Transcorporeality: The Ontological Scandal

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Corpus

'In Michigan, a man named David wanted his union of twelve years with Jon blessed by a representative of God before he died. David lay on the couch while Jim, a gay Presbyterian minister who also has AIDS, moved his hands to the silent sounds of peace. He spoke nourishing words of blessing on these two lives bound by God's grace: "Those whom God hath joined together, let no one put asunder ..." And then, as the minister began to celebrate the Communion for those who were present, he spoke the familiar words: "This is my body, broken for you ..." and that was the point at which David died. "Do this in remembrance of me".1

These are not my words. They belong to another voice, an American voice; the voice of a Christian journalist himself dying of AIDS. I ventriloquize his voice, because I want to talk about Christianity and the brokenness of bodies in postmodernity. The brokenness of these bodies is a continuation of the logic (and, ironically, humanism) of modernity. Postmodernity is a dissection of modernity's direction. And so the corpses and carnage of Ypres and the genocides of Belsen, are repeated, variously, at Pol Pot and Bosnia. The bodies, modern and postmodern, are concrete and also symptomatic. Where culture can be understood as a language, as an open field of shifting symbols, these pilings up of the dead are metaphors of cultural disintegration.

I want to talk about the racked and viral-ridden bodies of the sick, the engineered bodies of the beautiful, the power-hungry and disenfranchized bodies of the polis, the torn and bleeding body of the Church, the poisoned and raped body of the world and the abused body of Christ. This essay, then, is quite explicitly beginning from a Christian theological standpoint. The work on

epistemology by feminist philosophers such as Sandra Harding and Bat-Ami Bar On emphasizes the requirement that subjects construct ‘knowledges’ or make claims about the way things are from specific situations and these subjects need to acknowledge their standpoint if, together, we are to move towards what Harding terms ‘maximizing objectivities’. What Christian theology has to offer any discussion of corporeality is not simply in terms of the way its discourses have informed our past understanding (and neglect) of the experience of embodiment. Christian theology also offers a profound thinking about the nature of bodies through the relationship it weaves between creation, incarnation ecclesiology and eucharist. As Elizabeth Castelli observes, ‘From the very earliest Christian texts and practices, the human body functioned as both a site of religious activities and a source of religious meanings’.

I want to talk about the broken bodies of postmodernity through the discourses which access them for us. As Judith Butler reminds us, “To matter” means at once “to materialize” and “to mean”, and, elsewhere, ‘the materiality of the signifier (a “materiality” that comprises both signs and their significatory efficacy) implies that there can be no reference to a pure materiality except via materiality’. We have no knowledge, and no acknowledged experience of, the material world outside of the way we represent that world to ourselves. Furthermore, that recording of what is physically present, that representation, is going to be freighted with cultural meaning. For we have been taught how to represent the world to ourselves — our descriptions are culturally and historically embedded. But through these representations we inhabit the broken fragments of these contemporary bodies, they are mapped on to our bodies through their ‘signs and significatory efficacy’. The narratives of their tearing and violation, as we read them, involve themselves in the narratives of our own embodiment. Through these narratives these bodies, and our bodies also, scream and rage for resurrection.

‘Take, eat, this is my body’. The shock-wave in these words emerges from the depths of an ontological scandal, the scandal of that ‘is’. The literary nature of this demonstrative identification

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2 See Sandra Harding’s essay ‘Rethinking standpoint epistemology: what is strong objectivity?’, Bat-Ami Bar On’s essay ‘Marginality and epistemic privilege’ and Helen Longino’s essay ‘Subjects, power and knowledge’ in Feminist epistemologies, eds Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (London: Routledge, 1993), 49–120.


5 For another discussion of this scandal, as it was discussed by the Port-Royal grammarians of the seventeenth century, see Louis Marin’s essay ‘The body of the divinity captured by signs’, in Food for thoughts, trans. Mette Hjort (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3–25.
cannot be accurately catalogued. There is no avowed element of
similitude or comparison: it is not a simile, it is not a metaphor.
There is no element of substitution or proportion to indicate
synecdoche or metonymy: it is not an analogy, it is not a symbol.
A piece of bread is held up for view and renamed: this is my body.
A is not A in a logic of identification. A is B and, possibly (for
there is no stated reason why this should not be the implication)
A could be renamed again as C or D or E: this bread is my
whatever. What is being perceived and what we are being told are
out of joint. The phrase has the literary structure of allegory or
irony: something which seems to be the case is so but otherwise.

The scandal of that 'is', what I call the ontological scandal, raises
a question to do with the naming and identification of bodies. The
question runs somewhat parallel to a question raised in the title
of an (in)famous essay by the critical theorist Stanley Fish. Fish
asked 'Is There a Text in This Class?' in order to demonstrate that
the stable identification of a text is contingent upon the context.
'[B]ecause it is set not for all places or all times but for wherever
and however long a particular way of reading is in force, it is a text
that can change'. Similarly, I am asking 'Is there a body in this
room?', the upper room, that is, the room in which the Last
Supper of Christ was eaten. This is not to deny embodiment. I am
not performing some postmodern act of prestidigitation in which
what is disappears in clouds of philosophical obscurity. But I am
asking, like Fish, about the stability of the identity and
identification of bodies. Is the reality (whatever that means) that
bodies are beyond our ability to grasp them and that we deal only
with imaginary and symbolized bodies — our own and other
people’s? What does that ontological scandal in that upper room
announce about bodies? What kind of bodies occupy what kind of
spaces and in what kind of relationships to other such bodies? This
is the constellation of questions being orbited here. If, from the
specific standpoint of Christian theology, orderings and accounts
of the world proceed from that which has been revealed, and if,
therefore, this eucharistic body informs all other understandings
of 'body' for Christian teaching — then what kind of bodies is
Christianity concerned with?

