In this particular volume the issue of art as interference and the strategies that it should adopt have been reframed within the structures of contemporary technology as well as within the frameworks of interactions between art, science and media. What sort of interference should be chosen, if one at all, remains a personal choice for each artist, curator, critic and historian.
Interfering with the Dead

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1. CORPUS CHRISTI

Jesus said, “Whoever has known the world has fallen upon a corpse.”
— Logion 56.1, Gospel of Thomas.

To be worldly is to be dead. Falling upon something that you know: this is not like making a stumbling discovery; it is more like a plunge, more like leaping onto something than being accidentally tripped up by it. The corpse in this image is not the victim in a crime scene awaiting investigation, identification and justice. It is the sex object hidden by, succumbing to, and complying with necrophilic ravishment. Worldliness is a matter of life and death, of knowing that they will embrace, in a consummation devoutly to be wished.

This bizarre epigram is from an anthology of one hundred and fourteen non-narrative logia or sayings, allegedly direct from the mouth of Jesus, called the Gospel of Thomas. Almost two millennia after being written, this gospel – which evidently did not make it into the Christian New Testament canon – was discovered among a hoard of ancient manuscripts (twelve complete ones and the remains of a thirteenth) that was fortuitously unearthed in late 1945 by a goatherd, Mohammed al-Samman. He was poking about in among the clefts of the Djebel el-Tarif cliff, which skirts the farming fields of a hamlet called Nag Hammadi, on the west bank of the Nile near present day Luxor in Egypt. The manuscripts are fourth-century CE Coptic translations of what would have been formerly Greek and possibly Syriac texts. Although until this find they hadn’t been seen for ages, many of these writings are mentioned in other authenticated literature of the early Christian Church; in fact, vociferously so in a famous diatribe against heresy by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, written around 180 CE. From these citations and cross references, it seems likely that the original versions of this Nag Hammadi library had been composed two, if not more, centuries earlier than their exhumed Coptic versions. This would place some of these texts – notably the Gospel of Thomas with this oddity from Jesus – in the latter part of the first century, and thus as close to the historical Jesus as the putative biographical accounts in the gospels of Mark, Luke and Matthew. Indeed, if not closer.

ABSTRACT

An ancient library of what has become known, if contentiously, as the “gnostic gospels” was accidentally exhumed in 1945 from a monastic graveyard in Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Among these esoteric texts, most of which were lost to history since their hasty burial in the fourth century, the Gospel of Thomas has an especially piquant pedigree. Cited throughout early Christian literature as an exceptionally heretical and prohibited text that had been purportedly composed in the first century CE, its cryptic (when not incomprehensible) apothegms are claimed to have been secret knowledge written by the twin brother of Jesus Christ. This claim, even taken as figurative, poses a modest predicament for the archaeology of Christian theology. However, taken as an artifact of media archaeology, this text – one of its verses, in particular, which proposes an equation of knowledge and death – extends a dark perspective on our own contemporary cultural imperatives with embodiment and performativity.
Throughout the history of their various authoritative translations (from 1956 to 1988), the Nag Hammadi codices have collectively if contentiously become characterised as “the Gnostic Gospels” or “Gnostic Scriptures,” the Gnosticism of which identifies a miscellany of purportedly separatist mystery cults dispersed across the eastern Mediterranean in the first to fourth centuries CE (Christian, Jewish and Graeco-Roman Pagan). The Nag Hammadi texts are pungently placed within the orthodox landscape of early Christian church doctrine, indicating sects in open or clandestine conflict with an emerging institutional apostolic Christian authority. The gnostic featuring in many of these sectarian texts is a type of learning associated with initiation into an unspoken mystery distinct from the solid grounding. Many of the Gnostic sects acknowledged as “the Gnostic Gospels” or “Gnostic codices have collectively if contentiously become translated (from 1956 to 1988), the Nag Hammadi miscellany of purportedly separatist mystery cults, which might embrace the face of God. That’s a pretty wise forsaken but soulful atom of divine light within the dark matter of the world and the bodies blindly banging around in it.

