

Scandalous Displacements: “Word” and “Silent Light” in *Irma Voth*

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Nowhere does meaning ever belong to anyone. Meaning is not *in* the image, nor in a place, no more than any one of us occupies a place that can truly be ours. Life is only an uninterrupted displacement, an unceasing game of displacements between sites where nothing can reside, settle, find comfortable rest, a sleep of the spirit, but where the word produces, despite everything, hospitality, a temporary address. We are exiled from our first cry on, separated from our land of birth.”

- Marie-José Mondzain¹

My task in this essay is to perform a magic trick, something miraculous. I’m going to turn Miriam Toews into a theologian. Actually, let’s just call it a scandalous displacement and, I shall argue, this is not really trick of magic but an account of Toews’s novel *Irma Voth* as a performative poetic act of incarnation following the logic of the logos displayed in the prologue of the Gospel of John: “the Word became flesh and tented [*eskenosen*] among us.”² This word through which all things were and are made – let’s call it “*poiesis*”³ – is also named “light” and indeed “life itself” and when it becomes human flesh, the theologian John tells us, it becomes the image of God that speaks with messianic

authority, with creative power, the power to give birth to the word in all shared flesh – “eternal life” John calls it.⁴ That same prologue also suggests that this becoming is a scandalous failure in the world: “he came to his own, and his own received him not” (1:11). Yet John’s Gospel displays this scandalous failure as itself salvific for the world in the word: “abide in love” (15:9; cf. 13:34-5; 17:20-26). Or as the first letter of John puts it, “We know we have passed over from death to life, because we love . . . Whoever does not love remains dead” (3:14). This is a vision to which Miriam Toews’s novel also bears witness.

Irma Voth (2011) is set among the Mennonites of Mexico, where Toews herself went to act in Carlos Reygadas’s 2007 film *Stellet Licht* [“Silent Light”], which is set in a *plautdietsch*-speaking Mennonite colony but that Reygadas himself has called a kind of homage to the famous 1955 film of Carl Dreyer, *Ordet* [“The Word”]. I want to suggest that these artistic works are bound together in a figural relation to the Gospel of John’s sacramental hymn to the incarnation that focuses on the scandalous revelation of messianic authority. And John’s Gospel is itself figurally related to the whole of Scripture and beyond that to the cosmic (which simply means “worldly”) revelation of the poetics of creation John claims to see and to follow in Jesus. And here we may remind ourselves that the Radical Reformers, the early Mennonites, preferred the Gospel of John and in fact a vision of salvation as rebirth into the restoration of the divine image, a process that could be called divinization or deification, the human participation in the divine nature.⁵ This vision of salvation as deification constitutes an ontological scandal rooted in failure that binds the fleshly body of Christ to life, light, truth itself: the “bride of Christ,” begotten of the seed of the divine Word, becomes a literal extension of the incarnation – “flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone.”⁶ There is a mystical materialism within Anabaptist and Mennonite theology that may be recovered only figurally, but it will also require the overcoming of dead patriarchal religion. That is a large claim, to be sure, but in a very particular way I am arguing that this is the scandalous theological displacement witnessed to in Toews’s novel and it is faithful to the poetics of John’s Gospel.

By “figural” I mean that form of imagination and interpretation whereby two everyday events or persons are related, as Erich Auerbach puts it, via a spiritual act that deals with these events experientially rather than via conceptual abstraction.⁷ In terms related to Johannine incarnation, it entails the recognition of the spiritual depth of reality in everyday life: the Word made flesh, the

eternal entering and revealed in time. The figural seeks to portray “the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life [....] What we see here is a world which on the one hand is entirely real, average, identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances, but which on the other hand is shaken to its very foundations, is transforming and renewing itself before our eyes.”⁸ That is, temporal life participates in and bears witness to the eternal for its meaning, a meaning that requires spiritual attention and imitation if it is to be understood.⁹

