

Romance and Danger at Nag Hammadi

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The story of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts – a tale about a hapless Arab peasant who uncovers the buried secrets of early Christianity – has accompanied most scholarly and popular explorations of Nag Hammadi literature. As a colonialist relic, however, it is more than a quirky tale of the accidents of history. It represents and perpetuates the orientalist epistemological tropes that have since been fixed onto the individual texts themselves: seeking/finding, secrecy/unveiling (esoterism), and sexual taboo/sexual excess (asceticism/libertinism). This paper explores the resonances of this story with the history of Nag Hammadi scholarship, as well as with popular renderings of Nag Hammadi texts. It uses the recent cultural studies interests in affect theory to ask: what is at stake in casting what is called “Nag Hammadi literature” as the romantic and dangerous “East” to the Bible’s domesticated and rational “West”?

1. THE PLEASURE OF UNVEILING

Arrayed in brilliant colors of exoticism and exuding a full-blown yet uncertain sensuality, the Orient, where unfathomable mysteries dwell and cruel and barbaric scenes are staged, has fascinated and disturbed Europe for a long time. It has been its glittering imaginary but also its mirage. (Malek Alloula *The Colonial Harem*)

In 1945 an Arab peasant unearthed an ancient trove of Egyptian Christian texts in a sealed earthen jar near the Upper Egypt town of Nag Hammadi. The fateful find added immensely to our understanding of religious and philosophical thought in the ancient Middle East ... The texts offer tantalizing alternative versions of Jesus’ life and teachings, including the Gospels of Thomas, Peter, and Phillip and the Gospel of Truth ... The long-hidden trove of Gnostic writings dramatically increased contemporary knowledge of these sects’ ancient ideas. Before the discovery, Gnostic beliefs had been largely known only from the references in works by orthodox Christian scribes, such as Irenaeus, who had refuted Gnostic “heresies” in great detail ... It is possible that they were secreted away during the circa 390 campaign of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, against such writings and ideas. (National Geographic website entry)

The jar at Nag Hammadi – keeper of long-hidden secrets, the earthen vessel that can “offer tantalizing alternatives”. It is an object with strikingly sexual topography: dark, foreign, sealed off but still promiscuous, unfailingly rich in exotic possibilities. The above description of the jar, in its resonances with colonialist imaginings of the Orient, also gives an indication of how one is apparently supposed to read the affiliations of the jar with the Arab who discovered it.

The story of the jar is well known.¹ It is the preface or frame to most scholarly work on and most popular ventures into the so-call “Gnostic” texts, lending an air of authenticity, intrigue and excitement.² The story is, in most cases, more familiar than the content of the texts themselves, and

though the texts vary in content and apparent composition dates, the jar seems to be the defining context for these texts. As a result, the texts found at Nag Hammadi in effect remain there. Indeed Nag Hammadi is not just a story, no longer only a locale, but also a typology. As the term “Gnostic” slowly falls out of usage, in part for its orientalist investments, many of us who study these texts find ourselves referring to them *en masse* as “the Nag Hammadi texts”, which has the unfortunate effect of simply binding these texts to another orientalist construct – the dark hands of the Arab peasant, the mysterious and shimmering sands of the Egyptian desert. But the question of how or whether to address “the Nag Hammadi texts” as a group is not the primary one at this moment. Before that next crucial stage of work of re-contextualisation is done, I think it is worthwhile to stay suspended in the impressionistic mode of the discourse around Nag Hammadi, to pause and engage the illicit thrills the very words “Nag Hammadi” are steeped in. In doing so, I hope to parse some of the effects (that is, affects) of orientalist relations that have shaped the cultural discourse of Nag Hammadi – the romantic, dangerous “East” to the Bible’s domesticated and rational “West”.

On the one hand, it may seem a bit deceptive to relegate orientalist desires and affects to only the imagination around Nag Hammadi and “Gnosticism”. In the words of Stephen Moore, “[T]he very period when critical biblical scholarship was being invented in Europe – principally the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – was also the period when European colonization of the globe was in a phase of unprecedented, and eventually frenzied, ascent”.³ As such, the story of biblical scholarship as a discipline is embedded in a variety of colonialist discourses from its inception, full of regular attempts to try to “uncover” and “get inside” the rich and emphatically foreign language, social world and conceptions belonging to an ancient “other”. On the other hand, as Karen King’s exhaustive and excellent book *What is Gnosticism?* demonstrates, imaginations of “the Orient” have shaped the account and subsequent category of Gnosticism (followed by the reception of the Nag Hammadi texts) in particular ways. The tale of intrigue provided by National Geographic is not an original one, but rather derivative of more explicit connections between Gnosticism and the Orient. King describes the formative early 20th century scholarship on Gnosticism as, in part, attempting to actually locate the essence of Gnosticism in “the Orient” or in a primitive “Oriental myth”.⁴ Richard Reitzenstein, for instance, claimed that an Oriental (here meaning Iranian) Gnosticism preceded and contributed to, but is ultimately outpaced by, Christianity and its themes and concepts.⁵ Another history of religions scholar, Wilhelm Bousset, similarly associated Gnosticism with the Orient, but instead of describing it as the source of Christianity, he suggests that Gnosticism was a version of Christianity that suffered from an “acute Orientalising”.⁶ The recent incarnations of this are only a bit subtler – connecting the Nag Hammadi library to “eastern religion”, for example.⁷ The Orient and Gnosticism get braided together, as King notices, to preserve a properly Western Christianity free of primitive, heterogeneous, and polluting elements.⁸ Not just for history of religions scholars, but for much modern scholarly and popular consciousness, “Gnosticism” and even “Nag Hammadi” have functioned largely as oriental foils to European Christianity and the biblical canon – in part, one might guess, because Christianity and the Bible are such precious identity markers of Western culture at large. The picture of Gnosticism that has for the most endured since this early scholarship is a pastiche of texts, ideas, and polemical accusations shaped in the image of the Oriental stereotype. As in other representations of “the Orient”, Gnosticism is an instrument with which 20th century Christianity defined itself as rational, moderate, pure and advanced.