The shock-wave of the eucharistic phrase has to be calibrated
according to our conceptualizations of the body. Our conceptual­
izations of the body depend, in turn, upon the way the word is
used; upon the discursive practices in which 'body' is employed.
If we take Mark’s Gospel as a certain delineated context, then
'body' (soma) occurs four times — three of those occasions in the
last, Passion section. On all three other occasions 'body' is used

6 Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities (Cambridge, MA:
Harvard University Press, 1980), 274.
to designate the physical and biological organism — of the woman whose haemorrhage of blood is healed (5:29), of Jesus when he is anointed with the precious ointment (14:8), of Jesus when Joseph of Arimathaea requests the corpse from Pilate for burial (15:43). Only the eucharistic ‘This is my body’ of (14:22) does violence to the consistent employment of ‘body’ throughout Mark’s text. But the dissonance that it registers in the context of that one text may not reflect the dissonance registered in the wider Greco-Roman culture (or the wider context of the New Testament) of Paul’s use of *soma* in his letters to the church at Corinth. The dissonance registered in Mark may not be the same as that registered in the Middle Ages with its notion of the *corpus mysticum* or the dissonance registered today when the meaning of ‘body’ is so governed by medical and scientific discourses. Perhaps the ontological scandal is greater today, following a long period in which bodies have become discrete, self-defining, biological organisms. A change is certainly evident in the use of the word, for ‘body’ comes from an Old English word, *bodig*, meaning corpse, inert thing. Today it is used much more in the sense of a living, active form of life. Bodies are measured and identified according to strict, scientific criteria. And so to the logical positivist the demonstrative identification ‘this is my body’ with reference to an observable piece of bread is simply nonsense, a misidentification.

The ontological scandal of ‘This is my body’ today lies particularly in the confidence with which the misidentification is made. The grammar (whether English or Greek) announces an unequivocal logic — pronomial object (this) related to possessive subject (my body) through the cupola (is) — but the isomorphism of bread = body defeats the logic. The statement performs the same structure as, in the context of holding a wedge of Edam aloft, an authoritative subject-position pronounces: ‘Here is the moon’. It is an act of madness. But why and was it always?

**Corpuscularity**

It is an act of madness today because demonstrative identification is linked to perception. As one leading analytical philosopher has remarked, ‘Most of us are inclined to suppose that there are close connections between demonstration and perception, and some of these could be brought out by principles of the form “If conditions are C, then if a person makes a statement which demonstrates an object, the person perceives that object”’. But even he then goes on to say, ‘But I do not know how to spell out the conditions’.

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8 John Wallace, ‘Only in the context of sentence do words have any meaning’, in Peter A. French et al. (eds) *Contemporary perspectives in the philosophy of language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 319.
For example, the person making the statement could be blind or the object at a considerable distance. But it is not only the conditions which make the association between demonstration and perception difficult, it is the act of naming and the nature of perception itself. Naming relies upon social consensus and memory of past, confirming, acts of identification. People, generally and contemporaneously, call this a church and that a frog. They have learnt to. Social consensus does not call ‘bread’ ‘body’. To call ‘bread’ ‘body’, to rename the world, requires an Adamic act, an act at the origins of the world: ‘And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name whereof (Gen. 2:19). Despite modernity's several attempts to start again — witness Descartes, Locke, Kant and Hegel, to name a few — with language we always begin after the beginning. Margaret Thatcher may have attempted to rename ‘community’ those people who are allowed to vote and live in dwellings they have paid a tax on, but older views of community persist and resist such distortions. Furthermore, as Gareth Evans points out with reference to Strawson’s belief that a subject can identify an object demonstratively if he can pick it out by sight, hearing or touch, ‘the ordinary concept of perception is vague’. Perception involves a certain ego-centred orientation and evaluation of objects in a specific spatiality. Each subject position perceives, and in perceiving evaluates (hot/cold, dry/damp, dark/light), differently. I am, at first, alone in what it is that I perceive. Perception is always mediated — we see something as something (a chair as a chair, the garden as a garden), we do not simply see. Sometimes we are blind to what we see. Most of us have experienced what is common to dyslexics, or children learning to write who reverse letters/numbers — that something looks right, when in fact it is not: we are blind to an error we cannot perceive while staring at it. Authors make bad proof-readers of their own work. Only when something is pointed out do we see what it is we are perceiving. More generally, critical assessment — of a painting or a building, a poem or a state of mind — is illuminating to the extent that it brings to light things we have not considered before. Demonstrative identification is, as Gareth Evans emphasizes ‘an information-based thought’, it is not a form of description. But if naming is taught and perception is both relative and mediated, then what the statement ‘This is my body’ effects when the person saying it is holding a loaf of bread, is a scepticism. Do I see aright? Do I orientate myself correctly insofar as ‘this’ implies a ‘here’,

10 Ibid., 145.
implies a certain spacing, a certain understanding of place such that I can identify this place? Have I learnt to use ‘body’ and ‘this’ aright? The I, in its self-certainty, is undermined and has to seek confirmation for what it sees and has learnt from the responses of others.