Let me begin with the Johannine imagery of “word” and “light” in the two films. In Dreyer’s *Ordet* (Danish for “The Word,” 1955), two feuding patriarchs, Morten and Peter, try to order their families under the control of their own differing doctrinal visions of true Christian faith, and thus prevent the desired love marriage of their youngest children.¹⁰ They are caught up in possessive forms of religious belief and are unable to love. They dwell in death and (like Morten’s liberal pastor and the scientifically “enlightened” doctor) they do not believe in miracles. While Johannes, the “mad” middle son of Morten, tries to speak the word of Christ to this despairing situation, Inger – the wife of Morten’s oldest son Mikkel, who has no patience with Christian faith – effectively mediates the miracle of life-giving love that overcomes dead patriarchal faith. But she does it through death, and the miracle is actually made possible through the faith of Inger’s young daughter Maren, who tells Johannes (prior to the miracle) that she prefers to have a living mother on earth than to possess religiously a dead mother who watches over her eternally in heaven. It is the living faith of the daughter that eventually gives Johannes the power to speak the words of miraculous rebirth. But first he must die to the zombie-like literal preaching of a “mad,” judging Christ so as to inhabit more truly the image of God in the flesh, with clear eyes and a normal, sane voice.

When Inger dies in childbirth, her husband Mikkel stops the clock, displaying the cruel interruption of ordinary time. Upon her miraculous resurrection Inger’s first question is: “The child? Is it alive?” Mikkel, who has earlier bitterly lamented the fact that his aborted baby boy (the long-awaited patriarchal son) lies in four pieces in a tub in an attempt to save the mother’s life, now joyfully claims, “Yes, Inger. It is alive. It lives with God. . . . I have found your faith. Now life is beginning for us.” But is this Inger’s (or her daughter Maren’s) faith? The clock is started again, and Inger repeats the word “Life” three times, but she does not look happy. She has in fact not been resurrected. At most, as Johannes has

earlier indicated (“she is not dead, she is sleeping,” repeating the words of John 11:11), this is a Lazarus type of miracle – a resuscitation back to the restlessness of tragic time of dead babies and as yet unredeemed mortality, the daily struggle to abide in love. What or where, then, is the Word? In the words of the Johannine Christ: “my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27). The love that abides must also learn repeatedly to die; it cannot find rest in visible miracles. In John 12, Jesus tells “the world” that flocks after him when they hear about his raising of Lazarus: “Truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12:24). The glory of resurrection that “draws all,” says Jesus (12:32) is related to a love willing to die in the world so as to bear non-violent witness to the light, a light tied to eternal life – which remains in this world a hoped for miracle, the completion of love.¹¹ Mikkel’s overwhelming desire for his wife, Maren’s for a living mother, and Inger’s for a living child all face the continuing challenge of how to love dispossessively in a tragic world marked by death, warring religious “enemies,” and clashing socio-economic differences.¹²

Reygadas’s film *Silent Light* is an ode to *Ordet* in which Miriam Toews plays the Mennonite character Esther that most closely resembles Inger, but in *Silent Light* it’s her philandering husband whose name is Johan, a man helpless to resolve the tension between traditional Mennonite family fidelity and the siren song of the world (though his worldly lover is also a Mennonite named Marianne). This tension is resolved for him by the scandalous gift offered and mediated by the adulterous Marianne that displaces (and possibly also overcomes?) the conventions of both church and world. But if “Word” is central in *Ordet*, light, and moreover *silent* “Light” is central in Reygadas’s film. In fact the spoken word is so unimportant for him that the film has a Low German soundtrack dialogue that is sure to be understood by almost no one except the traditional Mennonites who eschew worldly cinema and therefore will not hear it. In an interview, Reygadas acknowledges the connection between *Silent Light* and *Ordet* but says “the films are about two totally different things. *Ordet* is about a miracle, and this film is about love.”¹³ This of course shows a poetic inattention to the complex Johannine resonances between the two. In the same interview he suggests that the idea of bringing Esther back from the dead in a resurrection scene “was coming from *Ordet*, though it was also coming from *Sleeping Beauty*.” Perhaps this just means that Reygadas, unlike Dreyer, isn’t intentionally making iconic (which is to say theological) films. But we’ve already seen that

Ordet isn't really about resurrection but rather about the relations between incarnation, love, death and living life.