But such dogged attempts to define Christianity or “the West” in terms of rationalism and moderation ring rather ironically, particularly since Oriental stereotypes have been represented with such an exorbitance of affective investment. For instance, Malek Alloula’s famous critique of the 20th century French picture-postcards of Algerian women (mostly women), recasts these postcards, not just in a political or ideological narrative of colonisation, but an affective one. He implicitly seems to notice (prefiguring the cultural studies trend) that political and ideological agendas often ride in on a wave of feeling, and subtly chronicles the aggression, shame, sexual desire and frustration of the

makers of these images – feelings projected onto the subjects of these images as barbarism, taboo, fragrance and mysteriousness.⁹

The almost wistful fantasy life around Nag Hammadi has a similar projective force. Scholarship and popular culture alike have for decades described the opacity, esoterism, “mystical” qualities or mysteriousness of these texts, and typologies of Nag Hammadi texts sometimes hinge on an experienced sense of how foreign they are. In numerous instances, this is expressed categorically and in a distinctly empirical tone. Harold Attridge for instance analyses at length the strategic combination of “familiar” (meaning New Testament) and “unfamiliar” material in the *Gospel of Truth*.¹⁰ He goes on to deduce how such a combination of “familiar” and “unfamiliar” material functioned in its ancient literary context, though he never asks the question: familiar to whom? Other scholars have picked up this kind of categorisation of material, but placed it in a less subjective-sounding framework.¹¹ Likewise much cultural energy has been expended speculating on the details of the sexualities of those who originally composed or used these texts. Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* is one such example. His conspiracy-thriller takes its inspiration from the mysterious status of these texts in that it fictionalises an active cover-up of “Gnosticism” by Constantine for the reason that the texts supposedly (and shockingly!) portrayed Jesus as human and married to, or at least sleeping with, Mary Magdalene. Scholarship has historically engaged in this same fascination, if in a different register. King notes that one major contradiction in the history of Nag Hammadi scholarship is in discussions of whether “the gnostics” were libertines or ascetics.¹² These poles, derived in part from the sexual slanders of early church polemicists,¹³ are traditionally conceived as exhibiting a kind of immoderate or perverse relationship to the body, and although more recent studies on asceticism have defined ascetic practices much more responsibly,¹⁴ the scholarly association of such a term with Nag Hammadi texts is heavily freighted. In other words, the libertine/ascetic question appears as another iteration of the fragrance/taboo binary so common in Oriental stereotyping.

The language of “mystery” or “intrigue” so often used to describe Nag Hammadi resonates with orientalist discourse of estrangement, of frustrated knowledge and frustrated representation. “Esoterism” as a category for instance seems less about the specific content of these texts than a statement of one’s own sense of being outside relative to them – and one’s inability to master such texts with the governing categories and tools available. While some of the texts of the Nag Hammadi codices indeed use the language of secrecy and revealing, this language has been taken in a more literal-minded typological or descriptive manner (and then generalized to the whole set of texts) than it has been for, say, the secrecy motif in the *Gospel of Mark*.¹⁵ Consequently, the most common trope for selling books on these texts tends to be one of “uncovering” secrets of the supposed Gnostics or “revealing” the hidden history of Christianity, an echo of both the voyeurism and sexualised aggression in images of the Orient.¹⁶ The question of how useful descriptors such as “esoteric” or “mystical” might be for any given text is too large for both this essay and my own relative expertise. But I do want to suggest that in the wake of orientalist epistemologies, the apparently opaque, esoteric, or mystical (might we say “veiled”?) qualities of *these* texts, at least, are impossible to distinguish from those affective projections of the distanced and frustrated colonial gaze.

If the discourse around Nag Hammadi has been particularly impressionistic, it is not that the impressionistic mode itself is a problem. To critique this impressionism would be to suggest that knowing could be somehow separable from feeling. But as Sara Ahmed has noticed, the term “impression”, like the word “sense”, is quite helpfully ambiguous, suggesting both cognition and emotion simultaneously.¹⁷ Her work, as part of a larger set of cultural studies considerations described as “affect theory”,¹⁸ has in part attempted analytically to knit feeling and knowing back together, if not entirely question their separation. Ahmed contributes an important model of emotions as social and socially generated phenomena, whose seeming interiority is rather an

indication of their formative effects. In other words, what one feels does not arise naturally from objects, or by deflection. Objects of emotion, rather, become saturated with affect over time and through their social circulation. That objects sometimes seem to have a particular “affective value” is a consequence of fetishisation:

But whilst Marx suggests that emotions are erased by the value of things (the suffering of the worker’s body is not visible in commodity form), I focus on how emotions are produced. It is not so much emotions that are erased, as if they were already there, but the processes of production or the ‘making’ of emotions. In other words, ‘feelings’ become ‘fetishes’, qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation. (Ahmed 2004, 11)

Ahmed’s conceptualisation marks an important theoretical development. Indeed, one familiar gesture of orientalist discourses has been reframing one’s senses, positions and desires as properties of the people, places, objects and texts that are being described, without careful consideration of the mechanisms that generate those senses.¹⁹ As a result, orientalised objects tend to recirculate the very feelings that produced them. In terms of Nag Hammadi, the categories and tropes used to describe and categorise the texts, let alone the repeated evocation of the story of their discovery, resolidify their associations with particular affects as “common sense”.

