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Divinity as Excess

In *On Balance*, Adam Phillips writes, “Perhaps ‘excess’ is a word we use to reassure ourselves that we can be something other than excessive.”¹ Following this, he makes the suggestion that when we are too much for ourselves, sometimes our only recourse is to find a god we are not too much for. What happens if this proposal is taken seriously as a psycho-social analytic for understanding notions of divinity?

I would like to suggest an understanding of divinity that neither assumes its ontological status, nor reduces it to a kind of compensatory personal gesture, but rather foregrounds the kind of constructive psychological and social work the category of divinity performs. That is, it helps us mitigate and negotiate emotional experiences the intensity of which frightens us or threatens our self-concept. “We are too much for ourselves,” Phillips writes, “in our hungers and our desires, in our griefs and our commitments, in our loves and our hates – because we are unable to include so much of what we feel in the picture we have of ourselves.”² The notion of excess for Phillips is about delineation: it is a way of producing and monitoring boundaries – and not only boundaries of social “appropriateness.” It is also a way of producing and monitoring subjective boundaries. As Kristeva theorized in *Powers of Horror*, we expel our “mess,” and radically separate it from ourselves to maintain our composure, our identification with an ego-ideal.³ We react to it with a kind of disgust, affectively sealing it off from ourselves. It is “not-I.”

For Phillips, like Kristeva, excess is the mess we cannot assimilate. But not insignificantly, both Kristeva and Phillips also seem to think this mess we cannot assimilate has something to do with God. Further on in Phillips’ book he writes, “[W]e have delegated to a figure called God all the excesses we find most troubling in ourselves, which broadly speaking are our excessive

¹ *On Balance*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010. p. 39.

² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³ Kristeva parallels “food loathing” with abjection as a psychological process: “Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire; “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*; I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* with the same motion through which “I” claim to establish “myself.”...During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.” *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 3.

love for ourselves and others, and our excessive punitiveness. God in this view carries the part of ourselves that asks too much of us, that is endlessly demanding, that wants us to be more or better than we are; that is, in short, excessively moralistic.” Phillips spends much of his analysis of God/gods and excess discussing the moralizing and anxiety-ridden components of divinity – God caps permissiveness, desire, and God’s “tyranny” replaces the tyranny of our needs.⁴ This is perhaps a kind of familiar proposition, the idea of God being linked with the regulatory superego, or as ego-ideal. Phillips thus produces a very conventional theological picture: the all-loving God, and the punishing God. God is allied with law, morality, and, psychologically speaking, charged with maintaining the unity of the subject. God is the product of splitting.

This is close to Kristeva’s own reading of God in *Powers of Horror*, in which she elaborates how notions of God have been predominantly tied to the paternal, and used in the service of bolstering the coherence and hard boundaries of identity.⁵ The problem with this position of Kristeva and Phillips is that it is informed by a very narrow and specific reading of biblical texts. Phillips leans heavily on Milton’s reading of Genesis, for example, and Kristeva leans heavily on purity codes and creedal categories. While one need not go far or think hard to come up with examples of notions of god being tied exclusively to the paternal, or deployed in a moralizing fashion, this greatly reduces the theological picture – biblically and otherwise. Even the versions of American Christian religiosity that are famous for their too-easy bottom lines and self-interestedness might be more complex than immediately meets the eye. Between the proof-texted lines, divinity in contemporary American culture and beyond often operates as a creative and constructive – though never innocent – negotiation of one’s subjective boundaries and place in the world.

This idea that excess is resolved into hard lines, coherent identity and behavior regulation through divinity that is suggested in Kristeva and Phillips is, however, also mitigated in some fragments of Phillips’ book. Indeed, the quote with which I began, in which Phillips sees “finding a god we are not too much for” as a resource, hints less at a God who is the consequence of splitting, who caps and condemns excess, and more at a god who functions to contain and hold.⁶ This suggestion is much more generous.

It seems that Jessica Benjamin also makes room for this possibility, if incidentally, in her essay “What Angel Would Hear Me?” when she uses the notion of divinity as a kind of parable for the admiration- and fear-inspiring, as well as capacious containing dimensions of (transference onto) the analyst.⁷ She takes as her starting point the opening of Rilke’s *Ten Elegies*, which speaks of the angel as the powerful and frightening figure who both receives the

⁴ *On Balance*, p. 45.

