Sovereignty in Ruins

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In what is perhaps his most dreamlike prose text, “A Country Doctor,” Franz Kafka describes in graphic detail the wound on the side of a young boy, the patient a district physician has been called to attend to in the middle of a snowy night:

On his right side, near the hip, there is an open wound the size of a palmprint. Many shades of pink, dark in its depths and growing lighter at the edges, tender and grainy, with unevenly pooling blood, open at the surface like a mine. Thus from a distance. Close up, further complications are apparent. Who can look at that without giving a low whistle? Worms, as thick and as long as my little finger, rose-pink themselves and also blood-splattered, firmly attached to the inside of the wound, with little white heads, with many little legs, writhe up toward the light.¹

The text is unusual for Kafka in its proximity to the sort of expressionist prose he was known to dislike, but it still very much bears the distinctive signature of the author. Here, as in so many other texts, the main character, the provincial doctor named in the title, is faced by a call he cannot fully respond to, a mandate or summons to work—call it a “charge” or “ex-citation” (from excitare, to call out or summon)—that turns out to be impossible to discharge. Kafka indicates in the text that there might be large, historical reasons for this impossibility, among them the preponderance of a false conception of medical knowledge and capacities in a secular world. The problem seems to be in part that in such a world spiritual needs now register largely as bodily, somatic disturbances: “Always asking the doctor to do the
impossible. They have lost their old faith; the pastor sits at home, plucking his vestments into shreds, one after the other; but the doctor is supposed to accomplish everything with his tender, surgical hands.\textsuperscript{2} Here a sacerdotal investiture crisis—the priest literally shreds his vestments—resonates as bodily symptom that induces, in its turn, an excess of demand with respect to the medical arts, one that generates its own investiture crisis: the doctor’s inability to fulfill, to satisfy the normative pressures, of his office.\textsuperscript{3} The immediate proximity of these remarks to the characterization of the boy as being “blinded by the \textit{life in his wound}” (my emphasis) suggests that one can only begin to grasp the meaning of this palpitating life substance and the crisis it materializes against the background of this collapse of the spiritual into the corporeal, of transcendence into an immanence that can no longer be mastered by the available sciences of immanence.

As Slavoj Žižek has noted, just such a correlation of a surplus of flesh with a crisis of investiture had already been staged by Richard Wagner in his opera \textit{Parsifal}. There Amfortas’s inability to administer his office as Grail King—Titurel, the king’s father, harasses his son with the admonishing question, “Mein Sohn Amfortas, bist du am Amt?”—takes on the carnal form of an endlessly bleeding wound afflicting the king.\textsuperscript{4} Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s great dramaturgical innovation in his film adaptation of the opera was to separate the wound from the king’s body, to present it as an autonomous bit of surplus flesh unable to find its proper bodily container. To put it in the form of a wordplay that works only in German (and, perhaps, especially in Swiss German), we might say, \textit{Was in der (Eid-)Genossenschaft genossen wird, geht darüber hinaus, was in einer Körperschaft verfasst werden kann}. It is, I would suggest, just such an excess of \textit{jouissance} or \textit{Geniessen} that keeps Kafka’s characters in a kind of perpetual motion that in another short fragment he characterized as the uncannily animated or undead dimension of an oath or \textit{Eid}, the mysterious validity of which survives the death of the figure that had previously embodied the \textit{Verfassheit}, the constitution and composure of the body politic: “They were given the choice to become kings or messengers. Just like children they all chose to be messengers. For this reason there are only messengers; they race through the world and, because there are no kings, they call out to one another proclamations that have become meaningless. They would happily put an end to their miserable life but because of their oath of office they don’t dare.”\textsuperscript{5}
In this context, one will recall that the dream that Freud himself saw as the inaugural dream of psychoanalysis—the dream in which the paradoxical stuff or raw material of the symptom makes a dramatic appearance—is itself a kind of parable of a country doctor overwhelmed by the demands of his office. Much as in the case of Kafka’s provincial physician, the famous dream of Irma’s injection stages the insufficiency of the sciences of immanence—including, first and foremost, medicine—for the treatment of hysterical symptoms. It thus marks for Freud the very birth of psychoanalysis, its emergence, precisely, as the science that is called on the scene by the hysteric’s body, one that manifests a strange excess of life that both belongs and does not belong to the body in question. At one point in this dream that for the most part circulates around Freud’s concern that he might have missed some sort of purely physiological cause of Irma’s suffering—and so that he himself failed to be a proper man of science, failed to satisfy the normative pressures of his office—Freud looks into his patient’s mouth; what he encounters there places Irma in a kind of kinship relation with the boy in Kafka’s story as well as with Wagner’s Grail King: “She then opened her mouth properly and on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modeled on the turbinal bones of the nose.” In the dream Freud essentially places himself in an impossible situation, one in which he can only lose. If Irma is physically sick, then he has failed as a physician; if it is, rather, her hysterical symptoms that persist in spite of Freud’s treatment, then he has failed as the inventor of a new science and therapy of psychopathology. The key to the dream will ultimately lie in Freud’s discovery—indeed, we might call this the inaugural, self-reflexive finding of psychoanalysis—of the ways in which his own mind has gotten (dis)organized around the fantasy of being found, of being judged to be wanting in the face of the normative pressures of an office or symbolic mandate.

