

The Shameful Mysteries: Carnal Remains

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No Boundaries?

A couple of years ago, the *New York Times* helpfully informed us that, at least among celebrities, mystery was over.¹ We have no more stars like Greta Garbo, whose desire to be alone sustained her mystique and was no small part of her allure. Instead, we have a celebrity culture of maximum revelation—and thus, as Jean Baudrillard has reminded us, of minimum seductiveness.² A sort of Warholian democratization has gone along with this openness. Social media and self-absorption allow any of us some small pretense of celebrity status; we can now expose as much of ourselves online as our service providers permit. It is certainly not universally true that everyone, even everyone in the first world, is busily typing up personal blogs and posting iphone photos. Many of us still prefer not to—but given the ease of putting ourselves on virtual display, that many may be a minority. (Some degree of such exposure seems even to be demanded—what professor *doesn't* have a web page?) Rather than draw interest by mystery, by keeping secrets, we try to draw it by display, in a self-revelation that can become nearly frantic. Bear with me: this particular de-mystifying, silly and superficial though it seems, really does bring us into connection with mysticism—because within and despite it, something remains, nonetheless. And that something “in” us, resisting the revelation of publicity while it troubles the very possibility of inwardness, may reveal to us a deeper mystery, with deeper theological implications.

The urge for display marks both a continuation of and a shift in the demands of knowability and self-exposure. Scholars, most famously Michel Foucault, often trace these demands to the monastic practice of confession, later extended into a widespread pastoral practice inclusive of lay people. Early confession is particularly a confession of the flesh—its desires, its persistent habits, and its intrusions upon the monk's urge for purity and transparency, for a body perfect in practice and in

¹ Ben Brantley, “Whatever Happened to Mystery?” *New York Times*, July 16, 2010. Archived at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/18/fashion/18mystery.html?_r=0>.

² Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991)—the idea is developed throughout the text.

knowability—for a body that can be told completely, put entirely into words with no remainder.³ Of course, such an urge is impossible; there is a silence, a secret to the flesh that eludes our telling. As Foucault notes, the power of demanding and drawing out confessions is a vital element in the very construction of the subject—in other words, the subject is drawn out into speech *as* it is interiorly constructed.⁴ Eventually, confession extends even into realms where we might have thought it impossible. As Michel de Certeau writes:

The clergy campaigns of the late Middle Ages developed procedures that made ‘mystical’ experiences ‘return’ to the fold of the visible institution. The instrument common to these methods . . . seems to have been the confession, which appeared in two complementary forms. One drew the secrets of private life into the realm of the Church. . . ; the other showed the public the ‘truth’ hidden within the institutions. . . .
One exploited the avowal, the other the act of showing.⁵

Here the private and the public cross in order to make publicize-able what had seemed “private,” both invisible and unhearable (though not necessarily inaudible), even beyond the bounds of language and display. Mysticism, returned to the fold or not, creates particular problems for the practice of confession and for confessional subject construction. It crosses the boundaries of the verbally constructed subject in some instances by troubling the possibilities of verbalization, leading language to stuttering or silence (or poetry); in other instances, it entails the dissolution of the subject itself, with or into the divine, such that there is no one to confess, and no one’s proper experience to describe. Despite the efforts to draw mystical “experience” into the publicity of confession, mysticism’s tendency to problematize, all at once, the subject, the experience, and the possibility of speaking thoroughly destabilizes both confession’s construction of the subject and its modes of crossing the bounds of that subject. That is, it unsettles the sense of a clear private interior (both physical and psychological) that can be clearly publicly exteriorized (told).

³ An important source for this idea is Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Brown cites Cassian, *Collationes* 7.2, 245 and 12.16, 145. In English in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series vol. 11: Cassian: Collations of the Fathers, Sulpitius Severus; Life of St. Martin of Tours, Dialogues, Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff (Dorset: T. & T. Clark, 1980). Brown writes, “Sexual fantasies were like signals on a screen. They registered processes that lay out of sight, in the depths of the self. They informed the monk of the movement of forces in himself that lay beyond his immediate consciousness. Only when the more faceless drives of egotism and rage were stilled would the monk come to sense a delicious freedom from sexual fantasy, associated with the state of total *purity of heart*. Until that time, sexual temptations continued to warn him that these drives still lingered unconsciously, within his soul.” *The Body and Society*, 421.

⁴ See especially Michel Foucault, “Sexuality and Power,” (1978) trans. Richard A. Lynch, in *Religion and Culture*, selected and ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge), 115-30, and “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” (1980), transcript by Thomas Keenan and Mark Blasius, in *Religion and Culture*, 158-81.

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 87.

Confession is an important cultural step in both making “us” and drawing “us” out. It is a difficult process, in which one’s own resistance must often be overcome. But we seem now to be long past the slight reluctance to speak that is inherent in confession, even past the need for indirect methods such as dream interpretation and free association in psychoanalysis, and well into an inability to retain a moment’s silence. To keep ourselves interesting, we are urged to tell secrets, thus to undo them; expression becomes a demand, but it is now a demand that we make upon ourselves, and one that meets with little resistance. That pressure to exhibit is not simply the pastoral pressure of auricular confession (indeed, this demand in its original form is no longer culturally very strong); it can also be a part of self-construction that gives visibility a central role. This is particularly a visibility of the *self*: notice how often those Facebook photos really are books, or albums, or faces, the image focused upon a face without background or context, as if there were nothing beyond, as if self became world, not by expansion, but by the contraction and disappearance of the outside. This urge to display oneself may in some manner be connected to the ubiquity of contemporary surveillance: if I am always to be seen, why not control the image? Or, perhaps, if I am always to be seen, why not insure my existence by maximizing my visibility? Even here, however, something eludes both self-display and surveillance technology, in the visible as much as in the spoken, just as mysticism continued (and even continues) to irritate and elude pastoral and ecclesial regulation through speaking and hearing.