But the advent of the gnostic testified to in this Nag Hammadi literature had little to do with the common godly smiley-face benefactions, which might encompass the reception of grace and the occasional epiphany, or to do with godly intercession, such as an accountable ground of knowledge or, according to the famous opening of the Gospel of John, the ground of divine incarnation and incarnation. In the milieu of, for instance, the Hellenic Judaism of the Biblical Proverbs, gnosia (from the Hebrew da’ath) is identified, in chapter 2 verse 6, with the face of God. That’s a pretty solid grounding. Many of the Gnostic sects acknowledged that such an exceptional exposure to gnosia would be a redemptive illumination, igniting an otherwise forsaken but soulful atom of divine light within the dark matter of the world and the bodies blindly banging around in it.

The God of the Marcionist heresy was utterly alien to the creator God or demigre who appears throughout the Hebrew Tanakh, the body of scriptures including Proverbs that will become known by Christians, when incorporated into their canon, as the Old Testament. This God, who permits no graven images of itself, is incongruously not only anthropomorphic in personality but tyrannical in temper: stubborn, conceited, jealous, and vengeful. For all his protestations that he is the Supreme and thus intolerant of competition, this God who permitted no graven images of itself, is incongruously not only anthropomorphic in personality but tyrannical in temper: stubborn, conceited, jealous, and vengeful. This God, who permits no graven images of itself, is incongruously not only anthropomorphic in personality but tyrannical in temper: stubborn, conceited, jealous, and vengeful. And this view doesn’t quite meet the Gnostic member of metaphysical and mythographic speculation, as well as apocalyptic pronouncements, are too diverse and contrary to suggest anything other than that this was a miscellany of enigmatic heretical arcana. An illegal, underground, collection of prohibited knowledge. And the strange urgency to conceal these tracts back in the fourth century as much as the story of their twentieth-century discovery and passage into scholar’s and valiant tradition (in some respects Thomas also eludes characterization as Gnostic), but to provoke the perverse trajectory of this particular motto as a morbid inversion of enlightenment. This provocation is not only a wanton wish to embellish logion 56 with Gnosticism, with a Doom House or a Death Metal timbre, even if it would wear each of those genres stylishly. It is also a reprimand against neutralizing the venom spat with each historical accusation of heresy and monstrosity delivered against it. (And just this sort of acquisitiveness, or at least purifying dismissal of those charges, accompanies the diplomatic, pluralist inclusion of the Nag Hammadi library into postmodern Gnostic exegeses of early Christianity.)

So let’s take Irenaeus at his word when he levels against the gnostics the charge that their speculative cosmogonies and cosmologies are “an abyss of madness” and “a blasphemy against Christ.” We might well deduce that this particular “Gnostic” cache which included Thomas was being hidden as a precious object when evaded hastily from an archive in the desert monastery to be sunken into its graveyard; and that this provenance endows the Nag Hammadi artifacts with the patina of secret, forbidden literature interred for its own protection and clandestine preservation, with expectation of its eventual salvage and restoration. It was buried as treasure rather than as waste, but nonetheless it would have been hazardous material. Evidently, too, this library was not the exclusive testimony of a single cell or sect: the scope of metaphysical and mythographic speculation, as well as apocalyptic pronouncements, are too diverse and contrary to suggest anything other than that this was a miscellany of enigmatic heretical arcana. An illegal, underground, collection of prohibited knowledge.

