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Between God and Gibson: German Mystical and Romantic Sources of *The Passion of the Christ*

For Suzanne Stahl

Mel Gibson's film of the last twelve hours in the life of Jesus was the visible crest of a sea change. Viewed by record audiences between Ash Wednesday and Easter, 2004; screened a year later by numerous Christian churches and groups, as if a new Easter rite had been instituted; declared emblematic for the Red States in the 2004 presidential race: *The Passion of the Christ* marks the receding tide of liberal secular society and the rising tide of a new conservative religiosity. But rising tides can also conceal invisible currents. Those whose information about the film came from its credits—virtually all who saw it in the decisive period of its reception—were not informed that Gibson's representation of the Passion drew heavily on a tradition that extends to 19th-century German Romanticism and the earlier mystical and visionary sources revived by the Romantics.

Gibson's *Passion* is known to have borrowed a great deal from the translation of a book published under the name of a 19th-century German nun,¹ Anna Katharina Emmerich (1774–1824): *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (DP), *Das bittere Leiden unsers Herrn Jesu Christi* in its original title (Br 26). Much less widely known is the fact that German Romantic poet Clemens Brentano (1778–1842) was the author of the writing attributed to her. Germanists and church historians have long been aware that *Das bittere Leiden* resulted from what Kenneth L. Woodward characterized in *Making Saints* as “the conscious elaborations of an overwrought Romantic poet” (389).

In a society increasingly preoccupied with safeguarding intellectual property, Gibson's use of Emmerich-Brentano is anomalous. If one who benefits knowingly but tacitly from false attribution is all the more culpable for having been reticent, a filmmaker who acknowledges his source in an interview but fails to credit it in releasing his film to its mass audience can be said to have knowingly reaped the benefits of plagiarism. The benefits drew compound interest. Borrowing heavily on what amounts to a Romantic forgery,

Gibson's reticence about his source enhanced the aura of his production by encouraging an unsuspecting public to form an exaggerated notion of the biblical authenticity of *The Passion of the Christ*.

Much of the debate over the film has been based on false premises. Early critical reactions took Gibson to task for incorporating an offending scriptural passage, Matthew 27:25, a curse pronounced by the Jews on themselves in demanding the blood of Christ. This created the misleading impression that the critics were censoring the Bible. Even if the alleged anti-Semitism of the film draws upon the New Testament and on traditional Catholic representations of the Passion, the discussion might have been more to the point if only the public had known that the film was based on "the conscious elaborations of an overwrought Romantic poet." Gibson adapted a literary work that deviates from and embroiders the Bible to the idiom of the violent action film.

For the sake of disclosure, I should acknowledge my personal response to the film. Before seeing it, I sympathized with Gibson's artistic and religious prerogatives. Though a secularist, I regarded his Christian and Jewish critics as a self-appointed censorship board. But rejection is not censorship. Viewed on its own merits, *The Passion of the Christ* struck me as sanctimonious exploitation, dishonest to the core. With its Latin and Aramaic dialog, the film cultivates a deceptive appearance of biblical authenticity. It capitalizes on much that is questionable in Christian Passion veneration, as well as on arguably anti-Semitic elements in the New Testament. Still, the biblical or traditional sources are less troublesome than their absorption in the public sphere. *The Passion of the Christ* is problematic because it refashions the sacred in the image of a profane medium. Its unlabeled mix of ingredients hastens the erosion of a public secularism that serves, among other purposes, to protect the religious themselves.

The intentions of this article are to show how the film mixes sacred with profane; to characterize the personal and historical circumstances that gave rise to the problematic literary source on which Gibson drew; and to indicate how the successive appropriation of sacred authority, first by a Romantic poet drawing on ascetic tradition and finally by a contemporary filmmaker utilizing the latest cinematic techniques, infuses a latent power into the sensational violence of the action film with consequences that are still unfolding.

The Film as Book

The reader is invited to imagine four intersecting circles across the page. The two middle circles are boldly outlined. They overlap broadly to signify the major content that the film borrows from the book: its continuous line of action, major episodes, secondary characters, dialog, and many details. The outside circles that project their influences into the center signify on the left

the concealed Romantic influence and on the right the visual impact of the Hollywood action film. From opposite extremes, the extraneous influences proceeding from German Romanticism and the Hollywood cinema thus meet and blend in the overlapping space of the film as book, giving rise to a cinematic verisimilitude that is spectacular and visionary but non-biblical in significant narrative and affective aspects.

Without credit, Gibson extracted from the Romantic-era work an account of the Passion as combat against a formidable, personalized opponent in a theater of battle polarized between friend and foe. Near the beginning, Jesus lies face down, praying in the night on the Mount of Olives. Beside him stands the enemy, Satan as tempter, in the film an androgynous temptress who mutates into a serpent. This is one of several satanic embodiments that owe as much to horror genre conventions as to the Romantic source.

When Jesus reconfirms his spiritual resolve, his physical ordeal begins. The role of the enemy passes to the Jewish police who arrest and beat him on the way to Jerusalem (*DP* 130ff.). Spectacularly, they throw him from a bridge. Next he faces the physical abuse and mockery of the Jewish crowds and Sanhedrin. They behave as a raging lynch mob, far in excess of their Gospel prototypes (*DP* 152, 153, 154, 157, 159, 166, 187, 199, etc.). Similarly, Roman sadism exceeds any biblical precedent. The scourging of Jesus is attenuated and gruesome (*DP* 217–23). The torrent of blows and savagery continues relentlessly until Jesus expires on the cross. From the fluid mob-like opponent, a few contrasting figures emerge: Pilate and his wife, dissenting Jews, the good thief.