So we must ask again: beyond confession, in self-presentation that no longer has to be actively elicited, can any mystery remain? The question must, as we noted earlier, seem a bit facile. The “mystery” of mysticism is rich, complex, theological. The “mystery” of an aloof celebrity is not. The “mystery” lost in self-publicity seems to fall closer to the latter. I want to argue, nonetheless, for what I think are important connections. Both varieties of mystery depend upon a sense that knowledge has real limits—that there are not just matters that are currently unknown, which we eagerly and often rightly pursue, but matters that do not belong to our knowledge, of which we can catch only the most indirect and enigmatic glimpses, yet which enrich the very knowing, speaking, showing and experiencing that they somehow elude. In that sense, boundaries themselves become problematic and unstable, between subject and object, known and unknown, inside and out, self and other. And I want to argue, too, that this is a mystery inherent simply in carnal living, a mystery shown to us—indirectly, again, and evasively—by certain strange truths of the flesh.

Exploring the question of boundary first will help us to understand what we might call the mystery of flesh, a mystery persistent even in the face of self-exposure. To think that mystery, in turn, will require us to consider the doubleness of the sacred, of awe and the awful, which we would so often rather tidy away. There is another doubleness, though, that we must overcome rather than restore. Despite broad rejections of dualism, we tend to assume that mystery belongs to the immaterial—mind, maybe, or spirit. Certainly the minds of others are to no small extent unknowable, but we have also recognized, from Augustine through psychoanalysis, our opacity even to ourselves. Conversely, we still tend to think of

body as simple matter, though philosophers and scientists alike are rapidly moving beyond this sense of matter as truly being simple at all. This simplistic mind-body split is, of course, problematic, and has indeed been problematized for centuries now. Problematic too, however, are reductive responses that make all into mind or spirit (a very rare move, particularly after the 17th century) or into matter (a far more common one, perhaps increasingly so). A nonreductive reading of flesh requires the restoration of mystery. Mystery is, I would argue, fundamental to flesh, however determinedly we try to demystify it; flesh is in turn fundamental to a sense of mystery that takes seriously the paradoxical pull of the sacred.

Crossing the Lines

Both boundaries and their blurring or opening are important to a sense of mystery and to mysticism, in which we seem to see or feel or know what nonetheless eludes subjective experience or knowledge. Yet it might well seem, if we feel that boundary-blur is somehow desirable (or even just interesting), that *demystification* is better than any sort of sustained unknowing in the undoing of interior/exterior divisions. Both the complete telling of the ideal confession⁶ and the pure visibility of discipline and self-display alike would seem wholly to exteriorize us, doing away with the myth of some private interiority where secrecy might be. We even use the language of “no boundaries” to describe an excessive exteriorizing or an exceptional eagerness for fusion. This, however, is its own form of reductionism; not the troubling of bounds, but their obliteration into a single term, whether that term is outside or in.

In *The Ego and the Flesh*, Jacob Rogozinski remarks:

Nothing today resists the becoming-image of the Spectacle—neither sex, nor death, nor the worst abjection, with the exception of this blind stain that bores holes into the most narcissistic of all the spectacles. Whatever escapes its grasp still has to be inscribed *in* the image itself. The greatest painters had long ago understood this: a picture has value only because of the place that it allows for the trace of the Invisible. Only in this way can the painter displace the narcissism of vision.⁷

The “blind stain,” the unseeable in the image, escapes grasp not only in the image, I (and Rogozinski) would argue, but in us. The demand that all secrets be told and shown, all mysteries demystified (that is, obliterated), is also an attempt to rid ourselves of the Invisible in the Visible, the silent in speech—the mysterious in the possibility of knowledge. Again, rather than troubling the boundary between interior and exterior, making it strange and feeling upon it the tug of the impossible, we have

⁶ Or nearly ideal. The perfect confessee would be one who has told so completely, and through telling retrained his or her body so purely, that there is nothing left to confess. It would thus be entirely silent; perfection in this case is a paradox.

⁷ Jacob Rogozinski, *The Ego and the Flesh: An Introduction to Egoanalysis*, trans. Robert Vallier (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), 204.

in this demand an attempt at a pure exteriorization. Such attempts fail, of course; we can make ourselves wholly outside only if “outside” still has a sense—for which some oppositional “within” is required.

A more complex and promising kind of boundary trouble emerges, however, in psychoanalytically based theories of abjection and remainder, such as Rogozinski’s, or Julia Kristeva’s in her influential *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. These are distinctly slippery concepts, perhaps by their very sense; they attempt to conceptualize precisely what eludes, cannot be caught up, or will not stay in place. Rogozinski writes: “The remainder is the untouchable of my touch as well as the invisible of my vision and the inaudible of my hearing: it can never be intuitively understood, nor will I ever encounter it in the world as one element among others in my daily experience.”⁸ Our means of knowing, “inside” or “out,” are frustrated. This does not necessarily make the remainder an object of mystical thought or experience or discourse, to be sure, but the resonance at least is intriguing. We encounter the problem of any mystery, however: given this necessary hiddenness, what can we possibly know; what can we say? Rogozinski’s understanding of the remainder is not precisely Kristeva’s; he is more engaged in questions of ego formation in relation to embodiment, she in questions of maternity and relation (obviously, these sets of concerns are not wholly disconnected). For both, however, the concept is simultaneously powerful and elusive, and for both, it engages with boundaries.

In Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, the discussion of remainder emerges out of the consideration of abjection. There is something within abjection, Kristeva writes, that

... cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.⁹

“Beside himself”—neither, or both, within or without; self, but without self-containment or even the certainty of individuality (a certainty linked to pride, as if it could save us from abjection and its accompanying shame). Desire, like knowledge, is drawn but not quite attached, not quite grasping—not even sure in which direction to turn.

Abjection is itself a problem of crossable boundaries, and of things that seem to want to be on the wrong side of them. Kristeva points out:

⁸ Rogozinski, 173.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Rudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

Taking a closer look at defilement, as Mary Douglas has done, one ascertains the following. In the first place, filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin. ‘Matter issuing from [the orifices of the body] is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spit, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. . . . The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins.’¹⁰

Abjection, the quality and the place of the defiled and defiling, is associated not merely with shame, but with the puzzles of leaving out—or expelling—and taking in. It is associated with what we cannot or will not include (such as disgusting foods), with what we expel (such as bodily fluids), and with what we shut out even from our awareness as best we can, such as death.¹¹ We exclude until we cannot, until, as Kristeva has it, the border crosses everything.¹² But this cannot mean that everything is included: rather, it means that inclusion and exclusion have lost their senses.

Certainly this is more interesting than a reduction, and it is no demystification—but still it must scarcely seem mystical. If anything, we seem to have found, here, the very inverse of the sacred: a boundary crossing from within to without, rendering the abject material repulsive; or a repulsiveness rendering material that might ordinarily be taken from without to within (such as food) unsuitable. This sounds like neither an illumination of the soul from within nor a dissolution into a loving divine. But the connections are closer than we might think.

Kristeva reminds us of a key source in understanding why. Georges Bataille, she writes, “links abjection to ‘the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding.’”¹³ Bataille is among the first, and the most forceful, to have noted the importance of the left-over, of (what) remains, particularly against philosophers’ near-constant urge to create totalizing systems. Addressing himself to an audience of not yet existent people who are “comparatively decomposed,

¹⁰ Ibid., 69. Citing Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 121.

¹¹ “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection.” Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2. Cf. “The corpse . . . is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. . . . refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death.” Ibid., 3.

¹² Kristeva continues: “There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.” Ibid., 3.

¹³ Ibid., 64.

amorphous, and even violently expelled from every form”¹⁴—in Kristevan terms, to the abject—Bataille argues that “foreign bodies” include not only those of the debased, but those of kings. “Primitive” subjects, he declares, “adore and loathe, . . . cover with honors and narrowly confine” their kings; the king “is an object of transports of exaltation to the extent that the transports facilitate his excretion (his peremptory expulsion).” We take pleasure in expulsion and even in excrement, but it is “only . . . the rapid (and violent) pleasure of voiding this matter and no longer seeing it.”¹⁵ Bataille does not make the point here, but thus, albeit indirectly, the heterogeneous and excessive is linked to the psychoanalytic pain of arousal, in which we find “forepleasure” only in anticipation of the release of arousal’s tension—and indeed, there is a sense of abjection in insisting upon the excesses of arousal, beyond what release might require: such is perversion. Bataille adds that in social development, excretion is the force opposed to appropriation, and is visible in realms of expenditure—in religion, sexual activity, irrationality generally. Thus he notes “the elementary *subjective* identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, fecal matter) and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine, or marvelous: a half-decomposed cadaver fleeing through the night in a luminous shroud.”¹⁶

In his considerations of this “heterology,” Bataille is resolutely honest about repulsive attraction. He is fascinated by the fluids that cross the bounds of our bodies—tears, blood, urine, semen—but also by wounds or lacerations, where we lose the confident sense of self-containment, and which are, he declares, the only possible sites of *communication*, not least communication with the divine. Communication inevitably entails disruption, even rupture. “God—to follow human custom here—is everything that might happen, taken as a whole. The act of breaking up this apparent whole itself takes place at the level of appearance. The crucifixion, for example, is a wound by which believers communicate with God.”¹⁷ At the site of the wound, the play of inclusion and exclusion seems to turn inside out, not simply to include the excluded or vice versa, but to trouble the binary itself. Kristeva writes:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* nothing other than abject.¹⁸

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, “The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade: An Open Letter to my Comrades,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 91-102, at 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92-94.

¹⁷ Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice, Calif.: The Lapis Press, 1988), 31.

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

This sense of a constitutive, necessary impossibility is at the heart of Rogozinski's reading of the remainder. In his theory of the construction of the ego, the I is given to itself, calls and re-calls itself, knows its own voice (in an intriguing echo of Gregory of Nyssa, for whom resurrection depends upon the body's matter knowing and drawing to its own). This does not, however, mean that the self is singular, self-same, and enduring—all longstanding claims about the ego that Rogozinski wants to reject. Rather, the self-calling I touches upon and is touched by a strangeness, a break—but this strangeness, this throwing into question, is constitutive of it rather than transcendent to it. In the beginning, there is multiplicity. "But how can we be sure," he asks,

... that it is always *the same ego* that returns? It ... seems impossible to affirm the multiple without throwing the very existence of the ego into question. The contemporary deconstructions of the ego rest on the same prejudice, the same naïve certainty that the ego can be only one unique Subject. ... This common prejudice must now be questioned.¹⁹

The same and not the same, the I is wounded (that is, broken or disrupted) at its heart, even pulverized, susceptible to communication.