⁵ See also Kristeva on the repression of the mother in Christianity in “Stabat Mater,” in *Tales of Love* Trans. by Leon Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

⁶ For instance, Phillips writes: “But God is also the figure for whom we are not too much. God provides the ultimate reassurance that our lives are not too much for us, not more than we can bear, which is something we are all prone to feel. So without God we can feel uncontained.” Phillips however seems to then lean towards the “limiting” rather than “holding” implications of containment, since he immediately follows this suggestion with the more predictable notion that God simplifies the overwhelming complexities of our lives. *On Balance*, p. 44-45.

⁷ “What Angel Would Hear Me?” in *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

cries of the poet, and threatens to dissolve him. She sees in this figure of the angel a parallel to the “awe and danger” that the analyst takes on in erotic transference. Using but also complicating the categories of maternal and paternal in the framing of erotic transference, Benjamin braids together the intrapsychic and intersubjective aspects of transference: the analyst is phallic, penetrating, all-powerful ideal, but also receives, recognizes and creates room for aloneness. As ideal, the analyst invites identification. As container, the analyst invites expressive mess.⁸

What is striking about this essay is not only her expanded and delicately theorized perspective on erotic transference in the analytic relationship, but the implication, assumed but not explored in the essay, that divinity has not just similar identificatory dimensions, but a capacity for holding one’s “mess.” This is, I would say, very close to Phillips’ more constructive suggestions about how to think about divinity in relation to excess.

Benjamin’s incidental assumptions about divinity offer the possibility of engaging appeals to divinity as a more rich and conflicted psycho-social process. If, by Benjamin’s implications, divinity operates like the analyst, then it seems it would not only be a projection of the ego-ideal, but also would importantly *make a place* for that which one expels and separates from oneself in disgust. Divinity operates as the powerful entity that permits surrender, and receives the shit or vomit of unconscious association,⁹ thus allowing feelings to be held and looked at, tentatively or provisionally owned, rather than simply cordoned off as “not-I.”

This idea that divinity not only represents an identificatory ideal, but also allows one to expel/express (and thus open for more conscious consideration) the feelings that would under other conditions be either intolerable or impermissible (ie., one’s “excess”) creates some new openings for the interpretation of divinity in NT texts and their afterlives. What if the category of divinity (occurring at the intersection of a whole set of social constructions) is seen as a creative process for the negotiation of subjective boundaries?¹⁰ That is, instead of only being the entity that gets constructed when one *cannot* negotiate our excesses, perhaps divinity can be thought as a way (among others) that one *does* negotiate one’s experienced excesses rather intelligently, if also with varying levels of consciousness.

To illustrate some of the possibilities, I want to briefly think about the figure of the lamb who shares the throne of God in Revelation. How might the Revelation’s lamb, especially in

⁸ There is much more that could be said about the theological implications of this essay of Benjamin’s, particularly her analysis of configurations of gender and the erotics of knowledge in the analytic scene and theories of transference. However, because of the time/space limitations here, I will only be discussing the dual function of the analyst/angel as both identificatory ideal (the intrapsychic function) and immersive, containing force (the intersubjective function).

⁹ Like Kristeva, Benjamin uses bodily “excesses” in this case shit, not vomit, as her symbol of psychological processes. *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, p. 169-170.

¹⁰ I use the term “divinity” in this piece with some discomfort, mainly because there seems to be no ancient parallel or precedent for the word. I choose this instead of simply god/God, though, not only because I want to capture notions of God alongside Benjamin’s angel, but also because I think that divinity implies a kind of diffuseness and non-exclusivity. There is perhaps too much pleading towards monotheism in the present, leaning too heavily on the few exclusive monotheistic statements in the bible, thus also often interfering with our ability to see the wide range of figures in the ancient world up through the present who are accorded transcendent, heightened or “excessive” status. Thus I am implicitly following critiques of monotheism as an ancient category (Paula Fredriksen and Larry Hurtado have both detailed the bumpy landscape of ancient “monotheism”), as well as suggesting that contemporary “monotheism” is shot through with all kinds of complexities. Ask most Christians to explain the trinity, for example.

relation to the sovereign God on the throne, reflect and structure a set of psycho-social processes?