Common to book and film is the Jewish lynch mob. It contrasts in pervasiveness and tone with the mournfully serene report of violence in the Gospels. Despite their good news, the Gospels read as tales told by men injured to the worst. Their far more measured report of overt Jewish violence is framed by the disciple Peter's repeated denials of Jesus "before the cock crows"²—a challenge to reflection. However, the capacity for reflection is battered brain-dead by Gibson's action film treatment, driven by stunts, special effects, and a riveting score. Inimical to introspection, book and film instead look outward with horror and revulsion to the mob of unbelievers.

The Gospels are not storyboards. *Das bittere Leiden* provides an alternation of crowds and small-group scenes, a colorfully dichotomized spectrum of good and evil characters, and a blow-by-blow choreography of violence. The correspondences listed in the table below, which will be discussed at length later in this article, stand out among those such as the Stations of the Cross that are based on more general Catholic tradition.

Table. Scenes and Their Sources		
<i>Film Scenes</i>	<i>Gospel Precedent</i>	<i>Emmerich-Brentano (DP)</i>
Snake at Jesus' feet	None	"odious reptile" ... "gigantic" (114)
Violent bridge scene	None	Jesus struck, thrown from bridge (136)
Sanhedrin and Jewish crowds as lynch mob	One major episode of overt Jewish violence	Constant blows and abuse with devils appearing in Jewish crowds (see above)
Peter confesses to Mary	None	Close correspondence (174)
Underground prison	None	Jesus in a subterranean prison (176)
Herod in gay ambience	Herod only mentioned	Herod as "effeminate" prince (206)
Scourging of Jesus	No details are given	Shares sequence and details (219–24)
Pilate's wife Claudia	Mentioned only once	Similar characterization (202–03)
Claudia's many dreams	One dream mentioned	Claudia dreams like Emmerich (203)
Claudia provides cloth	None	Close correspondence (224–25)
Stretching Jesus' arm	None	Exact correspondence (270)
Cross inserted into base	None	Exact correspondence (273)

Yet this is only one side of the book. Other intimations are lost to the film audience. The tumultuous blood-thirsty crowds have also been interpreted as a reference to the French Revolutionary mob (Frühwald 182). Pilate and the Romans may allude to the French or to the Protestant Prussian rulers of Emmerich's Catholic Westphalia after the Congress of Vienna.³ Emmerich is the suffering Jesus, Brentano a disciple. The violence also has its tradition-bound semiotics. The Stations of the Cross and the roles of Mary, Veronica, and other good Jews of course derive from a broader Catholic tradition. Evangelical Protestants embracing the film are blissfully unaware that the flesh sundered from Jesus' body when he is brutally beaten or scourged was originally a disparaging allusion to them as heretics torn from the ecclesiastical

body of Christ by the Protestant Reformation, an allusion explained early in *Das bittere Leiden*.⁴

Bernhard Gajek has documented the materials on which Brentano drew. Among them was the Baroque devotional writing *Das Leben Christi* (Mainz 1677) of Martin von Cochem (Gajek 93ff.). Martin's Baroque prototype contained many of the episodes and details Gibson extracted from Emmerich-Brentano, notably the detailed circumstances of Jesus' capture, scourging, and crucifixion. Martin had cited such prior sources as Brigitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena and had enveloped his recounting of the sacred events in an intrusive prayerful narrator's monolog reminiscent of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Brentano shrewdly recast the Passion narrative, eliminating the Baroque intermediary's overt citations of traditional authorities and granting Emmerich the role of a transparent medium that witnesses historical events unaided and recounts them in her own words. When Gibson in turn eliminates the role Brentano assigned to Emmerich, the resultant immediacy of presentation acquires the appearance of historical and biblical authenticity.

In composing *Das bittere Leiden unsers Herrn Jesu Christi*, Brentano consulted Hebrew calendars, travelers' reports, and maps of Jerusalem and the Holy Land (Gajek 98). Even what the poet heard and wrote down from Emmerich herself was triggered by his questions and promptings at her bedside and configured by his intensive reworking of transcripts (Schultz/SS 404). As a book collector-connoisseur and Romantic stylist-artist whose Dülmen manuscripts are replete with his fine ink sketches of the visionary scenes, Brentano also drew on medieval and Baroque iconography (Gajek 108–12). Akin to the Catholic Romantic "Nazarene" painters of the *Lukasbund*, the poet employed his skills to fashion finely wrought tableau-like scenes which Gibson's film skillfully exploits.

When we see a Nazarene painting from the life of Christ or a Baroque painting of Jews persecuting Jesus, we know that we are looking at a Nazarene or Baroque painting. In the film, however, the historical determinants have been rendered imperceptible to the public. Since neither Emmerich nor Brentano was properly acknowledged by Gibson, what remains of his immediate source is what conforms to the scenario of the film genre: action, violence, and good Christians against bad Jews and Romans.

Emmerich according to Brentano

If *Das bittere Leiden unsers Herrn Jesu Christi* is largely the work of the poet, Emmerich's input is undeniable. She has been referred to in various articles as an "anti-Semitic nun."⁵ Though she may have held such prejudices, the source given for her anti-Semitism is from Schmöger, who published his biog-

raphy four decades after her death and drew upon Brentano's protocols (Schmöger 547–48). The evidence is less solid than for the poet's involvement in the anti-Semitic *Christlich-Deutsche Tischgesellschaft*.⁶ Brentano either conveys a less filtered view of Emmerich or confronts us with seminal tendencies in the presentation of her life and significance. His account is more nuanced and compelling than those authored by more conventional biographers who depict her as the stereotypical saint. It can neither be ignored that Brentano spent several years at Emmerich's bedside, gaining much first-hand knowledge, nor ruled out that he would have had reason to tailor his biographical account to match visions he ascribed to her. Whether his report is more accurate or simply more adept, it pertains to the historical context of the book and hence to the hidden sources of the film.