In contrast to the Johannine poetics of love in the "word becoming flesh," *Silent Light* could be read more as a Jungian archetypal depiction of the complexities of desire, fidelity, adultery, forgiveness and the light and shadow sides of love. When Johan stops the clock (at the very beginning of the film) it might very well represent the threshold between reality and fantasy, or waking and dreaming. And the film itself encourages this ambiguity in its lengthy, lovely opening and closing shots of daybreak and sunset compressed in time – as if representing the beginning and ending of a single day or dream, even though whole seasons pass by in the film itself. The archetypal is never susceptible to the more figural movement of "the word made flesh" even while the complex emotional feelings of the forbidden love triangle are graphically and wrenchingly displayed, showing in effect that the apocalyptic tensions of earthly love are beyond human control. This is religiously represented in the exchange between Johan and his father, when Johan confesses his obsession with Marianne: is Johan's desire, as his father suggests, "the work of the Enemy" or is it, as Johan puts it, "God's doing"? Clearly the anxious tensions of desire, between illicit lust and the fidelity of love, go beyond mere ethical dilemmas.

In Reygadas's film, it is Johan's lover Marianne who mediates the miracle, which may scandalize both the church and the world – but wherein lies the scandal? Marianne self-effacingly suggests after their intimate sex scene that Johan should return to his wife Esther, saying "peace (*Fraed/Friede*) is more important than love." Of course, despite his stated belief that such peace will bring happiness (*Freid/Freude*), that doesn't work for Johan (or Marianne), and his wife's heart breaks (her "ticker" stops¹⁴) when he later tells her that he hasn't been able to stay away from his lover. At Esther's funeral, Johan's father tells him that his dead wife is "at peace now," but the lover comes and awakens Esther with a highly erotic kiss, and a final highly sentimental tear.¹⁵ Such mythical filmmaking is not attuned to Johannine incarnation (Niels Niessen cogently calls it "miraculous realism"¹⁶) and despite the scandalous resurrection scene with the lover mediating the miracle to the wife, it could end up supporting a phallogocentric moralism: proper love finds its rest (*Fraed/Friede*) in a restored patriarchal family supported by a patriarchal church that overcomes the world of sinful desire through dead religion. Marianne's final words to the resuscitated Esther are "Johan can now be at peace." Of course the ending of the film may be more

ambiguous, and may furthermore not represent Reygadas's intentions, and I hope some of the differences between *Silent Light* and *Irma Voth* become clearer in what follows. But let me say for now that the problem of the (Mennonite) images in the film is that they are not "lived" but rather abstract "props" for a "miraculous realism," which might also be seen as an isolated erotic and artistic male fantasy.

The novel *Irma Voth*, by contrast to Reygadas's *Silent Light*, is attuned to the more scandalous displacements entailed in the logic/logos of incarnation, in Johannine senses of both word and light. Marie-José Mondzain rightly calls this figural logic iconic (rather than symbolic or typological):

To become incarnated [*s'incarner*] is to become image [*eikon*]. To become image is thus to take on flesh. When the Word [*le Verbe*] was made flesh, it became image, not body. Therefore every image will celebrate the presence of a word [*parole*] in the absence of a body. A complex and powerful response, since henceforth [after the Word was made flesh] all makers of images will give their flesh to the Word [*le Verbe*]. Otherwise, they will give bodies to idols and make the visible fall back into a silence without redemption and without sharing. The Passion is the story of the redemption of the visible by the sacrifice of a body that consents to die so that the image may be resuscitated, thus the flesh of the word [*parole*].¹⁷

