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POLITICAL THEOLOGY: SACRED FLESH AND SOCIAL FORM

Eric Santner's exploration of the vicissitudes of the "flesh" in modernity in *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* insists at every point on the continued uncanny vitality of theological forms of life in the collective fantasies of the nation-state. Santner argues that the "sublime somatic materiality" that ostensibly once resided in the body of the king (per Kantorowicz's classic account in *The King's Two Bodies*,¹ a study whose continued relevance Santner brilliantly demonstrates) has passed into a multitudinous body of "the People" (4). Santner glosses the Italian biopolitical philosopher Roberto Esposito to characterize the theology of this passage as a "reimagined messianism" that strives "to proliferate and elaborate the carnal materiality" of a "surplus immanence" (30-31). Santner's inquiry seeks the "link" between the semantic and somatic excess embodied in the "flesh" and "the 'multitude' ... a link to some extent already inscribed in the semantic oscillations of the word *mass*" (30). The "semantic oscillations" that Santner seeks to trace are those that allow "mass" to signify at one moment, the lump or clot of inorganic matter or organic "creaturely" substance, at the next, the life of the nation, the general body of people as a form of life or "body politic." At the risk of some etymological violence (for the terms are differently derived in English), I want to play upon another linguistic coincidence: Santner's work is most powerful where it urges us to recognize the remains of the "Mass" (the liturgy of incarnation) at the heart of the social and political forms which constitute the modern "mass" or multitude.² In recognizing this further "oscillation," I want to suggest that the

¹ Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

² Cf. "mass, n. 1a.": "The liturgical celebration of the Eucharist; the Eucharistic service" derived from "post-classical Latin *missa* 'dismissal, prayer at the conclusion of a liturgy, liturgy, mass', use as noun of feminine of classical Latin *missus* , past participle of *mittere* to release, dismiss" and "mass n. 2.": "Etymology: < Anglo-Norman and Middle French, French *masse* (11th cent. in Old French; in Anglo-Norman also in form *mace*) and their etymon classical Latin *massa* lump, bulk, parcel of land, dough (in post-classical Latin also 'mass of people', 'estate', both from the late 4th cent.)" *Oxford English Dictionary*. Third edition, December 2000; online version March 2012. <<http://www.oed.com/>>; accessed 21 April 2012.

rhythm of the passage of the “flesh” from singular to collective bodies that Santner claims to be the hallmark of modernity is actually something much older, at least as old as Christianity itself. The “surplus immanence” of the flesh amounts to a displaced version of Christian incarnation articulated in the Pauline paradox of the “mystical body” of the Church. Santner’s study challenges us to make a broader inquiry into theological forms as social forms, in which each form is understood as the condition of possibility of the other.

While the final literary example in his study, Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, might seem to be developed in only a preliminary suggestive fashion, the title’s allusion to “the Endgames of Sovereignty” suggests that it has an emblematic significance as a microcosm of Santner’s larger argument. Santner discerns a political theological “afterlife” inscribed in the names of the chief figures of Beckett’s: Hamm and Clov reveal a “play haunted by the dimension of the flesh evoked by the ‘dish’ the two main characters embody through their names—ham with cloves—a meal typically served on the holiday marking the birth and death of Christ” (252), not to mention Easter. The primary liturgical festivals of Christian incarnation are found to be integral to Beckett’s absurdist dramatic universe. More ominously, Clov is also an anagram of “Volk” and thus the emblem of the worst nightmare of modern biopolitical violence, “the name of the new bearer of sovereignty in modernity” (252). Somewhere between Thomas à Becket and Samuel Beckett, Santner deciphers how the idioms of the ideology of race and nation of the twentieth century are travesties of the more ancient paradigms of an incarnational theology. In this deciphering, Santner forestalls the blandishments of those accounts of secular modernity, which misidentify its form and content with a thorough, supposedly liberating disenchantment of the world, a pragmatic dissolution of structures that channel the interpenetration of immanence and transcendence into useful fictions. His account emphasizes the varied ways in which trans-subjective collective fantasies bind modern communities and continue to animate social life with a crypto-theological vitality, beyond the conscious will of purportedly rational, secular agents.

