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LIT 333 . . . NOT REL 333: Jesus as a Literary Event?

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Abstract

The 'literary Jesus' is a fluid figure, which means that he is a literary creation not solidified by tradition, orthodoxy, or dogma. Authors from D.H. Lawrence to José Saramago have reshaped, re-contoured, and transformed Jesus into an array of subject positions, with each literary articulation relating to mythology, philosophy, and politics. Teaching Jesus as a literary event allows students to take overly familiar religious discourses and traditional understandings of Jesus and rethink them in terms of other conceptual possibilities, possibilities that open up conversations about the creative literary imagination.

Contributor Note

Victor E. Taylor is the Director of the Institute for Civic Arts and Humanities at York College of Pennsylvania. *Christianity, Plasticity, and Spectral Heritages*, his forthcoming book, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017.

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Well, probably it was this learning of doubt that made him go through the writing of The Gospel According to Jesus Christ . . . This time it was not a matter of looking behind the pages of the New Testament in search of antithesis, but rather of illuminating their surfaces like that of a painting, with the low light to heighten their relief, the traces of crossings, the shadows of depressions.
– José Saramago, 1998 Nobel Lecture

Is what in the most emphatic sense appears on the cross not precisely Christ himself as giver, and not God the Father who disappears in the background of the fascinating figure of the suffering Christ? Is his act of sacrifice not the ultimate gift? . . . Furthermore, if we take this gift in all its radicality, does it not compel us to read its meaning as the full acceptance of the fact that God is dead, that there is no big Other?
– Slavoj Žižek, *God in Pain*

LIT 333 . . . NOT REL 333: Jesus as a Literary Event?

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Student Learning Outcomes and Course Objectives

- To critically engage in cross-disciplinary analyses of religious, literary, and philosophical figures, issues, and discourses.
- To demonstrate an understanding of theoretically informed arguments relating to cross-disciplinary scholarship relating to the course topic.

- To complete a theoretically informed critical or creative analysis (paper or project) relating to the course topic.

Modes of Instruction

- Class discussion;
- Small group discussions;
- Lecture;
- Instructor/student conferences.

Policies and Expectations

- Please see the Student Handbook.

The (Non) Catalog Description:

Welcome to LIT 333: Jesus as a Literary Event? ... Not REL 333: Jesus as a Literary Event? ... Students, faculty, and, perhaps most significantly, the college catalog manager, anticipate that courses that take up the topic of 'Jesus' carry the prefix REL or ... maybe PHL LIT as a prefix seems to test institutional and disciplinary credulity. But why? Isn't there a well acknowledged literary Jesus? A Jesus of the sonnet? Poetry as well as prose and drama? The answer is yes and, more to the point, the literary Jesus, while seeming to come to many as a surprise, works as an event in which Christological consistency gives way to imaginative reconstitution. Consider, for example, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* in which the story of Jesus's return threatens to undo the teachings of the Church. In this literary context, the second coming is an event that ironically completes or threatens to complete Christianity by negating its organizational structure and mission. The same can be said of D.H. Lawrence's 'man who died', a Jesus figure who gives up his divine mission after the crucifixion and a



romantic encounter with a priestess of Isis; his fate seems to be that of aimlessly wandering the edge of the Roman Empire avoiding capture by the authorities. Introducing students to the literary Jesus, therefore, means giving the historical and theological Jesus the characteristic of an event, a rich plurality or multitude of persona sometimes lacking outside the literary imagination.

The (Non) Course Description¹

The literary Jesus of modern and postmodern literature often appears as a figure affirming two distinct narrative trajectories, devotional and reconstitutive. In the instance of the former, one can find numerous 'devotional' modernist portrayals or faithful symbolic representations of Jesus across the modern literary tradition. This is especially true in the post-baptismal works of T.S. Eliot, 'Journey of the Magi', and, as a second instance, in the verse of the Victorian/ proto-modernist poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. As perhaps the most representative of this trajectory, Hopkins' 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection' unites poetic insight with Christian theological commitment, making it an example of the devotional mode *par excellence*:

But vastness blurs and time
beats level.
Enough! the Resurrection,
A heat's-clarion! Away grief's gasping,
joyless days, dejection.
Across my foundering deck
Shone

¹ Portions of this text will appear revised in *Christianity, Plasticity, and Spectral Heritages* (2017) and *Religion After Postmodernism: Rethorizing Myth and Literature* (2008).

A beacon, an eternal beam.
Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm;
world's
wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is,
since he
was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd,
patch, matchwood, immortal
diamond,
is immortal diamond.