Illiterate and uninterested in his own Egyptian history, Mohammed al-Samman had hardly any idea of what he had discovered inside the large red earthenware jar in a cave that he had stumbled onto while digging for a natural fertilizer (“known as sabkha”) on the edge of the desert. Bitterly disappointed not to find any palpably recognizable treasure in the jar that he had broken open (despite the promising adjacency of a human skeleton), and regarding these old papyrus documents bound in leather as having negligible immediate value, the story goes that he tore a few up to trade for cigarettes with the camel drivers who were passing by at the time. Suspecting that objects of that vintage might sometimes be sold to city traders, he took the rest back to his house, although negligently throwing them onto a pile of straw in the open yard, where his mother resourcefully used some of them as kindling for the household clay oven. In addition to this archaeological fiasco, Muhammed himself was embroiled in an aston-
ishingly gruesome family vendetta at the time. Shortly after the fertilizer expedition, he and his brothers attacked a man from a neighbouring village whom they believed responsible for the murder some months before of their father, dismembering the culprit, tearing the man’s heart out of his chest and eating it! Needing to lie low from police, Muhammed entrusted the remaining papyrus to a local priest who, twiggling to their possible historical significance passed a sample to a local Egyptian historian, who then contacted Cairo’s Coptic Museum, initiating a consequent black market narrative of theft, extortion, curatorial ineptitude and smuggling involving postwar antiquities markets in Egypt, the United States and Europe (Zurich’s Jung Institute, notably). Juicy as all this anecdotal intrigue is, it isn’t nearly enough of an appropriate way to treat Thomas. Eusebius provided scriptural editors with a tripartite categorization of texts. Firstly, there were the “recognized books” (the undisputed new testament of Christian evangelion, which then contained the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, with the Acts of the Apostles, Paul’s correspondence, 1 Peter and the Revelation of John the Divine); secondly, the “disputed” or apocryphal literature; and lastly, the “bastard” texts – outright counterfeit, fraudulent or spurious, that’s to say illegitimate, works. Despite an initial effort by orthodox dogmatists to dispel it as an archaeological forgery, modern judgment since the Nag Hammadi discovery generally places Thomas into Eusebius’s second category of apocryphal literature. For Eusebius, however, not only doesn’t Thomas fit the designation of apocrypha; it doesn’t even warrant the designation of being a bastard text! He needs to create a fourth category beyond the capacity of correction or expurgation, a sort of outellite exclusively reserved for Thomas: a dark pit of prohibition and proscription, a sarcophagus like that around the Chernobyl nuclear reactor that sullenly entombs something too hot to handle…too contaminating even for alert, devout scholarship to cope with. Something poisonous, wicked, impious, evil. 

Some twenty-five years later, heeding the warning expressed by Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem in his Catachresis (possibly around 348 CE) predictably and generally declares false gospels to be harmful, but especially insists, “Let no one read the Gospel of Thomas and monasteries who came within the orbit of Athanasius’s correspondence. He had some serious clout. At the Council of Nicaea, called by the converted Emperor Constantine back in 325, Athanasius had won a momentous victory against a faction led by a bishop of Alexandria named Arius. The Nicaean dispute had been over the ‘substance’ of Christ. Arius proposed that Christ was similar but not identical in substance to God the Father and thus Jesus, as the incarnate son of God, was son of Man with a mortal body. Seeing both a profound theological scission looming from this disagreement as well as spotting a political opportunity, Athanasius countered that father and son were indeed identical in substance, and thus eternal. Suddenly, by denying what ought to be an incontrovertible belief in the divinity of Jesus, Arius sounded Satanic.

Athanasius’s strident success in theological battle meant the denunciation of Ariasism as heresy – a term derived from the Greek airesis, initially indicating a choice to disagree or dissent, but among early Christian apologists it assumed the judgment of a dangerously incorrect and misleading position on Church doctrine. Corrupted and corrupting. Arius lost his job (into which Athanasius stepped) and he and his followers were exiled. And Athanasius, during a checkered career with the church-characteristic of an ideologue (requiring occasional flight from danger), excommunicated them from the Church. The Synodicon Orthodoxarum pronounces that, “To whomever who accepts or has affection for [Thomas]…and does not abominate [this book] and spit upon [it] as being worthy only to be burned: anathema.”

Why did this book – which we now know to be so slim and terse and such a puzzling volume – incur such animosity and contempt from orthodoxy for so many centuries? In part, this was due to a belief initiated by Cyril of Jerusalem that the gospel had been written by a Manichean sect. That misconception was a boon to its notoriety. We owe the preservation of the citations of Thomas and their persistent sedition into the European Middle Ages largely to this guilt by association with the third-century CE Babylonian prophet and artist Mari and his heretical vision, among the texts of this Nag Hammadi Library, the qualms at breaking open the jar with the mattock kept councils considered to have dubious provenance, at century. and alluringly esoteric as much of the theological conception or authority and which were atributively constitute and foreclose the content of the Christian New Testament. (Thomas is markedly not among them.) It’s a list later deemed canonical by the synods of Hippo Regius (393 CE) and then at Carthage (in 397 and 419). This ruling would not have been treated lightly by any officers of the churches and monasteries who came within the orbit of Athanasius’s correspondence. He had some serious clout.
steeped in a millennium-old Zoroastrian legacy, of an irreconcilable cosmological dualism: a good God of spiritual light in fierce battle with its evil twin God of material darkness. A contrived joke against Mani’s followers was how orthodox Christians referred to them as “Maniaks,” spinning on the Greek words maniakos or maineuthoi: to be mad. Delightfully inspired as this madness might sound, there is only a slim and opportunistic relation between Thomas and Mani. Given the probable date of Thomas as a late first-century CE composition, it’s improbable to think of it as having a Manichaean origin. And it is this putative date of origin that injects the logos of this gospel with scintillating scandal, disclosed in the short prologue on the book’s incipit or title-page: “These are the secret [or hidden] words that the living Jesus spoke, and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.” Two momentous dares accompany this parvenu’s arrival, and it’s little wonder as “Maniacs,” spinning on the Greek words maniakos, that the guard dogs at the gates of canonical orthodoxy would fiercely rear up.

