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PAULINE BIOPOLITICS

In his most recent book, Eric Santner adds a brilliant chapter to his ongoing series of works tracing connections between political theology and psychoanalysis.¹ *The Royal Remains* both performs and calls for a more thorough treatment of *flesh* as both object and idea. For Michel Foucault, the reordering of sovereign powers over life and death which culminated in new regulations of both personal and species bodies converges around *sex*, which serves simultaneously as example and impetus for two linked processes:

One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death...In concrete terms, starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved in two basic forms...One of these poles – the first to be formed, it seems – centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines: an an anatamo-politics of the human body*. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the*

¹ See Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), as well as Santner's *The Psychotheology of Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). The latter three texts are hereafter abbreviated PEL, CL, and RR, respectively, and cited parenthetically.

population. The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which organization of power over life was deployed.²

I begin this meditation on biopolitics in Santner's book with such a long, and quite well-known, passage from Foucault because it seems to me that Santner's treatment of flesh manages both to return to Foucault's initial argument concerning the joint aspects of anatomo-politics and biopolitics,³ and also to torque our understanding of these operations. Insisting that psychoanalysis offers more than disciplinary practices, Santner remains invested in both Lacanian symbology and Freudian corporeality, but with this book delves most deeply into the latter.

Obviously, we might say, flesh is linked to sex—understood here as encompassing both sexuality and gender. For Santner, flesh becomes King (in Ernst Kantorowicz's sense of King as the sempiternal office, rather than the mortal body, of sovereignty), both sign and signifier of the *psychic* remnants of the juridical transition from monarch to people— but sex seemingly precipitates out of this transition. Citing both Roberto Esposito's return to the Pauline distinction between flesh and body and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's claim that Freud was a "philosopher of the flesh," Santner insists that any account of the flesh in relation to the "psychic life of power"⁴ must take Paul into account (RR 31). Though he takes issue with Esposito's rapturous treatment of biopolitical potentiality as it is captured, in the Christian tradition, by the promise of the risen body of Christ, Santner nevertheless wants to resurrect the flesh. He writes that "[t]here is, I think, still a great deal of work to be done before one can attach any sort of radical hope, let alone messianism, to a new thinking of the flesh" (RR 44). Flesh constitutes the real, in Santner's account. It inhabits the uncanny, creaturely space of the "undead"⁵—yet it also exceeds this space, for in Santner's suggestive remarks concerning the *enjoyment of life* (that which, for him as for Aristotle, separates life from mere life—or, in Santner's terms, a life of the flesh from the undeadness of flesh) we might see the shadow of *jouissance*—the Lacanian dialectic of pleasure and pain.⁶ So while Santner turns, to a certain

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978). Quotation at pp. 138-39. See also Foucault's *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, both ed. Michael Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 2008).

³ *Zoëpolitics*, as outlined by Jacques Derrida, seems to me best to capture the coupling of Foucault's two terms, focusing insistently as it does on *zoë* rather than *bios*—a distinction between two forms of life that Giorgio Agamben makes. Derrida argues that what Agamben terms biopolitics might better be designated *zoëpolitics*.

⁴ The phrase is Judith Butler's; see her *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁵ On the undead, see both RR, particularly Chs. 2-3, and CL, particularly Ch. 1.

⁶ See *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992).

extent, from Foucault's insistence that sex forms the "pivot of the two axes along which developed the entire political technology of life,"⁷ he also returns to this focus, via the intriguingly indirect path of an analysis of Paul.