As body (or "prop" for an archetype) the Word becomes a possessive idol, substitutable by the church as body politic that functions as a dictator, producing "programmatically visible messages made to communicate a univocal message," establishing a tyrannical "empire over emotions."¹⁸ The church, in other words, can become the world, as Kierkegaard puts it, by making "God's Word into something impersonal, objective, a doctrine—instead of its being the voice of God that you shall hear."¹⁹ Kierkegaard makes this comment in a lengthy meditation on what it would mean to see oneself truly in the mirror of the Word (James 1:22-27) - hence it is also "light" (a mirror that Paul calls "enigmatic" in his famous ode to Love, I Cor. 13:12). "Incarnation," we could say, is the enigmatic site of the visible intersected by the invisibility of the Word. It is dispossessive of visibility for the sake of shared vision that is also a "doing," an enacted verb, a model of renunciation for the sake of living life, an "abiding in love," not the preservation of a doctrine or of a silent idealized image. *Irma Voth*, early in the novel, prays, "God . . . help me to live" (21), and I'm interested in the figural echoes of "word" and "light" (both central in Toews's novel) in relation to scandalous Johannine reversals of life and death

positioned in contemporary relation to what Irma calls the “Mennonite motto” taken from James 4:4: “Whosoever will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”²⁰

The conflict between the worldly world and the godly world in the novel is displayed for Irma by two dominating men – the filmmaker Diego, who has hired her as a translator, and her father, an abuser of his daughters and indeed a murderer, but who (when he’s not yelling) is always praying and quoting Scripture as the religious patriarch. Diego lives for his art, which he above all understands in terms of emotion – he hates narrative and he hates actors, he says (26), who remain “props” for his purely emotional truth (243, 120). He will do anything, including lying brazenly and as often as needed, for the truth of that art.²¹ Irma’s father, by contrast, calls art a lie, and he says that films are “like beautiful cakes, filled with shit” (17-18, cf. 192).²² But he also tells lies about his daughters and in particular about what Irma “believes” about God, the afterlife, imagination and “real life.”²³ Needless to say, Diego and Irma’s father don’t get along, and Irma states: “Arguments between two visionaries are long, I learned. One of these men will be dead soon, I thought” (117).

Irma displays her figural imagination rooted in the word made flesh when she calls Diego’s movie a “song,” saying “I had nothing to else to compare it to, I guess, besides the Bible.” (237f.)²⁴ She doesn’t understand what the movie is “really about,” she says, but has a powerful emotional response to what is displayed, namely, “souls communicating with souls”: “It was like watching my own life. It was a pathway into myself” (239). This leads her toward a penitential confession, a new beginning that also potentially overcomes the worldly lies of patriarchal religion, which lead to death. Irma’s early prayer “help me to live” is accompanied by the question she poses to herself: “How do I behave in this world without following the directions of my father, my husband or God?” (21; cf. 43) It is related to the question the artist filmmaker Diego has asked her: “Do you feel that we can rebel against our oppressors without losing our love, our tolerance and our ability to forgive?” (26). The question of truth and lie in the novel not only concern the status of worldly art or religious belief, since the Mennonite father who calls art a lie has moved his whole family to Mexico because of a lie and it is the lie that causes Irma to feel dead. The question of truth and lie has to do with the meaning of life itself and is related to the claim in I John 3:14: “we know that we have passed over from death to life by the fact that we love....”