Revelation's lamb has received new attention in the last few years. Particularly with the rise of empire-critical and postcolonial readings of Revelation, the odd and apparently paradoxical figuration of a conquering lamb has generated attention beyond "liturgical" meanings or sacrificial christology. Christopher Frilingos, Stephen Moore, Lorel Johns and Tina Pippin, for example, address the lamb more for its complex entwinement of power and powerlessness, and not only what that might have to say about the imperial and colonial context of Revelation, but also what kind of gender relations, or even what relations between humans and animals, are encoded in it.¹¹ Indeed the term used for lamb in Revelation is *arnion*, not *amnos*. *Amnos*, as Lorel Johns has found, is the preferred Septuagint term for the animals used in burnt offerings. In the Septuagint, Johns has found, *arnion* is used "exclusively in nonsacrificial contexts in which it symbolizes vulnerability of some kind."¹² So this move away from sacrificial and liturgical understandings of the lamb is also more exegetically sound.

This lamb, while on the one hand is synonymous with vulnerability, is, as these scholars and many others have notice, also a conquering lamb, in a way betraying his own metaphors. He is standing as if slaughtered, but has a curious bloodlust of his own. It is he who unleashes fury onto the world, and he is strongly associated with, if not coextensive with, the warrior of chapter 19. He also shares the throne with an unparalleled cosmic sovereign, ever-living and worshipped for his generating will (4:9-11), whose holds the fate of the world in (a scroll in) his hand -- a hyperbolic ideal of autonomy and agency.¹³

It is this double-edge of aggressiveness and vulnerability, agency and passive suffering, in the figure of the lamb that has attracted so much attention. This troubling and highly charged mixture of images that connote both victory and victimhood has led to much of Revelation scholarship attending to the violence either inherent to, or misplaced upon, the text. The interpretive questions that typically arise around Revelation then have been about ideology. They analyze to what extent it "resists" or "reproduces" imperial values, structures or ways of being, for example, by placing not only Revelation's first century audience(s) in a larger grid of

¹¹ Stephen D. Moore, "Divinanimality and (Post)humanity: Ruminations on Revelation's Ruminant, Quadrupedal Christ; or, the Even-Toed Ungulate That Therefore I Am.,"; Christopher Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs and the Book of Revelation* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Tina Pippin, "The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in The Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* no. 60 (1992), p. 67-82.

¹² Loren Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John* Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003. p. 30. Folks like Eugene Boring, for example, also notices the *amnos/arnion* distinction, and likewise suggests "vulnerability" and "victimhood" as crucial resonances for Revelation's lamb, but still abide by sacrificial meanings for lamb. Eugene Boring *Revelation* Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989. Cf. p. 110, 129.

¹³ Neither the throne nor the lamb, as depicted in Revelation, are absolute representations of power and vulnerability, respectively, given the relative silence and passivity of the one on the throne (Moore, "Divinanimality," p. 34), and the conquests and violence of the lamb. In fact, that the lamb is unstable in its vulnerability and subjection suggests what might be at stake in the verb "*nikaw*." In terms of affect, the lamb standing "as if slaughtered" seems to express anguished helplessness, the terrified speechlessness and incapacitation that often attend encounters with (not insignificantly) both violence and the divine. More on "*nikaw*" as "overcoming" below.

political power/powerlessness, but tracing the deployment of Revelation's language and imagery in more recent contexts of power.¹⁴

But what if the lamb and the sovereign on the throne are read *expressively*, rather than ideologically; as images that are saturated with affect. A number of readings of Revelation have paid more explicit attention to the emotive, indeed the excessively affective dimensions of Revelation. Most famously, perhaps, are Adela Yarbro Collins,¹⁵ Greg Carey,¹⁶ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza¹⁷ and Christopher Frilingos¹⁸ to name a few. But most of these readings don't spend much time on the specificity of Revelation's affectivity beyond noticing how excessively angry it seems to be. And while many readers have noticed the affective pull that Revelation has, this observation has been subordinated to, or at least folded into, ideological readings, rather than a space for generative reflection in and of itself.¹⁹

It is worth considering, for example, the ways contemporary interpretations of Revelation (both scholarly and non-scholarly) give rise to various complicated combinations of pain, shame, dominance, helplessness, guilt, empowerment, anger and victorious pride. In the recent end-of-the-world predictions of Harold Camping, for example, Revelation was used as part of a mash-up of biblical texts, producing an interpretation that caused thousands of people across the nation to wait in anxious anticipation of a "rapture" that would save them from this earthly life. Interviews in newspapers charted the utopian hopes and desires of Camping's following: people in dire financial straits were relieved to be able to stop worrying about money, or simply hoping for something better than this life. "I was hoping for it because I think heaven would be a lot better than this earth," commented Keith Bauer, a truck driver who