The scepticism is the product of the metaphysical framework within which we today assess a demonstrative statement. It is evident from Gareth Evans’s analytical approach in his essay *Demonstrative identification* that what is presupposed in this analysis is the following: first, an independent ego (in order to create the ‘egocentric space’ from which one perceives); secondly, concepts of space and representation such that a distinction can be drawn between internal spacing of objects and the external or public spacing of those same objects (so that the latter makes possible the former); thirdly, concepts of relations between objects filling and creating that public space such that a subject ‘has an idea of himself as one object among others’; and, fourthly, concepts of materiality, memory (of previous encounters with the object) and perception such that object \( x \) can be deemed to be \( x \) because it constantly has properties of \( x \) as seen over a period of time. Overall, what is privileged throughout is the sense data constituting the objective properties of the particular object being indicated. This privileging has certain consequences. It assumes that the full presence of the object, all that the object is, was and will be, is available for observation. The ‘is’ of demonstrative identification dissolves as a word, suggesting direct access to the presence of the object through the assertion. ‘This is a table’, ‘This is a chair’. A commodity is born — the possessable reification of a certain individual’s perceptual labour. The name sticks so close to the object named — and it is the sticking close which enables ‘identification’ and ‘verification’ — that they become indistinguishable. It is only as such that the communication can be understood as information (or misinformation-) based.

Read from a Christian theological standpoint, one could say that the metaphysical framework here is a secularised doctrine of realised eschatology — the condition of resurrected and permanent dwelling within the fully illuminating presence of the divine. Wittgenstein himself seems to make this very same emphasis in insisting in *Philosophical investigations* that ‘everything lies open to view’, that what is called for is ‘complete clarity’ and that ‘nothing is hidden’.12 As Wittgenstein stated: ‘The truth of the matter is that

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12 *Philosophical investigations*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), 126, 133, 435. I am grateful to Conor Cunningham for pointing this similarity out to me (and also the implied metaphysics in Wittgenstein’s anti-metaphysical thinking). I take this opportunity also to thank him for reading and commenting upon this essay.
we have already got everything and we have got it actually present, we need not wait for anything'. With this emphasis, mediation, the act of representation itself, the performance of referring itself, is downplayed at best, but certainly on the road to being erased. It is not the statement which acts to bring the object into being as a certain object; it is the object which acts, provoking the assertion. The world asserts its own reality. Behind such a view lies an atomism: ultimate reality is found in the independence of each atom asserting its own self-enclosed being. Bodies, as such, dissolve into their distinct properties. A form of dissection is performed as the list of distinctive predicates lengths. A form of death is performed; death as also the dissolution of the body into its composite elements. So that the care to identify an object through perception and perception's correlation with naming, in fact collapses upon itself — the object is torn up into its various compounds. Speragmos. The body is a collection of organs, a binding of chemicals, a grouping of molecular structures etc. Jean-Luc Nancy observes the strong connection between atomism, individualism and claims to unqualified veracity: 'the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community. By its nature — as its name indicates, it is the atom, the indivisible — the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition. It is another, and symmetrical, figure of immanence: the absolutely detached for-itself, taken as origin and as certainty'. With the ancients, Leucippus and Democritus, this soulless materialism, materialism without mystery, announced a void, a nihilism. With positivists and radical empiricists, it announces a fluorescent world of fully presenced certainties indifferent to time, agency and mediation: the eternity of matter, like the ancient hylē. To the post-Einsteinian scientist, since matter and energy at root are interchangeable, matter is defined as the specific focusing of energy.

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Within such a metaphysical construal ‘This is my body’ makes three responses possible: observational self-doubt; a judgement about the mental abilities of the one who has made the misidentification; an ontological scandal (a ‘miracle’ as Enlightenment

14 This return to a Dionysian ecstasy which seizes the present while tearing it apart is a recurrent theme in contemporary writing. See Thomas Pynchon's V (London: Picador Books, 1975), Patrick Suskind's Perfume, trans. John E. Woods (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987) and Donna Tartt's The secret history (London: Penguin Books, 1992). In all these novels speragmos plays an important, ritualistic role where immanence turns upon itself. In pure immanence all bodies are dissolved.
15 The inoperative community, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1991), 3.
philosophy of religion would understand it). Within such a metaphysical construal, because of the independence of the object from the assertion and the one who asserts, the second of these responses would be privileged. The first would be ruled out by appeal to the experience and memory of objects having normative predicates; an appeal to normativity extended through calling upon the experience of other people. The third would be ruled out on Hume’s ground that a ‘miracle’ can only be demonstrated to have occurred when it occurred with a regularity that would make its occurrence normative and, therefore, no longer a miracle.

