Corporeality and the Numinous

Dear Woman,
To read the sacred inscriptions upon your body I must know your skin as palimpsest. With my fingertips I trace words no longer visible to the naked eye. Letters long since scraped off, or covered over with layer after layer of the tamed, acceptable, and ordinary. Steeped in the dye of the same, still the Other etchings upon your skin remain. Demand to be read. And as they are read, are they not written ever anew?

Just here, beneath the lines around your eyes, and here, in the corner of your crooked smile, I read, I write mystério. The mystery of you inscribed for all to read; yes, but in the only way that mystery can possibly be signified – in a language always open to new translation. Never fully known. Though another might hurl himself upon such a text, murderous and grasping, such scripture will elude him always. He will never know the meaning of that fine line; he can never be sure of the curve of your lips. Why, why do they dance just so before they part? Mysterium. Woman, for millennia it has been carved into your very flesh, worn upon your face. Thus it is now written that you are always already the virgin transcendent: the indefinably unreachable, ultimately unknowable, always eternally Other.¹ The beloved yet unbearable, unspeakable presence of transcendence within the immanent. Wholly Other. Unknowable. Yet tremendously present. Here, now.

In this now I cup my hands beneath your breasts. Full with milk they are, and heavy. Heavy as your thighs still drenched in blood. Heavy as your belly was, will be again. And now I read, I write tremendum. Overwhelming is the flesh of you, your skin all stretched and torn, leaking sacred words of power inconceivable and yet you do conceive them bring them forth your body cannot be contained it reads so terribly of the awful. With my lips I follow folds and tears, read with tongue the shallow scars running jagged across your surface vellum. Velvet soft are the signs of you in your corporeal immensity. ‘Grotesque,
monstrous,’ they read, they write, fearing suffocation beneath the weighty mass of you. Your body indelibly inscribed with the marks which remind them of a time when they were deep within the dark, of that time when they were nothing without you. You brought them forth; you doomed them to death. You are to be feared despised above all else. ‘Immanence,’ they read, they write, ‘vast and inescapable.’ How terrifying.

Pillowed upon your thigh, now breathing in your musk, I too read and write of awe and immanence, opening my senses to all your body gives to life. And with hands and lips and tongue I trace a sacred mass. Such words the richest wine upon your skin.

Fully naked now, you laugh. Oh woman, mischievous voluptuary, your arms, your hips in slow and fluid motion spelling out for all to read, et fascinans. Written through your body the desperately alluring certainty of the body’s pleasure, the pleasure of the sensual, the sexual body shared. Such a message a text forever slipping from beneath the sheets, and calling for response. Reading, writing your body then and now, ‘bewildered and confounded, he feels a something that captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment.’

Once upon a time, my love, you were a priestess in the temple, revered and honoured sacred whore. Once upon a time it was no sin to celebrate the body. That sex is holy was no secret; and you, you taught us how to revel in the flesh. How to dissolve, if only for a timeless instant, the boundaries of skin and ligament, teeth and bone, each and other.

The sacred, the holy, that Other ‘something’ characterised by Rudolph Otto as the mysterium tremendum et fascinans. The unknown wholly other and terrifying overwhelming presence and the most alluring of sensual attractions (all together all at once). The ‘numinous’. Radiant result of Otto’s rational inquiry into The Idea of the Holy – rendered corporeal (although this he did not make explicit), rendered intelligible, through female flesh. Through layers of inscriptions upon that ever-present body known as ‘woman’. The sacred. From the Latin sacer,
meaning, simultaneously, both ‘blessed’ and ‘accursed’. The issue, for 
the numinous remains, I think, a vexing issue still, is that ‘the full range 
of the term sacred … encompasses the maleficent as well as the 
beneficent.’ Beneficent and maleficent. Such binary opposites 
embodied, figured through the goodness and purity of the virgin, the 
vile pollution of the whore. But there is still more: there is the 
inescapable presence of the sacred, its unpredictable tremendous force. 
The sacred as the source of life, as the threshold between being and 
non-being – which is to say, there is ‘the infinite quality of the sacred, 
that inexhaustible reservoir from which all differences flow and into 
which they all converge.’ Imagined, ‘imaged’ as both womb and tomb, 
the sacred is ‘pre-eminently the real, at once power, efficacity [sic], the 
source of life and fecundity.’ All-encompassing mother.