Between his notes and biography and the details of *Das bittere Leiden* there are parallels and resonances that are lost or subsumed in the film. His notes of their conversations appear least embellished (Br 28,1). His anecdotal biography of Emmerich contains intimations that later Catholic commentators preferred to ignore.⁷ In the poet's notes of their conversations, she does not come across as a hate-driven bigot. She is a cheerful peasant woman who from childhood possesses naive piety, imagination, and compassion. As a fourteen-year-old, Anna had tried to assist her ailing parents by prayer and her peculiar device of surrogate suffering, that is, by taking upon herself the sufferings of others.⁸ In her later life, her instinctive pity and surrogate suffering only intensified. Her pains became more acute and debilitating. The once vigorous and active peasant girl was eventually reduced to a bed-ridden invalid.

Joining an Augustinian convent fulfilled her life's dream. But when Emmerich's convent was secularized along with many others in the wake of the Enlightenment, she was deprived of her status. This led to a conflict of authority of a kind associated with the beginnings of mystical experience. Her lost authority would have to be restored by God himself. Beginning in medieval times, the challenged authority of women, lay persons, and clergy caught in double binds involving faith had given rise to the varieties of visionary, contemplative, and speculative mysticism.⁹ Her afflictions, visions, and ecstasies began to spread her fame on the winds of the Catholic Awakening movement that was gaining force. From 1812 on, her afflictions are said to have included stigmata and other Christ-like wounds. Whatever these may have been—imagined, self-inflicted, or paranormal—it is worth remembering that pain was no rarity. In Brentano's account, she vowed to suffer as a surrogate for her fellows. Her prayers were fulfilled.¹⁰

Emmerich's example resonated with her contemporaries. Europeans, even of her peasant class, had fresh memories of revolution and of decades of war exacerbating the perennial misfortunes of the common people. The pious and uneducated Anna Katharina reacted naively to the crises of her

time, its confusions and turmoil. Already as a child, she had dreamed dreams of the Reign of Terror, of Louis XVI at the guillotine, and of the chaos and bloodshed of battle. She had experienced dread at a place in the fields where an innocent soldier was said to have been betrayed by false witness and executed. From early childhood on, she had been gripped by scenes from the Bible.¹¹ She sought to emulate Christ in her own afflictions.

In August 1819, Anna's status as a mystical stigmatic was challenged by the state: she became the object of a public controversy when a Prussian government commission investigated her. Her newly arrived poet-disciple waxed so zealous on her behalf that he antagonized even the cautious Catholic officials (Schultz/SS 402). The commission's painful and humiliating examination of Emmerich's body appears to be a prototype for Jesus' envisioned humiliation. Thus *Das bittere Leiden* mentions the violation of his modesty in a manner that suggests a feminine sense of shame. Forced to strip publicly before he is whipped, Jesus loosens a remaining undergarment and quickly turns to face the pillar to conceal his private parts, calling out to the Virgin Mary to avert her gaze. In the German original, Mary swoons in this same instant—an erotically suggestive passage that was deleted from the generally faithful translation.¹² Emmerich's humiliation by the investigating commission also reflects the political subjugation of Catholic Westphalia to a rationalist Protestant Prussian state. The pitiless male executors of Prussian order were intent on exposing the female embodiment of Catholic sentiment and compassion.

Compassion was also a profound, though contradictory, impulse of the *Zeitgeist*. The years of Anna's peak reputation produced Goya's *Disasters of War*, Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, the utopian schemes of Charles Fourier and Robert Owen for alleviating popular misery, and Arthur Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, with its philosophical meditations on cosmic suffering and its exaltation of a compassionate sainthood. The example of Schopenhauer should serve to remind us that it is possible to write brilliantly about compassion without actually having any. The era of compassion was also a period of rising political repression and of a new anti-Semitism. In the year before Brentano met Emmerich, anti-Semitic riots took place in many German cities—though fewest in Prussia. The cry of the rioters—"Hep, Hep!"—stood for "Hierosolema est perdita" [Jerusalem is lost]. According to Elon, this represented a throwback to the medieval crusading ethos encouraged by the Romantic spirit (101–07).

Brentano's Path to Emmerich

In this overheated and dangerously antithetical atmosphere, Emmerich's fame spread to the Romantic intellectuals, many of whom had converted or were ideologically inclined to embrace Catholicism as a confirmation of their

Romantic impulses. Her untutored faith and visionary gifts appealed to the Romantic elevation of imagination and interest in folk culture and to Brentano's own quest for transcendent truth and absolute love. The poet believed that elements of a primal myth survived in folk tradition (Gajek 35). The visionary nun also nourished his fascination with occult or mystical knowledge. He would eventually use her to test his hypotheses about the power of the miraculous. Her devoted companion experimented with her ability to distinguish authentic holy relics and gain clairvoyant knowledge of Jesus.¹³ After her death, Brentano even attempted to prove the supernatural preservation of her corpse by having it exhumed (Schultz 192).

Possibly like Gibson himself, Brentano was beset by artistic and personal crises. He had renounced the literary life and returned to the Catholic faith. He was the brilliant, unstable, prodigal son of a wealthy Frankfurt merchant family with distinguished Italian roots. Orphaned young, he threw himself into intense, unconventional attachments. He hurled pleading love letters at Sophie Mereau, the married woman who became his first wife whom he adored yet subordinated to his personal ambitions (Dülmen 272). He was devastated by Sophie's death in 1806. A bizarre marriage followed in 1807 with Auguste Bußmann, a sixteen-year-old girl of good family who was already solidly betrothed to another before her tryst with the poet. The two were standing in a crowd of Frankfurt burghers attending Napoleon's triumphant entry into the city. After making a scandalous public spectacle of their passions, the older man and the young girl eloped (Schultz/SS 169). The marriage was an instant disaster. Auguste was an untamed pupil of Romantic rebellion. He soon came to see his child bride as the demonic counterpart of the angelic mother figures he had always worshiped. With the support of friends, Brentano disposed of the demonized Auguste by means of a separation and divorce, an un-Catholic solution that he did not regret after returning to Catholicism, or indeed even after she committed suicide in 1832 in the wake of another tragic marriage (Schultz, SS 223–25).