And yet, it seems that to use the term “fetishisation” for the erasure of the history of production of emotions may have its problems. Laura Mulvey, for instance, writing on fetishism and cinema, offers a slightly different elaboration of the Marxist fetish by focusing on how the fetishised commodity is

made up of spectacle and significance ... Commodity fetishism also bears witness to the persistent allure that images and things have for the human imagination and the pleasure to be gained from belief in phantasmagorias and imaginary systems of representation. Objects and images, in their spectacular manifestations, are central to the process of disavowal, soaking up semiotic significance and setting up elisions of affect. Most of all, they are easily sexualised. (Mulvey 1996, 5)

Mulvey reads the Marxist iteration of the fetish with the Freudian one, finding important commonality in the aspects of substitution and worship of the surface. Freud seats the origin of the fetish in castration anxiety: the boy “discovers” his mother lacks a penis, and fears that he too will become castrated.²⁰ He disavows what he has seen, and the fetish object becomes both a signal of the loss and a substitution for the lost object of the mother’s penis. Mulvey notices that this substitution not only commemorates, but “functions as a mask, covering over and disavowing the traumatic sight of absence ... the psyche constructs a phantasmic topography ... which hides ugliness and anxiety with beauty and desire”.²¹ As Mulvey suggests, there is an avaricious, and still romantic, attachment to the fetish object’s palpable detail. These details guard against the illusion becoming uncomfortably plain. For what I am hesitantly calling the “Nag Hammadi texts”, the displaced desire of fetishism plays out in a kind of History Channel veneer of authenticating dust, a realism that hopes to avoid confrontation with fantasy as fantasy. The desert of Egypt, the Arab figure, the jar (an object not without its own complex fabulations),²² and even/especially the name Nag Hammadi, together conjure just enough specificity to give place to the imaginary. It might be worth noticing that here though, contra Ahmed’s description, fetishisation is not just an erasure of the history of production of (any) feelings, but also associated *with a particular set* of feelings – in this case, allure, romance, fascination and excitement.

While Mulvey and Ahmed do valuable readings of fetishism, I wonder why the erasure of labour, the “mask” that the fetish represents tends to overshadow the substitution the fetish performs, which seems to be in both cases a substitute for a *fragmented relation*. Fetishism, as a concept, has indeed attracted a lot of analysis. But one has to wonder if, given that one of the functions the fetish

performs is to deny or divert one away from the loss or fragmentation that engenders it, this attraction isn't still an echo of the fetish itself. To simply conclude with analysis of the fetish is, to some extent, to indulge the very wish the fetish makes.

Along these lines, one might also notice Freud's important recognition that fetishism is "a regular part of normal loving".²³ In *Three Essays on Sexual Theory*, Freud sees an example of this "normal" fetishism (as distinguished from perverse sexual object replacement) in the early phases of love when "the normal sexual goal appears unattainable or its fulfilment cancelled ... the pathological case only occurs when the striving for the fetish becomes fixated beyond such conditions and takes the place of the normal goal ...".²⁴ Even the idea that the fetish object arises from the discovery of the mother's castration should raise questions – not just about the unfortunate primacy of the phallus in Freud – but the relationship between fetishism and attachment. The phantasmic specificity and physical details of fetish objects become important because the fetish object provides what the love object cannot.²⁵ The fetish arises from a sense of incompleteness.²⁶ While it may not be productive to delineate the normal from the pathological in this instance, I do wonder about a general hesitance in discussions of fetishism to note its "normal" participation in love. The regularity of the fetish may in fact be a kind of Freudian caution to those Marxist critiques of fetishism that hope to interrupt the fetishistic problems of capitalism *with* the notion of love.²⁷

But if the fetish object in all its titillating particulars is, in part, created to reinforce the love object as present and ideal, even if only at the level of fantasy, that means the fetish is simply not possible without an antecedent love.²⁸ Perhaps the impulse to make love a solution, or the discomfort at including love in an analysis of fetishisation, is a wish to *preserve* love from a certain level of analysis, a reluctance to ponder love as an affective relationship no less constructed than fetishisation. But as so much feminist and gender theory in particular has recognised, love is regularly the place where power relations of all sorts articulate themselves most forcefully. It is not simply that power relations of all kinds arrive on the scene already encoded in the language of love, sex and intimacy, but that this encoding manages to form ("form" not "determine") the affective terms on which love, sex and intimacy are experienced. It would be short sighted then to imagine orientalist fetishes as linked only to sexual/sexualised objectification, or to think love without its own fetishising and objectifying dimensions. It seems the fetish and its antecedent must be thought together, and there can be no thorough critique of the fetish without a critique of the love to which it refers. So in the second half of this essay, I would like to suggest that the cultural site of "Nag Hammadi" regularly arises as a metonym for a more deeply complicated relationship to the Bible.