Some ten years later, Freud would encounter the case of yet another figure whose life came to be informed by the threat of being rendered formless, informe, under the pressures of a crisis of investiture precisely as a judge. I am referring, of course, to the case of Daniel Paul Schreber, whose psychotic breakdown was precipitated by his nomination as Senatspräsident of the Sachsen Supreme Court. Schreber seems to have experienced this crisis as the meltdown of his official, institutional identity into the rotting flesh
of a strange new creature, a delusional metamorphosis that led to his eight-year-long institutionalization. Freud based his case study of Schreber on the latter’s efforts to account for the meaning behind the madness of his metamorphosis in his now famous Memoirs of My Nervous Illness. Schreber felt himself called by divine forces to become a Luder and to cultivate a new sort of religious practice we might characterize as Ludertum. (In German, the word Luder can mean wretch, in the sense of a lost and pathetic creature, but can also signify a cunning swindler or scoundrel; a whore, tart, or slut; and finally, the dead, rotting flesh of an animal, especially in the sense of carrion used as bait in hunting. The French translation of Schreber’s Memoirs renders this word as Charogne, which was also, of course, the title of one of Baudelaire’s most famous poems from the Fleurs du mal.) Schreber’s inability to fulfill the office of his secular Beruf engendered a remainder of flesh that formed the kernel of his messianic Berufung to restore order to a world in which a state of exception had become the norm, at least in his “own private Germany.”

To return to Freud’s Irma dream: in his own rather apocalyptic commentary on this primal scene of psychoanalysis—and indeed, citing the dream visions and interpretations of the Book of Daniel—Jacques Lacan, who the following year would dedicate an entire seminar to Daniel Paul Schreber’s metamorphosis into a Luder, writes the following:

There’s a horrendous discovery here, that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, the secretory glands par excellence, the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering, is formless, in as much as its form in itself is something which provokes anxiety. Spectre of anxiety, identification of anxiety, the final revelation of you are this—You are this, which is so far from you, this which is the ultimate formlessness. Freud comes upon a revelation of the type, Mene, Tekel, Peres at the height of his need to see, to know, which was until then expressed in the dialogue of the ego with the object.

Lacan returns to the prophetic writing on the wall when he comments on the conclusion of the Irma dream. First Freud: “Not long before, when she was feeling unwell, my friend Otto had given her an injection of a preparation of propyl, propyls . . . propionic acid . . . trimethylamin (and I saw before me the formula for this printed in heavy type). . . . Injections of that sort ought not to be made so thoughtlessly. . . . And probably the sy-
ringe had not been clean.” Although this is perhaps going a bit too far, I do quite like the detail that the formula for trimethylamin is printed in “heavy type”—is, as Freud puts it, *fettgedruckt*—in which I can’t help but hear a slight emphasis on *Fett* qua surplus of flesh. In his own interpretation of the dream, Freud himself notes that trimethylamin was a substance—curiously, in the dream he refers to it as a body or *Körper*, though not explicitly as a fat one—with a possible link to the chemistry of sexual processes: “Thus this substance [dieser Körper] led me to sexuality, the factor to which I attributed the greatest importance in the origin of the nervous disorders which it was my aim to cure.”9 But as we know, this would be a cure that would intervene into the peculiar chemistry of the libido not by way of injections but rather by way of speech (after having experimented with hypnotism and even the laying on of hands). The language of the religions of revelation—religions based on the word and its transmission, a transmission that necessarily exceeds comprehension, or to use the famous formulation that Gershom Scholem coined to characterize the nature of revelation in Kafka’s universe: a transmission that remains valid in excess of a graspable meaning—all this allows Lacan to locate the symptom and its cure in the field of the signifier, in the discourse of the Other:

The dream, which culminated a first time, when the *ego* was there, with the horrific image I mentioned, culminates a second time at the end with a formula, with its *Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* aspect, on the wall, beyond what we cannot but identify as speech, universal rumor. . . . Like my oracle, the formula gives no reply whatsoever to anything. But the very manner in which it is spelt out, its enigmatic, hermetic nature, is in fact the answer to the question of the meaning of the dream. One can model it closely on the Islamic formula—*There is no other God but God*. There is no other word, no other solution to your problem, than the word.10