If then we can understand the demonstrative identification involved in ‘This is my body’ as suggestive of madness (within the current metaphysical construal and its priorities), can we say that this was always so or need be so? What if self, space (place), representation, perception and materiality are conceived otherwise such that ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘body’ are only contingently stable and identifiable? What if transmutation is written into the fabric of the way things are? What if we take ‘becoming’,\(^{16}\) take contingency, seriously such that the *nunc* as the ‘is’ of Jesus' demonstrative identification constitutes a different kind of ontological scandal?

Take, for example, the theological construal for the interpretation of ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘body’ in the work of Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century bishop living in the province of Cappadoceea — and the implications of this construal for understanding self, space (place), representation, perception and materiality. It might seem from the following that Gregory would concur with our contemporary analysis of the ontological scandal of ‘This is my body’: ‘if one were to show us true bread, we say that he properly applies the name to the subject: but if one were to show us instead that which had been made of stone to resemble the natural bread, which had the same shape, and equal size, and similarity of colour, so as in most points to be the same with the prototype, but which yet lacks the power of being food, on this account we say that the stone receives the name of “bread”, not properly, but by a misnomer’.\(^{17}\) But we would be mistaken if we read this in terms of contemporary analytical philosophy. The clues to the Christian metaphysics framing this passage are there in phrases like ‘the same with the prototype’ and ‘lacks the power of being’. The emphasis is not upon the object as such but upon the failure of the object to be part of a power-economy which nourishes, and upon the act of naming. Later in the same treatise, he can write:

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\(^{16}\) I place this word in inverted commas because of the way ‘becoming’ is axiomatic in immanent economies whether Spinoza’s, Hegel’s, Marx’s or process theologians’. I do not intend ‘becoming’ in such a way. I intend the activation, the *dunamis*, of being; a being that is gifted by a God who is the pure actancial giving. My ‘becoming’ should be read Thomistically.


'I, however, when I hear the Holy Scripture, do not understand only bodily meat, or the pleasure of the flesh; but I recognise another kind of food also, having a certain analogy to that of the body, the enjoyment of which extends to the soul alone: “Eat of my bread”, is the bidding of Wisdom to the hungry; and the Lord declares those blessed who hunger for such food as this, and says, “If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink” ... “famine” is not the lack of bread and water, but the failure of the Word’. 18

What is is governed here by the operation of the Word, not the perceived predicates of objects existing in and of themselves in a world consisting also in and of itself. The divine, the spiritual, principle prioritizes. Nature exists in and through this prioritization such that even within the human being the intellectual as spiritual is the animating principle that enables nature to prosper ‘according to its own order’. 19 The ‘stone’ imitating bread in the first passage cannot nourish (and so become a form of bread) because ‘it lacks the power of being food’. It is inanimate. But in and of itself as matter it could be animated and therefore become a source for food. The turning of stones into bread is a distinct possibility for the Messiah, as Satan points out in the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. Nature cannot be natural without the spiritual informing it at every point. It is not contained within the material but ‘in and around it’. The perceptually sensed can give knowledge, but Gregory distinguishes between ‘knowledge’ — which is mixed because its source is the tree of knowledge of good and evil in Paradise — and ‘discernment’ — which skilfully separates the good from the evil and ‘is a mark of a more perfect condition of the “exercised senses”’. 20 Without the exercise of discernment human beings cannot understand or see correctly. Building upon the Old Testament story of the fall of Adam and Eve into sinfulness (Genesis 3), Gregory reasons that the progenitors of humankind, having eaten the fruit of the tree of mixed knowledge, incline all subsequent generations towards a dependence upon the material order. This condition of being fallen expresses itself in the reification (and idolatry) of the objects perceived; a forgetting that they are continually in a state of being gifted to us, animated for us, by God himself. Materiality, for Gregory, is a manifestation of divine energia, a mode of trinitarian dunamis. 21 The danger of the fallen condition, whose disposition is not towards that which is

18 Ibid., 409
19 Ibid., 404.
20 Ibid., 410.
21 Energia is often translated as ‘operation’ or ‘working’, from the Greek verb energeo ‘to be operative’ or ‘to be at work’. Dunamis is often translated ‘power’, power, that is, which resides in a thing by virtue of its nature. Both these terms are used technically and philosophically first by Aristotle. For the relationship between Aristotle’s ideas and Gregory’s see my ‘Allegoria: reading as spiritual exercise’ in John Barton and Gerhard Sauter (eds), Story and revelation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
blessed and divinely good, is self-gratification — a certain aestheticisation of the senses such that one can be gratified through them. A certain solipsism ensues, a self-subsistence which is not merely illusory but destructive: the material orders are used and exploited for self-gratification, they are reduced to atoms of potential pleasure or pain, their form (which theologically is in harmony with the form of the good) is dissolved.

Corporeality has to be read spiritually, that is, allegorically. Creation, as the manifestation of God through His Word, is a text which it is the vocation of human being, made in the image of that God, to read and understand. Allegorical reading takes representation seriously, it has to; takes agency seriously for the point of reading and understanding is the perfection of the good life (blessedness). Allegorical reading disciplines the naming and therefore the identification of the material world — deception is the structure of evil, where a name and an appearance coalesce. Positivism is therefore evil. With discernment the world has to be read. Even bodies have to be read: 'thou wilt read, as in a book, the history of the works of the soul, for nature itself expounds to thee'.