¹⁴ For a sampling of some of the work that has addressed Revelation and its imagery in terms of social and political power and powerlessness, in addition to Pippin, Frilingos, and Stephen Moore, see also: John Dominic Crossan *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* New York: HarperCollins, 2007, chapter 5. Steven J. Friesen *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. J. Nelson Kraybill *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* New York: Continuum, 1996. Pablo Richard *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* The Bible and Liberation Series; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995. Barbara Rossing *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride and Empire in the Apocalypse* Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1999. David A. Sanchez *From Patmos to the Barrio: Subverting Imperial Myths* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. Leonard L. Thompson *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

¹⁵ Collins *Crisis and Catharsis*, chapter 5. Collins discusses the senses of powerlessness and aggression that haunt Revelation.

¹⁶ "Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation" in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* David L. Barr, ed. Leiden: Brill, 2006, 169-180. Carey, similar to Collins, imagines disillusionment and alienation to be at the base of Revelations violent revenge fantasies.

¹⁷ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (2nd ed.) Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998, chapter 7. Schuessler Fiorenza more generally cues into the "emotionally persuasive" character of Revelation.

¹⁸ *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters*, chapter 3. Frilingos likewise sees Revelation as trying to guide and/regulate the affective responses of its audiences.

¹⁹ It is not that affect is free of ideology. But thinking affectively or expressively about images and language can invite a more sympathetic and complex positioning regarding the text. That is, reading for affect can put a limit on moralizing around texts that ideological criticism often invites. Foregrounding and pausing on affect as a concept reads texts as expressive, lessening the burden of their truth-telling. While there is a lot at stake, ideologically, in interpretation, there is also a way in which predominantly ideological readings perpetuate the sense that New Testament texts were always treated as the moral compass that they have become for modern Western readers.

followed the predictions of Camping. He followed this by saying he was hoping for relief from mounting credit card debt and other bills.²⁰ It seemed that the thrust of many stories I read about the (failed) apocalyptic hopes inspired by Camping revolved around people's financial decisions – spending their life's savings, quitting jobs, etc., as if to suggest that in light of the oncoming rapture, people could have a relationship to their lives that was not so bound by American expectations of financial success, or burdened by the pressures of not being a “winner” in the capitalist system. A woman named Adrienne Martinez was interviewed by NPR, and in her interview, she chronicled how she and her husband left their jobs to spend time with their child, spent their savings, and budgeted all their money so that there would be nothing left by May 21: " 'My mentality was, why are we going to work for more money? It just seemed kind of greedy to me. And unnecessary,' she says. And so, her husband adds, 'God just made it possible — he opened doors. He allowed us to quit our jobs, and we just moved, and here we are.'"²¹

While these people were often treated as foolish or naïve (or as some kind of cultural curiosity) by the larger public, what Camping's predictions surfaced were not just senses of heavenly entitlement or moral scolding. They also surfaced the many and various deep wounds of contemporary living, and the pain of being bounded to the world.

On what would seem to be the other end of the spectrum, Revelation's prominent place in empire-critical and postcolonial biblical criticism perhaps indicates a similar set of affective circumstances. In the words of Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, as interviewed in their book, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*²²:

Wes: Even as we sit here this moment, comfortably conversing before a nice computer, I recognize how the privileges of empire surround us: the peace and quiet on the street, the plentiful food in our refrigerators and at the local grocery a few blocks away, the Internet at our beck and call, the luxury of time to ponder these questions. Each day as I get out of bed, empire is part of the fabric of my daily life in which I am entangled without having made any conscious choices to be part of it.

²⁰ From a May 22, 2011 LA Times article by Christopher Goffard, “But to others who put stock in Camping's prophecy, disillusionment was already profound by late morning. To them, it was clear the world and its woes would make it through the weekend. Keith Bauer, a 38-year-old tractor-trailer driver from Westminster, Md., took last week off from work, packed his wife, young son and a relative in their SUV and crossed the country. If it was his last week on Earth, he wanted to see parts of it he'd always heard about but missed, such as the Grand Canyon. With maxed-out credit cards and a growing mountain of bills, he said, the rapture would have been a relief.” Bauer's quote was reported by the Associated Press: <http://gawker.com/5804346/how-true-believers-dealt-with-the-failed-apocalypse>