The multiplicity, the ambiguity, the unavoidable physicality, the sensual 
and sexual, the lack of clear and proper limits, the blurred boundaries, 
the shifting forces, the absence of fixed meaning, the over-abundance 
of reminders – the ferociously feminine signifiers of the sacred seem to 
provoke from ‘man’ a most continual, monotonous response these days. 
He Other-izes the numinous. Distances himself from it. Makes himself, 
so he claims, safe and sound, secure, immune from its possible eruptions, 
contagion, pollution. When faced with the unruly, untamed, 
uncontrolled sacred (when faced, actually, with any Other) he makes 
of himself, with some modest difficulty, a/the moral agent. The moral 
agent suddenly (because ‘moral’) responsible for, suddenly (because 
‘responsible for’) more powerful than the Other. The logic seems a bit 
circular (circling the wagons to defend himself against the savages? in 
preparation for the war against his terror?), but what to do. I am not 
making this up, merely reiterating what he has written about his 
relationship to the Other – to any, every Other. Trying urgently to 
understand his fear, his need for control, his need to inscribe upon 
certain skins names and meanings both familiar and foreign to my body, 
to the bodies of the Others.
Now it is up to the self, and the self alone, to do something (an unspecified something) about the Other. The Other turns into the self’s responsibility, and this is where morality begins as the possibility of choice between good and evil … This responsibility makes me powerful; it also assumes my power; it presents the Other to me as weak; it also assumes her/his weakness. One is responsible to someone stronger than oneself; one is responsible for someone weaker than oneself …

My responsibility for the other, Lévinas repeatedly insists, includes also my responsibility for determining what needs to be done to exercise that responsibility. Which means in turn that I am responsible for defining the needs of the Other; for what is good, and what is evil for the Other. If I love her and thus desire her happiness, it is my responsibility to decide what would make her truly happy. If I admire her and wish her perfection, it is my responsibility to decide what her perfect form would be like. If I respect her and want to preserve and enhance her freedom, it is again my responsibility to spell out what her genuine autonomy would consist of … And if I confine myself to taking what I hear from her at its face value, would it not be equal to the sin of omission?9

From the perspective of an Other, this would seem to be a slightly excessive reaction, on the part of the obviously masculine, heterosexual ‘self’, to the fact that the world is filled with Others inscribed as feminine – filled with Others frighteningly corporeal. However, I appreciate greatly Zygmunt Bauman’s clarity and honesty. Curiously, in the text from which the above quote is lifted, Bauman repeatedly insists on the distinction between ethics (the Laws of God the Father, and/or the demands of Reason, or rules, rules, and yet more rules!) and morality (no Father God, no pre-established Law, no reliable Reason, no fixed rules). It is in the absence of ethics, he claims, that morality might be possible. He might be right. But I fear that his ‘responsible moral self’ has simply exchanged following (or breaking) pre-established laws and
rules for making them – and forcing them on Others. And from the perspective of an Other, this is simply business as usual, more of the same. More of ‘man’s’ inability to co-exist with the strange, the foreign, the mysterious, the unknown, the dark. More of his nausea and disgust, revulsion for the body and its excretions, abhorrence of its immense plasticity. More of his desire to possess entirely whatever body gives him pleasure. More of his refusal to recognise the Other in himself. More of his denial – denial of his weaknesses, denial of his dependency on Others, denial of his own corporeality.

Gods and Reasons come and go. Bodies multiply.

…

Dear Woman,

Shall I tell you a secret? It may well be that ‘the sacred’ is nothing but a myth, a story told to give some sense to this world, to make some sense of one another. But what a myth it is, and populated with such fantastic figures. Figures filled with power, knowledge, mystery. Site of awe and terror, desired and despised. Bloody, dark, and massive – and burning with a light too radiant. To immerse oneself in such a myth is an invitation to madness. But it is with such madness that ‘woman’ has been inscribed for centuries. Written through and through our flesh all the allure and autonomy and terror of a body not their own. And it is in the myths of the sacred that woman’s body is the source of life. Here is where I pause, throw down this pen and laugh aloud. For the myths are true, dear heart. There is the obvious, that we are all of us ‘of woman born’ – profound, intractable truth. And there is the truth that each body has an independence, bespeaks an existence separate, unique, unobtainable by any other. And the truth that bodies attract. And the truth that bodies shit and vomit, leak and bleed and rot and die. These are the stubborn truths, the ‘stuff’ of which we try to make some sense in the stories we tell to (and of) each other.