Firstly, were these esoteric, condensed “secret words” intended to be read only by the initiate? Well, not entirely. Almost half of the text, in the form of parables and more comprehensible maxims, correlate with passages in the canonical, synoptic gospels and which are hardly meant to be obscuredly reserved for an inner circle. But other sayings manifest a mystifying and beguiling novelty and have little equivalence with the sentiments of the Christian Testament, Logion 42, for instance, laconically declares: “Be passersby.” Thomas is often described as a sapiential text, yet this strange directive conveys no Confucian-like or proverbial sentiment of the Christian Testament, Logion 42, for instance, laconically declares: “Be passersby.” Thomas is often described as a sapiential text, yet this strange directive conveys no Confucian-like or proverbial sentiment, but also audacious claim on being the twin brother of the “living Jesus.” As with a nun’s vow to become a “bride of Christ,” Jesus’s twin brother cannot be contained within a purely spiritual allegory. In Irnæus’s words this opens onto an abyss of madness: no longer a relation of apostolic deference, nor of mentorship, but of doubling. Entertain the dazzling blasphemy of this metaphor for a moment! Was Thomas conceived at the Annunciation at the same time as Jesus, and then shown over by the father as illegitimate, as his bastard progeny? Does this figurative illegitimacy shadow the spiritual imitation of Christ? But there may be another view onto this quandary that offers it as a negation rather than as a digression of parental accountability. It would take a strange adjective to describe this annulled relation, one that slurs categorial distinctions and invokes a mode of exclusion in the sly way that the word ‘undead’ does: the twin of Jesus Christ is ‘unfathered.’

The signification of the authorship of the Gospel of Thomas is convoluted and abstrusely intertextual, perhaps deliberately to encrypt the author’s prestigious but also audacious claim on being the twin brother of the “living Jesus.” As with a nun’s vow to become a “bride of Christ.” Jesus’s twin brother cannot be contained within a purely spiritual allegory. In Ireænæus’s words this opens onto an abyss of madness: no longer a relation of apostolic deference, nor of mentorship, but of doubling. Entertain the dazzling blasphemy of this metaphor for a moment! Was Thomas conceived at the Annunciation at the same time as Jesus, and then shown over by the father as illegitimate, as his bastard progeny? Does this figurative illegitimacy shadow the spiritual imitation of Christ? But there may be another view onto this quandary that offers it as a negation rather than as a digression of parental accountability. It would take a strange adjective to describe this annulled relation, one that slurs categorial distinctions and invokes a mode of exclusion in the sly way that the word ‘undead’ does: the twin of Jesus Christ is ‘unfathered.’

The Acts of Thomas, the apostle Judas Thomas is named as the twin of the messiah.

Salvation – the ultimate therapeutic treatment – comes to the world, it’s announced in another Nag Hammadi text, the Gospel of Philipp, “when the two become one and the outer become as the inner.” This also is described in a ritual or ceremonial practice central to Valentinian Gnostic Christianity as the ‘bridal chamber’: an allegory of salvation in which spirit and physical matter are married into one (recycling the therapeutic union of opposites into an original unity, derived from Platonic philosophy). But the twinning of Jesus invoked by Thomas goes the other way. What happens to a world that turns against this pacific reconciliation of opposites; when, to use an odd recurrent autobiographical declaration of Nietzsche’s, “the one becomes two”? Mani claimed to receive his Gnostic revelation from his suddenly manifested divine twin: in effect, what was revealed to him was a simulacrum of the divine, and with that the duplicity of his God who also was not one (the monotheistic persona of Abrahamic religions) but two (antagonistic but identical rivals). The heresy in Mani’s prophecy – from which we derive any combative, destructive duality as Manichaean – was not just that there were twinned Gods (one, the substance of light; the other, the material of darkness) but that any God that divided from itself, who reproduced like this, would have to be a suspicious character and any world created by this God would be at best dubious, and more likely evil.

