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## SHAME WITHOUT SHAME: WHAT REMAINS OF MODERNIST AESTHETICS

**A**mong the many rich motifs that wind through *The Royal Remains*, we find the theme of the doctor as the paradigmatic figure of modernity. From Freud, to Kafka's "The Country Doctor," to Hofmannsthal's physician in *The Tower*, to the *médecins* Malte Laurids Brigge encounters at *Salpêtrière* hospital, Santner's doctor is the perplexed and ill-equipped heir to sovereign power. In the wake of deposed and decapitated kings, it falls to the doctor to minister to the flesh that, separated from the sacred body of the monarch, troubles and excites the body politic. As befits something undead, the flesh isn't pretty: it manifests as uncontrollable twitching, quivering lesions, bulging tumors, and tangles of worms writhing in open wounds. The doctor, impossibly called to fulfill the lapsed political and theological vocations of both the king and the priest, fails to mollify the flesh and thus to satisfy the imperative to re-integrate the *corpus mysticum* within a corporeal frame. Santner paints a portrait of a physician who is impotent to respond to the demands of the flesh and can merely bear witness to the afterlife of political theology.

The doctor's shame at his powerlessness is representative for Santner of the wide diffusion of this affect in modernity. At least in this one negative way, the physician fulfills the representative function previously performed by the monarch: his inadequacy to his office figures "the troubles that plague the office of the human" more generally (247). The tremulous flesh reminds us of our inadequacy, the embarrassments and awkwardness constitutive to beings whom the transition to popular sovereignty has saddled with an excess of immanence. To counter this shame, Santner suggests that comic laughter offers a space to which we may temporarily retreat from the offices we fill so poorly.

Affect offers a crucial node at which Santner's politics and aesthetics coalesce. Like doctors, Santner's artists "stand under the compulsion to respond to the ever-ramifying biopolitical pressures generated by the displacement of the king...by 'the people' in the wake of the French Revolution" (103). The distribution of the dismembered sovereign among the People generates a bodily surfeit, thus eliciting a set of biopolitical apparatuses and procedures to contain, manage, and administer that fleshy surplus. Shame and anxiety are the affects attached to the body ill-suited for the offices it has been biopolitically destined

for. Following T.J. Clark, Santner understands modernist visual aesthetics of abstraction as a type of anxious shame at falling short of the imperatives to realism, illusionism, or impressionism that came before. The turn away from figuration in painting is an expression of shame at the autonomy of the artwork that exists non-referentially, in and for its own procedures. In this account, shame rushes in to fill the vacuum left by the withering of monarchical sovereignty that leaves both aesthetic and political representation at a loss. An autonomous People needs an autonomous art, but neither has the grounds to sustain figuration, it seems. Santner, perhaps following Alain Badiou's lead, finds the clearest literary analogue to this aesthetic in Samuel Beckett's stripped-down drama, proposing that "Beckett has gone the greatest distance among modern artists in the process of figuring out abstraction" (251).

It seems to me that Beckett's work thinks more about voluntary servitude—what binds subjects to their offices—than about the Bartleby-esque refusal to serve Santner is interested in. Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* may be a better proving ground for the arguments advanced in *The Royal Remains*.<sup>1</sup> First, it is a dream work, filled with sleep-walkers, night watchmen, and darkness-shrouded visitations. Its linguistic texture is that of the unconscious with its poetic but enigmatic non-sequiturs. For Santner, the dream work is the mode through which the anxiety provoked by the disturbances of the flesh can be shaped into something with a discernible form. Second, two characters embody a fleshy modernity: one of the strangest doctor figures in all of literature, Matthew O'Connor, a quack, thief, and transvestite whose monologues occupy much of the book; and Baron Felix Volkbein, a royal remainder whose decadence is implied in his fake title, wholly fabricated by his father and authenticated by nothing but two purchased portraits and a fair amount of costumery. Felix's name, essentially "happy leg (or bone) of the people," suggests a certain perverse satisfaction in the castration of imperial grandeur. It is therefore a more direct invocation of the prosthesis of popular sovereignty than Beckett's Clov (whose name Santner reads backward as *Volk*). In *Nightwood*, the decomposition of the symbolic order (the tarnished and tawdry emblems of aristocracy detached from bodies that could make them cohere) and the decay of representation (opaque and self-referential language) meet the realm of queer desire and sensation. Third, *Nightwood* instigated Joseph Frank's influential theory of spatial form, which posits that modernist literature is primarily characterized by its approach to abstract painting. In the absence of strong narrative threads, Frank argues, texts are networked webs of internal self-reference, eliminating the temporal dimension usually associated with novels and approximating instead the two-dimensional plane of a canvas. Thus, *Nightwood* is a resource in thinking about to what extent verbal and visual abstraction share the same object.

Dr. O'Connor confides his political-theological theory of sovereignty to the faux Baron: "A king is the peasant's actor, who becomes so scandalous that he has to be bowed down to" (43). The scandal is scatological: the sovereign may piss wherever he likes, but the people are "church-broken, nation-broken...house-

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<sup>1</sup> Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 2006).

broken” like dogs (43). Church and state cordon off litter boxes, training their adherents simultaneously to control their bodily impulses and to revere “the king, the tsar, the emperor, who may relieve themselves on high heaven” (43). Awash in excrement and populated with social outcasts, *Nightwood*’s subversive narrative refuses to conform like a good dog. “The body has a politic too, and a life of its own that you like to think is yours,” O’Connor tells Nora Flood when she looks to him for answers about why her lover has abandoned her (161). We can read this as a statement about a self-divided, superfluous corporeality—the animated flesh—that moves between the individual and the masses and is not easily corralled. The doctor models neither sovereign shamelessness nor head-hanging shame, but something else.

