

WORD BECOME FLESH, FLESH BECOME WORD

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Legend has it that the relics of St Mark the Evangelist (the patron saint of Venice) were smuggled out of Muslim-controlled Alexandria in the 9th century covered by pieces of pork. There is a mosaic image of the legend on the exterior of the Basilica of San Marco. The idea was that this protective layer would deter the Islamic guards from searching the cargo too carefully.

Pig-matter thus functioned simultaneously as shield and weapon. It was a saving cocoon for something deeply valued (within), and an aggressive boundary-marker against a perceived enemy (without). The religious power of animal flesh comes starkly to the fore in this story, and does so in a way that is every bit as relevant to contemporary as to past religious boundaries. The pig is unclean to Jews and Muslims, and Christians have often used pig very deliberately to mark their territory.

But pigs are not the only animals to carry signficatory power in Christian tradition. Jesus Christ is interpreted in John's Gospel as a sacrificial lamb (the Agnus Dei, or Lamb of God, whose death takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29)), and in the Letter to Hebrews he is compared to the goat whose blood was sprinkled only once a year by the High Priest in the innermost sanctuary of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, in atonement for Israel's transgressions (Hebrews 9).

The world and its relation to God are thus mapped with the help of the bodies of animals, in complex and overlapping semiotic configurations that push some things and people outwards and bring others to centre-stage, and that provide some of the most important raw materials for cultic practice.

In Haruspex, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has worked with some very raw material indeed: the caul fat of the pig creates the canopy and walls of her 'tent of meeting'. Once a membrane for the pig's gut, it is now the membrane of a sanctuary-like space which may repel or may protectively envelop. This is then criss-crossed by ropes woven from the intestines of sheep, and these seem to bind in two possible ways: by connecting and supporting (as the ligaments of this space), or by constraining and entrapping (as a net or mesh). Finally, supported by these ropes, or caught in them, is the suspended heart of the piece, which is literally made of stomach: the fascinatingly-layered 'omasum' (or third stomach, out of four) of the cow.

It would be artistic laziness to let mere choice of material do all the semiotic work of a piece. Haruspex is, by contrast, highly-wrought, hand-crafted with a great investment of labour and time, and fashioned into a whole which is both aesthetically arresting and charged with possible meanings.

The artists making work for the Pavilion of the Holy See in 2015 were asked to respond to the famous Prologue of John's Gospel, in which it is announced that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14), this 'Word' being Jesus Christ. His taking of flesh – the incarnation – is the basis of the whole Christian doctrine of redemption. It involves God binding Godself to creatures, including the very materiality of their created bodies, in a way that is undaunted by the murkiness of bodily process. More precisely, the incarnation works to transform embodied creatures from one state (a state which is in some aspects a condition of filth) to another (a condition of grace). It initiates the glorification of all flesh. It is an entry of light into darkness, and a drawing of what is in the darkness into the light ('the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (John 1:5)). It is an intimation of future radiance ('we have seen his glory' (John 1:14)).

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva offers us the possibility of seeing signs of glory in the entrails with which she works – as soothsayers or haruspices have done at various times in human history. She takes things that have been hidden in deep darkness and brings them into light. Painstakingly cleaning out the half-digested fodder lodged in the cavities of the intestines, she makes of them things of fascinating and translucent beauty, holding them up for our contemplation.

But Hadzi-Vasileva does not simply draw us into a deeper relationship with fleshiness in this work (the fleshiness, or corporeality, which the Word of God assumed in the incarnation). She makes flesh eloquent. In this respect, flesh becomes ‘word’ in her artistic practice.

Her work highlights the theologically important associations in a range of New Testament terms. For instance, the word for ‘dwelt’ (the Greek word ‘eskinosen’, from the noun ‘eskineo’ that we meet in the phrase ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’) also relates to the noun for tabernacle or tent. As I hinted above, it therefore recalls the ‘tent of meeting’ in which the Ark of the Covenant was housed before the children of Israel settled in the Promised Land and built a solid Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus’s fleshly body is therefore compared to the tent (the early, itinerant Holy of Holies) in which the divine presence was once encountered. The tent that became a Temple has become a tent again: this time, a tent of flesh.

And if the suspended stomach, which meets us at head height, recalls a hanging pyx (in which consecrated bread is sometimes kept for devotional purposes in a church), or an image of the sacred heart of Jesus, then we have entered even richer symbolic territory. In Jesus’s time, the heart was considered the seat of intellect, and not the seat of emotion. The seat of emotion was in the intestines. It is rare that Jesus’s feelings are described in the New Testament, but when they are (whether in anger or in compassion) they are located in his gut. If the imagery of the sacred heart of Jesus has been used in traditional devotion as a reminder of his love and mercy, then there is also reason to experiment with that imagery in relation to the stomach and the bowels, where we humans feel our most visceral emotions churn.