The point Lacan is making here is that we are libidinal beings, that we desire in a human rather than animal sense, because our enjoyment is entwined with the signifier, with titles and entitlements, with the various offices with which we come to be invested in the world, offices we are, in turn, called to occupy—zu *besetzen*. The strange surplus flesh that Freud came to call the libido and that constitutes the stuff of our erotic investments in the world is born from the fact that our being is compelled to unfold within a matrix of signifying representations, a field never quite made to the measure of the animal that we also are. It is this very lack of measure, this lack of fit, that
opens the wound correlative to our passions and that accounts for the peculiar stuff of which dreams—and nightmares—are made. What accounts for our capacities to experience sublimity and abjection—and the peculiar oscillation between the two extremes—is that we are always contending with a bit of surplus flesh that can never be fully figured out. Some part of the discourse of the Other into which we are inscribed is always, we might say, fettgedruckt.

I would like to propose that the urgency of the engagement with the dimension of the flesh that calls psychoanalysis into being, that converted Freud from being a man of medicine into what Merleau-Ponty characterized as the only true philosopher of the flesh, has a precise historical index and one located not so much in the history of the natural sciences but rather in the history of what Foucault referred to as governmentality. (Indeed, I propose that we hear this word as a complex wordplay: a shift in mentality, in the way embodied subjects are minded, must be correlated with a shift in the nature of governance and Herrschaft, of the elaboration of potestas and auctoritas in the space of political life.) My argument is, basically, that this visceral yet somehow virtual dimension of the flesh that begins to haunt everyday life in modernity needs to be grasped as what I refer to as the royal remains, the residues of the substance of the king’s sublime body that has, in the age of popular sovereignty, entered into the life of the people without ever fully being able to find its proper locus or fully binding Verfassung.

It was precisely in response to the pressures generated by this new dispensation that Michel Foucault felt compelled to reject the classical concepts of political theory—above all that of sovereignty—in favor of a new ensemble of concepts and modes of inquiry that would be more responsive, more attuned to the locations and dynamics of political power and authority in modernity. As he put it in a very concise passage in Discipline and Punish: “The body of the king, with its strange material and physical presence, with the force that he himself deploys or transmits to some few others, is at the opposite extreme of this new physics of power . . . : a physics of a relational and multiple power, which has its maximum intensity not in the person of the king, but in the bodies that can be individualized by these relations.” To take the example of Daniel Paul Schreber, we can certainly say that his body was individualized, rendered into a case, indeed into a kind of paradigmatic case,
by this new physics of power. I would, however, insist that insofar as the agents of the new physics of power—and here one should include not only Schreber’s famous father but also his psychiatrists—imagined themselves to be addressing the care and discipline of living bodies and the biological life and health of populations rather than ministering to the strange materiality of the flesh in its now horizontally dispersed locations, they did not and could not fully grasp the nature of their tasks. Given the messianic place he saw himself as occupying, Schreber might have said about these agents of the new biopolitics: they know not what they do. But this is also true, I think, for the great theorist of biopolitics; Foucault himself did not fully grasp that his new theory of power was responding to the metamorphosis of what Ernst Kantorowicz had so richly elaborated as the political theology of the king’s two bodies in medieval and early modern Europe, a metamorphosis that would compel the people to have to figure out what to do with the carnal dimension—with the flesh—of their sovereignty, with the stuff of a second, sublime body. The task was, we might say, to figure out how to figure these royal remains that now intruded so forcefully into the life of the people.

Against this background it makes sense that in the same seminar in which he comments on the inaugural dream of psychoanalysis, Lacan will have further recourse to the uncanny materiality of flesh and the crisis of its figuration. The context of these reflections is a commentary not on the Schreber case—that will come, as I have noted, the following year for Lacan—but rather on Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.” The first-person narrator tells of his recent preoccupation with mesmerism and his curiosity about the fact that no one had ever seemed to have investigated the boundary between life and death by means of this technique, that “no person had as yet been mesmerized in articulo mortis.” The narrator proposes to a terminally ill acquaintance, a certain M. Ernest Valdemar, to allow him to attempt the experiment with him. The prospects appeared good, for Valdemar had already shown himself to be susceptible to mesmerism. His advanced state of tubercular dissolution—it is referred to in the story as phthisis, meaning literally to waste away—furthermore made it possible to predict the time of his demise. When the time of death finally arrives, the narrator is called on the scene and brings Valdemar into a mesmeric trance that miraculously preserves a kind of animation beyond the point of death. The story reaches a climax at the moment when Valdemar answers the narrator’s question whether he was asleep with the following words: “Yes;—
no—I have been sleeping—and now—now—I am dead” (281). The narrator’s attempt to describe the voice uttering these words—he refers to the utterance as a distinct “syllabification”—is worth quoting at length:

There was no longer the faintest sign of vitality in M. Valdemar; and concluding him to be dead, we were consigning him to the charge of the nurses, when a strong vibratory motion was observable in the tongue. This continued for perhaps a minute. At the expiration of this period, there issued from the distended and motionless jaws a voice—such as it would be madness in me to attempt describing. There are, indeed, two or three epithets which might be considered as applicable to it in part; I might say, for example, that the sound was harsh, and broken and hollow. But the hideous whole is indescribable, for the simple reason that no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ear of humanity. There were two particulars, nevertheless, which I thought then, and still think, might fairly be stated as characteristic of the intonation—as well adapted to convey some idea of its unearthly peculiarity. In the first place, the voice seemed to reach our ears—at least mine—from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth. In the second place, it impressed me (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch. (280–81)

The narrator then relates that Valdemar had remained in this state of what we might call mesmeric undeadness for a period of seven months. At that point he and the attending physicians decide that they will attempt to break the trance, to free Valdemar from his somatic purgatory, in a word, to awaken him to his own death. As for what follows, the narrator writes, “it is quite impossible that any human being could have been prepared”: “As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of ‘dead! dead!’ absolutely bursting from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity” (283).

It is worth underlining that Lacan offers this commentary in conjunction with remarks on kingship and its demise, that he links the case of Valdemar to the decline of Oedipus Rex, that is, to Oedipus at Colonus, the tragedy of the entsetzlich dissolution of the once-great king who now finds himself reduced, as Lacan puts it, to “the scum of the earth, the refuse, the residue,
a thing empty of any plausible appearance.” What we are faced with here is, I am arguing, not the body in its utter vulnerability, not the precarious biological life we share with the animal and vegetable kingdoms, but rather the enigmatic substance of sovereignty at the historical moment at which it is uncoupled from its primary locus, the body of the king, and, so to speak, takes on a life of its own within the life of the people. We might say that the capacity to be eingesetzt and to be entsetzt belongs to every body, distinguishes the Leibhaftigkeit of every citizen-subject.

The French Revolution is, of course, universally seen to mark the period of transition from kings to people as the bearer of the principle of sovereignty. It makes sense, then, to begin a discussion of the modern reorganization of the physiology of the body politic and its impact on the arts—and my focus now turns to the visual arts, in particular—with a discussion of one of the most famous paintings to emerge out of the crucible of that historical turning point, and indeed one that itself appears to be dedicated to this very project of a reconfiguration of the flesh in the wake of the king’s—or better: the King’s—demise. My guide in this discussion will be T. J. Clark, who himself begins his critical history of visual modernism with a seemingly exorbitant claim about the status of the painting in question, Jacques-Louis David’s Death of Marat, in the history of modern art (I hope that it will become clear in the course of these reflections why and how this painting can serve as a kind of allegory for my project as a whole). In his Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism, Clark writes the following: “My candidate for the beginning of modernism—which at least has the merit of being obviously far-fetched—is 25 Vendémiaire Year 2 (16 October 1793, as it came to be known). That was the day a hastily completed painting by Jacques-Louis David, of Marat, the martyred hero of the revolution—Marat à son dernier soupir, David called it early on—was released into the public realm.”

Rather than trying to rehearse the full complexity of Clark’s stunning argument, I focus on what for me provides the real key to his claim about the singular status of the Death of Marat in his broadly conceived history of modernism. Concerning David’s own uncertain grasp of the stakes of his painting and the staging of its initial viewing, Clark writes that David at the very least “knew that picturing Marat was a political matter, part of a process of making [the Revolution] a Jacobin property. . . . He believed that a new
world was under construction. No doubt he saw in the cult of Marat the first forms of a liturgy and ritual in which the truths of the revolution itself would be made flesh—People, Nation, Virtue, Reason, Liberty” (29). The problem, however, was that such conversions, still possible within the context of the political theology of kingship (and the forms of picture making it sponsored), did not and perhaps could not succeed under revolutionary and postrevolutionary conditions. “Marat could not be made to embody the revolution because no one agreed about what the revolution was, least of all about whether Marat was its Jesus or its Lucifer. David’s picture—this is what makes it inaugural of modernism—tries to ingest this disagreement, and make it part of a new cult object” (38). But this answer too is insufficient. For it is not simply a matter of a provisional disagreement as to the meaning of events, but rather of an impasse affecting the possibility of converting events—and these events in particular—into representative images and bodies that would convincingly incarnate their truths. The problem is that the events in question put under pressure the entire apparatus of representation in all its complex and intersecting meanings. And it is this impasse that, as Clark puts it, forms the gate through which contingency comes to invade painting.