II. CANONICAL GRATIFICATIONS

The fetish sponsors the idea that there is nothing to lose. (Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*)

"[O]n revient toujours à ses premiers amours" ["we always return to our first loves"]
(Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexual Theory*)

There is an ad for Prada *haute couture*, directed by Ridley Scott and Jordan Scott, which uses lines from *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* – a poem from the Nag Hammadi codices – as its narration. The poem is comprised mainly of self-declarations in a woman's voice. "I am the wife and the virgin. I am the whore and the holy one". These lines are being read in a voice-over as a woman (a model) moves from scene to scene, taking on different identities, signalled by her changes in high-end clothing, her styling, and the way she relates to those around her. "I am shame and boldness", she says "I am control and uncontrollable". There are a number of things about this ad worth playing out critically, but its primary relevance at this moment resides in both its relationship to the history of heresiology,

particularly the gendering and sexualisation of what is deemed “heretical”, and the way it connects emotionally with its viewers.

The ad is shot beautifully. The model travels through the city of Berlin, at times appearing pensive and holding a book, once appearing shy or perhaps coy at a party and then she loosens up as she is invited to dance. Another time she catches a cab and flirtatiously changes clothes in the backseat. At one point, the cab driver curiously and a bit abashedly watches her in the rear-view mirror. This scene encapsulates the short film as a whole. The viewer is a voyeur to this woman’s mischievous morphing from one sexy character to another. As an ad for a women’s perfume and clothing manufacturer, its main sales thrust is its ability to cultivate desire for and – importantly – identification with the model. You want her and want to be her, as the advertising cliché goes, to be equal parts good girl and bad girl. There’s gratification in being a little of both, as this film envisions so deftly.

The choice of the poem for this film is explained by some of the film’s collaborators, and much of their explanation revolves around the poem’s oldness as a sign of its rich, even primordial meaning. Miuccia Prada notes how “illuminating something from ancient times can be”, and Jordan Scott comments on the timelessness of the poem – it speaks “to the present and the future” (though, funny enough, no mention of the past).²⁹ In a certain way, the poem’s ancientness is the central fetish at play here. But the directors have made sure to mention that *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* is a text of so-called Gnosticism. One can reasonably assume that the notion of this text as Gnostic and heretical is crucial to its use in the film, adding a kind of transgressive glow. Indeed it plays rather well with the mysterious ambience and subtle naughty-girl aesthetics the film displays. While the poem itself is a pretty compelling and unique piece of literature, it’s fair to say that Prada and the directors wouldn’t be caught dead using something called an “early Christian text” or something from the very unsexy Bible in an edgy fashion film.³⁰

Heresy as sexy – or more particularly, heresy as a woman with overt sexuality – has a long history. Virginia Burrus published an article in 1991 entitled “The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius and Jerome”.³¹ In response to some scholarly interest in the historical activity of women in “heretical” early church social circles, she cautions against idealisation of such movements as including particularly many, outspoken or strong women. She suggests that in these writings, women were rather figures who represented anxieties about community and identity. “[T]he fourth-century figure of the heretical woman”, she writes, “who is almost invariably identified as sexually promiscuous, expresses the threatening image of a community with uncontrolled boundaries”.³² The “good church” was imagined as virgin and bride, in proper order and boundaries sealed. The “bad church” was imagined as “bad girl”, susceptible and seductive.

One can hardly question that anxiety is a key affective ingredient in this discourse of heresy and “heretical woman”, and it is important not to downplay the shaming violence inherent in these characterizations. But one also might take notice of what a curious move it is on the part of these writers to assign “heretics” to something that would appear to place high on the affective register of excitement. After all, unless late antiquity differs from the current era more than I think, the good girl/bad girl figuration relies less on the logic that one avoid the latter entirely than the logic that the former is for marrying, and the latter is for fucking. It seems orthodox desires find their gratification not just in the relish of their rightness, but in the hot fantasizing around transgression.

The pleasure of transgression regularly solidifies the shaky norm (think bachelor parties and college bi-curiosity) in this kind of affective circuit – disgust, excitement, shame, disgust. We might think not just of “orthodox” desires as being gratified this way, but “canonical” ones as well. Thus, the larger cultural construction of canon requires a little collective “dabbling” in the risqué outside to maintain its affective pull. How can one fully know the comfort, the paternalistic safety of one’s institution without an excursion into thrill (anxiety) inducing foreign territory?

The Prada ad expresses this very fantasy. By using the text of *Thunder* and having one model play out all these identities, the ad depicts a struggle within a single subject who derives pleasure from, and becomes the object of others' desire through, good girl/bad girl oscillations. The model represents then the excitement of boundary transgression, while at the same time the film itself provides that transgression, the taste of another world with its little eroticised foray into Nag Hammadi: *ancient, Gnostic, heretical*. When such forays into the non-canonical end, however, wisps of these experiences accrue as the affective boundaries of the canon.

Finally, I have arrived at the canon. Or, phrased a little less teleologically, I have returned there. Drawn to the fetish, it seems I have strayed from the analysis I hoped to make in this section: a scrutiny of love. So let me return to the beginning of this section, which, incidentally, began with a return: the return the fetish seems to accomplish. "On revient toujours à ses premiers amours", Freud writes in his section on fetishism in *Three Essays on Sexual Theory*. He injects this phrase as he describes the choice of the fetish as retained from early childhood – which, he says, should be thought alongside the constant returning to the first love. In this eruption into French, Freud suddenly waxes lyrical, as if to sympathise, or perhaps to illustrate via his own affected language the nostalgic power constitutive of the fetish. This phrase is felicitous for several reasons. First, one can hardly think "first love" in Freud without thinking Oedipally, and, in fact, the fetish arises at a crucial moment in the Oedipal complex. Second, the romantic, nostalgic quality of this phrase not only indicates presence – the return of something – but, in its nostalgia, indicates an implicit acknowledgement of loss, of the impossibility of that return. The fetish, while marking a loss, allows one the fantasy of the return not just of the "lost object" (in this case, the maternal phallus), but also to "having" the ideal mother, and a time before fragmentation, a time *before loss*.

