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THE BEAUTIFUL MARRANO:

A RESPONSE TO AGATA BIELIK-ROBSON

I'm extremely grateful to Agata Bielik-Robson for her critical --- in the very best sense of that word --- response to my work. In attempting to speak back to her, which is no easy task, I should first make clear that I have nothing but respect and admiration for the larger project that lies behind her critique: a uniquely formidable counter-reading of political theology carried out in the name of the "Marrano."<sup>1</sup>

It is unlikely that anything I say will convince Agata, but perhaps I can at least try to clarify some of the differences between what I call "unbearable life" and what she calls "finite life." After reading Niall praise my book as almost classically Derridean, I couldn't help but smile when I saw her criticize it for not being deconstructive enough! In a certain sense, I suspect the disagreement between us may ultimately be a disagreement over what exactly "deconstruction" is: she suspects a violent transcendentalism in my version of Derrida, crudely speaking, whereas I worry about an --- equally violent --- vitalism in hers.

To gently push back against some of her specific criticisms, I very much hope it will be clear to other readers of the book that I am not uncritically endorsing Robespierre's political philosophy. It was never my intention to "denigrate survival as a *lesser life* that, as Hegel put it, clings to life slavishly and at all costs," as Agata puts it, and I explicitly take issue with this view throughout the book. Already in Chapter 2, for instance, I make the very point that Agata makes against me when I speak of the vicious circularity of the French Revolutionary Terror which leads it to turn against the people themselves as the originary enemy.<sup>2</sup> However, I certainly do contest Agata's claim --- which begins as early as the Thermidor propagandists, continues through Arendt, all the way up to the "revisionism" of François Furet --- that there was something philosophically inevitable about the Terror's failure. In Chapter 5, I seek to understand Robespierre's political imaginary from the "inside" --- something that has very rarely been done over the last 200 years --- by bracketing off what I see as the moralizing fatalism that influences so many readings of the Terror.

What might we do to release Robespierre from the straitjacket of history? To defend the Terror, we don't need to

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<sup>1</sup> See Agata Bielik-Robson, *Derrida's Marrano Passover: Exile, Survival, Betrayal, and the Metaphysics of Non-Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 66-9.

be some kind of neo-Hegelian master --- merely a historian who is willing to read archives which are still emerging today. It is worth recalling, for example, that

the notorious Law of Suspects --- which so many scholars see as the harbinger of modern totalitarianism --- was not designed to deprive citizens of rights and expose them to arbitrary political violence but precisely the opposite. As Warnich reminds us, a named "suspect" was accorded a legal status that protected them from the kind of direct popular "justice" represented by the September massacres of 1792.<sup>3</sup> For McPhee, likewise, Robespierre emerges, not as the incorruptible killing machine of repute, but as a curiously sympathetic figure, beset by real enemies, wracked with illness and self-doubt, and taking flawed decisions whose real-world consequences were, he realized, unknowable.<sup>4</sup> In returning the Terror to the messy complexity of its real historical context, what begins to emerge is that (*pace* Agata) this was very much *not* a struggle between a terroristic divine violence, on the one hand, and the peace of finite life, on the other, but between lesser and greater *violences*.

For me, this is the powerful political lesson that Derrida teaches us in another classic early essay which, just like the reading of Foucault to which Niall refers, takes to task an attempt to delimit or perfect metaphysics from the vantage point of an allegedly non-violent outside: I'm thinking here of his famous reading of Levinas's ethics in "Violence and Metaphysics." It is not possible to choose between ethics and philosophy, alterity and metaphysics or peace and violence, Derrida contends in this essay, and so Levinas's attempt to critique the philosophy of totality from the perspective of the other remains caught in the same kind of bind we observed in Foucault. To recall a cryptic claim that is never fully fleshed out here or anywhere else in his work, we can at most and at best decide --- without any predetermined criteria or guarantees of outcome --- between the lesser violence (*le moindre violence*) and the worst violence (*le pire violence*).<sup>5</sup> If I don't have the time and space to pursue Derrida's claim in more detail here --- but suffice to say that it raises as many questions as it answers --- I'm sure we can agree that it clearly describes a very different deconstruction from the one offered by Agata. In Derrida's political ontology, violence is simply inescapable --- indeed the worst violence of all is carried out under the guise of that apparent absence of violence we call "peace."

If Agata is worried that my position risks defending or justifying political violence, I must say that I equally worry about the eerie *absence* of any (real or potential) violence in her

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<sup>3</sup> Sophie Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* trans. by David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" in *Writing and Difference* trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

own political universe --- a state of “peace” that, following Derrida, perhaps conceals the worst violence of all. It is striking that her philosophical Marrano seemingly never lives in fear of their life (quite unlike the really-existing Marranos) and never has to risk their own death or those of their enemies. To pose one question back to her, then, I would like to ask what she would have her philosophical Marrano do when called upon to defend their simple, down-to-earth way of life against the inescapability of violence, persecution, repression? For Agata, of course, Spinoza is the philosophical father of her version of Marranoism, but Spinoza knew very well that the Iberian *conversos* were also willing to die for their religion: “I myself knew among others of a certain Judah called the faithful,” he famously writes of a Spanish convert to Judaism who was burned to death by the Inquisition, “who in the midst of the flames, when he was already thought to be dead, lifted his voice to sing the hymn beginning, ‘To Thee, O God, I offer up my soul,’ and so singing perished.”<sup>ii</sup> In its combination of other-worldly *bonne conscience* and hyper-critical judgement upon those who get their hands dirty, though, I worry that Agata’s philosophical Marrano ironically begins to resemble, not Judah the Faithful, but something closer to Hegel’s Beautiful Soul.

In concluding this response, I think Agata perhaps comes closest to anticipating, and responding to, my own question when she invokes Benjamin’s famous theory of “creaturely sovereignty.” To take the risk of ventriloquizing her a little, I think she might say back to me that the Benjaminian sovereign is no Hegelian Beautiful Soul, possessed of a pearl-clutching good conscience and an inexhaustible capacity for judging others, but exactly the opposite: he is a guilty creature amongst creatures, equal to, if not weaker than, his subjects and so utterly lacking the legitimacy to rule over them. Yet, once again, I am less sanguine than her about the prospect that “creaturely sovereignty” affords us any protection against exposure to sovereign violence, indeed quite the opposite. If Agata is quite right to note that Robespierre’s politics of the already dead has perversely now become the prerogative of the political right, we could say much the same about the modern fate of a Benjaminian politics of the creature. What political leader today from Tony Blair to Barack Obama, after all, does not protest their very own sovereign creatureliness -- - which is to say their guilt, their bad conscience, their human, all too human weakness in the face of the awesome responsibilities of office --- even or especially as they defend their decisions to invade Iraq, expand the targeted killing programme in Afghanistan and so on? In this grotesque parody of Benjaminian sovereignty --- where *mauvaise conscience* is the new *bonne conscience* and feeling guilty itself becomes proof positive of the virtue of our cause --- we

perhaps witness the ugly truth of what happens when the Beautiful Soul goes to war.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, "Letter LXXIV to Albert Burgh," in *Correspondence of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. by A. Wolf (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1928).