Orphaned young, widowed early, burdened with guilt, Brentano was a prodigal son with nothing to return to. He invented a home, first in "the Invisible Church of Art" (Hoffmann 180) and afterward in a poeticized Catholicism. Van Dülmen recently called attention to the continuity of the Romantics' cherished circles of friendship and their later conversions to a Catholic religious fellowship. This is nowhere more evident than with Brentano. He found life unbearable without the intimacy of his sister Bettina, his friend and brother-in-law Achim von Arnim, or other associates whose hospitality had begun to wear thin.¹⁴ In 1817 he wrote a massive confession of sins and returned to the fold. He also courted a Lutheran pastor's daughter, the poet Luise Hensel. She was in love with another man, but likewise in the process of conversion to Catholicism, encouraged by Brentano. Partly to get him out of her hair, Luise urged the poet to visit Emmerich in the Westphalian

town of Dülmen. Brentano had been preceded there by others of his circle, including his brother Christian.

The poet went to Dülmen in 1819 and was so overwhelmed by his first encounter with the saintly invalid that he extended his stay for five years until her death in 1824. Luise also became a nun and continued to influence Brentano's affairs for years to come. After Emmerich's death, preserving her visions and the memory of her life became the central objective of Brentano's remaining years. He published *Das bittere Leiden* in 1833—nine years after Emmerich's death—and worked on her biography. The Catholic expert who examined the Brentano-Emmerich papers in the 1920s did not think very highly of the poet's religious development before or after his conversion. There was something unwholesome in his Romantic alchemy of sacred and profane love.¹⁵ Before converting, Brentano had raised poetry to a religion. After it his Catholicism was rank with poetic impulses. The nun replaced the other female figures in his life as a mother-figure and soul-mate in one. Recent scholarship has even argued for an erotically charged relationship. Brentano is said to have encroached on Emmerich's female privacy in tending her wounds. The invalid nun's expressions of affection for her "pilgrim" go beyond the erotic usages of traditional bridal mysticism and offer evidence of a relationship not confined to the spiritual (Schultz, *SS* 401–02).

Be this as it may, it seems clear that Brentano's obsession with guilt and expiation and Anna's extraordinary spirituality were decisive in drawing him to her bedside. The available literature suggests that, no less than Yeats or Dostoyevsky, he was above all an author, driven not by pure lust or anti-Semitism, but by his own creative demons. What they drove him to is of course another matter. In one respect at least, the Romantic poet was as modern as the present-day writers and artists who cannot simply experience their personal crises without publicizing them on talk shows and turning them into marketable commodities. Brentano made a major artistic production of his spiritual crisis, with God as a co-sponsor and the devil on hand to claim the critics and doubters. In this sense, we are dealing with a passion of the creative artist.

Brentano Eclipsed

Both the book by Brentano and the film by Gibson succeed in attributing their production to a divine source: Emmerich's divinely inspired visions or the Bible. For either, this involves something like ventriloquism or sleight of hand; and the upshot in both cases is a validation of Catholic Romanticism on the one hand and of the violent action film with a sacred content on the other.

The work Brentano attributed to Emmerich both breaks with and validates his previous life as an artist. In collaboration with Achim von Arnim, the poet had formerly reworked and elevated folk material in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Scholars including Frühwald and Gajek have established that, like *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, *Das bittere Leiden* incorporates and refashions materials drawn from various sources (Frühwald 294–97). With their peculiar artistic means, the Romantics supported the dictum *vox populi, vox Dei*. If *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* played secretary to *vox populi*, *Das bittere Leiden* does so for both *populus* and *Deus*. At the same time, the work necessarily relates to the lives and interactions of Emmerich and Brentano. Given the main premise that the nun's sufferings parallel those of Jesus, it is only consistent that the participants in her lived drama correspond (though not one-to-one) with figures in the visionary work itself. They correspond to the degree that they embody faith and compassion or cruelty, indifference, and unbelief.

The following discussion should suggest how much of the informing power of the Romantic sources is lost and how much is either sublimated or transformed into the one-dimensional cinematic action-film genre. In the film, the visionary scenarios from *Das bittere Leiden* are bolstered on the one hand by a presumption of biblical inerrancy and on the other by visionary cinematic technique. This leads to a serious disconnect. Despite their mystifications, Emmerich and Brentano did not go so far as to claim divine verbal inspiration.¹⁶ By not crediting his immediate source and composing the dialog in ancient languages, Gibson suggests to the public that his screenplay is based on the Bible treated with a modicum of artistic license. He obscures the Romantic source of his film's pathos and thereby brackets out the human illness, compassion, historical experience, and imaginative inner life of Emmerich, along with the poetic interventions of Brentano.