Santner reads I Corinthians and, briefly, Ephesians (a deutero-Pauline epistle) to illustrate that "*the flesh is the thorn in the body*, the dimension of embodied subjectivity that registers an excess of the normative pressures that inform and potentially 'deform' a life lived in relation to agencies of authority and authorization" (RR 39). But Romans, the letter that has received so much philosophical attention since Jacob Taubes' 1987 lectures,⁸ provides another avenue for exploration of questions of the flesh.⁹ I wish to investigate not Paul's famous distinctions between Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free (which are of course distinctions of the flesh),¹⁰ or even the metaphor of the emergent church as a body in 12:4-5 that condenses the passage Santner reads in I Corinthians 12:12-27. Rather, I turn to the related distinctions between "children of the flesh" (*tekna tēs sarkos*) and "children of the spirit" (*tekna tēs epaggelias*, better translated as "children of the promise") in Romans 9:8 and the attendant metaphor of spiritual filiation, specifically "adoption as sons" (*huiiothesian*) in Romans 8:23, which recalls the earlier "sons of God," (*huoi theou*) in Romans 8:15. This transition between "children" and "sons" disappears from view in some philosophical treatments of Paul's "universal" call,¹¹ yet I want to insist on retaining that difference, on teasing out what it might mean for Santner's "science of the flesh."

Paul's analogy argues that the fleshly sign of living under the law (that is, circumcision) no longer matters, that children of the promise (of hope, of grace) require no such corporeal inscriptions, though those who bear the mark of the law—the mark of the missing, of the remnant, of the detached flesh—are of course fundamental to the newly-grafted *ekklesia*. So his argument about "children of the promise" rhetorically erases the mark of the law. Yet his attendant claims that all who heed the call will be "adopted as sons" performs a ghostly reinscription of the law, reasserting gendered differences and the potential for exclusion at the very moment he is describing the utter inclusiveness (the universality) of grace. Paul's "adopted sons" may not be

⁷ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 145.

⁸ See *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, citations of Paul in English refer to the Revised Standard Version presented in *The Writings of St. Paul*, first edition, ed. Wayne Meeks (New York: Norton, 1972); Greek citations taken from George Ricker Berry's King James Version in the *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984). All Greek definitions cited in the body of the article are taken from Liddell and Scott's *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

¹⁰ See Daniel Boyarin's *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

¹¹ See, for example, Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), though even Badiou concedes, at the end, that differences of the flesh "matter."

circumcised, but they are *circumscribed*, rewritten as masculine subjects (or, to use Paul's own introductory phrase, "slaves to") the undead Christ.

That is to say, Paul's condemnation of the flesh returns us to the flesh, and to the spectre of law – not, perhaps, the law he declares dead, but the undead law of the resurrected flesh. Effacing one mark, it delineates another – the infamous law of love, circumcision of the heart rather than the foreskin (Romans 2:25-29)¹² – but the rhetorical or spiritual operation Paul describes can only always mimic the corporeal operation it seeks to supersede. This spectral superscription, palimpsestically recrypting the missing flesh, returns us to sex, and to Foucault's originary remarks about anatomo-politics and biopolitics. Paul, of course, continually juxtaposes the flesh (*sarx*) with the spirit (*pneuma*), yet his shifting references to childhood as a metaphor for spiritual incorporation in Romans bear further scrutiny. Unlike *pais*, which usually means a human child (whether boy or girl) and is a word Paul rarely uses, *teknon* is more truly a *zoëpolitical* term, for it can refer to either a male or a female child, or to the young of animals. It means "that which is born," though it is most often translated "son." It indexes creatureliness, a common vulnerability, as well as the unfolded possibilities of gender that *huios* will foreclose.

In some ways, I've simply reiterated an old critique of Paul, in whose writings many detect the origins of some of the heteronormative biases that continue to have juridical impact. Yet what I am saying is both more and less than that. Rather than continuing to rehearse the debate, I wish, like Santner, to look to Paul's enfleshed letters¹³ for potential openings or points of departure. In his introduction to *The Royal Remains*, Santner pays homage to Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, particularly its treatment of wounds. His meditation on flesh is always also a meditation on the wound, on vulnerabilities that are also points of access (for good or ill) – as we see with his claim that "flesh is the thorn in the body," for Paul. I said above that Santner's focus on the enjoyment of life¹⁴ introduces *jouissance* into his analysis, yet how can we interrogate this dimension without romanticizing, even fetishizing, the wound? That is, in the end, how do we read the call for a "science of the flesh" that is also a science of the unconscious (in psychoanalytic terms), or a science of the soul (in Foucault's terms) – or, relatedly, and perhaps most radically, a science of grace? Santner's

¹² On the typology of "circumcision of the heart" and its remainders, see Julia Lupton's "Merchants of Venice, Circles of Citizenship" and "Othello Circumcised" in *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 75-123.