Centrally Strange

The space of a break and a strangeness, the space of many-ness, allows shifting and unsettling. The question is always a little bit strange, since it must include what we don't know—why else, after all, would we ask it? It is to itself that the ego calls itself, not to some other, but that self is strange at heart.

Self-strangeness, something "other" that is no less "me," has quite a long history. In a haunting passage from his *Confessions*, Augustine writes after the death of a beloved friend, "My heart was black with grief. . . . My eyes were restless looking for him, but he was not there. I hated all places because he was not in them. They could not say, 'He will come soon,' as they would in his life when he was absent. I became a great enigma to myself."²⁰ *Great enigma* here is *magna quaestio*, a great question, in the sense in which question is related to quest, to inquiry, seeking, searching. Augustine's "I" had become, in this strange void created in the *me* by a friend's death, all puzzlement and restlessness. *Our heart is restless until it rests in you*, he says to his God in the book's very first paragraph. But neither he nor that God ends up being very restful at all. The questions change, but the querying questing continues.

Augustine becomes a great query when his sense of self, his ability to call himself, is everywhere cut through by the echo of the emptiness he finds throughout his world, an absence stronger than the presences it haunts. But there is a prior otherness already haunting what seems to be his interiority: "If you are already in

¹⁹ Rogozinski, *The Ego and the Flesh*, 136.

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 4.4.

me, since otherwise I would not be, why do I cry to you to enter me?"²¹ The self is strange to itself, not because it is falsely and inauthentically alienated, but because it would not otherwise *be*, not without the strangeness that is in it and the absence that it surrounds. This strangeness is found both in the nightmare emptiness of a world absent a loved one and in the overabundance of a divine already "in me." No wonder we are restless. And it is not only our minds or souls or spirits that pace in this restlessness; Augustine is resolutely enfleshed—and after all, to quote a more modern source, the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego.²²

The self that calls and gives itself is, says Rogozinski, "endlessly put into question by some element X, a divergence or gap that destabilizes it."²³ So is it my flesh or not? Yes, it is and is not: "*it is of my flesh*, rooted in the immanence of my tactile sensings, given. And yet it continually resists this synthesis: it is what is given in my flesh as foreign to my flesh."²⁴ This haunting strangeness, itself indissociable from the flesh, is an original/alterity, a remainder that can be neither perfectly incorporated nor summarily rejected. The primal strangeness of the I is not alienation, but *aporia*. Augustine seeks in the external world for his God, but at first he seeks wrongly, as if God could be identified with the world's things. His God was with him, he says, even within him; yet Augustine, in a seeming prepositional impossibility, was not with God.²⁵ This unplaceable God, this absent friend, both work as unsettling remainders that are and are not the self; spaces necessarily at the heart of the self without ever quite being of it. The remainder haunts us, is often given to us anxiously, is always given mysteriously. Otherwise than Being, it is also an other to language, unsayable in speech.²⁶ This is a limit not only of language, but of our access to what is inaccessible in any direct fashion to intellect and senses alike. However, "certain phenomena can provide us with an indirect access to the remainder."²⁷ These phenomena are affectively intense, including love and hatred, desire and disgust—the very traits by which Kristeva has characterized abjection.

The "interior" of my-self is itself *aporetic*, not because of some transcendent element of the world, but because it is a great enigma *to itself*. The remainder is within us yet opens us. Rogozinski suggests that the body demands both an enveloping flesh and an opening to the world; the envelope is perforated. Thus we hear echoed Kristevan maternity, a maximum of life within placing itself beyond us. But we have to resist the notion that the corporeal self is first whole, then opened.

²¹ Ibid., 1.2.

²² Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 27. Rogozinski, citing this passage, adds, "Some weeks before his death, Merleau-Ponty wrote this sibylline note: 'Freud's philosophy is not a philosophy of the body but of the flesh—the unconscious—the ego (correlatives) to be understood on the basis of the flesh...as differentiations of one sole and massive adhesion to Being that is the flesh.' It must be possible, following Merleau-Ponty's clue, to reground the Freudian theory by understanding it 'on the basis of flesh,' a flesh that would no longer be considered a universal element of Being." Rogozinski, *The Ego and the Flesh*, 75.

²³ Ibid., 171.

²⁴ Ibid., 177.

²⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.27.

²⁶ Rogozinski, *The Ego and the Flesh*, 183.

²⁷ Ibid., 173.

Openness suggests the possibility of incorporation, but an unbearable vulnerability too—the impossibility of excluding with sufficient force. We may literalize the remainder as small separated bits of ourselves, objects that can excite both desire and disgust; we may project it in hate or in love. We re-incorporate the remainder constantly and incompletely. Our hearts are restless.

The divided unity that demands the persistence of that gap between flesh and remainder Rogozinski calls “instasy,” an immanence that nonetheless retains divergence. I am given myself, by myself, as an otherness more intimate than self, but not fused with it.²⁸ He writes:

God’s “emptying-out,” which the theologians have named his *kenosis*, his descent in flesh and his death on the Cross, are the condition of this invocation allowing him to call him by his Name. It is indeed the . . . story . . . of a living flesh that is disfigured and transfigured, that dies and is resuscitated—and it is the story of *our* flesh, our life, the intrigue of the ego and the remainder.