Psychoanalytic thinker Adam Phillips describes the fetish as an "obstacle to thought" – a disavowal of what one knows is gone or missing.³³ The idealised and imaginary status of the phallus lends an interesting twist in this scene. The mother's phallic status is the result of two idealisations, the idealisation of the phallus and her seeming to "have it all". The boy's horror in Freud's description of this discovery revolves around his fear that he may also suffer the violence of castration, or *become like her*. He may even develop a life-long disgust for women.³⁴ This scene is the source of the internalisation of sexual differences for the boy. Yet his fantasy of the phallic mother was indeed that he *was* "like her" in having the phallus. One wonders if, reading against the Freudian text a bit, the fetish is not only a denial of the loss of the phallic mother, but the loss of being "like her" in the first place. The fetish perhaps disavows this loss of being like, and rearticulates it as an emphatic "being different". This makes sense, particularly if one reads the boy's possible future "disgust" and horror of women in a Kristevan frame of abjection.³⁵ The fetish in this case returns not just an impossibly idealised love object, but tactically flattens the richness of this scene of "first love" into a scene not of the complex entwinement of attachment, violence, loss and identification, but the surface phantasmagoria of binary sexual differentiation.³⁶

In this way, fetishisation of Nag Hammadi and its texts, as well as its highly invested and phantasmically devised binary differentiation from canon, might be thought of as a disavowal of, or an obstacle to thinking about, the complicated intersections of attachment, identification, loss and violence inhered in our larger cultural relations to the Bible. Consider, for example, the symbolic practice of swearing on the Bible when taking office. While this formality is a clear consolidation and mutual reinscription of authorities, there may be other factors at play, as well. Part of what one attests to when one places their hand on the Bible is (ostensibly) their own integrity, the Bible acting as a kind of representative of wholeness and non-contradiction. In this instance, the Bible, not unlike the phallic mother, reflects and enables such a self-conception of being, shall we say, intact, and it does this through the mechanism of identification. However, also like the phallic mother, the Bible's sense of fullness is perhaps better understood as a nostalgic production.

This set of relations and pained experiences with the Bible do not simply analogically mimic the Oedipal paradigm, though. In fact, in the territory of the Oedipal, family is one of the streams of formative relations with which the Bible has been merged. What does it mean, for instance, that Bibles get handed down as heirlooms, family trees regularly etched into the cover pages? This deep entwinement of family history and distant history has robust identificatory and affective dimensions, not only layering attachments, but also writing an ongoing genealogical script that locates the present as an extension of the biblical past. Less on the symbolic level, and more on the anecdotal level, it remains unclear to me how distinct the text of, say, 1 Samuel, can be from the voice of my father, who read the story of David and Goliath to me on our porch one humid summer evening in Pennsylvania. Indeed, my father's investment in the Bible as literature came as a kind of rebellion against his own parents, whose version of Christianity could accommodate neither the messiness of the text nor the directness of his questions. As someone who finds great gratification in the messiness of the text and the Bible as literary production, it is difficult to pinpoint where exactly my emotional cathexis lies. And that is perhaps the point: somewhere in the mix of my identification with my father and his losses (or my romanticised annexing of his minor rebellions), the Bible has become – among other things – not just a partner in, but also an object of, my affection.

The “among other things” is no aside, I'm afraid, given that as a trained biblical scholar, my affection may be laced with some less palatable affects. Stephen Moore's *God's Gym*, elaborating on the links between discourses and practices of medical examination and those of biblical scholarship, has described in vivid detail the brutal aggression and pretence that comprises the scholarly gaze. He recounts how the cold, dispassionate aura of this gaze is both idealised and precarious, but nonetheless implicated in a number of interpretive violences. Contemplating the impact of doing such work with the students he teaches, particularly those with strong senses of piety, he wonders, “But who actually bleeds when the biblical scholar dissects?”³⁷ So I might similarly ask what I am to make of the anxious and hostile valences of my work as a biblical critic, priding myself on meticulous inspections and the incisiveness of my scholarly scalpel.³⁸ Moore's larger project in *God's Gym* is one in which he illustrates, luminously and painfully, the inseparability of his own biography (“My father was a butcher ...” he begins) from his practice of carving up “corpuses”, and even cleaving Jesus from the hips of his students as if splitting conjoined twins.³⁹ As one can see even from these brief examples, the imagery in *God's Gym* is lavish with constant and morphing evocations of identification, violence, loss and attachment, thus serving as a poetic and personal illustration of the very set of complex relations I am proposing.

But if biblical scholarship is framed as a kind of autopsy, this morbid fascination presents more questions. One might notice that the endless task of slicing, segmenting and separating a body also seems to be a way of maintaining, if also controlling, contact with that body. Such cutting only precludes love if one imagines love devoid of antagonism, hurt and ambivalent dependence. Moore's question of “who bleeds” might also be posed in terms of whose body (beyond that of Jesus) one is cutting in such incisive readings. If I am suggesting the Bible enables and reflects one's desire for wholeness, to what extent is this carving up and examination of the Bible a stand in for one's own body or the body of another, as a vicarious or vengeful redirection of violence and pain? This may very well include pain caused by the contents and entwinements of that very object. Rejections of the Bible are no less intractable, of course. Turning *away* in disgust, for instance, as in Freud's description of the castration complex, is still a formative horror.⁴⁰ It seeks to seal one off from the “known” loss, violence and attachment inherent in pivotal and primary relations.