In cases of the latter, in which a certain form of modernist (atheistic) reconstitution is emphasized, one could point to such works as D.H. Lawrence's previously mentioned novella *The Man Who Died*, and, somewhat earlier, to Leo Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief*, which is a 'hybrid' text in that it blends literary sensibilities and religious expository discourse. In both instances, Jesus is consistently portrayed as a non-divine figure and, for Tolstoy in particular, Jesus or, more precisely, his teachings, minus the miracles, are the foundation for a future revolutionary religio-ethico-politico era.

Discourse to Incite Student Intellectual Engagement I

The event that most significantly marks the re-figuration of Jesus, however, takes the form of an 'atheistic reconstitution' in postmodern literature; a re-figuration that resists the traditional formulation of the Godhead and the subsequent divinity of Jesus, but at the same time embraces and emphasizes the humanity of Jesus. Although the Nobel laureate author José Saramago, in his novel *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, maintains a vertical dualism in his work, God above world, the Jesus that he reconstitutes in



the literary narrative doesn't fold back into a heavenly space or, for that matter, identify with that divine dimension. Jesus, instead, 'dis-identifies' with the divine, seeing God as an abusive tyrant without purpose or a purpose driven by goodness: 'You brought me here, what do you want with me. For the moment nothing, but the day will come when I will want everything. What is everything. Your life. You are the Lord, You always take from us the life You gave us. There is no other way, I cannot allow the world to become overcrowded' (1994: 220). It is this outright callousness of the 'Lord' that seemingly pushes Saramago's Jesus to embrace his humanity over his divinity, which leaves the reader with a representation of Jesus as a parallax moment or as an event precariously located between two figural possibilities, the 'divinity of Jesus' and the 'humanity of Christ'.

This ambiguity contained within the 'Jesus event' becomes important to the novel insofar as the figure of Jesus is the one who may potentially underwrite a new post-theology – one that will be central to a reimagined or revised postmodern Christian atheism. Saramago gives the reader a troubled 'singular' or problematically dualistic Jesus – a Jesus who comes to prefer his humanity to his divinity. The final scene of the novel reverses the Gospel account in which a dying Jesus calls upon the Father to forgive his executioners, all of humanity, for their misguided act. Saramago's Jesus does something quite extraordinary; he calls upon humanity to forgive the Godhead for *His* misguided act:

Jesus is dying slowly, life ebbing from him, ebbing, when suddenly the heavens overhead open wide and god appears in the same attire

he wore in the boat, and his words resound throughout the earth, This is My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. Jesus realized then that he had been tricked, as the lamb led to sacrifice is tricked, and that his life had been planned for death from the very beginning. Remembering the river of blood and suffering that would flow from his side and flood the globe, he called out to the open sky, where God could be seen smiling, Men forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done. (1994: 376-7)

Saramago's literary recreation of the Gospel scene allows Jesus to be reconstituted or refashioned as a sacrifice without 'deep' dogmatic meaning, the impending death allows for an event to occur at the strictly human level. Jesus is, as Žižek observes in *The Monstrosity of Christ* and *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, a Job figure – one whose suffering is pointless in the not so great scheme of things.

Discourse to Incite Student Intellectual Engagement II:

For Slavoj Žižek, whose recent theological writings affirm a Christian atheism, as well as Saramago, Jesus' death marks the *telos* of Christianity insofar as Jesus, left dying, dead, and/or unresurrected in the traditional sense, remains, finally, fully human. More provocatively, as Žižek argues, one becomes fully Christian when one embraces Jesus' 'atheism' as it is announced in his cry 'my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matt. 32. 46). This final moment in Jesus' life, similar to the one depicted in Saramago's novel, gives us not a portrait of a loving God, but a derelict God, a God



that has forsaken Jesus and us, according to the reworking/rewriting of the narrative.

While Saramago provides the reader with a truly radical, disavowing Jesus, it is also worthwhile to further examine as an extension of this 'literary Jesus' Žižek's concept of the 'comedy of Christianity', which, in the dramatic sense, serves as an 'atheological' transgression of dogmatism. Žižek, in 'The Comedy of Incarnation' from *The Parallax View*, reads the move from, myth to agape as a decisive reconfiguration of the failed Hegelian dialectic, a material synthesis rather than a spiritual synthesis. His Cartesian subject, filtered through Lacan, mirrors this failure of synthetic unity, which makes Žižek's Cartesian subject a 'ticklish' subject in the history of philosophy. If Christianity is a myth, basically literary, then Christianity exceeds tragedy, according to Žižek, by expressing itself through the form of comedy or the dialectic of comedy in which the 'coming together' of the Christian narrative is made meaningful by the fact that it ironically falls apart – Christ dies, without resurrection.