To understand such a world is to find a corpse. Not just a material, fleshly, down-to-earth world, but a dead one. But this is to be understood in the manner that the heretic is dead: living dead, anathema – in distinction to how the pious, the saved, live through the promise and provision of divine scripture. Let us think of this strange maxim uttered by a living Jesus as though it were in the words of the corpse in the tomb. A prophet speaking on behalf of the undead. Think of it as a defiance of the logos as holy word and in the Annunciation: of word made flesh and disowned by
God in the way that Didymos Judas Thomas must be disowned. Not orphaned or cast out, but ‘unfathered,’ ‘unmade.’ To understand the world is to rot with it, to be its leper, be its grave, to be its black gnosis and black mass. Dead to the world.

2. CADAVER CHRISTI

Jesus said, ‘Whoever has known the world has fallen upon the body.’

~ Logion 81, Gospel of Thomas. 18

What can we make of this tiny scirbal alteration between logion 56 and logion 80, which are identical other than for the substitution of “the body” (in Coptic transcription: p-soma) for “a corpse” (−ptoma)? Perhaps it was a slip of the pen, or of the ear. One commentator suggests that logion 80 should be taken as the original because it implies a divine primordial body, and thus a far more positive image: “Whoever recognizes the world” in the Thomasine sense, a world permeated by the primordial light of the kingdom of God, finds the body and those who find the body are highly commended: they are superior to the ordinary world.” 18 This would be uninterestingly pious stuff, except that it portrays logion 56 as an astonishingly improper and compelling corruption of the original, and thus far more interesting than its imputed correct version — particularly if it resulted from a symptom of the corruption of a Jesus-corpus — deserves more of our attention.

Corpses are not simply dead bodies. Corpses are problematic, recitative, and obstinate. The corpse may epitomize the entropic processes of self-digestion or autolysis, bloated decomposition and putrefaction in the steady, fatal slide into dank manure, slime and sewage; but the corpse also is paradoxically a ghastly icon of arrested rigor and ceremonial rigidity. As the problematic “stiff” in crime stories, the corpse has a colloquial phallic exhibitionism and obdurancy, associated with awkward practical problems of disposal and with concealing guilt. And, of course, “stiffs” keep popping back up in these stories with the discomforting if not horrifying homocoming of a disavowed secret: floating to the surface in a black lake, exposed by accident in the boot of a car in transit, roused from a fetid tomb or clawing their way from an unholo grave. And sometimes, too, with blackly comic impropriety. Hitchcock’s 1955 movie The Trouble with Harry plays wry sport with the embarrassing persistence of the guilty secret embodied in the well-dressed and forever immaculately neat male corpse lying in a meadow, whose death every member of the nearby tiny New England community separately believe they must have somehow caused, and whose corpse each person furiously draws from view in repeatedly failed attempts to cover up its complicity. The corpse in Ted Kotcheff’s Weekend at Bernie’s (1989) is similarly stubborn and unspoiled conspicuousness. Bernie is the uncruelful head of a corporation who has been murdered by a Mafia colleague at his beach house retreat. Two young innocent employees who have arrived for a weekend party at Bernie’s witness the crime, and must keep the pretense of Bernie being alive in order to escape death themselves. Bernie’s corpse is handled like a puppet, much to the maddening bewilderment of the hit-man who, despite repeated efforts, cannot put Bernie down.