I distrust stories that deny these truths, or explain them away, or just don’t mention them. I distrust stories that do not tremble with wonder in the face of Beings each different from all others. I also distrust stories
purified, cleansed of the shit, those myths filled only with a sweet and
g gentle light. Could this be why again and again I return to read, to write
the numinous flesh of you? To be read, to be written anew by you? The
bone-deep inscriptions of your relentless otherness. The feather-light
promise of pleasures to come flashing in your eyes. Your weight upon
me now, your breathing rough and thick, strong is the word of you.
Your touch now almost imperceptible … contradictions flow through
your flesh, impossible conjunctions are made incarnate – you, in your
corporeal complexity. Yes, I choose to read the myth of the numinous
upon your skin. To affirm your multiple sacred otherness, to reiterate
you the virgin ever unknowable, you the mother fearsome giver of life,
you the whore most carnal lover. I choose to read and to reinscribe these
sacred names upon your body: virgin, mother, whore.

‘If we insist, and we must for some time still, upon the names that are
given us as our heritage, it is because, in respect of this borderline place,
a new war of religions is redeploying as never before to this day …’11

A new war? Perhaps not so new after all. Good versus evil. One or the
Other. Either/Or. You are either with us or against us. My God’s bigger
and gooder than your god, and anyway your god isn’t god at all. Such
stark simplicity. Devoid, barren of all ambiguity, all complexity. My
love, I fear that we are bearing witness to the resurrection of a most
totalizing discourse. A most annihilating discourse. A most boring
discourse. A discourse that cannot abide multiplicity of any kind, can
neither recognise nor tolerate any adumbrations of the otherwise. A
discourse in which all Others are inscribed as evil, purely evil.

But your body tells a different story, no, a host of different myths. It
does not read as ‘purely’ any single word; there is no simple logic to the
texts upon your skin. Scrawled, embedded, carved, chiselled, painted,
drawn, etched, smeared, scarred – their sheer profusion prevents any
hegemonic script or reading.

…
Perhaps it is perverse to insist upon the names given us, to insist upon a heritage in which every single name with which we ever have been branded has been used against us. I comprehend all arguments against the virgin, against the mother, against the whore. I comprehend the danger of these names. In isolation, none can survive the onslaught of Good’s most recent war. The virgin will be imprisoned, ‘protected’ from defilement. The mother will be disciplined, trained in the art of adequate housekeeping. The whore will be raped, beaten, and told that it’s her fault. These truths I comprehend. But I comprehend as well the powers of these names, the forces they emit. So it is that I avail the Other of all of them, all together all at once. Together their inscriptions shift and slide about our skins, resisting all imprisonment, ever opening to yet another passage, and another, and another.\textsuperscript{12}

Reading your body numinous with my fingertips, I pause in wonder. Was there a beginning once? Was the sacred, that trembling conjunction of the \textit{mysterium tremendum et fascinans}, ever traced into your flesh for the very first time? Or did the \textit{mysterium tremendum et fascinans} of your corporeality once write the very being of the holy? Was there a moment when the sacred was new born, conceived of flesh and blood? Do you smile at the blasphemy of such questions, delight in the impossibility of their answers?

The numinous. Corporeality. The profound, unspeakable mystery of incarnation. The terrible, inescapable powers of life and death. The most alluring of pleasures. All together all at once. Corporeality. The numinous. Of which have I been writing, upon which have I inscribed the other?

\textbf{Endnotes}
\textsuperscript{1} ‘The other as other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us; to the contrary, it withdraws into its mystery … Just as with death, I am not concerned with an existent, but with the event of alterity, with alienation … The transcendence of the feminine consists in withdrawing elsewhere, which is a movement opposed to the movement of consciousness. But this does not make it unconscious or subconscious, and I see no other possibility than
Numinous Subjects


2 'Every child that is coming into being rests, like all life that is coming into being, in the womb of the great mother, the undivided primal world that precedes form. From her, too, we are separated, and enter into personal life, slipping freely only in the dark hours to be close to her again; night by night this happens to the healthy man.' Buber, *I and Thou*. p. 25.

3 'Thus what man cherishes and detests first of all in woman – loved one or mother – is the fixed image of his animal destiny; it is the life that is necessary to his existence but that condemns him to finitude and to death.' Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 187.


7 Ibid. p. 242.


10 'The fact is that it doesn’t take long for the experience of the Numinous to unhinge the mind.' Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*. p. 6.

11 Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge.' p. 58.

12 Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*. p. 53. "Resist" would be the word befitting the sacred' (Clément).