¹³ The length constraints of this essay don't allow for a further consideration of Santner's own treatment of letters, particularly the Chandos Letter, and the links between drama and epistle. 2 Corinthians, given its focus on letters (both epistles and *grammata*), would perhaps be the most relevant Pauline text for such an analysis. The metaphor of the converted as letters of the flesh, the undead law graven on "tablets of the fleshly heart" (*en plaxin kardias sarkinais*, 2 Cor. 3:3) links to the "circumcision of the heart" Paul speaks of in Romans 2:25-29.

¹⁴ A phrase which, as Santner notes, "suggests...the deep connection between the state of exception and the culture of enjoyment/consumption." (RR 20, n.21)

call reminds me in some ways of Jean-Luc Nancy's "Deconstructions of Christianity," particularly *Corpus*, in which he also posits a coming-to-being through the wound.¹⁵ Perhaps Nancy can provide another opening for thinking about the problems, and the potentials, of the flesh?

Alternatively, how might a consideration of Hannah Arendt's remarks concerning *birth* (one that avoids Esposito's potential pitfalls) in conjunction with her analysis of statelessness and abjection (RR 50-59) reorient these questions? For Arendt, natality is "the miracle that saves the world," birth always standing for politics *in potentia*.¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, in the project commencing with *Homo Sacer*, takes it as his task to bring together a Foucauldian analysis of biopolitics with an Arendtian examination of the modern outgrowths of totalitarianism (even, or perhaps especially, those practiced by democratic regimes). Articulating a clear call for a return to Foucault's focus on sex as the locus of bio- and anatomo-politics, Agamben writes that "[u]ntil we become aware of the political nature of bare life and its modern avatars (biological life, sexuality, etc.), we will not succeed in clarifying the opacity at their center."¹⁷ Roberto Esposito, the follower of both Foucault and Agamben, pays attention to what Arendt terms "natality" in his quest for an affirmative biopolitics, while at the same time criticizing Arendt for "not thinking the category of life thoroughly enough."¹⁸ In some ways, then, he ends up reiterating the thanatopolitical biases he seeks to escape. In the introduction to *Immunitas*, Esposito argues that "[t]he figure of the implant, whether an artificial prosthesis or a natural implant like fertilized eggs in the mother's womb" is "the most striking case in point" or illustration of his claims regarding the immunitary paradigm.¹⁹ I would first call attention to the false distinction between "natural" and "artificial" in this statement, for (as Esposito argues later in the volume), reproductive technologies can most certainly play a part in the "natural" implantation he describes.²⁰

In this context, we might think of the term *assistance*, as it features in *assisted reproduction*, *assisted living*, or *assisted suicide*. These three phrases, designating the outreaching or even prosthetic processes and arrangements of community and technology with the potential to aid, but also to manage, both the beginnings and

¹⁵ See Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ See Arendt's *The Human Condition*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 247.

¹⁷ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 120. In an earlier essay in *JCRT*, I argued that Agamben himself generally does not heed this call to focus on "biological life, sexuality, etc." See "The Sexual Politics of Pain: Hannah Arendt Meets Shakespeare's Shrew," *JCRT* 7.2 (2006): 18-32.

¹⁸ See Esposito's *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), qtn. at pg. 150, and *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011).

¹⁹ Esposito, *Immunitas*, 18.

²⁰ As Esposito notes regarding artificial insemination (*Immunitas*, 138).

the ends of life, point us towards theories of the posthuman even as they bring us back to Paul. And the first, in particular, falls precisely on the axis where anatomo-politics and bio-politics converge. As with my question about the risks attendant upon theorizing wounds as points of opening, I wonder how we can continue to think about the potentialities of birth without the attendant risks of essentialism, dangers feminist and queer theorists have pointed out for years? Or, *pace* Paul, how can we bring new notions of community – that is, of adoption *not* as sons, but (to use another Pauline, and Santnerian) term, as *neighbors* – into play, while still remaining attentive to Foucault's originary observations about sex?

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