Matter is not eternal, it is brought into being by God, ex nihilo (out of nothing — Genesis 1:2) and ex libertate (through God's sovereign free will). Matter is temporal and transmutation is structured within its very possibility — it came from nothing. Bodies will change until they attain their perfect, impassible state, post-resurrection. It is this transmutational potential that makes miracles possible — turning water into wine, the healing of the sick, the raising, of the dead etc. Within this theological construal of corporeality 'This is my body' is another such miracle. The ontological scandal here concerns God's uncreated power to bring being from nothing, bring flesh from bread. The scandal is the giftedness of being itself — that something should be rather than not be — which the transformative word of God announces. The very assertiveness of the statement is a practice of authority — authority to rename, refigure — the performance of the transaction. What is involved in this transaction? Gregory writes that 'our nature is twofold, according to apostolic teaching, made up of the visible man and the hidden man'. So which body is being pointed to, transposed, re-presented in that statement 'This is my body'? For Gregory, who takes a grain of wheat as an example of his understanding of a body, in which the whole potential of the plant lies still hidden, the 'body' of the wheat is its totality of transformations, the totality of its becoming. Not the

22 I have expanded upon this in two earlier essays: 'Allegoria: reading as a spiritual exercise', Modern Theology (forthcoming) and 'Kenosis: death, discourse and resurrection' a chapter in Balbazar at the end of modernity (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999).

23 'On the making of men', 422.

24 Ibid., 421.
object of one moment, but the *skopos*, the whole of the work that it performs, the unfolding of its natural order, defines the nature of a body. By ‘natural’ here is meant that which is in accordance with the telos of divine blessedness which animates, maintains and perfects creation.

The observation of the outward qualities of an object, what Gregory termed *poiotes*, is not an end itself. The end is the underlying reality of a thing, what Gregory termed *upokeimenon*. This is approached when we see things in relation to God, *epinoia*, when we view what is through our desire towards God. Because we are, and all created things are, subject to time, then this process can never come to a conclusion. Hence, we can never know the *upokeimenon* itself. And so, as one of Gregory’s more recent commentators has stated, ‘Gregory draws the conclusion that we cannot know the essences of thing, even our own soul and body, or the elements of creation’. What we occupy is a certain intellectual processing that operates within a generative semiosis. Since the essence of things cannot be known, the displacement of their identity is endless. The *poiotes* become signs to be read by the intellect and yet their meaning is endlessly not deferred but protracted, extended out of the material order of this world and into what Gregory termed the *aion*. ‘Now that which is always in motion, if its progress be to good, will never cease moving onwards to what lies before it ... it will not find any limit of its object such that when it has apprehended it, it will at last cease its motion’. All created things push on towards their final dissolution (in death) and recomposition (in resurrection).

This multiplicity, this fragmentation and dissemination of identities differs from modernity’s atomism, insofar as all proceeds from and participates in God, the Lord as the one simple *upokeimenon*, the one *ousia* which is not the same as our *ousia*.

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25 The Greek word used by Gregory is often translated as the ‘mark’ or the ‘goal’ one has in view. The English word ‘scope’ derives from it.
26 Translates as ‘those things which compose or make up any object’ from the Greek verb *poieo*, to make.
27 *Upo* is a Greek suffix meaning ‘under’ and *keimai* is the Greek verb ‘to lie’. The noun *upokeimenon* has a philosophical use approximating to what might be translated ‘the ultimate reality’.
28 This is a very important word for Gregory — as it was also for Basil, another of the Cappadocian fathers. It translates often as ‘conception’ but refers to the faculty in the mind which operates upon what the sense immediately perceive. For a further, and more detailed, examination of this word see Schaff and Wace, 249.
30 This Greek work is often translated ‘age’ or ‘from of old’. From Plato’s *Timaeus* onwards it took on the associations of a realm independent of time, the eternal realm, and this is how Gregory uses the term.
31 Schaff and Wace, 410-11.
32 This is the Greek word for ‘Being’. It derives from the participle form of the verb *eimi* — to be. But the word is freighted with philosophical usage and is sometimes translated ‘substance’.
'For according to the diversity of his activities (energies) and of his relations to the objects of his gracious activity, he also gives himself different names'.

An object’s identity, its intelligibility, only consists in its being an object of God’s activity. It has no autonomous identity outside of these divine energies. Gregory writes in his book *The Life of Moses*, that ‘none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but only the transcendent cause of the universe, on which everything depends. For even if the understanding looks upon any other existing things (*ousia*), reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without the participation in true being (*metousia tou ontos*).’

To experience the world in this way is to experience a profound vertigo. 'For here there is nothing to take hold of, neither place nor time, neither measure nor anything else; it does not allow our minds to approach. And thus the soul, slipping at every point from what cannot be grasped, becomes dizzy and perplexed and returns once again to what is connatural to it.'

