, dated 8-12k BC, in the near east. These 'bullae' both contain tokens (in their interior cavity) and impressions of the same tokens (on their exterior skin). They act out the mnemotechnic cruelty of the sign, its function of making the flesh a container for the word by inscription on the surface. Schmandt-Besserat's discoveries are very much in line with Nietzsche's suppositions a century before, the inscriptions of writing are tied not just to the body, but to the inscription of debt and trade.

If coins and clay tablets, writing and currency all have their origins in the same set of trade and transport relationships, then as prosaic as it might seem the Nietzschean superman's great achievement—the ability to make promises— begins by promising the delivery of trade goods. It might be productive to think as well that these practices came into being as part of a change in the way of life, a mode of social and economic production which we might call civilization: agriculture, settlements, animal husbandry, new forms which demanded the construction of legality in order for people to live together in greater numbers and proximity. From fixed settlements arose the need for trade, and from this to guarantee delivery of goods. By constructing a set of historical conditions for the production of the split between word and flesh, seeing it arise through a set of social relations, allows us to see as well that the end of this split, or its reconfiguration might also be historical. The

irony here of course that it is writing which makes history possible. Writing places itself outside of history—as God—exactly because it is what history cannot exist without.

If this *mise-en-abyme* were not enough, today the reverse is happening, genetic material, genetic knowledge, the word within the flesh is being commodified, being reduced back to the point of origin of the law itself as mere trade. The law which is the law of exchange, of material exchange, commerce, is facilitating the privatization of what is universal, what is more than anything else could be said to be the inheritance of all, the *zoē*, our common genetic code. In commodifying genetic material the universal which is constructed through trade equivalencies has reduced the words which construct the flesh itself to tokens of exchange. Behind this equivalence is always another in-equivalence, the conditions of the law, its construction and implementation are always at the service of power which stands itself outside, as exception, not transcoded, but incomprehensible. Jeremy Rifkin has written 'optimistically' about this situation recently, saying "[t]he new genetic engineering tools are, by definition, eugenics instruments', and whereas the old eugenics was shaped by political ideology, fear and hate, 'the new eugenics is spurred by market forces and consumer desire'" [Peterson:79 citing Rifkin]. The line of thinking I have developed here reveals however that these two forms of eugenics in fact become the same, the 'coming singularity' swallows them both and reveals their equivalence.

### **3. the red heifer: sol ich werden**

The sacrifice of the red heifer, or *parah adumah* is considered to be *chok*, that is an act of incomprehensible meaning, only understandable by the divine intelligence. Both the *parah* (the red heifer) and the *pesach* (the passover lamb) are *chukim*, beyond understanding, but only the *parah*, is considered purely *chok*. Where as "[i]t is only the details of the *pesach*, for example eating it in one house or not breaking any of its bones, which one could describe as *chukim*." [Bornsztain:161] whereas the "*parah adamah* is a *chok* of the unfathomable sort" [Bornsztain :160].

Giorgio Agamben's account of the *homo sacer* might offer some insight to this sacrifice. In Roman law the *homo sacer* is considered the one that can be killed without legal consequence, but also does not have the legal standing as a person, such that their killing cannot be considered a sacrifice. This person is noted by Agamben as being outside the city, outside the *polis* and therefore outside the law. For Agamben, life as *bios*, individual human life begins with the *polis*, it is the capacity for political, civil life. [Agamben 7]. As such the life and death of the *homo sacer* are purely *zoē*, what Agamben calls "bare life."

I would propose that the *parah adumah* is not properly sacrifice at all, but an attempt to slaughter pure *zoē*, to kill death itself. It is not properly a metaphorical act, an act of displacement. In that the animal must not have breed, it is a terminal point of *zoē*, *zoe* is eternal as a whole, but to kill this limb is to partialize it, a metonymic substitution it symbolically kills the whole through killing part. The *parah* then seems to be the thetic, the passageway between *bios* and *zoē*, and like Freud's myth of the killing of the primal father, between savagery and civilization, that it must take place beyond the camp, seems to construct the meaning of the camp itself. It proposes to put bare life beyond the camp, and to claim that all life within civilization is *bios*, once written into the second *zoe*, the law, even the traces of *zoe* (and maybe with it, symbolically death itself) are pushed out beyond the camp, must not be touched.

I have mentioned at the beginning that a coming singularity is in evidence from many angles, including immersive technologies. While writing (and mathematics) structured human consciousness in such a way that thinking became equated with abstraction, these two became almost indistinguishable from the mnemonic function of writing, which I have presented here as a displacement of the body, as a second body. Immersive technologies, ironically facilitated by the absolute reduction (to zeros and ones) of digital technology, seems to open out a new field in which the mnemonic function demands no reduction, no abstraction, no representation, but re-presentation, a full re-experiencing of past events. This too leads

to a kind of 'chok' and we have seen evidence of this in the supposed 'dumbing down' of culture with the rather humble steps towards immersion that television and film culture have brought about in replacing the book.

If as I argue, we stand near the event horizon of this new singularity it is a point of decision. To the one side stands the opportunity to construct a humanity which transcends its previous limits, which is capable of becoming anything it can imagine, to the other stands our old fears, which as Marx has said, "weight on the minds of living like a mountain." The point is in what Marx said next, "Men make the world, but they do not make it from conditions of their own choosing." [Marx:247] To grasp the conditions of our choosing, perhaps the Red Heifer can be used to produce a sort of negative theology of this 'chok' of our coming singularity. We might remember the most common image of the singularity is a star, literally fueled by the collapse of the law of gravity under its own weight. If it is too blinding to stare into the light of the singularity, we might know something of it by the shadow the *parah adumah* casts in its glare, or to borrow an image from Artaud, its signaling through the flames.

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