



THE ROYAL REMAINS

*The People's Two Bodies and the
Endgames of Sovereignty*

The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty

By Eric L. Santner

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'Sovereignty studies' has been on the rise over the last decade. The translation of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* in 1998 and the publication of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's *Empire* in 2000 did much to bring theories of personal and political sovereignty to the centre of debates over the 'biopolitical', Michel Foucault's term since the 1970s for the type of 'governmentality' to which we are all subject at present. At least since his magisterial study of the German jurist Daniel Paul Schreber's 'nervous illness' (*My Own Private Germany*, 1997), Eric Santner, currently professor of modern Germanic studies at the University of Chicago, has been at work considering the ways that this sovereign power, understood particularly as a 'space of representation' – that is, as the 'offices, roles, symbolic mandates and titles' that we assume in our daily lives – can affect, to put it plainly, our 'nerves'.

Drawing upon Ernst Kantorowicz's landmark *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), Santner here, in *The Royal Remains*, argues that the (traumatic) investiture of sovereign power in 'the people' at the moment of the French Revolution logically transfers the split corporeality of 'the king', at once the body politic (immutable, divine, transcendent) and the body natural (mortal, contingent, precarious), onto us. This power transfer is not a clean one, however. We never quite 'fit' our new symbolic authority. The king never did either, for that matter. The 'political theology' of sovereignty itself is always productive of a kind of excess, what Santner calls a 'surplus of immanence', a 'strange materiality', in short, the 'flesh' that organises the symbolic networks of authority in the first place.

Part one of *The Royal Remains* develops Santner's theory of this 'flesh', which extends what, in a previous work, he identified as the 'creaturely' (*On Creaturely Life*, 2006): that bit of surplus humanity in all of us that can be reduced neither to the zero-degree of bare life nor to the purely atavistic or animal aspects of ourselves, but which emerges, often terribly but always sublimely, when we are 'exposed' to the excesses of sovereign power (Santner, in an article from 2005, offers up the abused prisoners of Abu Ghraib and the case of Terri Schiavo, the Florida woman in a persistent vegetative state whose husband was kept from taking her off life support by an Act of Congress, as examples of the contemporary 'creaturely').

Part two then goes on to uncover the 'flesh' as it is occasioned by sovereign authority in various works of art (by Jacques-Louis David and Francis Bacon) and literature (by Shakespeare, Hofmannsthal and Rilke), where that authority is either confronted (think Bacon's caged figures)

or in crisis (think Shakespeare's *Richard II*). Particularly with regard to visual art, Santner involves himself in a dialogue with other critics' attempts at articulating this new 'physiology' of Modernism. Though he lauds and largely adopts T.J. Clark's brilliant take (in *Farewell to an Idea*, 2001) on David's *Death of Marat* (1793), Santner tweaks Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois on Bataille and the *informe*, J.M. Bernstein on the 'normative authority of nature', and Gilles Deleuze on Bacon and the 'logic of sensation'. Santner's arguments here are less critical and more a course-correction meant to bring this remainder of sovereign 'flesh' into better view. But what it amounts to is a fundamental reorientation of our understanding of the modern itself, which we must now see as at once a symptom of and testing facility for reconciliation strategies between the odd couple of populations and politics. Is it any wonder then that contemporary artists such as Tania Bruguera or Santiago Sierra, or international exhibitions such as Documenta 12, have embraced the notion of 'bare life' as both theme and theory? What *The Royal Remains* offers, though, is a way to understand these developments within a larger grand narrative of modernity and why it remains, necessarily, incomplete.

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