Why insist on the implacable designation of ‘corpse’ for the protagonist in this sort of danse macabre rather than the more supple and chic term ‘body’? It’s not pedantry. The corpse is a residual inedency of life that remains paradoxically unincorporated; that’s to say, resistant to embodiment even as decay. A corpse is the atrocity, or perhaps the expletive of a body: the curse that diverts an oath from a pledge into a swearword, but it’s also something that ludicrously or offensively sticks out of the form of the body. Stiff with erotic concentration but without the motivating surge of tumsence, the corpse stands spastically and forever at attention as a zombie soldier guarding a memorial flame of animate life or vitality, and attending this memorial in a hideous formal pantomime or pageant of the death it commemorates. Or, in another scenario, the corpse is the cadaverous ‘ich’ sustained by a curse, like the damned sailors of the legendary Flying Dutchman or Hector Barbossa’s skeletal crew on the Black Pearl in Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End (2007). Mummified or desiccated in a golden reliquary and in rotting lace or linen, the corpse is an enduring and magical artifact fabricated and maintained by a priestly caste or cult; an article so potent it must be locked away in secret; unseen, but guarded by spells and repeated rituals for the eternity it survives. Corpses are exquisitely blighted by an exclusion from both life and death. In the current popular jargon of vampiric and zombie fantasy, we would call this exclusion the protocol of the undead. Yet, as we intuitively acknowledge, corpses — certainly those farcical mannequins like Harry and Bernie — are worse than undead, more pathetic, less romantic. In comparison with any kind of corpse however, bodies are infinitely more flexible and inclusive, informal and mobile. They come and they go without ceremony.

Corpses may seem to be a subcategory of bodies; but where the corpse is a grotesque mockery, black magical ornament or irony of lifelessness, the body is everything and that is opposed to this specific state of the corpse. This is nominally so, because a ‘body’ can name structures of living as well as dead flesh, while also designating any extensive ensemble of things concrete (organic or inorganic) or abstractions becoming material or tangible. Embodiment involves incorporation: the constitutive formation of complex but unified substance. Compellingly, as a property of substances, ‘body’ always implies a volume if not fullness, a strength if not intensiveness, and weight if not ripeness... even in its mordid connotations. A body of water, a body of work, a body of evidence, even the bodies of plague victims piled in a cart: these have an agency and animation that the corpse — as the cul-de-sac of the corpus (which in its ancient and modern senses is a mass and massing together of working material, the stuffing of form) — no longer possesses. The Latin locution that the Vulgate Gospel of John renders for the dying Christ could be the nihilist slogan for all corpses: “Consummatum est,” if it is finished, my work is done. 20 But this has to be understood, however, not with the triumphal significance of Biblical concordances that identify this finish as consummation (fulfillment of passion), nor as consummate utterance (perfect in its fidelity to prophecies of the messianic mission). Instead, we would treat the Corpus Christi as a black magic of the corpse, and the miraculous transubstantiation of the sacrificial body as an interference with death comparable to the putridly voracious, hellishly unfulfilled, unresurrected (unsaved) zombie. The paradoxical reticence of the corpse’s consummation is an exquisite diabolical spell.

Bodies on the other hand are loquacious, even garrulous. They can be vivaciously original, sporting customized and unique aesthetic adornments and modifications, or be subsumed in anonymous victimization or mass conformity. They can be tossed like debris within the fury of a tsunami; flow in ecstatic rage through streets or stadiums as inspired torrents; submit to masochistic objectification on grandly military and on intimately tender scales of behaviour; they can entwine in rawness, hunger, affection and compassion with seeping volatility or with taut density...
and severity. Whatever they get to up or submit to, suffer from or are suffused with, however they may be interred or interred, bodies are gargantuan, mutable and performative in ways that corpses are not. This is dramatically demonstrated in the ascendancy of performance art through the second half of the twentieth-century, comfortably aligned with the emergence of the philosophical discipline of biopolitics and also strikingly coincident with the critical and pedagogical eclipse of the genre of the nude. Its worst enemy. And it may be time to in life and has no relevant relation to it, other than that it is identifiable in its rotting double, the corpse. Psuche is outside this corpse as an unbeing, yet identified with it in the way that in a morgue a witness is asked to identify a dead body: duplicitously invoking the verb ‘to be’: ‘yes, this is so-and-so;’ but only if one adds ‘it is no longer this person.’ What is no longer is not pictured as a divorcing of life and body, or the subtraction of a living essence or ghost from the inert vehicle or machine, but as a wedding of body and corpse, an alchemical wedding in which the corpse is not a process of living but the advent of simulacrum) of nothingness. We might say that, as with divinity mediated through the acheiropoieton, psuche is not non-existent so much as ‘invisible.’ And, again comparable to the acheiropoieton, psuche is an image only insofar as it is a stain or blot that occludes the image of life. Ismuch as un-being is an unidentifiable macula or blot rather than a hole or absence, we could say, that the corpse is a body seen against the transit of psuche. Sic transit.