²¹ The full excerpt of the interview on NPR: "Knowing the date of the end of the world changes all your future plans," says 27-year-old Adrienne Martinez. She thought she'd go to medical school, until she began tuning in to Family Radio. She and her husband, Joel, lived and worked in New York City. But a year ago, they decided they wanted to spend their remaining time on Earth with their infant daughter. "My mentality was, why are we going to work for more money? It just seemed kind of greedy to me. And unnecessary," she says. And so, her husband adds, "God just made it possible — he opened doors. He allowed us to quit our jobs, and we just moved, and here we are." Now they are in Orlando, in a rented house, passing out tracts and reading the Bible. Their daughter is 2 years old, and their second child is due in June. Joel says they're spending the last of their savings. They don't see a need for one more dollar. "You know, you think about retirement and stuff like that," he says. "What's the point of having some money just sitting there?" "We budgeted everything so that, on May 21, we won't have anything left," Adrienne adds. (Reported by Barbara Bradley Hagerty, NPR, May 7 2011). See also an entire article in Daily Finance devoted to what to do is you you're your financial stability in the wake of Camping's predictions: <http://www.dailyfinance.com/2011/05/23/no-job-no-belongings-no-rapture-how-to-rebuild-your-financial/>

²² Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999.

Anthony: For me that's how the seductiveness of Babylon really works: Babylon doesn't present me with difficult choices; it says to me, if I go with the flow, I can lead a happy and meaningful life.²³

The book begins by outlining the place of Revelation in socially disengaged rapture theologies and (pre/post) millennial movements, and contrasting their own method of a socially-engaged and political reading of Revelation which makes a detailed account of Revelation's context.²⁴ One of their social explanations for the success of such interpretations is that

America's own myths are unable to account for the situation in which people live, people will look elsewhere for answers. In other words, as long as politicians and advertisers continue to appeal to people's pursuit for the "American dream" of self-made, family-based, happy-faced prosperity, premillennialism and other forms of apocalyptic thinking will prosper.²⁵

It seems, however, that despite the different interpretational strategy for Revelation, the affective thrust of *both* millennialism and Howard-Brook and Gwyther's own reading of Revelation is based in a kind of haunted and pained disillusionment with American imperial promises. Reading Revelation for traces of imperial ideology, finding it hopelessly entangled in (or trying to disentangle it from) histories of colonialism, and claiming it as a source of resistance for the moment all have important ethical functions. But these responses, even when framed in the most objectivist kinds of terms, have pain, guilt and shame at American imperialism or Christianity's prominent place in the history of colonialism, for example, barely under their surface if not at their very core. Indeed, to "unveil" and expose imperialism and colonialism has its own aggressive fantasies of victory -- ones resonating, if subtly, with the moralizing exposure of Babylon that Revelation enacts. The fantasy is to conquer with knowledge.²⁶

Interpretationally, the Camping followers awaiting the rapture and end of the world might be qualitatively distinct on several fronts from liberal biblical scholars – the latter an obsessive reader of the specificity of the text, the former a group who finds little need in checking to see if a rapture even occurs in Revelation and mostly finds "context" as a category unnecessary for reading the Bible. But both groups, however different their ideologies may be, have similar affects reflected in and amongst their constituencies. Both groups include people that await a kind of triumph, whether heavenly or social.²⁷ Both groups express, with varying levels of

²³ Ibid., p. 268.

²⁴ Ibid., Introduction.

²⁵ Ibid., 17.

²⁶ On the aggressiveness/paranoia of even post-Foucaultian epistemologies and hermeneutics of suspicion, cf. Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. As Sedgwick points out, this is not to say one should trash hermeneutics of suspicion, just to note that hermeneutics of suspicion as an epistemology, while in many ways crucial, has a way of thoroughly "disavowing its affective motive and force and masquerading as the very stuff of truth." p. 138.

²⁷ As Catherine Keller has noted in the first chapter of her book *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, Revelation "scripts" all kinds of visions ranging in their politics from the fundamentalist conservative to the liberationist, and ranging in their apparent religiosity, as well.

explicitness, a kind of pain and shame over the late capitalist US economic situation. Made helpless by it, and helplessly knit into it, they wish to transcend it and see true reality exposed.