What, as Clark puts it, “changed the circumstances of picturing for good” (46) was, precisely, the entrance of the people onto the stage of power formerly occupied by the monarch: “That is to say, [the revolution] tried to put one kind of sovereign body in place of another. And the body had somehow to be represented without its either congealing into a new monarch or splitting into an array of vital functions, with only instrumental reason to bind them together” (47). Contingency, Clark concludes, “is just a way of describing the fact that putting the People in place of the King cannot ultimately be done. The forms of the social outrun their various incarnations” (47). This means that there is a great deal more at stake here than a provisional disagreement as to the meaning of events. It is rather a question of a fundamental impasse affecting the concept and procedures of representation. The task was to put forth a body that would, as it were, incarnate the now empty place of the king, the figure that had traditionally been charged with corporeally representing the subject for all other subjects of the realm. The task would be, in a word, to incarnate in some ostensibly new way the excarnated principle of sovereignty: “Marat . . . had to be made to stand for the People. By now the enormity of the task should be clear: not just that Marat was such a disputed object, pulled to and fro by the play of factions (though
this indeed is part of the problem), but that at a deeper level any body was inadequate to what had now to be done. Or any technique of representation. That representation was henceforth a technique was exactly the truth that had not to be recognized” (47).

The real tour de force of Clark’s reading of the *Death of Marat* consists in his account of the ways in which David’s painting ends up succeeding at bringing this fundamental impasse to a commanding painterly presence, one that evokes, precisely, what I have characterized as the spectral yet visceral dimension of the flesh no longer figured and contained by means of the royal physiology—by the king’s two bodies. For Clark, the locus of the flesh is not exactly where we might assume it to be, that is, in Marat’s wounded body, but rather in the large, empty upper half of David’s canvas or, at the very least, where the one seems to extend or metamorphose into the other. As Clark puts it, David’s treatment of the body “seems to make Marat much the same substance—the same abstract material—as the empty space above him. The wound is as abstract as the flesh” (36, emphasis added). The flesh that can no longer be figured in the body of the king becomes, in a word, the abstract material out of which the painting is largely made. The empty upper half of the painting stands in for a missing and, indeed, impossible representation of the people: “It embodies the concept’s absence, so to speak. It happens upon representation as technique. It sets its seal on Marat’s unsuitability for the work of incarnation” (47). The scumbled surface forming the upper half of the painting thus no longer functions as a simple absence but rather as a positive, even oppressive presence, “something abstract and unmotivated, which occupies a different conceptual space from the bodies below it. This produces, I think, a kind of representational deadlock, which is the true source of the *Marat*’s continuing hold on us” (48). This is, Clark continues, the “endless, meaningless objectivity produced by paint not quite finding its object, symbolic or otherwise, and therefore making do with its own procedures” (48).

Clark goes on to link this apparent failure to a kind of shame that will forever haunt modernism; we might even say that the abstract material out of which the upper half of the painting is made is just the ectoplastic substance of this haunting: “In a sense . . . I too am saying that the upper half is a display of technique. But display is too neutral a word: for the point I am making, ultimately, is that technique in modernism is a kind of shame: something that asserts itself as the truth of picturing, but always against picturing’s best and most desperate efforts” (48). In David, this shame emerges
precisely at the point and in the space where “‘People’ ought to appear, as a kind of aura or halo” (48). What appears at the missing place of the new sovereign body is rather a kind of dream work made painterly flesh in the pure activity of painting; the empty upper half of the image forms not so much a vacancy as the site of an excess of pressure, a signifying stress that opens onto a vision of painting as pure drive: “And yet the single most extraordinary feature of the picture . . . is its whole upper half being empty. Or rather (here is what is unprecedented), not being empty, exactly, not being a satisfactory representation of nothing or nothing much—of an absence in which whatever the subject is has become present—but something more like a representation of painting, of painting as pure activity. Painting as material, therefore. Aimless. In the end detached from any one representational task. Bodily. Generating (monotonous) orders out of itself, or maybe out of ingrained habit. A kind of automatic writing” (45). My own sense is that the shame at issue here pertains not simply or even foremost to painting’s failure to reach its object, to what Clark here characterizes as a distinctively modernist stuckness in technique, artifice, mediation, self-reflexivity, and so on—a shame, ultimately, of painting’s nominalism, its moving within a frictionless universe untethered from lived life and the things that make it matter; it pertains, rather, to an almost defiling contact with the flesh that one had torn free from the king’s sublime physiology and claimed for the people. Among other things, David’s painting shows us just how difficult it would be to redeem, to make good on this claim. To put it in the form of a paradox, we might also say that the history of European art from this point on will in some sense be dedicated to the task of figuring out abstraction, this eventful opening onto the nonfigurative understood as the abstract materiality of once representative figures and bodies. Put somewhat differently, the normative pressures proper to painting—the pressures pushing toward what would be recognizable as excellence in painting—was mutating in response to a radical transformation of the political and social form of the normative pressures informing lives more generally.