I make these suggestions not to psychoanalytically diagnose all relationships with the Bible, or imply that cultural relations to the Bible are reducible to psychology. I rather want to surface the ways in which the biblical canon structures and reproduces its affective power through its mixing and merging with other complicated loves. Whether described as coming from affection or aversion, love or hate, exacting distance or warm proximity, cultural practices around the Bible nonetheless

seem to bespeak certain structural and affective similarities, not the least of which are the losses constitutive of the biblical canon itself. Such losses are regularly disavowed and tend to spring up symptomatically elsewhere. Along these lines, it may not be coincidence that Gnosticism arrives on the cultural scene with the sharp new tools of historical criticism, not because Gnosticism was “found” by historical critics, but because it became the poor substitute for the Bible, the relations with which had become suddenly and exponentially more fragmented. The “peeling back of the layers” of biblical texts has a distinct relationship to the constant piling of mystery/unveiling tropes onto Nag Hammadi literature. Such “unveiling of mystery” both re-enacts and controls a traumatic moment of realisation around the Bible – expressing an equivocating desire to see.⁴¹

But if one cannot analyse the fetish without its antecedent and fragmented love, one cannot analyse love without its constitutive fetishisation,⁴² given that for Freud “normal” love is composed to some extent on the fetishistic marking and denial of loss.⁴³ Once again, from a Freudian perspective, the fetishisation of the Bible seems to emerge from the feigned and nostalgically produced fullness, and the fear of loss of this fullness, that structures the castration complex. Take for instance the sense that the Bible is an endless resource that cannot be drained. If I read it enough, if I study it enough, it will provide me with what I need – whether that is a stronger (or deconstructed) sense of Christian identity, a clearer picture of history or a more satisfyingly complex one, or new light on a personal or social matter.⁴⁴ If I have not found what I am looking for, it is because I have not looked hard enough. This sense of fullness however is less a witness to the gratification the Bible offers than a signal of its inability ever to satisfy fully or deliver on its assurances. Ahmed describes national love along these very lines, where spellbound romance with the object signals and covers the losses incurred by the complex relationship to that very object.⁴⁵ Why else might one return to such an object again and again but to hold out hope and to compensate for *its* lack of return? Interpretation, it seems, is always a melancholic effect.

III. CONCLUSION: ON RETURNING TO FIRST IMPRESSIONS

In suggesting that the fetishised romance around Nag Hammadi is an “obstacle to thought”, I do not want to be mistaken for saying that the *texts* associated with Nag Hammadi are an obstacle to thinking about the Bible, as if work on these texts is somehow a distraction from the real crux of the issue. Quite the contrary, it seems that the fetishisation of the site of Nag Hammadi and the texts found there has been almost primarily an obstacle to thinking about more complicated histories and notions of the Bible, which these texts readily enrich. The fetish object is never content-less or a simple placeholder, but rather has specific relation to that which it replaces.⁴⁶ That I would fear such a misreading though is already an indication of the precariousness of my enterprise, and the haunting ambivalence of returning to formative scenes (perhaps the most visceral lesson of the fetish). Even rewriting a scene is still a captivation by that scene. What I am hoping for is not only “re-writing a scene”, but also reconsidering affective relationships to such scenes.

This scene of the find at Nag Hammadi has been constantly staged and restaged, illustrating an almost obsessive collective need to express not just that these texts arrive from the desert or Egypt or a jar, but to actually recount the moment of discovery, peasants, sand and all. The problem is not just that the story itself is a colonial relic, but that this story has become fixed onto the texts as an epistemological paradigm, reminding one of their intriguing foreignness, sealing onto them an orientalisating hermeneutic, and providing a primary trope for scholarship around them (finding, revealing, unveiling). Quite ironically, this suggests that the dogged interest in unveiling hidden knowledge may be more a contemporary fixation than an ancient one.

Yet as a scene, a “moment” of discovery, this story perhaps more poignantly communicates epistemological contingency. Recounting a *scene* of discovery as preface, especially in such affect-

rich imagery, subtly reminds one of the experiential, momentary (and therefore conditional) quality of knowing. Knowing happens as an event, as an occasion saturated with affect: one that shapes and forms. I described the Nag Hammadi story as “impressionistic”, and to receive an impression is to be touched or marked. As Ahmed writes, “*We need to remember the ‘press’ in an impression*”.⁴⁷ Thinking of this scene as a kind of “first impression”, one is immediately cued into its formational aspects. In fact, if knowing is occasional, one might suddenly be reminded of the risks of separating that which we call knowledge from the scene and the instance of its impressive entrance. Thus to do epistemological history is to do, imply, or even necessitate affective history.

One also might notice that first impressions can be deceiving, and even hilariously mistaken. Their momentousness depends almost entirely on what transpires after: in time, that first impression might mean differently, offering up ongoing occasions for reflection, new kinds of knowing and new affective experiences around it. Indeed, to retell it is to imbue it with a different “sense”. I began with a popular anecdote of the haphazard discovery made by an Arab peasant, a story that belied a larger romance. But with further reflection, this quickly became an account of love. Love is, of course, difficult to account for, and the very mention of love often precludes accounting for other affects. Thus this essay has been not only an attempt to address the way particular affective experiences are hidden and re-instantiated through the production of objects of knowledge – in this case, Nag Hammadi and the Bible. It has also been an occasion to tell the story that a particular love refuses to tell: the conditions of its confession. Here in the throes of unrequited love, it seems that the romance and danger of the fetish are rather the traces of the love object – the romance required to maintain a love that cannot meet the very needs it creates, and the danger of the loss that admission prompts.