These interpretations of Revelation obviously can have very different impacts on individuals and social structures, and it is important not to flatten or relativize the very different implications of, for example, awaiting heavenly rescue and being catalyzed towards social action. And that is exactly the point: reading Revelation as referential of a clear ideology has its limits, since its ability to persuade its readers towards a coherent cause is hardly convincing, nor does it seem to have a clear relationship to any one social constituency. But Revelation *does* possess, at least in the present, a stunningly consistent capacity to attract and process poignant and various permutations of expressions of melancholy victory: a mourning of the perils of belonging to the world, beside (or inside) idealized hopes for somehow “overcoming” them.

The lamb of Revelation seems to process and contain an excess of aggression, despair, helplessness, and pain. But it also seems to enact the fantasies of the ego ideal – the sovereign agent, all-knowing/all-seeing, and ruling over all. I am not only suggesting this as a way of understanding contemporary readings of Revelation, but also as an angle for understanding Revelation in the first century, particularly its pained relationship to the Roman empire, which recent scholarship has so carefully and thoroughly described. That these imaginations of the lamb be read as psycho-social expressions and negotiations (conscious or otherwise) with pain, subjection and fantasies of power, is, I think, a valid historical proposal, and is actually signaled in the text.

The lamb is a figure who invites identification and participation in his own activities. For instance, the lamb invites others who conquer/overcome onto the throne with him (3:21), it is through the lamb that the holy ones rule over all the earth (5:10) and the lamb shares meals and titles with them in chapter 19. Likewise, in Rev. 14:1, the 144,000 stand on Mt. Zion with the lamb. Even more significantly, in chapter 19, the rider -- who is clearly strongly associated with the lamb -- both are given the title “King of kings and Lord of lords,” (17:14, 1916) -- also seems to share attributes with both God and “the faithful”/Revelation’s audience. Matthias Hoffman has noted that the “unknown name” of 19:12 could allude to either the unknown name of God or the passage in Rev. 2:17 in which “all who conquer” are promised a new name that no one knows except the ones who receive it.²⁸ This simultaneous allusion to the lamb, God and “those who conquer,” is thus quite strategic. All are conquerors who share the throne, and thus the reader can share not only in the sovereignty of the throne, but also eat together in 3:2, at the wedding supper of the lamb (19:9), and at the great supper of God (19:17). In this way, the conqueror/lamb appears not only as object of worship, but may also act as a kind of avatar – or at the very least a figure with whom readers are supposed to associate themselves.²⁹

The text invites the reader to identify with the lamb in its conquest and victory, which is described as “*nikaw*” – overcoming. Is it the excess susceptibility and pained subjection

²⁸ Matthias Reinhard Hoffman *The Destroyer and the Lamb: The Relationship Between Angelomorphic and Lamb Christology in the Book of Revelation* Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005, p. 177.

²⁹ I am indebted to Hal Taussig’s work surfacing the identificatory/participatory dimensions of Jesus, and thinking about Jesus as a way of participating in divinity. Taussig sees the “follow me” motif in the Gospel of Mark the declaration “I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” in the Gospel of John (14:20), as instructing the reader in this identification.

represented in the lamb that the readers must “overcome” through joining in that very figure’s ascension to the throne? If the lamb/reader overcomes its excess sense of vulnerability and subjection on the one hand by sharing the sovereign’s throne, the lamb/reader is never quite able to shed its excesses. The lamb remains a lamb in the final utopian scene, thus puncturing the fantastical victory of the ego-ideal. In the text, the ego ideal does not finally foreclose expression of the mess that both interrupts and gives rise to that ideal. These imaginations of the divine in Revelation involve a fusion of identification and containment -- even containment *through* identification, as if by identifying with the lamb on the throne one can begin to examine, perhaps only semi-consciously, and allow back in, perhaps only tentatively, the extreme sense of pain that the imagination of sovereignty strives so urgently against.

This reading of divinity as excess, or, more specifically, as a negotiation of affective excess, allows for a social understanding of divinity that does not simply reduce it to a projection of an ideal or a moralizing mechanism, but rather sees the constructive, collective psychological work that divinity performs. Gods, angels and other -- shall we say -- “excessive” subjects, may provide both an escape from and encounter with those parts of ourselves that are too much for us. As that which is almost inevitably beyond, outside of, or more than oneself, and also that which inhabits us, it seems divinity is bound up with excess from the start, allowing us not only the ambivalent comfort of our boundaries, but also the kind of mitigated ecstasy and terror involved in temporarily dissolving them.