It takes the whole of the novel for Irma to come back to this question of what it means to live, and it begins with a penitential

prayer for rebirth after seeing the film and recognizing her complicity in the lies that have caused her to feel dead (246f.). She reassesses the Epicurean cure for living life “on life’s terms” prescribed by the woman who plays the role of Marianne in the film: “Don’t fear God. Don’t worry about death. What is good is easy to get, and what is terrible is easy to endure” (38).²⁵ In fact, says Irma, that’s a lie: “What’s terrible is not easy to endure and what’s good is not easy to get” (247). A different light is required, the light of penitential love, a contrite loving heart. That light, however, cannot be mediated by the priest in a confession booth, even if he calls Irma “my daughter” (250). Irma has to come to this realization within herself in another way. She returns to the notebook Diego has given her to keep a diary, along with a pen that lights up (“word” and “light,” 43), and to the first words she wrote there: “YOU MUST BE PREPARED TO DIE!” (advice from Diego about film-making). She realizes she now knows the answer to her own question, the question she has earlier posed to Wilson, her friend, and with whom she has exchanged secrets of the heart about what it might mean to die (91-93), an exchange very different from Diego’s preaching about art: “If this was the last day of your life what kind of story would you write?” (251). She scratches out the word DIE and writes LIVE, and then scratches it all out and starts again.

This time she hears her mother’s whispered voice²⁶ in her memory: “Irma, just begin” (16, 168, 253), and she exclaims prayerfully:

I want to be forgiven. I want to be forgiven for causing the deaths of so many people I’ve loved. . . . I want to be forgiven by the people I love. Wilson told me that art is redemptive. My father told me that art is a lie. I can’t forgive myself but I can forgive my father. And my hope is that we’ll both be brought back to life. (253)

In the beginning is the Word that speaks creation into existence and through whom all things are made, brought into being – that word that is life itself that is also the light of human beings. The question remains: how to be reborn into that life, that light, so as to live? At the end of the novel we have a retelling of the story of the wandering prodigal, Irma, who is coming home; the one who waits, “leaning against the fence like she’d been out there a long time, weeks, maybe months, just waiting for me to show up” is her mother. The waiting mother.²⁷ When she sees Irma the mother begins to run:

She was running and laughing. She was running and laughing! And then we were hugging each other so hard, my God, she was strong. She wouldn't let me go. My brothers joined us in this wild, joyful embrace and then I saw my father coming out of the house, using his hand to shade the sun from his eyes, and he also came towards us, not running and laughing but walking firmly and steadily. (254)

In conclusion I wish to reflect on the figural meaning of this concluding reference in the novel to the “return of the prodigal daughter,” or “the waiting mother,” as it lies at the heart of the scandalous displacement to which the novel bears theological witness. Of course, the first thing to be said is that this scene is not the very end of the novel. It is Irma's *imagined* ending, and whether it is true or can be *made true* (the basis of a shared flesh) or not remains an open question. What it is truly, poetically, is the song of a daughter, her sisters and their mother in which the word of life becomes flesh in them – perhaps also in a becoming to which the brothers and the dead father may be joined in a wild, joyful embrace. It displaces the patriarchal Father by showing the gendered idolatry of this vision of God and of divine love mediated in a patriarchal Church whose male priests have lost the existential poetics of incarnation: “For God so loved the world . . . For God sent the son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved” (John 3:16-17). In Henri Nouwen's meditation on Rembrandt's painting of “the Return of the Prodigal Son,” he reflects on the maternal images of the waiting father that figure or “call forth” divine maternal love “marked by grief, desire, hope, and endless waiting.”²⁸ In Irma's vision the father is displaced by the waiting, loving mother who celebrates the return of her daughter who was dead and is alive again. Indeed, Irma's father is imagined as the “elder brother” of the parable, governed by anger, fear, resentment and holding fast to a dogged doctrinal obedience even as he longs to love and be loved in a dance of celebration, to rejoice in the rebirth into life of one who was dead, which might also include him. It is the promise of a non-magical and yet iconic incarnational realism. This is a scandalous birth of the word that can only be heard once the dead idols of patriarchal religion have been destroyed so that all images may be liberated in the shared mortal flesh of the loved world.²⁹ Such a song is one that a Mennonite theology of incarnation needs to hear in order to live again, perhaps in the poetic words of one of our worldly witnesses. So, as Irma's mom says, “just begin.”