Obviously, in the Homeric world, psuche is not the soul as the animating life-force nor is it cause of the vitality of an organism (associated, for instance, with pneuma), such as it appears later in Aristotelian empiricism, and where it becomes a principle of generation or composition, of change, and also of decomposition or compost; and where it is necessary for a being to decay as much as grow in order to be of its own essence. Nor, evidently, is psuche in this archaic sense the flourish of an intelligibility of essence: Being as the possession of an inalienable identity. In the legends that are canonized through the Homeric stories, a living being does not possess a psuche; once dead they become a psuche. However, this becoming-psuche is not a process of living but the advent of unbeing and of life being undone, of being other than itself. Thus the Homeric, archaic psuche is neither an index to nor a potentiality of life since it plays no role in life and has no relevant relation to it, other than that it is identifiable in its rotting double, the corpse. Psuche is outside this corpse as an unbeing, yet identified with it in the way that in a morgue a witness is asked to identify a dead body: duplicitously invoking the verb ‘to be’: ‘yes, this is so-and-so;’ but only if one adds ‘it is no longer this person.’ What is no longer is not pictured as a divorcing of life and body, or the subtraction of a living essence or ghost from the inert vehicle or machine, but as a wedding of body and corpse, an alchemical wedding in which the corpse is not a process of living but the advent of simulacrum) of nothingness. We might say that, as with divinity mediated through the acheiropoieton, psuche is not non-existent so much as ‘invisible.’ And, again comparable to the acheiropoieton, psuche is an image only insofar as it is a stain or blot that occludes the image of life. Ismuch as un-being is an unidentifiable macula or blot rather than a hole or absence, we could say, that the corpse is a body seen against the transit of psuche. Sic transit.

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in alchemical as well as Duchampian terms, a bride “stripped bare.” This compromised recognition of the corpse could not occur if psuche were an immortal entity; what we identify as the archaic unbeing of a corpse and living body occasions an exquisitely horrific copulation.

I’ll borrow a phrase from Reza Negarestani – caying and disappearing thing that it identifies, aspirations of the alchemical wedding recited in admittedly in a cavalier act, out of context – in his brill...
translator James M. Robinson has proposed that Thomas could be affiliated with the hypothetical Q source which, throughout the twentieth century has been theoretically postulated as a sayings compendium (partly oral, partly written but no longer extant) providing the source along with Mark for the canonical gospels of Matthew and Luke. Some suggested dating of the conjectural “layer 1” of Q, and by association Thomas, even precede the composition of Mark by thirty years.

4. The common noun gnostikos, technical as it is, has a relatively benign and even banal affect compared to its more piquant adjectival use, both in antique testimonia and in modern usage. But the term ‘Gnostic’ as used today in an expedient summary of extremely diverse religious and metaphysical doctrines is an appellation that, with perhaps one exception, those antique sectarian movements would have been unlikely to recognize. The exception may be that of the faction led by Marcellina in mid-second-century Rome. Her Christian sect, which allegedly practiced a type of communistic social code, is contemptuously mentioned by Irenaeus as publicizing themselves with the adjective gnostikos (Iraneaus in Philip Schaff, ed., The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, 439.) Irenaeus used the derogatory nuance of this word in the manner of Paul’s usage of term gravidus with an evident Platonic pedigree. Modern scholarship has tended to employ this adjective and the proper noun of ‘Gnostics’ anachronistically: derived from Irenaeus’s derogatory jibe, it entered common English usage with a platonic pedantic modern scholarship.

5. In her Gnostic Gospels, Pagels rhaphically portrays, Gnostic Christian communities of the late Roman empire as almost counter-culturally militant or renegade, in both their various ascetic as well as libertarian social and religious principles. In a more recent (1998) PBS education blog on Thomas, she associates gnostikos with a Zen-like satori or insight, and also with a mode of Socratic self-knowledge instead of apocalyptic prophecy, situating the Jesus in Thomas in the tradition an enlightened religious sage figure rather than the rabbinical messiah of the canonical New Testament. “Jesus, in effect, turns one toward oneself, and that is really one of the themes of the Gospel of Thomas, that you must go in a sort of spiritual quest of your own to discover who you are, and to discover really that you are the child of God just like Jesus.” Elaine H. Pagels, “The Gospel of Thomas,” FRONTLINE (blog), April 1998, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/thomas.html (accessed June 5, 2013).