The unifying thread of the book and its most compelling argument lies in Santner’s contention that biopolitical modernity is inaugurated by the passage of the king’s “flesh”—the “surplus of immanence that oscillates between the sublime and the abject” (81), the substance of the second, “mystical” body of the sovereign—into the “people.” However, as I have shown elsewhere, a closer reading of Kantorowicz’s sources reveals that when the mystical body imaginatively passes into the people in modernity, it is actually returning in a new way, to an earlier form.³ This is because the “mystical body” was originally

³ My argument is based on careful reading of a crucial source to which Kantorowicz is deeply indebted but also, on some levels, deeply misapprehends: Henri Cardinal de Lubac S.J., *Corpus Mysticum: L’Eucharistie et l’Église au Moyen Age* (Paris: Aubier, 1949); English translation, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds CJ, with Richard Price and Christopher Stephens, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). See my article, “Political Theologies of the *Corpus Mysticum*: Schmitt, Kantorowicz and de Lubac,” *Political Theology and Early Modernity*, ed.

confected in the incarnational liturgy of the Mass, a ritual in which Christ's body was made present in and through the sacrament understood precisely as a form of social bond. In the pre-modern Mass, the "people" (the laity as much as the clergy) constitute the Body of Christ as a mystical body; in their immanent participation in the ritual, they are infused with the "sublime" substance of the divine made flesh. Kantorowicz's work is crucial for capturing the dynamic through which this liturgically generated social flesh is gradually appropriated by the singular sovereign, to be refashioned into the King's second body. But even as this transaction, which dignified the absolute sovereign, was occurring throughout Western Europe, the liturgical mystical body was also already mutating into popular proto-nationalist forms. These are witnessed by post-Reformation martyrologies, for example, long before the French Revolution, which represents the "violent primal scene" (51) of the "modern reorganization of the 'physiology' of the body politic" (89) in Santner's study.⁴ Santner has admirably documented modern iterations of this phenomenon that still shape the world we live in today. Moreover, our understanding of the modern and contemporary social phenomenality of the "flesh" might change if we recognize that Santner's account represents the latest chapter of a longer, secret history of political and social transactions underwritten by the incarnational legacy of Christian theology and liturgy.

While we should continue to explore the prehistory of the biopolitical "flesh" in the migrations of the Christian *corpus mysticum*, Santner's modern work nonetheless expands the range of figures and idioms in which scholars of premodernity might discern the quavering of "sacral soma" (xxi). To take one example, Santner insistently draws our attention to the figure of the doctor in modernist imaginative literature as an emblem of a larger crisis, in which (as in Kafka's "A Country Doctor") "spiritual needs now register largely as bodily, somatic disturbances" (64). In his explication of the doctor's significance, Santner draws upon Hannah Arendt's analysis of twentieth-century totalitarianism, in which the "clergy and court officials who ... theatrically attended to the effigy representing the 'second body' of the king after the burial of his mortal remains, found their modern avatars among those men of science and medicine—the ultimate biocrats—who worked to isolate and protect the charismatic 'stuff' or 'matter' of general equivalence enjoyed by the members of the race" (52). The doctor in the bureaucracy of the modern nation-state becomes invested with powers that blend together the sacerdotal and the scientific, becoming the priests who administer a biopolitical liturgy, the incarnational rituals which invest the bodies of citizens with a "surplus of immanence" as they negotiate the distribution of sovereign "flesh." Thus, the doctor of one version of Hofmannsthal's drama *The Tower* is, in Santner's account, "neither a political master ... nor a messianic savior," but his task nonetheless partakes of both realms insofar as it "hold[s] open the possibility of new possibilities in the realm

Graham Hamill and Julia Reinhard Lupton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 147-176.

⁴ See my article, "Reforming the Mystical Body: From Mass to Martyr in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*" forthcoming in *ELH*.

of political life by, so to speak, insisting on the insistence of what remains of political theology in the flesh of the destitute creature" (186). Yet, in other instances, as Kafka's story illustrates, the doctor as biopolitical priest is more often than not inadequate to the task, overwhelmed by his duties to manage the excesses of the phantasmatic "flesh" of the state.

To the reader of Shakespeare (whose work is a frequent point of reference in Santner's text), the quasi-sacral "office" of the biocratic modern doctor might call to mind those curiously ineffectual doctors who mark the closing scenes of one of the great tragedies of sacred monarchy, *Macbeth* (4.3, 5.1, 5.3). Santner's work might help us to read the significance of these doctors anew, beyond their function as metaphors for the rulers who are responsible for the good or ill health of their realms.⁵ The inefficacy of the Scottish doctor who cannot heal Lady Macbeth ("More she needs the divine than the physician" [5.1.64]⁶) might be read as testifying more generally to the diseased state of Scotland under the rule of the illegitimate Macbeth, who lacks the wholesome touch of his saintly, legitimate English counterpart, Edward the Confessor; this is illustrated by the testimony of another seemingly ineffectacious doctor during an interlude in an evidently healthy and redemptive England in 4.3. The episode in which the English Doctor makes a brief appearance is particularly arresting in light of Santner's ruminations on the "semio-somatic surplus" of the body invested with "symbolic office" (47).