The Romanticism that is subsumed or supplanted in the film infuses the beginning of *Das bittere Leiden*. Its Last Supper is celebrated in a German Romantic ambience: "An der Südseite des Berges Sion, nicht weit von der nun auch verödeten Burg Davids und dem von der Morgenseite zu dieser Burg aufsteigenden Markte, liegt ein starkes, altes Gebäude zwischen Reihen oben zusammengezogener schattiger Bäume in einem geräumigen Hofe, der von dicken Mauern umgeben ist" (Br 26:71). "On the southern side of Mount Sion, not far from the ruined Castle of David, and the market held on the ascent leading to that Castle, there stood, towards the east, an ancient and solid building, between rows of thick trees, in the midst of a spacious court surrounded by thick walls" (DP 64–65). Moreover, David's Castle, we are told, was where he and his chivalrous companions honed their martial skills: they are knights of yore, as imagined by a Romantic artist (DP 65). In another commentary, implausibly attributed by the supposed scribe to the untraveled Emmerich, the ruined Castle is described in the manner of a Romantic ruin. David's Castle is reminiscent of the ruined monasteries painted by Caspar

David Friedrich—or the heart-breaking secularization of Emmerich's own Augustinian convent: "Wenn ich in den alten Zeiten Schlösser großer Könige und Tempel so herabgekommen sehe zu niedrigem Gebrauche, denke ich immer ... wie jetzt, wo auch so viele große Werke frommer, treuer Mühsamkeit, Kirchen und Klöster zerstört, oder zu weltlichem, oft nicht allzu sündenreinem Gebrauche verschleudert werden" (Br 26:218). "When in meditation I behold the ruins of old castles and temples ... my mind always reverts to the events of our own days, when so many of the beautiful edifices erected by our pious and zealous ancestors are either destroyed, defaced, or used for worldly, if not wicked purposes" (DP 192). Brentano's Jerusalem obviously stirs the same emotions as Romantic Heidelberg, where a fellowship of poets and artists dreamed in the shadows of a ruined castle.

The Last Supper takes place in the house of Nicodemus. Like a German painter of the *Lukasbund* in Rome, Nicodemus dwells amid the ruined monuments of the past and occupies himself as a sculptor in his spare time.¹⁷ The Supper itself is eaten at three tables which seat twelve each in three adjoining rooms.¹⁸ This fanciful arrangement is suggestive of the interlocking circles of Romantic friends documented in Richard van Dülmen's cultural history of Romanticism *Poesie des Lebens*.¹⁹ In its size, semi-public surroundings and male network, the Last Supper is not unlike the *Tischgesellschaft* of Brentano's beloved friend and brother-in-law Achim von Arnim (Nienhaus 16).

Romantic art and Catholic faith merge in the ambience of visionary Jerusalem. Objects of utility in the Last Supper are depicted with a painterly attention to symbolic detail. There are scarcely veiled defenses of Catholic rites and sacraments, including the Real Presence in the Eucharist,²⁰ which, it seems, Protestants do not contemplate with sufficient solemnity. During the Last Supper, the Apostles are depicted as jotting down notes on the small parchment scrolls they carry on their persons.²¹ Just as the notes the Apostles take are destined to become the Gospels, the notes Brentano took, or claimed to have taken, at Emmerich's bedside are to become *Das bittere Leiden*. The visionary revelation at her bedside thus goes beyond claiming to mediate the biblical antecedent to mimic and embody it in an artistic equivalent of Real Presence in the sense of George Steiner's book of that title. In all events, these symbolic and contemplative elements are lost in the transformation of book into film. It is only when the mode shifts to action and violence that the Romantic source is readily convertible into the modern cinematic medium.

The Book as Film

Beginning with Jesus' sorrow and subsequent capture on the Mount of Olives, the film transforms the book into a Hollywood action film with its violence, physical feats, and crass polarization of good and evil characters.

The setting in the book is redolent of German Romantic sensibilities. Thus, Jesus prays not in the cultivated stretches, but in the wildest part of the Garden of Gethsemane.²² If the wild setting suggests in the book a Romantic sensibility, the nocturnal wilderness in the film evokes the genre conventions of a cinematic horror remote from the scriptural source. The grotesquely androgynous hooded Satan appears vampire-like with a worm recoiling in his/her nostril. The cinematic snake is not crowned as in the book, a meaningful but potentially absurd detail for a film. Gibson's horror-film ambience of night is intensified by the uncanny creatures that haunt Judas. In the book, they hover, less spooky, near Judas at the Supper (*DP* 79, 86).

As soon as Jesus is captured on the Mount of Olives, the lynch-mob-like action becomes dominant. Led off to Jerusalem, Jesus is made to run a gauntlet of blows on a bridge, a non-biblical scene from *Das bittere Leiden*. Spectacularly, he is thrown by his captors over the side of the bridge and caught to dangle on his ropes and chains in mid air.²³ This acrobatic torment follows the book, but it also recollects an incident reported by Brentano of Emmerich's childhood, one of her several encounters with the evil power. Crossing a bridge on her way to church, an evil passerby, apparently Satan in the form of a dog, struck her and threw her from the bridge (*Br* 28,1:261).

However, the book and film also introduce consoling scenes wholly absent in the Gospels. The thrice repeated denial of Jesus by Peter figures prominently in the Gospels, where the space assigned to it in the terse narration is significantly large.²⁴ A powerful episode within the Passion narration, its suggestive artistic potential received an eloquent testimony in Chekhov's fine short story "The Student": two peasant women weep bitterly as a seminarian evokes the failure of the faithful. However, in *Das bittere Leiden*, the Apostle Peter's failure and betrayal of Jesus is overshadowed by crowd violence and then consolingly outshone by Peter's interpolated confession of his betrayal to Mother Mary.²⁵ The emphasis is shifted from the failure of the faithful to the viciousness of the faithless. Who could really blame this Peter? After capitulating before a vicious reign of terror, the Apostle confesses to Mary and promptly rounds a corner on his way to becoming a rock of the Church. This resembles the selective remorse of the poet, who was still defending himself to the last from possible heirs of the demonized Auguste (Schultz, *SS* 224–25), and who was on the whole less exercised by any sense of guilt for her tragic death than by the blindness of those who did not embrace the Guarantor of his salvation. Like the Apostle, the poet had discovered a mother figure to seek solace with in Emmerich. His prolonged penance at her bedside had put him well on his way to becoming a pillar of the resurgent Church—by doing what he had always done best.