Since we live in and through metaphors of the real, which are never stable as the nature of the objects they name are never stable, from one moment to the next. Since, for Gregory, allegories is the character of creation: we can name this vertigo, semiosis. Semiosis here is the opening up of words to their infinite possibilities to mean. But *this* semiosis, unlike the semiosis argued for by Philippe Lacoue Labarthe where ‘madness is a matter of mimesis’, is not the nihilism of soulless materialism but a divine not-knowing working within what is seen, and disciplining a discernment that sees beyond what it is given to who it has been given by and for what purpose. God is not substance here; God is distinct from substance as created matter is distinct from uncreated, creation from creator. God is transcendent.

It has caused some surprise among scholars that Gregory has little explicit discussion on the Eucharist, and yet might this not be because, within his doctrines of creation and incarnation, the world is a eucharistic offering: it continues to exist as a giving of thanks for its very givenness. All things feed each other — that is the nature of their participation in God. Christ as the bread of life feeds our rational beings that we might continue to discern and desire God in all things. Bodies here are frangible, permeable; not

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33 Quoted in Harrison, 40.
autonomous and self-defining, but sharing, and being shared. When I give I give myself, even though what I give is flowers, a smile, a sweet word, an academic essay such as this one. What I give is consumed by the others to whom I give. I touch upon their bodies by the presence of my own body heard and seen, smelt and sometimes tasted by them. The fluidity of time itself is the fluidity of identity. ‘This is my body. Take eat’. The body is always in transit, it is always being transferred. It is never there, as a commodity I can lay claim to or possess as mine. This is the ontological scandal announced by the eucharistic phrase — bodies are never there (or here).

Corpus Mysticum
It is the scandal of Mark’s Gospel — taking the ending that most New Testament scholars advise (16:8) — that the resurrected body makes no appearance. And even though in the other gospels, as in the second century appendix to Mark’s, the resurrected Christ makes an appearance, it is neither a stable body nor a permanent one. The body takes on different properties — the propensity to appear and disappear at will, a transformation of its appearance such that even disciples do not immediately recognise who it is who is with them. Finally, the body disappears back to heaven in the Ascension. The body of Christ — the archetypal incarnate being, the body given over totally in its witness to God, in its manifestation of God — is an absent body, figured forth only in signs (the sacraments and liturgies, the scriptures and lives of the saints). As Ephesians puts it, ‘The Church is Christ’s body, the completion of him who himself completes all things everywhere’. The body disseminates itself through a myriad other bodies, which are themselves other signs where tissue is also text. ‘To matter’ is ‘to materialise’ and ‘to mean’, to return to Judith Butler’s comment. Transcorporeality is a feature of intratextuality, and vice versa. The body is fractured endlessly, by the Spirit, and yet also, simultaneously, gathered into the unity of the Word and the unity of the Word with the triune God. The eucharistic ‘This is my body’ performs that first act of dissemination, that first transcorporealism. Michel de Certeau notes that this was the understanding of ‘corpus mysticum’ until the middle of the twelfth century when ‘the expression no longer designated the Eucharist ... but the Church’. He adds, significantly, that ‘The Church, the social “body” of Christ, is henceforth the (hidden) signifier of a sacramental “body” held to be a visible signifier, because it is the showing of a presence beneath the “species” (or appearances) of the consecrated bread and wine’.37 The meaning and scandal of the eucharistic ‘This is my body’ begins now to make its increasing

move towards an emphasis on what is visible (rather than what is hidden). The trajectory of modernity is begun, which will culminate, as we saw, in the positivism (and nihilism) of the statement's scandal today. The move can be paralleled with the need in the Lacanian subject to enter the law of the Father, the law of the symbolic as a substitute for the lost real body of the mother, the ineffable and irrecoverable \textit{réel} as Lacan defines it. Certeau points out what is forgotten here, or what (taking the Lacanian picture) is being repressed — the loss of the body as the very possibility for its dissemination. 'Christianity was founded upon the \textit{loss of a body} — the loss of the body of Jesus Christ, compounded with the loss of the "body" of Israel, of a "nation" and its genealogy. A founding disappearance indeed',\textsuperscript{38} is the loss which prepares the way for the mystical, the kenosis which prepares the way for a semantic diffusion of naming gathered together under him who will be given the Name above all Names.\textsuperscript{39} It is the loss of the one, archetypal body, which engenders a transcorporeality in which the body of Christ is mapped onto and shot like a watermark through the physical bodies, social bodies, institutional bodies, ecclesial bodies, sacramental bodies. All these bodies are available only in and through textual bodies (discourses, gestures to be interpreted, social semiotics). But bodies cannot be reduced to signs, they are always excessive to signs, resistant, insistent upon a presence which eludes and discharges signs. The symbolic issues from the demands of the real and the desires of the imaginary. In the logic of demonstrative identification the impenetrability and discreet autonomy of the physical body provides the concrete means whereby these other bodies can be deemed metaphorical. But in the theological account of bodies, within an account of incarnation and creation, only the body of Christ (hidden, lost and yet always pervasive for always disseminated) is the true body and all these other bodies become true only in their participation within Christ's body. Christ's body as the true body is the pure sign — the only sign which is self-defining. I recall one of the controversial hymns of the tenth century Syrian monk, Symeon the New Theologian: 'I move my hand, and my hand is the whole of Christ/since, do not forget it, God is indivisible in His divinity ... / ... all our members individually/ will become members of Christ and Christ our members'.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{The mystic fable}, 81.