It is mercy, compassion, and even perhaps anger, that bind the Lamb of God to his destiny. So when made into ropes or cords (reminiscent of the ropes with which he was flogged, or led forcibly to the cross) these lambs’ intestines can suggest the way that Christ’s journey to the Cross was not only imposed from without, but was the following of his own ‘gut’ - his own compassion; a working out of the logic of his love and his sense of justice.

In such ways, flesh becomes communicative in Hadzi-Vasileva’s hands – as it has been communicative in many religious traditions. However, here, it also communicates some unpredictable new possibilities.

One of her inspirations for this work is the quadrantal structure of the van Eycks’ Adoration of the Mystic Lamb which forms part of the great altarpiece in Ghent. There, diverse groups of people are drawn as though from the four corners of the earth to venerate the Agnus Dei, who is raised up in the centre of a paradisaal space.

But in Haruspex, the animals have given way to one another, changing places and disrupting expectations. The Lamb is no longer the centre; [JUST AS] pigs are no longer wholly outside.

The work poses some acute ethical challenges as a result. The possibilities it explores for the redemption of flesh do not stop at the ambiguous beautification of animal body parts. They seem to challenge human exclusions, and to ask what new relationships are possible across religious and political divisions. Part of what may need to be redeemed in the redemption of flesh is the way that flesh has been used as weapon and boundary-marker, as Christians used it in the legend

of St Mark's translation to Venice with which we began. Part of what may need to be interrogated is the idea of anything (or anyone) being ultimately so unclean as to be beyond redemption.

Jesus himself seems to have shared the attitude to swine of his fellow Jews. But he also associated controversially with the unclean. His identification with sinful flesh culminated in a 'cursed' death (outside the city, 'on a tree' (Galatians 3:13, referring to Deuteronomy 21:23). He relativized the central institutions of the cult, and invited his followers to enter a perpetual interrogation of their own sense of what was licit and illicit; where true centres are and where are their margins; who counts as 'in' and who counts as 'out'. In Jesus's identification with sinful flesh, the ignoble were shown to be capable of glorification – they were graced, and made beautiful.

The goat sacrificed yearly by the Jews on the Day of Atonement (as well as the other goat sent out of the city to carry their sins away with it - the scapegoat (Leviticus 16)) were conduits for sin to be expelled from the social body. Analogously, the Gadarene swine in Luke 8 were used by Jesus as a sort of conduit for unclean spirits to be expelled from the suffering body of a possessed man. There are analogies between them. In different ways, these animals are like the 'gut' itself - a necessary conduit to make the body clean. Jesus's own sacrifice makes him like these animals - a means whereby the 'Body' of the Church is made whole and well.

In other words, if Jesus's redemptive work can be compared with the way that a goat was sacrificed for sin, it can perhaps plausibly be compared also with the way a herd of swine were sacrificed to liberate a demoniac man from his demons. And both can be compared with the infinitely complex, and marvellous, processes and organs by which the body expels waste and sustains life.

In a quite unexpected turn of events, Hadzi-Vasileva discovered that the 'omasum' with which she had become fascinated, and which she had decided to bring from out of its darkness into the light, is called in the English vernacular the 'Bible' (sometimes the 'Psalterium'), on account of its dense, page-like folds of skin. As flesh it has already been imagined by butchers and slaughtermen (perhaps for centuries) as 'word'. She therefore presents it to us to read, a 'thickness' anchored in a finely-sculpted and luminous 'thin' space, in which we may be drawn upwards or downwards by ropes of desire.

Moreover, in her exploration of how the Word may be met in flesh, she also shows how flesh may have a great deal to communicate to us. And in her ability to probe the relation between word and flesh, she shares something with one of the great fathers of the church, St Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who in his Confessions (Book 13, chapter 15) talked of Scripture itself as being like a canopy made of skins:

Now who but thee, our God, didst make for us that firmament of the authority of thy divine Scripture to be over us? For 'the heaven shall be folded up like a scroll'; but now it is stretched over us like a skin. Thy divine Scripture is of more sublime authority now that those mortal men through whom thou didst dispense it to us have departed this life. And thou knowest, O Lord, thou knowest how thou didst clothe men with skins when they became mortal because of sin. In something of the same way, thou hast stretched out the firmament of thy Book as a skin - that is to say, thou hast spread thy harmonious words over us through the ministry of mortal men. For by their very death that solid firmament of authority in thy sayings, spoken forth by them, stretches high over all that now drift under it.

In the Beginning...the world became flesh

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