We can think of Dr. Matthew O’Connor as offering a variation on the choice Santner presents us with of the doctor as “biopolitical master” or “philosopher of the flesh” (186-7). The former is a channel for biopower; the latter “hold[s] open the possibility of new possibilities in the realm of political life” by testifying to the persistence of political theology in the flesh of modernity (186). (This is somewhat at odds with the fatalism of the book’s subtitle.) Darkly jocund, wearing wigs and makeup, Dr. O’Connor resembles a clown or jester. “Laughing I came into Pacific Street, and laughing I’m going out of it,” he says (36). One of Santner’s key insights is that comedy gives expression to the surplus flesh. The clown-doctor who says to Nora, as the admitted charlatan does, “‘You see that you can ask me anything,’ thus laying aside both their embarrassments” (86) offers a perspective on the shameful surplus without concomitant anxiety. For Santner, flesh masquerades as sovereignty, “veiled by this sublime (im)posture” of the neutered royal (81). But I would suggest that Dr. Matthew O’Connor shows us a sublime *impostor*, the flesh in drag: an explicit sham who has no pretensions to passing, whose wardrobe never fully conceals the body underneath. Shame here is brazenly performed rather than treated as an occasion for self-concealment. This is neither an aesthetic of shame nor an aesthetic of shamelessness, but a shamelessness about shame.

I could point to many other instances of the modernist embrace of shame in Woolf, Joyce, Lawrence, Lewis, or Hall; it is perhaps epitomized by Lord Alfred Douglas’s 1894 poem, “In Praise of Shame.” When Beckett’s *Endgame* opens, Clov is covered with two textiles: a sheet that covers his entire body, under which a handkerchief covers his face. In the final moments of the play, the sheet is gone, but the handkerchief remains. What is this but a figure for the unveiling of shame? As Jacques-Alain Miller puts it, “There is nevertheless shame at being alive [the presence of the handkerchief] behind the absence of shame [the withdrawal of the sheet]” (26).<sup>2</sup>

Thinking about such disclosures can help us appreciate the historicization of the flesh *The Royal Remains* proposes. Santner’s dating of modernity oscillates between the Renaissance, the French Revolution, and World War I. Discussing

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “On Shame,” *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 11-28.

the latter, he relies on Elaine Scarry's understanding of the body as the ultimate material ground in order to explain why sacrifice appears to offer a path to transcendence that opens when grand narratives no longer lead there. Conceiving of World War I as the result of "a veritable mania for the ultimate sacrifice" (172), Santner suggests that the agitation of the royal remains contributed to the frenzied killing on an unprecedented scale. Seen from another perspective, we might reverse the direction of causation and say that the scope of the casualties during World War I revealed the royal remains and made them visible.

Michael Warner, who, like Santner, is interested in the politics of abstraction, observes some of the same paradoxes in the body politic that Santner does.<sup>3</sup> He writes that access to abstract, disembodied universality actually requires the abandonment of the particular (if supposedly neutral) bodily identity that granted the access privilege in the first place. Thus the whiteness or masculinity or heterosexuality that enables self-abstraction into identification with an anonymous public must be disavowed. The collective subject would be compromised by particularity if it were to have any positive attributes. "Being of necessity anywhere else, the mass subject cannot have a body except the body it witnesses. But in order to become a mass subject, it has left that body behind, abstracted away from it, canceled it as mere positivity. It returns in the spectacle of big-time injury" (179). Warner suggests that our attraction to disaster grows out of a desire to re-member the mass subject and materialize its "impossible relation to a body" (179). In other words, "Disaster is popular because it is a way of making mass subjectivity available" by situating it corporeally (177). We might say, then, that the catastrophe of World War I—while of a different order than the pop culture spectacles Warner refers to—ushers in modernist aesthetics because the extensive injury and destruction makes the People's two bodies visible together. Thus, what twentieth-century verbal and visual abstraction responds to is not only an inability to locate the democratic subject, its own inadequacy in coping with the vagaries of the flesh, or the biopolitical pressures that seek the same goal but also the stunning conjunction of embodiment and abstraction afforded by the sudden materialization and mobilization of a disembodied public in the trenches.

Among Dr. O'Connor's pronouncements is this, which also concerns an absent body and one which replaces it in a manner all too present: "In the king's bed is always found, just before it becomes a museum piece, the droppings of the black sheep" (44). The doctor witnesses this version of a royal remainder in which the sovereign and the creature are two sides of the same coin. This, indeed, is what *The Royal Remains* predicts in "the 'meta-political' figure of the physician...the one who appears to stand in closest, most *einfühlbar* proximity to creaturely life as the underside of sovereign power" (186). The sheep, who feels no shame, is a figure for the masses who have desecrated the king's bed. That the sheep is black, however, particularizes it and, through the suggestion of the outcast, underlines the constitutive dimension of a salutary shame in the effort for

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002).

sovereign representation (the museum project). What *Nightwood* shows us therefore is that modernist aesthetics do not hesitate to pull back the covers and put the royal remains to use.

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