Calvin Thomas.


Reviewed by Mark Osteen

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Calvin Thomas's book is unorthodox not only in its impressive range—encompassing Hegel, Heidegger and Hitchcock, as well as Bataille, Freud and James Joyce—but also in its style. The dips and veers in Thomas's writing and the large umbrella of his interests is perhaps appropriate, since his subject is no less than the construction of Western masculinity, and how that construction has been erected upon the repression of the male body and its anxious productions. Just as that construction has produced and been produced by anxiety, so, claims Thomas, does he aim in his ambitious book to produce anxiety. He did so in this reader—indeed, at times my response went beyond anxiety to agony, especially when reading sentences like this one: "For Lacan, it is this anteriority of the other to the one that turns the 'point' from which the seer sees to that as which he is seen" (113). Or this one: "Language, however, conspicuously fails to dissolve reification to the extent that language is subtended by an already objectifying and hierarchizing patriarchal symbolic order that in its specific historical moment has itself been permeated by the instrumental rationality and commodity formalism of capitalist reification" (95). It seems no accident that Thomas's subject is excrement: the piles get pretty deep at times.

Of course, Thomas is not alone among psychoanalytic theorists in shoveling heavy jargon. Less common among this set, however, are the excruciatingly clever bon mots that also pepper Thomas's style. Sometimes this wordplay both entertains and enlightens, as his segmentations and neologisms ("scatontological" is my favorite) capture the same semiotic fluidity that his analyses aim to expose. At other times, however, he resembles a hyperintelligent class clown straining for laughs. Here is one example, from an otherwise illuminating discussion of Hegel's strange comparison of *Vorstellung* to urination: "The phallus must veil and reveil itself to relève itself, but it can never reveal itself (much less relieve itself) without at the same time shaming and reviling itself. The being of Spirit is not a bone; it is the imageless Begriff of a boner" (60). A groaner! This is not explication; it's the exhibitionism of someone who still gets a thrill from saying "dirty" words in public.

I shall put these stylistic excesses aside, but I probably shouldn't, for Thomas's subject is excess itself: the abjection that in its very "asideness" defines and deforms masculinity. Thomas examines how writing emerges as a bodily function through a recurrent association with male matter such as semen, urine, and feces, and how that association reinforces or disrupts masculine identity. What is repressed in masculinity, Thomas argues, is its deep relation to the abject, to what Bataille dubs la part maudite; thus to retain
mastery, masculinity often recodes its own productions as feminine. Thomas's primal scene is the so-called "money shot"—those scenes of ejaculation, usually on some part of the woman partner's body—in hard-core porn. These scenes, which, Thomas claims, ultimately represent the woman's invisible orgasm as much as the man's visible one, exemplify how Western masculinity denies the value of powerlessness itself. That is, the woman here exists to prevent the man from turning into the shit he really believes himself to be. Similarly, any signifying process inevitably stains the self that conceives itself immaculate; the result (and motive) is anxiety, which males seek to recontain in ideal receptacles—a process that merely reproduces the originary anxiety in a different form.

The opening chapter presents Thomas's thesis fairly clearly, with useful forays into the works of Luce Irigaray, Jean-Joseph Goux, and Alice Jardine. In the next chapter, after dipping a tentative toe into Hitchcock's _Vertigo_, Thomas explores Hegel's idealism through the aforementioned analogy between representation and urination. What Hegel really feared, argues Thomas, was the visibility of abject production, which he associated with "fecalized" Jewishness. Hegel must therefore be answered by Bataille's heterological "prodding," which raises expenditure above saving and thereby "makes reason shit." Without such transgressive moves, Thomas suggests, meaning is stripped of the necessary "de-meaning" that gives it value.

The next two chapters examine varieties of "dysgraphia"—the fear of writing—in Freud, Heidegger, and Derrida. Rereading Freud's famous Wolf-Man case history, Thomas reexamines its implicit association of divine production and profane defecation, and thereby uncovers in Freud an obsession with castration that hides a more generalized anxiety about anality; thus Freud himself demonstrates how "civilization . . . must channel the incontinence of its discontents" (84). Here Thomas teases out a key contradiction not only in Freud, but perhaps in Western masculinity itself: that while the phallic mode of subjectivity embodies the power to generate meaning and value, because it is also figured as fecal, it can never be anything but powerless. The rest of the chapter turns this important insight around and around, scrutinizing it through the somewhat murky Lacanian lenses before finally suggesting that because the male creator can never create without also being placed in excrement, he must either withdraw from representation (an impossibility) or make woman into the fecalized object. Although this chapter has potentially important ramifications for gender studies, its central insight seems less original than Thomas thinks, and could be advanced without making us slog through quite so much psychoanalytical mire. Turning to Heidegger, Thomas begins to historicize (a welcome change), suggesting how Heidegger founds his nostalgia for pure Being upon "fecalized" Jews. Similarly, he argues, Heidegger maintains his hold on Derrida because of the latter's own need to "cleanse" abjection of any taint of materiality and hence to get "upstream" from all physical traces of production.

In scrutinizing the "anal Joyce," Thomas is a bit of a latecomer, since Joyce's fascination with anality and feces has recently been examined by a number of critics, including Vincent Cheng and Kelly Anspaugh, among others. Thomas's reading remains valuable, however, for the way he paints Joyce as a smudged

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hero happily wallowing in shit: that is, although Joyce's fetishizing of excrement bespeaks a certain anxiety, nonetheless for Thomas he remains an artist who "writes the modernist male body and its abjection directly and by that gesture at least articulates a conspicuous lack of enmity to, and anxiety about, the materiality of production" (165). This is a reading with which I generally sympathize, but I think that Thomas overreads the evidence for anality in such early works as "The Sisters."

More persuasive is his discussion of Stephen Dedalus, in whom Joyce inscribes "the anxious tension between . . . fluidic production and the symbolic means of its containment" (175). However, sometimes Thomas falls victim to the same idealizing, ahistorical tendencies he criticizes throughout his study. For example, discussing Stephen's famous description of "home, Christ, ale," and "master," as "foreign" or "acquired" words, Thomas dismisses the idea that Dedalus chooses these words for their political freight. But while it is true that Stephen and Joyce recognize and even celebrate generalized intertextuality--the recognition that "all speech is always acquired"--the passage in question is clearly contrasting the differing political implications of those very loaded words in England and Ireland, and thus alluding pointedly to the long history of English colonialism. Nevertheless, I concur with Thomas's suggestion that Stephen cannot hope to overcome his artistic paralysis until, like his creator, he accepts his own irremediable "soiling" by materiality.

Thomas concludes that the desire for immaculate productions leads to a drive for pure mastery that culminates in objectifying and finally killing those fecalized others. To counteract such lethally "pure" writings (and readings), Thomas imagines an ethics of interpretation that recognizes but does not repress its anxieties and therefore is constantly subverted and sublated by abjection. His conclusion is praiseworthy, even powerful. But it would acquire more force if Thomas had taken his own advice: if he had descended from his abstract theoretical plane and dirtied his hands with the actual data of history--those real killings and oppressions that he is too often content to treat as mere traces of linguistic or psychoanalytic problems.

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