Rogozinski then asks, “Could what humans invoke with the name ‘God’ thus be the remainder? How are we to go from there to identify the genesis of the remainder with the Passion of an incarnated God?”²⁹ (He will, as we shall see, qualify this question, not quite identifying remainder with divinity.) Traditions of the incarnate Passion, though Rogozinski does not remark upon it here, prominently feature abjection, even in the most literal of bodily fashions. We need only consider stigmata, ostensibly miraculous mirrorings of the Passion and crucifixion wounds at the head (representing the crown of thorns), side (the centurion’s spear), feet and hands or wrists (the crucifying nails), sometimes accompanied by tears of blood (a double displacement, not only the excretion of a bodily fluid but of a fluid that, unlike tears, is not supposed to leak, certainly not from the eyes). The fluids that cross out of the body seem here to cross over bodies too, as Christ’s wounds reappear on the bodies of passionate followers.³⁰ But the theological possibility that Rogozinski invokes is not that of extrojection, but of its converse: “The great mystery is not Incarnation but rather incorporation.”³¹ The body incorporating remainder, never fully, yet never as wholly other, is also the body of invocation, the body that can call the Word.³²

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 302. Cf. 294: “A deliverance is thus possible on the condition of tying together a very singular relation with the remainder, namely, by rediscovering its primary identity, its originary unity with the ego-flesh, while preserving a divergence within this identity. . . . What makes it possible is the internal division of the remainder, which is presented both as the focus of alienating identifications and a force of resistance to these identifications.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

³⁰ I make this point at greater length in “Sharing God’s Wounds: Laceration, Communication, and Stigmata,” in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, eds. by Andrew Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 133-46.

³¹ Rogozinski, *The Ego and the Flesh*, 188.

³² *Ibid.*, 188.

Invocation, Incorporation, Incarnation

Rogozinski is not aiming here at the reductivism of which psychoanalytic explanation can sometimes be guilty—that is, he is not attempting to explain away divine incarnate Passion, nor the invocation of Word. “The remainder,” he carefully acknowledges, “is not the hidden truth of God—but it is our relation to the remainder that most often gives us access to the divine: the immanent experience of its disfiguration and transfiguration subtends the madness of faith.”³³ This is not the same madness that comfortably regrounds itself in an ontotheology or a reassuringly stable metaphysics—that is a sort of madness of hyperrationality or systematic stability.

This faith is, rather, a madness at once mysterious (yes, even mystical) and corporeal. It is, I suspect, a very old sort of faith, but one largely lost in the ways in which Christianity has received Platonism. Augustine is an odd place to find it, in some ways—it is perhaps more obvious in someone like Tertullian, whose more Stoically grounded Christianity avoids, sometimes startlingly, the Platonic tendencies to disincarnation.³⁴ But Neoplatonist though he is, Augustine has an important qualification for the philosophers he loves: In their work, he says, he found the conceptual equivalent of the Johannine claim that

... God the Word was born “not of flesh nor of blood, nor of the will of man, nor the will of the flesh, but of God.” But that “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” I found this nowhere there. And I discovered in those books, expressed in many and various ways, that “the Son was in the form of God and thought it not robbery to be equal in God,” for he was naturally of the same substance. But, that “he emptied himself and took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself ”—this those books have not.³⁵

There is strikingly little Christology—strikingly little Christ—in the nonetheless deeply incarnate passions of the *Confessions*. But it does not seem too great a leap from the God emptied of self into human flesh to the human body incarnating a self seeking that God within. Not merely boundary, but direction, is blurred. Incorporated desirously, extrojected in loathing, this conspicuously mortal and shockingly servile divine flesh teaches us our own. The space that absents me from me, the absence around which I am, an absence at once too little and too much, which is also me, is of my flesh. Rejected and reincorporated, desired and despised, it shares in the sense of the sacred.

³³ Ibid., 301.

³⁴ Carly Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of Flesh in Tertullian of Carthage: Dressing for the Resurrection* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 66: “Stoic materialism is so deeply written into Tertullian’s anthropology that it is difficult to comprehend his intransigent commitment to the flesh without reference to that philosophical position.”

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Albert Outler (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), 7.9.

As a great question to myself, I am embodied as something other than reductively mechanistic matter: not other than the body, but the body as irreducible, and restless. With apophasis, we find that there is a secret, a mystery in the heart of saying—and not only in any particular thing said. With incarnationalism, we find that the divine is wholly flesh. But with the God encountered by the self in the space of the remainder, we find that we and it can be reduced to neither position. Mysticism teaches us the apophasis of the body.

Such body invokes the Word, calls Word to itself, as sense: as that strange combination of meaning and sound that crosses over itself without ever quite closing the aporia between sense as sensuous and sense as conceptual. In some Christian traditions both orthodox and marginal—Augustine is exemplary in the former instance, Valentinus in the latter—this crossing is the meaning of the incarnation too, the revelation not of a particular meaning but of meaningfulness itself.³⁶ Our bodies too make meaning possible: and this because in and as body, I am; I sense, and I make sense. The mystery is neither word nor body, but embodied word; we encounter divinity in the strange gap of embodied self because the divine is itself aporetic.

We have not simply incorporated or internalized the strange, the not-even-possible, but we have been made by it, are not without it. We are great puzzles to ourselves—but not of a soluble sort. To emphasize properly this insolubility, we must turn back to the paradoxical sense of the sacred, a paradox, I think, that is not simply etymological.