Mary is not the only parallel of the compassionate nun. Another consoling female interpolation is the sensitive wife of Pontius Pilate, Claudia. Not without justification, the critics of the film have regarded her as symptomatic of

an unhistorical vindication of the Romans at the expense of the Jews. However, the matter is more complicated. In book or film, Pilate's wife Claudia watches Jesus being led through the street in bondage. In the book version, the wife of Roman power appears to be Anna Katharina's sister in dream. For like the visionary nun, Claudia dreams extensively about Jesus' life. Indeed, the visionary nun is said to have had visions of Claudia's visions.²⁶ Claudia is drawn by compassion to the spectacle of Jesus' torment. In book and film, she brings or sends a bundle of cloth so that Jesus' mother can wipe up the blood shed during his scourging.²⁷

In *Das bittere Leiden*, Pilate does not come off quite as well as in the film. He is presented in the book as cowardly, indecisive, opportunistic, and superstitious.²⁸ If in the Gospels Pilate is caught between a rock and a hard place, Gibson makes him a man of good sense and good will. What the *Catholic Guide to the Passion* confirms of the film's Pilate in the *Ecce Homo* scene can be extended to his larger role: "Here we see the vivid contrast between a man who still has a shred of compassion left in his heart set against a seething mob whose appetites for greater spectacle can't be satiated" (43).

In Emmerich-Brentano, Matthew 27:25, the curse of Christ's blood upon the Jews, elicits a vision of evil reverberating upon the accursed.²⁹ Even if this is balanced elsewhere with expressions of compassion for Jews or Lutheran heretics, this is surely Brentano's hand at its heaviest and at its worst. Here especially there is an echo of his involvements in anti-Semitic Romantic circles in Berlin. According to Elon, Brentano is representative of Romantic intellectual influences that stimulated the above mentioned "Hep, Hep!" riots in numerous German cities (101ff.). In all events, Brentano's stylized reflections on the curse are an inversion of the historical events. It seems as if by rioting against Christ the Jews were responsible for persecuting themselves.

The film's horrendous scourging of Jesus is pure Emmerich-Brentano.³⁰ It is an extended scene for which there is nothing more specific than a laconic line in the Gospel of John: "Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged" (19:1). In film or book, there is a non sequitur in this. If Pilate's purpose is to let Jesus off easy, why have him flayed to a bloody pulp? Though the extreme scourging makes no sense in the film and risks coming across as the ultimate sadistic voyeurism, it conforms to what Brentano conveys of Emmerich's ascribing of divine meaning to her painful ailments as suffering on behalf of others. In film and book, Jesus is taken at Pilate's behest to a public place where he is chained to a post, a tall one in the visions and a waist-high one in the film. In either case, brutal and degenerate sadists begin by working Jesus over thoroughly with rods. In a procedure too similar to be coincidental, they go on to use whips resembling cat-o'-nine tails with "hooks" attached.³¹ These rip strips of flesh from Jesus' back. In the book, it is made clear that the tearing off of Jesus' flesh is symbolic of a Protestant Reformation that sundered "flesh" from the ecclesiastical body of Christ.³² The scourged Jesus is

flayed in back and then turned to be flayed just as brutally in front. In film or book, blood splatters the arms of his sadistic tormentors.³³

In a small but technically significant detail, the film differs here from its source: Because Gibson's whipping post is waist-high, Jesus can be whipped until prostrate. He then rises to his feet, causing his tormentors to utter in amazement: "Reddere non potest." It is not possible to come back after that sort of punishment. The movie-going public may well be less likely to take this as a foreshadowing of the triumph of spirit over flesh in the Resurrection than to recognize it from, say, *The Last Samurai*: Tom Cruise, as a captive of samurai warriors, takes a fierce beating only to get back up and fight his opponent to a stand-still. Whether in *The Last Samurai* or in *The Passion of the Christ*, the hero who is beaten to a pulp before making a redemptive comeback is a Hollywood stock-in-trade.

Emmerich-Brentano and Gibson can be gruesomely impressive in capturing the physical details of torment. Preparing to nail Jesus' hands, the soldiers in Emmerich-Brentano bore holes so the nails will not bend or break in the hardwood beam. When they notice they have miscalculated Jesus' arm length, a rope is tied to his wrist to wrench his arm so that his second hand is in place to receive the nail.³⁴ Equally grim and craftsman-like is the manner in which the cross to which Jesus has been nailed is hoisted up till its base is inserted into a reinforced hole, causing his suspended body to receive a final tormenting jolt. This procedure is found in outline in Martin von Cochem, but if we can assume that the invalid Emmerich suffered as reports of her condition indicate, then the gruesome precision of lifting may betoken a contemplation of her pain. If the connection is implicit in the book, it is of course lost in the film. The viewers are given no clue of the framing account of the visionary nun, which might have lent the perspective of the film an honest distance from what it portrays. Instead, a harsh cinematic immediacy claims to be authoritative. By ratcheting up the descriptions with special effects, *The Passion of the Christ* surpasses the evocations of torment in *Das bittere Leiden*. There was no dearth of blood in Emmerich-Brentano, nor in the Catholic tradition that gave rise to it, yet the film's extravagant effects of dripping, splattering, running, and pooling blood owe something to the tradition of the Sam Peckinpah blood-bath Western.