Notes

- 1 Marie-José Mondzain, "Tarkovsky: Embodying the Screen." Trans. Annabel Kim. *Byzantium/Modernism: The Byzantine as Method in Modernity*. Ed. Roland Betancourt & Maria Taroutina. Leiden: Brill, 2015. 262.
- 2 My translation, related to the similar Greek terms in 2 Cor. 5:1-4; Heb. 8:3; Rev. 21:3; cf. also the relation of "tent" and divine "glory" in Ex. 33:7f.
- 3 The language of "making" all things through the Logos in John 1:3 is tied to the verbal form of "genesis," to "bring into being" via divine speech. *Poiesis* is the Greek word for this in the Platonic tradition, appropriated in early Christianity to relate human making via imitation of the divine word made flesh in Christ. This essay is an attempt to extend the poetics of this relation to Mennonite literature and theology.
- 4 E.g. John 3:16, 36; 5:24-26; 10:28. For an excellent discussion of the Johannine symbolism of light and life as related to the meaning of *logos* (word), see C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), especially Part II. Dodd states: "The Logos is the *topos* of the archetypal life and light; they are (as we might say) aspects of the Logos . . ." (203; cf. 351)
- 5 See Alvin J. Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop, NL: De Graaf, 1977).
- 6 For examples in Menno Simons, see *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J.C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 59, 146, 402, 439. See also Beth Kreitzer, "Menno Simons and the Bride of Christ," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 70.3 (July 1996): 299-318.
- 7 Auerbach states: "The two poles of a figure are separated in time . . . and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a spiritual act." *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton University Press, 1953), 73.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 9 This view is compatible with Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of the "unfinalizability" of the living Word that echoes in Dostoevsky's (and indeed all) dialogical art. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 97f. That Bakhtin's literary approach is itself rooted in the Johannine theology, and the incarnational theology present in Byzantine and Russian Orthodox traditions, is shown in Alexander Mihailovic, *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), and Charles Lock, "Carnival and Incarnation: Bakhtin and Orthodox Theology," in *Critical Essays on Mikhail Bakhtin*, ed. Caryl Emerson (New York: G.K. Hall, 1999).
- 10 My reading of *Ordet* is indebted to David Penner, "Daughters on Crosses in *Ordet*," unpublished lecture.
- 11 It is no accident that John 12:24 is the epigraph to Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. For a reflection on the poetics of the epigraph in that novel, see Travis Kroeker and Bruce Ward, *Remembering the End: Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (London: SCM Press, 2002), chapter 6.
- 12 The perfection or "completion" (*teleios*) of love in Jesus's sermon on the mount (in imitation of the "heavenly Father") is love of enemies (Matt. 5:43-48) and selling "what you possess and give to the poor" (Matt. 19:21).
- 13 Jose Teodoro, "Silent Light: an Interview with Carlos Reygadas," *Cineaste Magazine* (Spring 2009). See also the suggestive comparative interpretation