Highest and Lowest

Not, particularly, in Christian mysticism, where both this inwardness of a mysterious-that-makes and a Kristevan sense of abjection come to be highly developed (though of course, even within Christianity, this is far from the only strain of mysticism). This abjection of self recognizes the impossible that is found within—and the very notion that the impossible is *found* is, and must be, a mystery. Kristeva declares that “Mystical Christendom turned . . . abjection of self into the ultimate proof of humility before God.”³⁷ Though, as she points out, Levitical prohibitions focus plenty on fluids across boundaries,³⁸ “As far as the concept of a subjective interiorization of abjection is concerned, that will be the accomplishment of the New Testament.”³⁹

I find myself a little less certain of this division, precisely because, as Kristeva’s citation from Mary Douglas notes, bodily boundaries cannot be treated in isolation. But certainly the rhetoric of self-abjection is especially clear in

³⁶ For anyone who finds this as endlessly fascinating as I do, I go on about it at greater length in “Take and Read: Scripture and the Enticement of Meaning,” in *Divine Enticement* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 169-204.

³⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

³⁸ “Any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body defiles. After a reference to sacrifice (chapter 16), we have again a designation of the impurity of blood.” *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

Christianity—perhaps just because of its incarnational focus. Kristeva argues that Christ’s role is to demonstrate pure sublimation, to show what it is to be without flaw:

Christ alone, because he accomplished that heterogeneity, is a body without sin. What others must do, because of their fault, is to achieve that sublimation, confess the part of themselves that rebels against divine judgment, a part that is innerly impure. Because the unrivaled existence of Christ is nevertheless the vanishing point of all fantasies and thus a universal object of faith, everyone is allowed to aspire to Christic sublimation and by the same token know that his sins can be remitted. “Your sins will be forgiven,” Jesus keeps telling them, thus accomplishing, in the future this time, a final raising into spirituality of a nevertheless inexorable carnal remainder. Sin then remains the only token of difference from the sublimity of Christ.⁴⁰

She reads the meaning of the incarnation, then, as a perfect overcoming of abjection in the flesh, a triumph of sublimation and sublimity even as the carnal remains. The role of confession here parallels its role in early monasticism, that of purifying and rendering transparent with the aim of rendering empty-of-sin. Again, there is a play across boundaries, this time of words—often words about the body—by which the inner impurity is confessed, made outer, and the inner subject thus made pure again. The abject is always “edged with the sublime,” but seldom quite so dramatically transformed.⁴¹

The possibility of such transformation fits with Kristeva’s insight that in Christianity, sin and evil on the one hand, love and beauty on the other, have a curiously convertible quality:

Neither debt nor want, sin, as the reverse of love, is a state of fullness, of plenty. In that sense, it turns around into living beauty. Far from advocating solely a doctrine of limitation and conformity to divine speech, the Christian conception of sin also includes a recognition of an evil whose power is in direct ratio to the holiness that identifies it as such, and into which it can convert. Such a conversion into jouissance and beauty goes far beyond the retributive, legalistic tonality of sin as debt or iniquity. Thus it is that, by means of the beautiful, the demoniacal dimension of the pagan world can be tamed. And that the beautiful penetrates into Christianity to the extent of becoming not

⁴⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁴¹ “In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime.” Ibid., 11. Burrus amplifies: “If ‘the abject is edged with the sublime,’ as Kristeva puts it, this is due in part to the fact that both the abject and the sublime evade objectification and exceed the bounds of mere selfhood or body.” Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 47.

merely one of its component parts, but also probably what leads it beyond religion.⁴²

The beautiful, of course, is not exactly tamed itself, not simply pretty or pleasant. Emphasizing the excessive character of beauty, Kristeva notes that here excess is also a wanting: “The idea of ‘want’ tied to sin as debt and iniquity is therefore coupled with that of an overflowing, a profusion, even an unquenchable desire, which are pejoratively branded with words like ‘lust’ or ‘greed.’”⁴³ Excess and insufficiency come together in desire, and the experience is bewildering—and, as Virginia Burrus notes, sometimes shameful. “It is also in shame that flesh is conceived as the passionate site of pleasure inseparably wedded to pain, joy bound up with its own thwarting,” she writes.

As Silvan Tomkins remarks, we frequently feel shame when our physical wants are not satisfied. I would add that we also frequently feel shame when they *are*: what is perhaps crucial to shame is the very exposure of our fleshly wanting, of the immensity of human need. . . . We encounter, then, also a lack of limits, an excess of materiality, a propensity for debasement, a slide into dissolution—a monstrosity of *abjection*, in short.⁴⁴

Like abjection, like mysticism, shame is a boundary-troubling experience. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that this is particularly a trouble with the boundaries of the self, of “the double movement shame makes toward powerful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality.”⁴⁵ Burrus writes more emphatically:

Shame is at the heart of the anguished awareness of human limits at the point where those limits are exceeded, conveying the power as well as the danger of relationality itself. For some, relationality may be too tame a term. Less tamely, Georges Bataille speaks of the violently self-sacrificial experience of the dissolution of disparate or ‘discontinuous’ subjects in which shame is implicated.⁴⁶

Shame and beauty are neither contraries nor convertible one into the other, but entangled.

There is no question that Kristeva’s thinking, on which Burrus draws extensively, is careful and nuanced. But yet a further complication may be required

⁴² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 123.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁴ Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 46.

⁴⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*” in David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, eds. *Gay Shame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 49-62, at 51.