\textsuperscript{39} 'The Christian doctrine of kenosis issues from a baptismal hymn incorporated into Paul's letter to the church at Philippi (\textit{Philippians} 2 v 5–11). Here is described the descent of Christ from heaven to earth and, following his death, his return to the Father who gives him 'a name which is above every name'. For a further examination of the association of kenosis with naming and discourse see my essay 'Kenosis: death, discourse, and resurrection.'

\textsuperscript{40} George A. Maloney trans., \textit{Hymns of divine love by St Symeon the new theologian} (New Jersey: Denville, 1976), 54.
We need to take one step further—a highly important clarifying step. For there have been recent attempts to reinvent transcorporeality as a description of what is ‘removed from any mystery’. This attempt, frequently recognizing its indebtedness to a Christian doctrine of incarnation—‘The spirit of Christianity is incorporated here in full. *Hoc est enim corpus meum*’ is more fundamentally indebted to Spinoza’s and Hegel’s secularization of this doctrine. ‘There was a spirituality of Christ’s wounds. But since then, a wound is just a wound’.

Jean-Luc Nancy’s justly acclaimed essay ‘*Corpus*’ presents such a picture. Here, in a way which seems to push beyond the soulless materialism evident in the logic of demonstrative identification, Nancy writes: ‘The body has the same structure as spirit, but it has that structure without presupposing itself as the reason for the structure. Consequently, it is not self-concentration, but rather the ex-concentration of existence’. Bodies are no longer discrete entities, they are disseminated. Body is always and only a community of bodies—textual, social and institutional—touching each other ‘separated but shared [partage]’. ‘This body has no longer any members, if members are the functional parts of the whole. Here, each part is the whole, and there is never any whole. Nothing ever becomes the sum or the system of the corpus’. In Spinoza, there is only one body or substance and everything else is a modification of that One, a part within the whole. Here the body is fractured and disseminated endlessly through the spirit and thus allows for a place of ‘ab-solution’, a deepening absence. ‘Thus, the body has been turned into nothing but a wound’, Nancy concludes.

As Nancy realizes the wound here has lost its mystery. It is the final expression of soulless materialism. The piles of corpses at Ypres, Belsen, Cambodia and Kosovo will not go away. This is a fatal wound that bleeds eternally. No life here. There may be room

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42 Ibid., 22. The Latin is a quotation from the institution narrative of the Catholic mass. It translates as ‘This is my true body’.
43 Ibid., 22.
44 Ibid., 26.
46 Ibid., 28.
47 Ibid., 29.
48 Ibid., 30.
49 This, of course, raises an highly important question: why does Nancy continually make appeal to Christian rhetoric in order to describe his concept of the body or the community? Why does *The inoperable community* move, inexorably, towards a final chapter, entitled ‘Of divine places’ where he insists that ‘we shall not call this presence “god” we shall not even say it is divine’ (150)? Why does this demythologizing discourse which attempts the stripping away of mystery operate through and upon Christian discourses concerning the mysteries of incarnation and transubstantiation? Is this the repressed other of French intellectualism, a Catholic imaginary informing the symbolic at every level? As theologians we have hardly yet begun asking these questions.
for a liberal notion of tolerance — we belong to one another, so bring out the social contract that all may sign. But there is no telos, for this tolerance, no good life to which it tends. In fact, Spivak criticized Nancy’s essay for its adoption of a position which ‘is not yet articulated into the ethical, and calculated into the moral and the political’. Bodies are gendered and there is no account of what that gendering practises in Nancy’s ‘communities of bodies’. She asks if Nancy is ‘performing an Augustine who cannot himself undo the metalepsis of the Eucharist’. Another critic also takes Nancy to task for ‘the whiff of the incarnation’ that lingers about the essay. But this essay announces endless crucifixion, Hegel’s endless death of God. There is nothing here to stop the eternal haemorrhaging. The all too real wound will only endlessly replicate itself in other all too real wounds. This is the postmodern brokenness of bodies. But as I pointed out earlier in my section entitled Corpus, this nihilistic monism stands within the trajectory of secularism, the logic of modernity, where all objects are seen as present to themselves. This is the fracture of atomism, but not the corpus mysticum.

To understand this is crucial. The true postmodern move can only be made from the other side of modernity, as a critique of modernity. There is only one radical critique of modernity — the critique that denies the existence of the secular, that immanent self-ordering of the world which ultimately had no need for God. The Christian doctrines of incarnation and creation stand opposed to such a self-ordering system. They stand opposed to positivism’s realised eschatology. They stand opposed also to the endless deferral and unquenchable grief for a lost body. The body is absent yet present, that is what mysticum announces. In Christ’s ascension his body is expanded to become a space in which the Church will grow. Paul’s en Christo is a locative use of the dative. Eschatology is both not yet and is being realised in our midst, through our labourings. Christ is both broken and given so that we become partakers in him and yet Christ also gathers us together, calls us to each other as fellow members of his multi-sexual body. Our transcorporeality is towards resurrection, not endless ‘ab-solution’ (or dissolution). Nancy states how in transcorporeality, his