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In this context, I’d like to recall the two moments of extreme intensity achieved in Freud’s famous dream of Irma’s injection, both of which Lacan characterized as a kind of prophetic (and perhaps, in some sense, automatic) writing on the wall. The first was reached in the image of the inflamed tis-
sues of Irma’s throat, the second in the letters of a formula that Freud sees in the dream, one he associates with the chemistry of human sexuality. These two elements are, in a way, also present in David’s painting: the first in the form of Marat’s wounds (and sickly, puffy skin more generally), the second in the pieces of paper filled with writing that stand in a kind of visual symmetry with respect to Marat’s martyred, Christlike body. Clark, for his part, places considerable emphasis on these bits of writing, seeing them as more than a means for the idealization of Marat as exemplary friend of the people. For Clark, these bits of writing are the place where, to use a Lacanian location, the signifier falls into the pictorial space whose meanings it is meant to authorize and becomes an object among other objects, one that juts forward beyond the picture plane and toward the spectator with a peculiar insistence. Rather than sealing the meaning of the image, these discursive bits function instead as a thing-like surplus of script that, as it were, objects to any claim as to the legibility of the historical situation. Apropos of the words just out of sight in Marat’s letter and presumed to be “de la patrie,” Clark asks, “But is there a final phrase at all? Of course there looks to be something; but it is so scrappy and vestigial, an extra few words where there really is no room left for anything, that the reader continually double-takes, as if reluctant to accept that writing, of all things, can decline to this state of utter visual elusiveness. Surely if I look again—and look hard enough—the truth will out. For spatially, this is the picture’s starting point. It is closeness incarnate” (40, emphasis added). Clark adds that these bits of painted writing “become the figure of the picture’s whole imagining of the world and the new shape it is taking. . . . The boundaries between the discursive and the visual are giving way, under some pressure the painter cannot quite put his finger on, though he gets close” (42).16 (We should recall here, once again, that the bit of writing in Freud’s Irma dream was fettgedruckt, thereby linking it to what Freud first spotted in Irma’s throat as a stain of inflamed flesh that has no business being there.)

But as Clark has so persuasively argued, it is in the swirling, vertiginous void that fills the picture’s upper half that this pressure finds its proper place—its nonresting place—in the visual field. The spectral materiality of the flesh that forms at the impossible jointure of body and letter, soma and signifier, enjoyment and entitlement—a dimension that can neither be fully imagined nor, finally, be spelled out in a formula—finds its inaugural modern figuration in that dense, agitated, painterly writing on the wall. Clark is right, then, to see in the painting the opening onto a new aesthetic di-
mension and one that has a very precise historical index. What makes modernism is that its basic materials are compelled to engage with and, as it were, model the dimension of the flesh that is exacerbated to an unbearable degree by the representational deadlock situated at the transition from royal to popular sovereignty. What, in historical experience, can no longer be elevated, sublimated, by way of codified practices of picture making to the dignity of moral allegory, introduced into a realm of institutionally—and, ultimately, transcendentally—authorized meanings, now achieves its sublimity in a purely immanent fashion, that is, in the various ways in which the vicissitudes of this abstract yet inflamed materiality itself becomes the subject matter of the arts.

I would like to emphasize here the difference between the flesh qua partial object, on the one hand, and parts of the body functioning (or not functioning) in harmony within a discrete organism, on the other. To put it in rather oversimplified art historical terms, what Clark describes apropos of the Death of Marat demonstrates that the dissolution of the image of Leviathan that forms the famous frontispiece of Hobbes’s book on sovereignty—and of the form of sovereignty represented by that image—does not simply yield a multitude, a swarming, unruly mass of body parts (in this case, individuals) adrift and uncoupled from any form or organization. The mass that is unleashed by way of the excarnation of the sovereign, the dissolution of his sublime body, is one that now, so to speak, metastasizes within each individual, one that can indeed crowd out the self from within. To put it another way, what Freud discovered was that individual psychology and the theory of the libido are always, at a profound level, a theory of masses in the multiple meanings of that word.

The editors of a volume of essays on the “republican body” have put the problem I have been elaborating here quite succinctly: “With democracy the concept of the nation replaced the monarch and sovereignty was dispersed from the king’s body to all bodies. Suddenly every body bore political weight. . . . With the old sartorial and behavioral codes gone, bodies were less legible, and a person's place in the nation was unclear.” My own argument has, of course, been less about the transformation of social codes than about the agitations of the flesh brought about by this shift, the nature of the matter that accounts for the new political weight of every citizen. I have argued that
biopolitics, psychoanalysis, and a variety of modern and modernist aesthetic practices have all struggled with this dimension, with the materiality of this uncanny mass or matter each in different fashion, each with its own degree of comprehension and incomprehension as to the issue at issue in what now issues forth from the bodies of its creaturely citizens.