⁴⁶ Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 4. Citing Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 11-25.

here, a complication provided by Burrus's work: it is precisely Christ's abjection that will inspire his followers; not simply the triumphant and transfigurative raising, but the deepening enfleshment, a lived pain and humiliation, a criminal's death (as, in fact, one in a row of criminals, not even unique). Granted, there is a strong and understandable tendency for Christianity to focus upon the triumphal vision of the resurrected body, upon death defeated—perfect sublimation of all that is evil and ugly, such that even our remains become perfected. One of the few sites of resistance to this triumphalism, however, has been mysticism. Not all modes of mysticism attend to the body, of course, but those that do so within Christianity have often dwelt upon vulnerable woundedness. Rather than dualizing body and spirit, or sublimating carnality to transcendence, such mysticism is intent upon openness, spaces that paradoxically undo separations.

The wound is such a paradoxical space. We have noted that the remainder, the site of me-and-not-me, may arouse both disgust and desire. The wound, site of breakage or perforation, is exemplary in this regard. We tend to regard wounds, where we cannot be clinically dispassionate about them, with some disgust and dismay. But as Bataille reminds us, the wound is the site of communication—the place where passing from one to another becomes possible—and, he says, of *desire*.

More often than the sacred object, desire has the flesh as its object and in carnal desire the game of 'communication' appears rigorous in its complexity. In the carnal act, in desecration—and in desecrating himself—man crosses the limit of beings.

So, what attracts desire in the being of flesh is not immediately the being, it is its wound: it is a point of rupture in the integrity of the body, . . . a wound that puts its integrity at stake, its rupture, which does not kill but desecrates.⁴⁷

For Bataille, the doubleness of the sacred is always in play; to desecrate can never be far from consecration, nor either one from sacri-fice, in the literal sense of making sacred. Echoing Bataille's recurrent interest in mysticism, Kristeva writes that for the mystic,

. . . abjection will not be designated as such, that is, as other, as something to be ejected, or separated, but as the most propitious place for communication—as the point where the scales are tipped towards pure spirituality. The mystic's familiarity with abjection is a fount of infinite jouissance. One may stress the masochistic economy of that jouissance only if one points out at once that the Christian mystic, far from using it to the benefit of a symbolic or institutional power, displaces it indefinitely . . . within a discourse where the subject is

⁴⁷ Georges Bataille, in "Discussion on Sin," in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. and introduced by Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 26-76, at 29. Italics and first ellipsis original.

reabsorbed (is that grace?) into communication with the Other and with others.⁴⁸

This communication is always imperfect; the subject neither wholly absorbs nor is wholly (at least not lastingly) absorbed into otherness. We must avoid the temptation to suggest that there is a good, pure and spiritual crossing on the one hand, and a crass, shamefully corporeal version on the other. The two are, startlingly enough, enriched in their entanglement, in a bodily sacred, a mystery of flesh in which we are reminded that the term *sacred* does not pull in a single direction. Nor will it allow us to hold onto those tidy boundaries of the embodied self. We are haunted by something that neither is nor is not us. Kristeva writes of “the truth of self-division (abjection/sacred),” adding, “Here two paths open out: sublimation and perversion. And their intersection: religion.”⁴⁹ Their intersection is also the point of the paradox, from which the opposing directions unfold. The truth of self-division is never simply divisive; we are complicated by incorporation.

The “religious answer to abjection,” writes Kristeva, is “*defilement, taboo, or sin.*”⁵⁰ This is indeed a common religious—certainly a common Christian—response to the abject. But it cannot be the only one, and she herself, commenting on the strange in-corporation of sin into beauty, has shown us why. It is precisely by incarnation, Burrus argues, that wholeness and containment are sacri-ficed—and that wounded rupture becomes sacred.

When Word becomes flesh, shame is no longer the brittle defense of desire against the threat of the abject but rather the expansive gateway of a nearly intolerable exposure to erotic transformation from within the depths of abjection—as gloriously manifested in the wild openness of fleshly touch, the fluid exchanges between bodies and subjects, the sublime boundlessness of eternal resurrection(s).⁵¹

Burrus’s reminder of the abject’s association with *shame* is essential here. Verbalizing the self (the very self made in some measure in that verbalization) pulls against shame, which in its simplest form desires secrecy, the refusal of revelation of the secret. Though I am quite certain that there are exceptions, one does not generally speak in ritual or sacramental confession of anything that might be a source of pride (though one might speak of pride itself, regarded as cause for divine and self-recrimination). Of course there are non-shameful secrets, and there are public shames. But the workings of confession play upon a fear that Burrus identifies; not having to speak of shame is no small motive for not acting shamefully. As she notes, we are careful against the possibilities of our own shaming:

⁴⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 127.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵¹ Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 52.

a sense of shame—or, perhaps more precisely, an empathic awareness of our capacity both to shame and to be shamed—serves as a guard against the violence of shaming, protecting privacy and dignity, cultivating not only tact but a positive sense of awe in the face . . . of what is at once most vulnerable and most sacred in human existence.⁵²

At a maximum of vulnerability—woundability, openness—we are also at the sacred. There, strangely, it already was. There, impossibly, it remains.

Kristeva acknowledges the dependence of the spiritualized upon the perverse body; the “body that is pneumatic since it is spiritual, completely submersed into (divine) speech in order to become beauty and love” can only exist as the sublimation of “the ‘body’ as eager drive confronted with the law’s harshness.” She attributes this insight to Christianity: “One of the insights of Christianity, and not the least one, is to have gathered in a single move perversion and beauty as the lining and cloth of the same economy.”⁵³ But the relation goes beyond dependence to entanglement, even to the impossibility of disidentifying these two strains: into a perverse beauty, in which mystery remains, and the submersion into a speech recognizable by human ears and minds must remain incomplete after all.