The context of the English Doctor's intrusion into the play in 4.3 actually destabilizes what would seem to be a clear contrast between healthy and sick body politics and their healing or contaminating ruler-physicians.⁷ Immediately before the Doctor arrives on the scene, Malcolm, the supposed true prince and usurped heir of the holy martyred Scottish King Duncan subjects Macduff to a dizzying series of feints and counter-feints, first accusing him of acting as a covert agent of Macbeth, and then accusing himself of numerous vices, culminating in his claim to "relish" the commission of a litany of crimes: "Nay, had I power I should / Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, / Uproar the universal peace, confound / All unity on earth" (4.3.97-101). It is precisely this vow to decimate a social ideal of unity, virtually synonymous with the ideals

⁵ Marjorie Garber has analyzed the doctors in *Macbeth* in these terms; see, most recently, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 718-19.

⁶ All citations of *Macbeth* are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare: Later Plays* (Vol. 2), Second Edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

⁷ I am consciously using the Schmittian terminology of "intrusion" here, to acknowledge in passing Santner's fine engagement (in his Chapter Five) with my translation of Schmitt's work on Shakespeare: *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*, trans. David Pan and Jennifer R. Rust (New York: Telos Press, 2009). The English Doctor's testimony to King Edward's healing touch, juxtaposed with the evident signs of the true Scottish heir Malcolm's incipient Machiavellianism, is, I want to suggest, a sort of "disjunction" productive of "surplus value," akin to the "intrusions" or *Einbrüche* that Schmitt claims deform the play of *Hamlet* and that Santner identifies with the "remainder—the flesh of the royal remains" that haunts modernity (157-58).

promulgated by the incarnational liturgical tradition of the *corpus mysticum*, that pushes Macduff to the brink: “O nation miserable … since that the truest issue of thy throne / by his own interdiction stands accursed / And does blaspheme his breed?” (4.3.107-09). And it is at this very moment that Malcolm takes it all back and re-presents himself as indeed the true, healing ruler-to-be: “I … here abjure / The taints and blames I laid upon myself / For strangers to my nature … My first false-speaking / Was this upon myself” (4.3.124-26; 131-32). Macduff is not so sure: “Such welcome and unwelcome things at once / ‘Tis hard to reconcile” (4.3.139-140). It is in the midst of Macduff’s uncertainty, his state of purgatorial suspension, that the Doctor intrudes with a seemingly unrelated testimonial to the holy virtues of the royal touch:

There are a crew of wretched souls
That stay [the English king’s] cure. Their malady convinces
The great essay of art, but at his touch,
Such sanctity hath Heaven given his hand,
They presently amend. (4.3.142-146)

Just as abruptly as the Doctor enters to announce the miraculous fact of the royal touch, he leaves, allowing Malcolm to take over his office, to explain more fully the nature of the king’s “healing benediction” (4.3.156). On the most obvious level, the intrusion of the Doctor works to heal the rupture caused by Malcolm’s own Machiavellian tactics in the preceding sequence: Malcolm is empowered to recount the divine properties of the royal flesh in a way that reinforces his claim to inherit them from his “most sainted” (4.3.110) royal parents and overwrites the memory of his most recent dissimulations.

Santner’s work, however, helps us to see that the transactions of this scene might be more complex. This vignette from *Macbeth* illustrates that, already in the early seventeenth century, we can find a certain “biopolitical” synergy between the sacerdotal powers of the king and the medical techniques of the doctor, even though here the sacred agency of the king is represented as trumping the “art” of the medical practice. We might even understand this episode as another early instance of the transference of the sacral substance of the “flesh” from the sovereign to the people: the “wretched souls” who “presently amend” with the royal touch surely also assume and perpetuate something of his holy property in the process of their “cure.” The possibility that this episode could convey a dispersal of sovereign “flesh” is underscored precisely by the way this tale of the holy, healing royal touch is framed by the extended sequence of Malcolm’s deceit, which carries an excess negativity not fully absorbed by the prince’s subsequent account of the “miraculous work in this good King” (4.3.148). The English King Edward himself might truly command full possession of his “sacred soma” but if, as is implied, this virtue will also pass into Malcolm, we, like Macduff, cannot be so certain that he is capable of marshaling it so righteously. Malcolm’s abruptly-revoked posture as a Machiavelli might be taken to hint that the somatic sublime expressed in the royal touch might not, in fact, be wholly welded to the sovereign person; it might, indeed, in another future moment of crisis take on a more free-floating existence, distributed among

the “wretched souls” of the body politic to be managed, more or less efficiently, by Malcolm’s uncanny alter-ego the Doctor. From the perspective of Santner’s excellent analysis of the modern condition, we might read the English Doctor of *Macbeth* as an anachronistic, empty placeholder for the administrators of the modern biocratic state, who continue to bear witness to an excessive sacral “flesh” they can neither fully contain nor control.

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