The ambiguity and ambivalence that attaches to this issue is, perhaps, best captured by the German word that Freud favored when he spoke of the excitations or stimuli that circulate in the social and psychic spheres: Reiz. One thinks, for example, of Freud’s notion of the Reizschiitz that, in his view, functions as a kind of callus on the ego-skin and that protects the mind from becoming overwhelmed by stimulus, by Reizüberflutung. The danger, we might say, is that the spaces of modern life have become too reizvoll, too full of something that threatens psychic life with an overproximity that turns what is charming into the stuff of anxiety and repulsion. And in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud characterizes the drive as “the psychical representation of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation, as contrasted with a ‘stimulus,’ which is set up by single excitations coming from without.”

In my reading, one would have to replace the term innersomatisch or “endosomatic” with a formulation that would capture the fact that the soma at issue is at some level extraindividual, that the excitations at issue belong to the larger normative framework of the bodies that come to matter within them. So the next time someone characterizes you or something you have achieved as reizvoll, you now know that this is not entirely a compliment: it might ultimately mean that your flesh is showing or, perhaps better, some bit of flesh is showing on and through you as something that sticks out, that doesn’t quite fit into or fully belong to your body no matter how much you might try to get it to fit or into shape.

**Epilogue**

Because the project from which these remarks have been taken was at some level really an attempt to lay the groundwork for a reading of Rainier Maria Rilke’s great novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (the last quarter of the book is an extended reading of the novel), I’d like to end my essay by, as it were, giving Rilke the last word.

Rilke’s novel—one of the first great urban novels in German—tells the story of a now-impoverished twenty-eight-year-old Danish aristocrat who is struggling to become a writer; he does so in large part by exposing himself
to the Reizüberflutung of the streets of Paris. What can’t fail to strike the reader of this novel, which is composed of seventy-one discrete notebook entries of varying length and complexity, is the proliferation of passages describing bodies that seem unable to contain their insides, somatic pressures and protuberances that push against the boundaries of veins, organs, and skin, internal masses that expand and crowd out the self from within just as the urban masses crowd in upon Rilke’s protagonist from without. The bodies at issue in these passages—and die Masse that issues forth from them—are taken from various thematic complexes in the novel: bodies encountered on the streets of Paris; bodies recalled from Malte’s childhood in various Danish manor houses or Herrenhäusern (including his own body); bodies recalled from literature and history, among them those of a series of late medieval and early modern sovereigns. When asked by his Polish translator about the links between some of these thematic complexes, especially those between these suffering sovereigns, Malte’s childhood memories, and his contemporary experiences in Paris, Rilke responded that in the novel, “there can be no question of specifying and detaching [zu präzisieren und zu verselbstständigen] the manifold evocations. The reader should not be in communication with their historical or imaginary reality, but through them with Malte’s experience: who is himself involved with them only as, on the street, one might let a passer-by, might let a neighbor, say, impress one. The connection,” Rilke continues, “lies in the circumstance that the particular characters conjured up register the same vibration-rate of vital intensity [Schwingungszahl der Lebensintensität] that vibrates in Malte’s own nature.”

Among these evocations one finds, for example, the description of the tormented body of King Charles VI of France who suffered some forty bouts of madness; the state of this royal flesh recalls Kafka’s description of the wound on the side of the young patient in “The Country Doctor”:

It was in those days when strangers with blackened faces would from time to time attack him in his bed in order to tear from him the shirt which had rotted into his ulcers, and which for a long time now he had considered part of himself. It was dark in the room, and they ripped off the foul rags from under his rigid arms. One of them brought a light, and only then did they discover the purulent sore on his chest where the iron amulet had sunk in, because every night he pressed it to him with all the strength of his ardor; now it lay deep in his flesh, horribly precious, in a pearly border of pus, like some miracle-working bone in the hollow of a
reliquary. Hardened men had been chosen for the job, but they weren’t immune from nausea when the worms, disturbed, stood up and reached toward them from the Flemish fustian and, falling out of the folds, began to creep up their sleeves.\textsuperscript{20}