ENDNOTES

¹ The iteration above can be found at: http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/timeline_18.html

² Marvin Meyer offers one particularly indulgent version of the story: “According to Muhammad Ali of the al-Samman clan, who has told this story to James M. Robinson, this remarkable manuscript discovery took place around December 1945. At that time (so the story goes), several Egyptian fellahin, including Muhammed Ali, were riding their camels near the Jabal al-Tarif, a huge cliff that flanks the Nile River in Upper Egypt not far from the modern city of Nag Hammadi. They were looking for sabakh, a natural fertilizer that accumulates in the area, and so they hobbled their camels at the foot of the Jabal al-Tarif and began to dig around a large boulder that had fallen onto the talus, or slope of debris against the cliff face. Much to their surprise, they uncovered a large storage jar with a bowl sealed on top of it as a lid. Muhammed Ali hesitated before opening a sealed jar. Apparently he feared that the jar could contain a jinn, or spirit, that might be released to haunt him and do mischief. Yet he also reflected upon the legends concerning treasures hidden in the area, and his love of gold overcame his fear of jinns ...” Meyer (1992: 5).

³ Moore (2006: 10).

⁴ King (2003: 71-109).

⁵ King (2003: 84-90) ; Reizenstein (1978).

⁶ King (2003: 90-100); Bousset (1970).

⁷ James Robinson (1990), for instance, draws vague comparison between the texts and “eastern religion”. See also Harris (1999).

⁸ For example, Rudolf Bultmann’s famous study on the Gospel of John, which details and constructs the “Gnostic redeemer myth” (still an influential concept in Nag Hammadi scholarship) based on Reizenstein’s work, negotiates similarities between the gospel and apparently “Gnostic views” by arguing the Gospel of John was both countering and trying to appeal to so-called Gnostics. Bultmann (1971) Cf. King’s discussion of this text (2003: 100-107). See also Wayne A. Meeks’ elaboration and refinement of Bultmann’s thesis (1972). See the extended argument on some of these points in King (2003).

⁹ In his chapter on postcards from women’s prisons Alloula writes that, symbolically speaking, the imprisonment of women “becomes the *equivalent of sexual frustration*” in these representations. “On the

other side of the [prison] wall, a man is desperately clutching the bars that keep him from the object of his unequivocal yearning ... This 'elaborated' staging (the tell-taleness of the postcard), which presupposes that the photographer is inside the place of confinement, is highly revealing. *It is the imaginary resolution of the hiatus that differentiates the inside from the outside ...*". The photographer apparently not only represents his own exteriority and sexual frustration in the images themselves. In staging and taking the pictures, he also lives out his fantasy of being inside and having "penetrated the harem" (1986: 25-26). In another place, Alloula subtly correlates the frustrated attempts of the photographers to see and represent veiled Algerian women with their imbued sense of taboo. "The opaque veil that covers her intimates clearly and simply to the photographer a refusal. Turned back upon himself, upon his own impotence in the situation, the photographer undergoes an *initial experience of disappointment and rejection ...* the Algerian woman discourages the *scopic desire* (the voyeurism) of the photographer. She is the concrete negation of his desire and thus brings the photographer confirmation of a triple rejection: the rejection of his desire, the practice of his 'art', and of his place in a milieu that is not his own. Algerian society, particularly the world of women, is forever forbidden to him (1986: 7).

¹⁰ Attridge (1986).

¹¹ See Cox Miller (1989), Perkins (1996). This appears particularly in descriptions of Nag Hammadi texts as "revising" early Jesus traditions (see Puttkhuizen 2006 or Pearson 2007) or having an "allusive" relationship to New Testament and canonical texts that are assumed to be already more "familiar" to the ancient audience of NH texts. "Allusion", as a modern literary term, suggests a shorthand reference to (as opposed to direct quotation or citation of) a well-known piece of literature, figure or event that calls up the context of the reference to contribute both a sense of familiarity and richness of meaning to the new text. The problem with claiming "allusion" as a tactic of some NH texts relative to what are later called "New Testament" texts is that it assumes the traditions ostensibly being alluded to are relatively stable and prior. "Allusion" may more readily fit oblique references to Tanakh literature in first and second century writings, but ancient rhetorical and elaborative practices have repeatedly challenged modern assumptions about the stability of cultural literature in the ancient world. Allusion likewise doesn't allow for the possibility that these texts might be sharing, shaping and participating in a number of circulating literary tropes or themes in the first few centuries.

¹² King (2003: 201-208). See also Williams (1996: 139-188).

¹³ For sexual slander as a common practice of delimiting identity boundaries (among other things) see Knust (2006)

¹⁴ One important example is the landmark study by Wimbush and Valantasis (1998).

¹⁵ Discussing the secrecy motif in the Gospel of Mark, Richard Walsh and George Aichele aptly comment, "While (William) Wrede and (Morton) Smith offer different types of historical explanation for Mark's enigmatic nature, Frank Kermode locates the secrecy in the act of interpretation itself, for 'all narratives are essentially dark' to interpreters. Without that darkness, there would be no interpretation. Interpretation itself, not a particular author, creates secrecy" Aichele (2005: ix). The project of this book, in fact, is to suggest that canon is constructed and upheld through various border-producing and -protecting interpretations.

¹⁶ See such sensationalist titles as: *The Gnostic Gospels of Jesus: the Definitive Collection of Mystical Gospels and Secret Books about Jesus of Nazareth* by Marvin Meyer; *The Allure of Gnosticism* by Robert A. Segal, Murry Stein PhD, and June Singer; *Forbidden Faith: The Secret History of Gnosticism* by Richard Smoley; *The Gnostic Papers: The Undiscovered Mysteries of Christ* by John Panella. Searching Amazon will produce dozens of others.