Žižek's dialectic between 'figure' and 'ground' presupposes failure, disjunction and disunity. In other words, following St. Paul, Jesus' death is not defeat; it is a victory insofar as two once separate entities are brought into unity. One, following Žižek and not St. Paul, by contrast, becomes a Christian, then, by identifying with Jesus' atheism on the cross – his failure to reconcile difference between heaven and world. Therefore, to truly be a Christian, within this reversal, one must be an atheist, which means that one, ironically, is closest to God when one denies or disavows 'Him', as He denied Himself – a comic inversion. Oddly, this is similar, if not the opposite,

to the logic behind making 'despair' the most serious of sins; one, in despair, believes that there is no hope, which means that one believes that he or she is beyond the redemptive power of God – a sinful conclusion. While despair is a serious condition, it is possible to experience that it is only in this place of hopelessness that God genuinely saves² by His grace, e.g. Faust. In typical Žižekian fashion, we are confronted with an entire set of comic reversals when it comes to mythic narrative beginning, as Žižek notes, with Søren Kierkegaard, a literary-philosopher:

In 'The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern' ... Kierkegaard sketches out his fantasy of what a modern Antigone would be like. The conflict is now entirely internalized: there is no longer a need for Creon. While Antigone admires and loves her father Oedipus, the public hero and savior of Thebes, she knows the truth about him (murderer of the father, incestuous marriage). Her deadlock is that she is prevented from sharing this accursed knowledge (like Abraham, who also could not communicate to others the divine injunction to sacrifice his

² In *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Žižek comments on 'grace' as the equivalent of 'free choice':

It is fundamentally the choice of 'freely assuming' one's imposed destiny. This paradox, necessary if one is to avoid the vulgar liberal notion of freedom of choice, indicates the theological problem of *predestination* and *Grace*: a true decision/choice (not a choice between a series of objects leaving my subjective position intact, but the fundamental choice by means of which I 'choose myself') presupposes that I assume a passive attitude of 'letting myself be chosen' – in short, *free choice and Grace are strictly equivalent*; or, as Deleuze put it, we really choose only when we are *chosen* (2000: 18).



son): she cannot complain, share her pain and sorrow with others. In contrast to Sophocles' Antigone, who acts . . . she is unable to act, condemned forever to impassive suffering. (2006: 105)

In this solitude of 'impassive suffering', Kierkegaard denies one of the most fundamental aspects of tragedy – Hegel's 'eternal justice'. Whether it is Greek or Senecan or Shakespearean tragedy, the high are brought low and some prevailing justice is instantiated, even if it seems disproportionate to the reader; King Lear, of course, stands as an example of this feature. Pure suffering, as in the case of the modernist Antigone, suspends justice and, by implication the ethical, making suffering exclusively 'aesthetic'. Žižek adds a 'Stalinist twist' to Kierkegaard's modernist Antigone and imagines her publicly 'denouncing' her father and his sins, which leaves her more isolated or socially ostracized. The modern Kierkegaardian Antigone falls on the side of aesthetics, which is pure suffering. The 'postmodernist' Antigone is on the other side of the 'either/or', the ethical, which is pure renunciation. The common point between the two is the 'parallax gap'.

The modernist Antigone cannot overcome the rift separating her from those who could potentially alleviate her suffering. The postmodernist Antigone, with a 'Stalinist twist', is equally isolated insofar as no one, with the exception of Oedipus (were he alive), would understand her renunciation as something other than an unforgivable betrayal (2006: 104). The 'aesthetic' and the 'ethical' determine very different outcomes although both share a vision of Antigone in complete isolation. The possible mediating 'third' term from Kierkegaard would be in this instance

the 'religious', which theoretically could supersede both the aesthetic and the ethical. However, as Žižek points out, the 'religious' is not an inherently stabilizing term, which redirects the question of the 'parallax gap' in the narrative, Sophoclean and Christian, to comedy:

Kierkegaard gives no clear priority to the Ethical, he merely confronts the two choices, that of Aesthetics and of Ethics, in a purely parallax way, emphasizing the 'jump' that separates them, the lack of any mediation between them. The religious is by no means the mediating 'synthesis' of the two, but, on the contrary, the radical assertion of the parallax gap. (2006: 104-5)

In Žižek, the 'rift' or 'gap' is described as being 'parallax', the space between two incommensurate symbolic systems that is itself represented by both, albeit differently. The paradox of the 'lack of common measure', Žižek argues, creates 'an insurmountable abyss between the Finite and the Infinite' (2006: 105). In addition to incommensurability, the parallax gap or 'split' in the religious: 'We are never safely within the Religious, doubt forever remains, the same act can be seen as religious or as aesthetic, in a parallax split which can never be abolished, since 'minimal difference' which transubstantiates (what appears to be) an aesthetic act into a religious one can never be specified, located in a determinate property' (2006: 105).