It is crucial that Malte introduces the figure of the mad king while considering his own descent—his own deposition or \textit{Ent-Setzen}—to the place of \textit{die Fortgeworfenen}, the figures he encounters on the streets of Paris whose only distinction is to lack every distinction or status, whose only entitlement is that of enjoying their bare life, a life often described with reference to their excessive and agitated flesh. The \textit{Lebensintensität} that is vibrating along the same frequencies in the suffering sovereigns evoked in the novel, in Malte’s own body, and in those of the outcasts of Paris, is one located not in the biological body but rather in the virtual yet uncannily carnal dimension of sovereignty, in the flesh that has migrated from the body of the king into the life of the people and whose sublimity or greatness—whose \textit{Grösse}—now pushes against the skin of every citizen. It thus makes sense that at the very moment that Malte seeks a cure for the pressures—the internal and external Reizüberflutung that is beginning to drive him mad—among the psychiatrists of the Salpêtrière, he is forced to recall an earlier encounter with this dimension, one that clearly surpasses the capacities of the country doctor from his childhood, one in which the figure of the sovereign master or Herr was already caught up in a kind of chronic state of exception or perhaps better, \textit{Entsetzen}:

And then, as I listened to the warm, flaccid babbling on the other side of the door: then, for the first time in many, many years, it was there again. What had filled me with my first, deep horror, when I was a child and lay in bed with fever: the Big Thing. That’s what I had always called it, when they all stood around my bed and felt my pulse and asked me what had frightened me: the Big Thing. And when they sent for the doctor and he came and tried to comfort me, I would just beg him to make the Big Thing go away. . . . But he was like all the others. He couldn’t take it away, though I was so small then and it would have been so easy to help me. And now it was there again. (61)

Malte goes on to describe in detail the return of this somatic sublime dimension of embodiment:

Now it was there. Now it was growing out of me like a tumor, like a second head, and was a part of me, although it certainly couldn’t belong
to me, because it was so big. It was there like a large dead animal which, while it was alive, used to be my hand or my arm. And my blood flowed through me and through it, as through one and the same body. And my heart had to beat harder to pump blood into the Big Thing: there was barely enough blood. And the blood entered the Big Thing unwillingly and came back sick and tainted. But the Big Thing swelled and grew over my face like a warm bluish boil, and grew over my mouth, and already my last eye was hidden by its shadow. (61–62)

The question with which Rilke leaves us is whether we are up to the challenges posed by this dimension, *diese neue Größe*, that presents a surplus of immanence that cannot be mastered by the available sciences of immanence, a surplus that seems to call less for new and better science or medicine than for new concepts of politics, community, citizenship, and subjectivity.

**Notes**


1 Kafka, “A Country Doctor.”

2 Kafka, “A Country Doctor.”

3 This exposure to an excess of demand is figured at the end of the story as the doctor’s nakedness and sense of irremediable loss, betrayal, and errancy: “Naked, exposed to the frost of this unhappiest of ages, with an earthly carriage, unearthly horses. I, an old man, wander aimlessly around. My fur coat is hanging at the back of the carriage, but I cannot reach it, and not one of this agile rabble of patients lifts a finger. Betrayed! Betrayed! A false ringing of the night bell once answered—it can never be made good again” (Kafka, “A Country Doctor,” 65).

4 See Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.


7 I am referring to my study of the case, Santner, *My Own Private Germany*.

8 Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, 154–55. The reference to the Book of Daniel is relevant not only because it is itself a book of dreams, prophetic signs, and interpretations, but also because it links such matters to the fate of kings and questions of sovereignty. Before giving King Belshazzar his interpretation of the enigmatic writing on the wall, Daniel—the name means *God is my judge*—recalls the fate of Nebuchadnezzar in terms that prefigure Shakespeare’s series of “sad stories of kings,” perhaps most centrally,
that of King Lear: “But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him; he was driven from among men, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild asses; he was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of men, and sets over it whomever he will” (Daniel 5:20–21). Daniel then provides his prophetic interpretation of the enigmatic signifiers that had appeared to Belshazzar: “This is the interpretation of the matter: mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians” (Daniel 5:26–28).

9 Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, 140.
10 Lacan, The Ego in Freud’s Theory, 158.
11 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 208, emphasis added.
14 Clark, Farewell to an Idea, 15. Subsequent references appear in the text.
15 In an earlier formulation, Clark refers to this process as that of making Marat a totem (26). Here one should no doubt recall Freud’s hypothesis of the emergence of totemism out of the murder of the primal father and the incorporation of his powers by way of the ritual repetition of the totem meal—the symbolic enjoyment of his sublime flesh.
16 The assignat visible in the image adds an additional twist to the “signifying stress” elaborated by Clark. It introduces the problem of the “backing” of paper money—by gold, land, some piece of the real—at this crucial historical juncture (see 48–50), the capacity, that is, of paper currency to float free of value.
17 Melzer and Norberg, From the Royal to the Republican Body, 10–11, emphasis added.
19 Letter of November 10, 1925, in Rilke, Letters, 371, emphasis added.