50 Ibid., 36.
51 Ibid., 47. ‘Metalepsis’ is the Greek word for ‘a taking’ or ‘participation’. With Quintilian it became a term in rhetoric, rather like metonymy — it means an act of substitution (of one word for another).
52 Ibid., 52.
53 See my essay ‘Kenosis: death, discourse and revelation’ for a discussion of Hegel in the context of modernity’s fascination with taxidermy.
54 To a certain extent, this will also be a critique of postmodernism in its philosophical guise. It can point up the way philosophical postmodernism pushes beyond the secular and employs theological language to do so, but it will also have to announce the impossibility of philosophy to move beyond itself. Postmodern philosophy eventually flounders upon an implicit metaphysics which it is continually trying to avoid and evade.
'community of bodies', 'Bodies call again for their creation'. But there can be no account of either such a creation or such a recreation, only, to use Simone Weil's term, de-creation. All creation is seen to groan in Nancy's notion of embodiment, but no salvation or redemption can be offered it. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek comments, with reference to Nancy's notion of the body (which he develops in terms of the Lacanian objet à — an immanent antagonism of the psyche whereby the subject rejects the Real), that the self-positing itself as an object 'appears as an antagonism of God's prehistory, which is resolved when God speaks out of his Word'. In other words, Nancy's body exists on a plane of endless dispersal, the Real, figured as the nihilo out of which creation will emerge. But this creation is only possible when conceived theologically, as an act of God's Word. Without this the body will dissolve into what Nancy describes as 'millions of scattered places'.

We cannot afford the disappearance of the body. Too many bodies have disappeared already. Ultimately, Nancy announces a metaphysical genocide. While refusing the full, self-realised presence of the body, we must also refuse its endless dissemination. With transcorporeality, as I am conceiving it theologically, the body does not dissolve or ab-solve, it expands. While always located within specific sociological and historical contexts, it nevertheless is continually opening up, allowing itself to open up, in acts of following which effect the trans-ferral. Transcorporeality is an effect of following in the wake of the eternal creative Word. Discipleship becomes transfiguring. The body accepts its own metaphorical nature — insofar as it is received and understood only in and through language. Only God sees and understands creation literally. We who are created deal only with the seeing and understanding appropriate to our creatureliness. We only negotiate the world metaphorically. The body, as metaphor, moves within and along the intratextual nature of creation. As such meta-phor becomes inextricably involved with participation within a divine economy — metousia, metexein, metalambanein and metanoia. Continually called to move beyond itself, the transcorporeal body itself becomes eucharistic, because endlessly fractured and fed to others. It becomes the body of Christ broken, given, resurrected and ascended. The body does

55 Thinking bodies, 23.
56 Ibid., 77.
57 The inoperative community, 137.
58 I find illuminating here a comment made by Conor Cunningham on an earlier draft of this paper: 'Postmodernity dissolves the body and modernity ossifies it'.
59 These are all words employed theologically by the Greek Fathers on the basis of New Testament texts. Meta is the Greek suffix for 'with' — metousia is the sharing in one substance, metexein is the verb 'to participate', metalambanein is the verb 'to be made a partaker of and metanoia often translates as 'repentence', but more accurately means a transformation of one's mind.
not disappear. In fact, it realises its own uniqueness, its own vocation, its own irreplaceability, as offering a space for the meeting and mapping of other specified bodies, a sacred site. The transcorporeal body expands in its fracturing, it pluralizes as it opens itself towards an eternal growth. Only, as such, can the wounding, can the differences, be redemptive—constitutive of the endless desire to know (where to know means to love). Only as such can the wounding, can the differences, image the intradivine wounding, the intradivine differences, of the Godhead. Through the brokenness of the transcorporeal body God’s grace operates through his creation. As such ‘This is my body’ announces, for the Christian, the scandal of both crucifixion and resurrection, both a dying-to-self-positing and an incorporation into the city of God.

Here is announced a theology for the disabled, the sick, the racked, the torn, the diseased, the pained. Only in the context of the Presbyterian minister, the liturgies of marriage and communion, the sanctification of practised love as worship, does the brokenness of David’s AIDS and Jon's bereavement become redemptive, redemptive for those of us who bear something of their body weight (with something of its pain) within our imaginaries. For these broken bodies too, perhaps especially, are transcorporeal. Especially, because the body that lives out such a brokenness understands more clearly a living in and through others, a dependency. It is a dependency that the (always relatively) abled-bodied need to accept as a gift, as a spiritual food they cannot live without. This Christian theology of the body bespeaks the need to bear the weight of their uniqueness. For the Christian, the giving and receiving of our bodies constitutes us as who we are in Christ, the transcorporeality of all flesh makes possible its transfiguration.

Of course, as I said at the beginning of this essay, all this is from the standpoint of Christianity. Other standpoints—even within Christianity — are inevitable. Those occupying these other viewpoints will read (and write) the experience of embodiment (and the brokenness of so many bodies) differently. What we know, or what we believe we know (and its representations) is always situated — historically, culturally, economically — and sexed. But if we are to make moves towards a ‘maximizing objectivity’ we need to begin by surveying the scene from where we are, while being open to the resonance and resistance of other voices. For me, something of that standpoint is composed of the fact that I am a male, Christian theologian who has openly advocated same-sex unions, who has friends dying or living with the fear of AIDS, and a brother in the last stages of a wasting disease. I dedicate this work to Stewart.