Conclusion

Stripped of figurative symbolism, the details of violence merge with a cinematic verisimilitude that passes itself off as scriptural-historical veracity, a slight of hand that works. It all looks so real. Therefore it must be true. Despite its pretense of biblical fidelity, *The Passion of the Christ* confers legitimacy on a media violence that numbs thought and compassion. The potential to

foment anti-Semitism or other forms of group hatred may derive more from the action-film scenario of good and evil characters than from any Bible passage. The word as thought is degraded by spectacle. Ocean-bound islanders who convert to Christianity may be gratified to witness Bible stories performed in their native idiom and style. Gibson has done as much for the insular tribe of media-bound American Christians: the idiom of the tribe is action, horror, and cruelty.

The film and its Romantic source perpetuate a far older tradition in which sacred authority was characteristically mediated and appropriated. Brentano's exchange with Emmerich re-enacts a medieval monastic constellation in which male scribes served as amanuenses to visionary or ecstatic nuns (Gajek 42–43). Significant relationships also link the medieval to the cinematic. In *Film vor dem Film*, Jörg Jochen Berns argued that the mental processes of cinematic viewing and imagining were anticipated toward the end of the Middle Ages by pictorial mechanisms invented for contemplating the Passion. Berns' examples reproduce the detailed late medieval iconography of scourging.

In comprehensive studies of visionary, mystical, and ascetic testimonies in the Middle Ages, Bernard McGinn, and Peter Dinzelbacher provide evidence suggesting that phenomena of the sort attributed to Emmerich typically arose from the specific needs of groups and individuals to receive or express spiritual affirmations and teachings. An acute need for spiritual authority induced the visionary mystics to proclaim their visions, occasioned Meister Eckhart and Tauler to preach their speculative sermons in German to untutored nuns and lay people eager for instruction, or stimulated devout female ascetics to project their affective life onto a supernatural plane by the experience or simulation of stigmata, afflictions, or erotic ecstasies. Traditionally, it was the spiritual content that elicited the mode of expression.

This traditional dynamic was reversed by the German Romantics poets, who were above all worldly authors. The contingencies of their worldly literary careers led them to appropriate and rework a spiritual content, reversing the older relationship of spirituality to expression. An acute crisis of Brentano's sense of validation as a poet is reflected in his *Geschichte vom braven Kasperl und dem schönen Annerl* of 1817. The poet-narrator feels deep shame for his "pharisaical" profession vis-à-vis the pious old mother-figure in the tale. The poet surmounts his shame by re-christening himself a "writer" and placing himself at her service.³⁵ A comparable crisis of authority catalyzed the troubled author's denial and sanctification of his creativity in playing the humble scribe to the ailing nun. Gibson's *Passion*—with its sanctification of the profane medium by means of a feigned authenticity—merely reveals a more brazen stage of the same worldly dynamic. With its pretentious Latin and Aramaic dialog, *The Passion of the Christ* wants to be viewed both as the unadorned word of God and as a work of uncompromising cutting-edge cinema.

Any satisfaction that we as scholars might derive from demonstrating that the new is after all deeply rooted in the old should not divert us from the unfolding character of the new. If *The Passion*, vying for its box-office victories between *Hellboy* and *Dawn of the Dead*,³⁶ is a sign of the times, Christianity is turning itself over to the entertainment industry to be retooled on its terms. Christian misgivings about the mindless violence of the genre practiced by the director were barely audible. When ancient Roman Christians sought to abolish the bloody Roman games, they presumably did so as much to save the souls of the spectators as to spare the flesh of the gladiators or their prey. In the 21st-century equivalent, the Christian enterprise appears content to affix its logos to the arena and insinuate its ostentatious prayers into the ritual of saluting the emperor as a sanctimonious prelude to the fun of watching the killing. With private altars in every household, the Cineplex complements the spectacle-centered mega-church as the place to experience what passes for sacred mystery.

We need to consider what sort of future is foreshadowed by a blockbuster film as mendacious and lucrative as *The Passion of the Christ*. No tendency is more alarming among Christians, Muslims, or Jews than the trend toward a conflict-prone messianic or apocalyptic mind-set. When it comes to tapping into this powerful source material, the violent action film is more intimately familiar to the public at large than the cosmic plan of destruction laid out in the Book of Revelation. But what could be better than a biblical ingredient for enhancing and dignifying the material? A public trained by thousands of viewing hours knows what comes next when familiar motives flash before it. The holy victimization suffered by Gibson's Christ cries out for its sequel: the return of a kick-ass Warrior Messiah, the avenging superhero familiar to us as Schwarzenegger, as Gibson in *The Patriot* and *Braveheart*, or as Russell Crowe in *The Gladiator*.

We are already advancing into this next, dangerous phase with the politicized Christian apocalyptic of the Left Behind novel series of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Their concluding sequel, *Glorious Appearing*, came out hard on the heels of *The Passion*, delivering the requisite vision of divine vengeance: "Men and women soldiers and horses seemed to explode where they stood. It was as if the very words of the Lord had superheated their blood, causing it to burst through their veins and skin."³⁷ Here is a degradation of the word³⁸ by its self-anointed prophets that ought to stir religious and secular scholars alike to act in its defense. Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* is a warning of our prospects if we continue to allow whatever passes for religious sincerity to exempt public figures from commonplace standards of decency and honesty.

Notes

¹ The personal history of Gibson's devotion to Emmerich was discussed before the release of the film in an interview-based *New Yorker* article by Boyer (70); see also *Guide to the Passion* 85.

² In the Gospels, the denial of Jesus by Peter encloses the report of Jewish violence against Jesus: Matt. 26:58, 69–75; Mark 14:54, 66–72; John 18:15–18, 25–27. Luke reports the denial of Peter before the violence, but the two seem to coincide in time.

³ Gajek 32, 39–40; Frühwald 255; Br 27,2:331.

⁴ Br 26:136; DP 117.