- by Ian Tan, "Death, time and the possibilities of renewal in Carlos Reygadas' *Silent Light* and Carl T. Dreyer's *Ordet*," *Off-Screen* 20.4 (April 2016).
- ¹⁴ The Mennonite doctor who tells Johan that Esther has suffered a heart attack can't give him an answer about "why," as medical science still hasn't discovered all the possible causes of "heart failure." This echoes the exchange in *Ordet* between the doctor ("I believe in the miracles my science has taught me") and the "new" liberal pastor ("miracles no longer happen" because "they would break the laws of nature").
- ¹⁵ Or perhaps the tear (and whose tears they are is ambiguous) represent both women's sorrow, for different reasons, at Esther being brought back to that dead life? That would make it a more authentic homage to Dreyer, but Esther's line, "Poor Johan," which precedes Marianne's "Johan can now be at rest" leaves it ambiguous.
- ¹⁶ Niels Niessen, "Miraculous Realism: Spinoza, Deleuze, and Carlos Reygadas's *Stellet Licht*," *Discourse* 33.1 (Winter 2011): 27-54. Of course the whole film, from the stopping of the clock by Johan to his father starting it again when Esther "wakes up," could simply be Johan's male fantasy. I will return to this in the conclusion.
- ¹⁷ Mondzain, "Tarkovski: incarner a l'ecran," p. 107 (my translation; English version, "Tarkovsky: Embodying the Screen," p. 259). See also Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses (Stanford University Press, 2005).
- ¹⁸ Mondzain, Marie-José. "Can Images Kill?" *Critical Inquiry* 36.1 (Autumn 2009), p. 32. The Reformation, she avers, "could only denounce the betrayal of the incarnation in the cult of idolatrous visibilities that were the basis of institutional incorporation" and yet, even the Radical Reformation can lapse into new idolatries and produce authoritarians such as "The Mouth" in Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*. Consequently, states Mondzain, "Artistic practice broke with the Church in order to remain faithful to the incarnation of the invisible" (30).
- ¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 39. We might recall Mikkel's comment that what made Johannes go insane was reading too much Kierkegaard, but it may be more accurate to say reading Kierkegaard "truly" in relation to the mirror of the Word makes possible Johannes's transition ("rebirth") from the "insane" man who thinks he is Christ to the truly incarnate one who with the child performs the miracle but now not in his own name: "Give me the word. The word that can return the dead to life."
- ²⁰ Miriam Toews, *Irma Voth* (Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2011), p. 12. Page numbers to the novel will appear in parentheses in the body of the essay.
- ²¹ His name in the novel also conjures the famous Mexican mural painter, Diego Rivera, who also shows up in the novel, his art generating powerful emotion in Irma's sister Aggie (172-3)—interestingly (tellingly?) his equally famous artist wife, Frida Kahlo (whom Diego treated abusively), doesn't appear in the novel. Instead, readers are given the childlike art of the non-famous Aggie.

- ²² The father is especially unable to love his daughters, trying to force them into his mold through corporeal discipline and even accidentally killing the eldest who tries to run away. On his views on art, see 18, 192, 253.
- ²³ “Dad says you believe in God but not an afterlife, said Aggie. He says that’s impossible. That’s not remotely accurate, I told her. I never said that.” (18) “Dad said you love your imagination more than real life, said Aggie. What? I said. That’s not true!” (112)
- ²⁴ She also calls it “like a dream” (cf. 51-3, 91-3) and “like dying, but in a beautiful way” (239). There are many other songs too, “worldly” and “religious” (88, 93, 95, 138, 152).
- ²⁵ Cf. 98 on Epicurean cosmology: “random patterns of atoms flying around and forever on the move.”
- ²⁶ In contrast to her father’s whispering in her ear, “Art is a lie,” Irma’s mother says (while “moving her hand in a slow circle around my back the way the earth orbits the sun”), “Love is not selfish” (192). The mother also inspires Irma’s figural imagination: “The world seemed spectacular and beautiful and calm, like the sacred heart of Jesus, as my mother would have said. The world we were leaving, that is. But I guess that’s how the world works. How it sucks you in by being all beautiful just when you’re ready to leave” (145).
- ²⁷ See also the lovely passage on the “exquisite patience” of the waiting jacaranda tree that “waited and waited and waited, barren, ignored, unexceptional, until a certain day in spring when it would erupt joyfully and comically into life.” This figural revelation is mediated to Irma by Natalie who “mothers” her in Mexico city: “If the tree could wait all year for a relatively brief moment of beauty, said Natalie, and continue to stay alive for centuries, then so could I. You’ll stay alive for centuries? I said. I’ll stay alive, said Natalie. I’m a pupil of the jacaranda tree.” (194)
- ²⁸ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 102.
- ²⁹ Austin Farrer says “The rejection of idolatry meant not the destruction but the liberation of images.” *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John’s Apocalypse* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 14.