The incarnational complication—the abject divine body—is at this intersection. To desecrate and to consecrate cannot, in a paradoxical sacrality, be put on either side of a tidy boundary. They cannot be perfectly identified, but neither can they be exactly distinguished. Responding to Bataille, Jean Daniélou declares:

That these descriptions [of dissolution] might apply at once to mystical states and to states of sin is an assertion that has already been made by either Origen or Gregory of Nyssa, when they justify the use of the word *Eros* to describe powerful mystical states. In fact, these states present the characteristics of excess, of negativity, of escape, and of fusion that define the sacred.

He insists, nonetheless, that despite the formal resemblance, an important distinction remains: that of whether, in a theophany, the self dissolves into the unknown; or whether, on the contrary, it loses itself in present appearance. But Daniélou is too complex a character (and thinker) to have thought these always clearly divergent; or he is, at any rate, too complex not to leave space for us to suspect an imperfect distinction. Sin and mysticism, he argues, are “reconciled insofar as they are extremes.”⁵⁴

Bataille’s ideas on the sacred are probably inseparable from those of Colette Peignot, who wrote under the name Laure. In “Story of a Little Girl,” she muses upon

⁵² Ibid., 3.

⁵³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 124-25.

⁵⁴ Jean Daniélou, in “Discussion on Sin,” 35.

A child's curiosity about her belly precisely when she knows that God sees all and follows her into the attic. Curiosity and then terror. Life soon managed to oscillate between these two poles: one sacred, venerated, which must be exhibited. . . ; the other dirty, shameful, which must not be named. Both more mysterious, more appealing, more intense than a bleak and unchanging life.⁵⁵

Bataille—for a time Peignot's lover—and Michel Leiris will write in their notes to her work, "The two poles that Laure describes are not exactly the sacred and its opposite, for the one and the other are sacred; they are two contradictory poles within the sacred world, 'sacred' signifying at once worthy of horror or disgust and worthy of adoration."⁵⁶ But "contradictory" is too simple; the poles are not oppositional. The mystery is not simply that both poles may exist, but that they touch, as if the line extended between them became a circle, or as if they pulled apart from a common, yet incomprehensible, point. We find such a point in our fleshiness, read after the astonishing abjection of the incarnation.

But how can we think flesh as mystery, when it is so obviously susceptible to knowledge? Can it really give us anything beyond the knowable itself? Certainly much is *unknown* about bodies, about their functioning and malfunctioning, but the unknown is not mystery. If, however, we think flesh as lived and living body, if we allow it complication by what is and exceeds it, by otherness, by divinity, by word, that there is mystery—more, that there is sacred mystery—begins to seem true.

Certeau, like Foucault, like Peter Brown, reminds us insistently of the confessional imperative to render the body wholly visible—not just in its matter, but in its secrecy too.⁵⁷ Like the abject, the secret depends upon bounded sites; like the abject, it is relational. Certeau writes:

Secrecy is not only the state of a thing that escapes from or reveals itself to knowledge. It designates a play between actors. It circumscribes the terrain of strategic relations between the one trying to discover the secret and the one keeping it, or between the one who is supposed to know it and the one who is assumed not to know it (the "vulgar").⁵⁸

In the earliest religious senses the mysteries, too, were to be kept from the vulgar and revealed only to the initiated; gradually, the term has come to take on a more intractable sense of what cannot ever be revealed except by indirection—not

⁵⁵ Colette Peignot, *Laure: The Collected Writings*, trans. Jeanine Herman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), "Story of a Little Girl," 1-31, at 11.

⁵⁶ Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, Notes to "The Sacred," in *Laure*, 37-94, at 88.

⁵⁷ Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 88. "Individual poverty was but the precondition of mutual exchange. It divested one of any asset or held-back secret. It was essentially epiphanic. The stories of 'brothers' or 'sisters' worked in the direction of composing a legible scene. The point was to create transparent bodies."

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

because it is forbidden, but because it is beyond direct modes of revelation. The one who “knows” the mystery is one who has sensed the permeation of the knowable by that which is not.

Our bodies reveal us to us as divinely imperfect, even damaged. The celebration of humility, abjection, or pain sits oddly and very uncomfortably with most contemporary Christianity.⁵⁹ Christianity has become, and not unreasonably, about healing wounds—or, in its more aggressive forms, denying them. To celebrate the woundedness of flesh may make many feel slightly ill—or, to return to Burrus’s important insight, ashamed. But shame itself, as much as joy, shows us a mystery.

The mystery is that of the sacred itself, as body irreducible to mechanism, in its stubborn paradoxicality: at once beautiful and perverse, delightful and repulsive, altogether carnal and fully spirited. It is a mystery we “know” in the flesh, as an abjection we are drawn to keep secret, but which reminds us of its opposing pull of glorious joy. When the body has been known as thoroughly as possible by biology, described and presented as ubiquitously as possible by social media, rendered as unnecessary as possible by technologies, something, though no thing at all, remains. The flesh itself shows us a mystery.

⁵⁹ There are, of course, notable exceptions, as any reader who has made it this far is undoubtedly aware. Burrus’s work has already been noted; another particularly good recent example, drawing explicitly on Bataille’s work, is Kent Brintnall, *Ecce Homo: The Male Body-in-Pain as Redemptive Figure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).