⁵ Wills refers to “an anti-Semitic Bavarian nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich”; Fredriksen to “a stigmatic nun whose visions enunciated an anti-Semitism typical of her time” (I am grateful to Prof. Fredriksen for referring me to her source, an article by Cunningham that refers to Schmöger.)

⁶ See Nienhaus 182–203; cf. Elon, who sees Brentano's celebrated speech against the type of the “Philister” as a continuation of Achim von Arnim's anti-Semitism and as consonant with the reaction against the Enlightenment (100).

⁷ The Catholic investigator in the canonization trial, Father Winfried Hümpfner was at pains to disavow Brentano's depiction of Emmerich's childhood gifts of imagination: “Von krankhafter Phantasie oder eingebildeter Prätension war keine Spur” (1). This accords with the requirements of sainthood that any visions or miracles must come from God. Niessen observed that “[d]ie Frage nach der Authentie der Wiedergabe der Visionen hängt auch ganz besonders mit der Frage nach dem moralischen Werte, dem Charakter des Clemens Brentano zusammen” (134). Woodward summarizes Brentano's negative impact on Emmerich's failed canonization trial (178–84).

⁸ Br 28,1:247, 267.

⁹ Weeks 39ff., 60, 63, 64, 72, 95, 96; see also Dinzelbacher and McGinn cited below.

¹⁰ Br 28,1:247, 289–90, 267, 381–82.

¹¹ Br 28,1:251, 258, 161–62.

¹² Br 26:246–47 (“Jesus zitterte und bebte vor der Säule, er zog seine Kleider selbst ... aus ... und sagte, sich zu der Säule kehrend, um seine Blöße durch dieselbe zu bedecken, indem er nun auch die Binde seines Unterleibes lösen mußte: ‘wende deine Augen von mir.’ ... ich vernahm, wie Maria es vernahm; denn ich sah sie in demselben Augenblicke bewußtlos und abgewendet in die Arme der sie umgebenden verschleierte heiligen Frauen sinken.”); cf. Br 26: 191, 202. The translation (DP 219) edits out the final gesture of stripping and turning away and thereby eliminates the potentially erotic frisson of Mary's swoon (“he turned his face once towards his Mother, who was standing overcome with grief; this look [!] quite unnerved her: she fainted ...”), cf. DP 166, 176.

¹³ Frühwald 257–62; Schultz 191.

¹⁴ See van Dülmen 138, 304.

¹⁵ Hümpfner approvingly quotes a fellow Catholic's revulsion in response to the lecherous spirit expressed in post-conversion writings from Brentano's literary estate: “Bezüglich der leidenschaftlichen Briefe und Lieder Brentanos an Luise Hensel sagt Diel-Kreiten: ‘Es ist eigentlich eine traurige, beängstigende Lesung, wenn man die vielen Seiten aufgeregtester Leidenschaft, oft an das Überschwängliche streifender Phantastik, jener *ungesunden Verquickung des religiösen und erotischen Momentes* durchgehen muß, und das Alter des Dichters dabei bedenkt, das nicht mehr zu jenen jugend-

lich aufbrausenden Ergüssen zu passen scheint.' 'Jetzt war das wahrhaft religiöse Element in den Gefühlen Brentanos leider zu stark überwuchert von der irdischen Liebe.' Er wäre deshalb abermals imstande gewesen, seinen Glauben der Liebe zu opfern" (11, emphasis in original).

¹⁶ Brentano's introduction to the German original solemnly renounces any special claim to historical accuracy among all similar fruits of contemplative devotion to Jesus.

¹⁷ Br 26:72; DP 66.

¹⁸ Br 26:82; DP 72.

¹⁹ Dülmen 201; cf. Nienhaus 23, 44ff., 55–56.

²⁰ Br 26:92ff., cf. 134; DP 82ff., cf. 115.

²¹ Br 26:98; DP 87.

²² Br 26:114–15; DP 99.

²³ Br 26:157; DP 136.

²⁴ See note 2.

²⁵ Br 26:200; DP 174.

²⁶ Br 26:229; DP 202–03.

²⁷ Br 26:253; DP 224–25.

²⁸ Br 26:223; DP 197.

²⁹ Br 26:273ff.; DP 239ff.

³⁰ Br 26:245ff.; DP 217ff.

³¹ Br 26:246, 249; DP 219, 221.

³² Br 26:136; DP 117.

³³ Br 26:249; DP 221.

³⁴ Br 26:318; DP 270–71.

³⁵ In the "Tale," published two years before he joined Emmerich, Brentano's poet-narrator is ashamed of his profession: "It is strange that a German always feels a little embarrassed to say that he is a poet. One says it least willingly to people from the lower classes for these are liable to associate this with the scribes and pharisees in the Bible. . . . All people who do not live by the sweat of their brow must to some extent be ashamed, and that is felt by one who has not yet found himself in trouble, when forced to admit he is a poet" ("Tale" 136–37). After his lengthy peroration on the poet's lack of respectability in response to the pious old woman's innocent question about his profession, the poet arrives at the following solution, anticipating Brentano's sly exchange of roles to that of a scribe at Emmerich's bedside: "Then it suddenly occurred to me how I could bridge the gap of comprehension between us: 'Dear mother,' I said, 'I am a writer'" (137).

³⁶ Anne Thompson gave this revealing account of the early success of the film: "*The Passion* held the No. 1 position at the box office for three weeks, then dipped when *Dawn of the Dead* knocked it out of first position. Now in its seventh week, *The Passion* beat out last weekend's No. 1 movie, comic-book action-adventure *Hellboy*, which dropped 52 percent to \$11.1 million...."

³⁷ Cited from Kirkpatrick.

³⁸ I am indebted to James Van Der Laan for calling my attention to a Christian discussion of "the humiliation of the word." See Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

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