19. Gospel of John, chapter 19, verse 30. The full verse is cum ergo acceptum Iesus dicavit consummatum est inchoator capite tradidit spiritum. (The King James Version translates as: “When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar (sour wine) he is said, It is finished: and he bowed his head and gave up the ghost”.) The Revised Version translates the last clause as “gave up his spirit.”

The phrase consummatum est is derived from the Greek original, teletos, which invokes a term stock used in the completion of an economic, or financial, transaction equivalent to ‘paid in full,’ and which would in the gospel text would refer to a debt having been accounted for.

20. The Vulgate Gospel indicates the genealogy of the prophesied sacrifice in chapter 19, verse 28, poised scenes Jesus quia omnia consummata sunt ut consummatur scriptura dicta stox (“Afterwards, Jesus knowing that all things were accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, said I thirst.” KJV).

21. The miraculous authority of achenopea may have an analogy if not source in material practices such as the use of clay seals for authenticity of imperial proclamations and legal testimonials, or cast images in imperial coinage, as well as the indelible pattern left in dyed cloth after it has been washed. See James Trilling, “The Image Not Made by Hands and the Byzantine Way of Seeing,” in The Holy Face and the Paradux of Representation, eds. Herbert L. Kessler and Gerhard Wolf (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1998), 109-127. A startling extrapolation of the dyed image is the suggestion that the achenopea known as Veronica's veil or the mandylion, bearing the face of Christ during the Passion, is associated with menstruation, thus identifying the Christian blood debt and sacrifice with the mandil as a menstrual towel. See Ewa Kuryłuk, Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and a Structure of a “True” Image (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). And in comparison see Avril Cameron, “The Mandylion and Byzantine Iconoclasm,” and Herbert L. Kessler, “Configuring the Invisible by Copying the Holy Face,” both in The Holy Face and the Paradux of Representation; and Jeffrey Hamburger, “Vision and the Veronica,” in The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany (New York: Zone Books, 1998). On the signification of the untouched and the impure touch in manufacturing the image, see Marie-José Mondzain, “The Holy Shroud: How Invisible Hands Weave the Unlookable,” in iconoclastia: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002), 324-335.

22. Archeological and forensic assessments of the Turin Shroud are detailed in Robin Cormack, Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks and Shrouds (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 89-152. On the centuries-long debates, generally called the iconoclastic controversy, over the possible iconolatry or idolatry of achenopea in Byzantine


25. Sic transit gloria mundi (“Thus passes worldly glory”) is, of course the keystone to funereal homilies and valediction as well as having a ceremonial utterance in papal coronations, and is likely derived from Thomas à Kempis’s Imitation of Christ (1418). O quam cito transit gloria mundi? My truncation of the phrase isolates the inevitability of the unpredicated passing as a crossing, an obscuring or an eclipse rather than a passing away or loss.


27. Perhaps the most vivid and lurid manifestation of this bizarre identity is in the recurrent exquisite corpses of Edgar Allan Poe’s fantastic premature burials and somnambulant revenants: Madeleine Usher clawing her way out of her coffin; Berenice’s unearthly scream from the grave as her lover, in a fugue state, tears her teeth out with dental pliers; or Monsieur Valdemar, when released from his post-mortem mesmeric trance explodes into a puddle of putrescence.

28. “[...] The Lydians, / Renowned in war, in the old days / settled there / On the Etruscan ridges, and for years / The city flourished, till an arrogant king, / Mezentius, ruled it barbarously by force. / How shall I tell of carnage beyond telling, / Beastly crimes this tyrant carried out? / Requite them, gods, on his own head and on / His children! He would even couple carcasses / with living bodies as a form of torture / Hand to hand and face to face, he made them / Suffer corruption, oozing gore and slime / In that wretched embrace, and a slow death.” Virgil, The Aeneid, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York, London and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf/Everyman’s Library, 1992), Book VII, lines 644-656. The reference to this practice occurs in several lost sources from antiquity: such as the florid oratory of Quintus Hortensius Hortalus (first century BCE), reported by Cicero in his lost dialogue Hortensius, and which St Augustine in turn reports on. Cicero also cites a reference to the corpse-bride in Aristotle as an analogy for the amalgam of body and soul, which in later Pauline language becomes the Christian soul shackled to the mortal flesh of the body.