Discourse to Incite Student Intellectual Engagement III:

For Žižek, then, the resilience or incorrigibility of the 'religious' as it comes to terms with 'determinate property'





gives rise to a particular instance of the 'rift' or 'gap'. Between myth and language or philosophy and literature, the 'religious' intervenes with some putative explanatory power. However, rather than viewing the 'religious' as the crucial synthesizing discourse, it is, as Žižek notes, the significant space of 'minimal difference', which is the space of incommensurability, an eventual space.

In order to illustrate Žižek's 'Christian comedy', it is necessary to examine the way in which Žižek 're-marks' Christian identity through atheism. This process begins with a continuation of his analysis of Kierkegaard's imaginative reworking of Antigone. The idea of reversal of highest and lowest, which links traditional tragedy (high brought low) and comedy (high/low comedy of manners or social misplacement), takes shape around the presentation of Jesus: 'Is there anything more comical than Incarnation, this ridiculous overlapping of the Highest and the Lowest, the coincidence of God, creator of the universe, and a miserable man? Take the elementary comical scene from a film: after the trumpets announce the King's entrance to the royal hall, the surprised public sees a miserable crippled clown who enters staggering ... this is the logic of Incarnation' (2006: 105).

Žižek adds that 'the point is that the gap that separates God from man in Christ is purely one of parallax: Christ is not a person with two substances, immortal and mortal' (2006: 105).

As Žižek clarifies, Jesus does not 'represent' the divine; nor is he a 'symbol' of the divine. In these instances, Jesus only would be the object of a phenomenological or hermeneutical or structuralist explication – something to be "totally" reconciled to an ultimate

framework: 'As this miserable human, Christ directly *is* God. Christ is not *also* human, apart from being God; he is a man precisely *insofar as he is God*' (2006: 105). With Christ 're-marked' as pure 'parallax', Žižek has set aside the necessity of 'commerce' between dialectical opposed realms, sacred/profane, mytheme/mythos, or text/horizon of meaning. Following a re-imagined, failed Hegelian dialectic, Žižek gives an account of a new paradoxical unity with God as 'parallax':

This is how Hegelian 'reconciliation' works: not as an immediate synthesis or reconciliation of opposites, but as the redoubling of the gap or antagonism – the two opposed moments are 'reconciled' when the gap that separates them as posited as inherent to one of the terms. In Christianity, the gap that separates God from man is not directly 'sublated' in the figure of Christ as God-man; it is rather that, in the most tense moment of crucifixion, when Christ himself despairs ('Father, why have you forsaken me?'), the gap that separates God from man is transposed into God himself, as the gap that separates Christ from God-Father; the properly dialectical trick here is that the very feature which appeared to separate me from God turns out to unite me with God. (2006: 105)

The Christian theological tradition, across denominations one could argue, understands Christ to be not only the one who reconciles a fallen humankind with the divine, but also the one who brings an end to all theological symbolic difference – one with Christ. With Christ, then, the 'rift' or gap supposedly





vanishes, if we 'properly' follow through onto-theologically. A 're-marked' Christianity, however, preserves the 'rift' or gap – not as the insurmountable 'Otherness' of negative theology, but as 'redoubled'. As Žižek writes, the gap that 'separate[s] me from God turns out to unite me with God' (2006: 107). This 'redoubling' of the interval suspends the need for synthesis and, instead, ironically positions the 'gap' as the ineluctable condition for unity with God. In other words, when one sees the gap between humankind and the divine as the antagonism that makes 'reconciliation' possible, one can have 'a faith'. Here, one could offer the following as a creed: 'I believe in the God that abandoned himself. Whatever affirmation one chooses it must reject a 'big Other' and underscore the persistence of an impossibly unity predicated on separation. This philosophical 're-marking' of Jesus' death is offered as an instance of an incomplete Hegelian dialectic in which the 'Universal' and the 'Singular' overlap:

While observing Napoleon on a horse in the streets of Jena after the battle of 1807, Hegel remarked that it was as if he saw there the World Spirit riding a horse. The Christological implications of this remark are obvious: what happened in the case of Christ is that God himself, the creator of our entire universe, was walking out there as a common individual. (2006:110)

Žižek previously comments that if one follows this linking of the Universal and the Singular the 'real' is not revealed as much as the 'problem' of the real is made visible in the instance of appearance: '*How does appearance itself emerge from the interplay of the Real?*' The thesis that the Real is just the cut or

gap of inconsistency, between two appearances has thus to be supplemented by its opposite: appearance is the cut, the gap, between the two Reals, or more precisely, *something that emerges in the gap that separates the Real from itself* (2006: 107). The journey through myth, over the gap, to the Real is suspended by Žižek and the so-called 'gap' or 'rift' is not placed between 'saying' and 'understanding' or the 'sacred' and the 'profane'; the 'gap' is, as Žižek notes, within the Real 'itself', as a condition of its own possibility. This repositioning of the 'gap' is further clarified when Žižek includes the concept of 'Kantian spontaneity' in the discussion: 'At the phenomenal level, we are mechanisms, parts of the chain of causes and effects; at the noumenal level, we are again puppets, lifeless mechanisms' (2006: 107). Žižek understands the 'gap' between the two levels is the 'only place of freedom', the site of appearance.³ Like Napoleon riding on horseback or Jesus, one could imagine, on an ass, the Universal and the Singular, within a synthesizing dialectic, are joined, eliminating the 'gap'. Re-marked, however, the appearance does

³ In *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek describes this tension between appearance and essence in the following Hegelian terms:

So – back to Hegel: 'the suprasensible is appearance *qua* appearance' does not simply mean that the Suprasensible is not a positive entity *beyond* phenomena, but the inherent power of negativity which makes appearance 'merely as appearance', that is, something that is not in itself fully actual, but condemned to perish in the process of self-sublation. It also means that the Suprasensible is effective only as redoubled, self-reflected, self-related appearance: the Suprasensible comes into existence in the appearance of Another Dimension which interrupts the standard normal order of appearance *qua* phenomena (2000: 196-7).



not form an end to the 'rift', but is itself, according to Žižek, the Real-of-the-rift/gap.

Žižek's terms, is the fact that the 'hidden terrifying secret' is the same – whether it is in front of the veil or behind it. This is much more than a naïve realist pursuit of truth – seeing is believing. The critical insight here is that the 'rift' or 'gap' is not situated between two planes of existence, but within Reality itself: 'This very lack of difference between the two elements confronts us with "pure" difference that separates an element from itself' (2006: 109). From this observation, Žižek offers a definition of God that, in rejecting prior models predicated on uniting two discrete planes, makes God the instance of the 'gap', radical self-same-difference: 'And is this not the ultimate definition of the divinity – God, too, has to wear a mask himself? Perhaps "God" is the name for this supreme split between the Absolute as the noumenal Thing and the Absolute as the appearance of itself, for the fact that the two are the same, that the difference between the two is purely formal' (2006: 109). This 'formal difference', then, permits one to, as Žižek argues in 'The Comedy of the Incarnation', become fully Christian in atheism, with Jesus not God and not man, but the 'supreme split', which is captured in comedy or literature in general as an event.

Epilogue for Students/Readers

One of the key/critical concepts that allows for a 'literary Jesus' is *plasticity*. Jesus within an imaginative or literary-narrative space becomes *plastic* and pliable, able to be fashioned and shaped to accommodate a wide range of aesthetic, ideological, theological, and

cultural desires. Jesus's plasticity is an event or sets up an event, either as the effect of an action or as an occurrence independent of a cause (we'll read more Žižek to understand this distinction). To capture the potential of this event, we, as readers and thinkers, need to develop a plastic capacity of our own. We need to become 'intellectual' events – plastic, pliable, shapeable as we encounter discourses that challenge our postures and attitudes toward texts and concepts.

Writing Topics and Questions for Office Hours, MWF 11:00-12:00:

Are authors allowed to rewrite the Gospel stories?

Haven't the Gospels also been revised and rewritten over centuries?

Can there be a dialogue between the theological imagination and the literary imagination?

Could one write a dialogue between a literary Jesus and Jesus of the Gospels?

What if I like a literary Jesus better than Jesus in the Gospels?

What does Žižek's atheism do for me?

Does Saramago see the possibility of a new Christianity as a religious practice?

Does Žižek really see himself as a Christian? An atheistic Christian?

Is Christianity both a tragedy and a comedy?

Is there a Gospel according to Žižek? If not, could I write one?

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