



Deconstructive Criticism

Experiencing the Gospel of Mark
LTSG – MGVH

Based on Stephen D. Moore's
"Deconstructive Criticism: The Gospel of the Mark" in Mark & Method



What is deconstruction?

- o Jacques Derrida
 - Western thought and binary oppositions: soul/body; nature/culture; male/female; white/nonwhite...
 - "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 ... insight into the general functioning of a textual system."



What is deconstruction?

- o Paul de Man
 - "The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction."
 - "A deconstruction always has for its target to reveal the existence of hidden... fragmentations within assumedly monadic totalities."



What is deconstruction?

- o "Deconstruction reads with an eye and ear extended for the excluded, the marginal, the blind spot, the blank." (*SDM, 86*)
- o "Deconstruction is scrupulously attentive to difficulties in the texts that it reads." (*SDM, 86*)



The text as "parable"

- o "... the Gospel as a whole can be said to function parabolically, parable being a type of paradox." (88)
- o "*Parabolai* in Mark are a partition, screen, or membrane designed to keep insiders on one side, outsiders on the other." (92)
- o "There are no insiders in Mark who are not at the same time outsiders." (93)
- o "*Parabole* is prudent. It inflicts a greivous wound on common sense, but takes care to leave it untended."



The Written V(o)ice

- o "In the West, the spoken word has almost always been privileged over the written." (89)
- o "What if *Jesus*' speech were inhabited by writing? What if it were haunted, infected, afflicted by it?" (89)
- o "Mark is gradually folding back on itself as we read it... 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." (91)

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 ones 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."¹⁰ The "eccentric," "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, too far from 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 dyastic 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 *chiazō*, "to mark with the letter x," 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 8:50 with the words *ego eimi* ("I am," or "I am 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 [ego] want, but what you want" (14:36).

To be marked with the x, the cross, is painful, for *chiazō* also means "to cut." Another meaning of *chiazō* is "piece of wood." And the chiasm on which Jesus writes is a letter 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 *ichthys*. And *ichthys* ("fish" in Greek) was an early christological acronym: *Ihous Christos Theos Ichnu Soter* ("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 book, a clawed fishhook or x. From the four sharp corners of its page, Jesus-*ichthys* dangles, gaping for air. At the end of the narrative line, Jesus writes 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 as the last supper (no fish support) 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 (evangelist'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/Inside"—what better epigraph for Mark? These concepts are inadmissible in his text, yet indispensible 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?" Mark can more aptly be written ~~Mark~~.

Faced with the mystery of Jesus, Mark can only (double) cross itself. Faced with the his-and-mine-ness of exegesis, the critic can only repeat the genre. 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.

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 striking, "other" logic of that misserious 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 mis-ite 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 manuscript or his lattices."¹¹ 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 whose 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?

Deconstructive Criticism

- o "Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all; it does not settle for methodological procedures, it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail;... it produces rules—other conventions." (Derrida: 99)

Deconstructive Criticism

- o Mark's Nightmaze: Writ(h)ing on a Bed of Paper
- o "A Gospel is more like a dream than a dissertation... 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." (100)

Deconstructive Criticism

- o Rabbinic > Freud > Literary theory
- o Reader Response > Deconstructive
- o Deconstructing art
- o www.danbrown.com/the_new_york_times/the_last_supper_interactive.html#
- o What is it about? Where is the focus?



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Deconstructive Criticism

- Text? Subtext? Pretext? Pre-text?
- Is this stuff legit? Just literary? Litter?
- Is there any place for this in the Church?
- What if you tried preaching a 'deconstructed' sermon?