¹⁷ Ahmed (2004).

¹⁸ Affect theory refers to a broad set of considerations within the purview of cultural studies, and thus influencing other disciplines, including now biblical studies (at the SBL annual meeting in New Orleans in 2009, the Bible and Cultural Studies section dedicated one session to intersections with affect theory). "Affect" is most easily understood as "emotion", and affect theory is best described as that which attempts to think about emotion in explicitly intersubjective and social terms. However, since "emotion" tends to connote a discrete and internal personalized experience, there has been discussion within affect theory about whether the use of the term emotion is actually counterproductive to the enterprise. Indeed it seems the term affect allows for theorisation that includes physiological, social, epistemological and linguistic considerations. Some texts (aside from Ahmed's) which have taken up questions of affect, and which have influenced my notion of what affect theory constitutes, includes: Sedgwick (2003), Puar (2007), Massumi (2002), Shepherdson (2008), Clough and Halley (2007).

¹⁹ See also Ahmed's discussion of spatialisation in orientalist discourses (2007).

²⁰ Freud (1961).

²¹ Mulvey (1996: 5).

²² Laura Mulvey writes particularly about sexual and spatial symbolism in the story of Pandora's box, which was, as she notes, originally a jar (1996: 53-64).

²³ Freud (2007: 131-132).

²⁴ Freud (2007: 132).

²⁵ I use the term love object here not only to be loyal to Freud in this instance, but to highlight the objectifying dimensions of love. The Relational school of psychoanalysis has offered important adjustments to this, in order to activate/animate the dyadic and interdependent relationship between the subject and her or his "love objects". I take those developments seriously, as I will discuss later in this paper, but I do not think that such developments require a total and perhaps naive renunciation of love as containing some varying elements of objectification.

²⁶ More will be said about the "incompleteness" and the discovery of the mother's castration below.

²⁷ For example, Hennessy (2000) juxtaposes fetishised identities and commodified desire with "revolutionary love". Wannewetch (2007) contemplates desire as idolatry, and proposes an Augustinian theology of love in contrast. See also Ahmed's (2004) critique of an idealised notion of love as a concept for politics. Ahmed does discuss both fetish and Freudian notions of love, but interestingly, she does not link the analysis of the two.

²⁸ I mean logically antecedent, not necessarily temporally.

²⁹ These comments were posted with the video on the Prada fragrance website, but have now been taken down. The video can still be found on YouTube.

³⁰ In fact, underscoring this point, a recent spoof of a fragrance ad was posted on YouTube (through TotallySketch.com) that had a "sexy" Jesus as spokesmodel for "Christ" cologne.

³¹ Burrus (1991).

³² Burrus (1991: 232).

³³ Phillips (1997: 87).

³⁴ Freud (1957: 96).

³⁵ For Ahmed's discussion on Kristeva and disgust, see Ahmed (2004: 84-87). For Mulvey on Kristeva and disgust, see Mulvey (1996: 63-64).

³⁶ Jessica Benjamin (1998) has done excellent work trying to put the complexity back into this scene and its implications.

³⁷ Moore (1996: 70).

³⁸ He has put his finger on the pulse (pun intended) of the strong tensions often felt between those reading the Bible in academic settings and those reading it elsewhere. Yet perhaps because of the intensification of biblical politics in the intervening 15 years since the publication of *God's Gym*, I find myself more cautious about placing the scalpel only in the hands of biblical scholars, particularly given the regularity with which verses and phrases get neatly sliced out of the Bible for strategic deployment.

³⁹ Moore (1996: 70).

⁴⁰ This is indeed Kristeva's reading (1982).

⁴¹ This is *contra* Mulvey. She analyses the refusal to see embedded in fetishism, but distinguishes curiosity from fetishism in ways that I find somewhat theoretically suspicious, mostly because the fetish seems to indicate, as she herself notes, a kind of attachment to the visual field *as well as* a "refusal" to see. Indeed Freud *contrasts* the disavowal constitutive of the fetish with "scotomisation" – an erasure from the visual field. Rather, the boy both has and has not seen. Cf. Mulvey (1996: 53-64).

⁴² Thanks to Hal Taussig for pushing me on my original thesis so that I might discover this point.

⁴³ This enterprise has some dense irony, since the term "fetish" for both Marx and Freud was already coined with reference to religious objects, mainly "primitive religion". I'm hoping that the chauvinism associated with the term is outweighed by the fact that both Marx and Freud theorize fetish as being the result of pretty sophisticated psychic and social processes – and indeed, the Bible *does* arise within some complex socio-economic and psychic arrangements. In terms of commodity fetishisation, the Bible has been, since Gutenberg, deeply embedded in not only mass production, but defined by the very erasure of the many labours that create the seemingly unitary, coherent surface of the Bible (the heavy-handed work of textual criticism or institutional authorisations, the precarious craft of translation). The Bible's dropped-out-of-the-sky reputation is not so much a question of religious, traditional, or interpretational orientation as capitalist orientation.

⁴⁴ This melancholic return operates in numerous ways and across a wide range of theological/theoretical perspectives – in the commitment of the biblical scholar as well as that of the lay reader to keep plumbing the depths of “the book”.

⁴⁵ Ahmed (2004: 130-131).

⁴⁶ As Phillips (1997: 79-92) suggests.

⁴⁷ Ahmed (2007: 6).

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