

Uncanny Bodies, Impossible Knowledge and Somatic Excess in Isaiah 29

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This essay¹ explores affect and somatic excess in Isaiah 29.9-16. I argue that the text presents the male body as a site of resistance to signification and linguistic representation. In this non-signifying body, affect, sensation, and experience are of foremost importance. This emphasis on sensation destabilises both the representational economy of the text and the gendered associations upon which this economy depends. Rejecting the association of the masculine with rationality, discourse, and representation, Isaiah 29 offers in its place an unstable male body and an uncanny masculinity positioned in the space outside representation. The uncanny male body, rich in affect but resistant to signification, suggests a new way of understanding embodiment and imagining gender in the Prophets. My argument draws upon Brian Massumi's analysis of affect in *Parables for the Virtual*, Luce Irigaray's work on gender and language, and Sigmund Freud's classic essay on the uncanny.

1. INTRODUCTION

The words of the prophet Isaiah have strange things to say about the body. In chapter 29 of the book that bears his name, Isaiah commands his listeners to “stupefy yourselves and be stupefied; close your eyes tight and be blind!” (29.9).² In the next seven verses, a radical erasure of knowledge and subversion of meaning ensues. The body – the eyes that see, the ears that hear, the very state of wakefulness that makes understanding possible – is replaced with un-sensing, unknowing flesh. The transformation defamiliarises the body and destabilises the larger economy of representation. This self-stupefied, blinded body is a body whose experience exceeds what is representable in language, including the linguistic metaphors we commonly use when we talk about bodies. What is the meaning of such a body, and how can it be represented?

This essay considers the non-signifying, excessive bodies of Isaiah 29. I will argue that the body in Isaiah 29.9-16 presents a site of resistance to signification. The representation of embodiment works to destabilise the representational economy of the text. While this instability is ultimately resolved, it nevertheless marks a point of disturbance and reasserts the materiality of prophecy against the smoothness of the literary text. In this non-signifying body, affect, sensation and experience are of foremost importance. The first half of the essay presents a close reading of Isaiah 29.9-16. Building upon Brian Massumi's work on the affective and non-signifying body, I will consider the problems of sensation and signification in the biblical text.

The close reading and analysis in the first half of the essay form the basis for a broader argument in the second half about gender, language and representation. Granting materiality to textual bodies requires, as well, granting them a sex. As an engagement with the work of Luce Irigaray makes clear, the textual economy of Isaiah 29 is a thoroughly masculine space, and the bodies addressed are undoubtedly male bodies. And yet these male bodies are implicated in a radical denial of knowledge and refusal of signification. What happens to masculinity when the masculine economy of

representation falters? As I will demonstrate, when Isaiah 29 pushes the boundaries of representation, masculinity itself is subverted. Freud's theory of the uncanny provides a helpful form for thinking through this subversive transformation. The uncanny, un-signifying, affective bodies of Isaiah 29 suggest a new way of understanding embodiment and gender in the prophets.

The work of Brian Massumi provides a useful starting point for thinking about the body in terms of affect and experience instead of representation and signification. His book *Parables for the Virtual* opens with a call to move beyond linguistic and positional models of embodiment (Massumi 2002). Massumi argues that a preoccupation with systems, grids of oppositional frameworks (male/female, black/white, gay/straight and so on), and Saussurian/Lacanian coding have displaced the moving, sensing body (4). This leaves cultural theory unable to account for movement, change and experience. *Parables for the Virtual*, which draws frequently on Deleuze and Guattari, is a concerted effort to render experience, sensation and affect "culturally-theoretically thinkable" (4).

While *Parables for the Virtual* contains a number of provocative theoretical insights, it is the discussion of affect that is most useful for thinking about embodiment in Isaiah. Massumi argues that bodily experience entails an affective excess that exceeds language and linguistic structure. This body exterior to signification is the body I will take up in Isaiah 29. The second half of this essay will set Massumi's work on affect against two perhaps unexpected interlocutors – Luce Irigaray's work on gender and language and Freud's writing on the uncanny. I am less interested in the intricacies of the relationships of each of these texts to one another (Irigaray's relation to Freud, for example, is a topic that has filled entire books), than in how, together, they offer a new way of thinking about bodies in Isaiah. Indeed, before speaking further about Irigaray's analysis of the masculine economy of representation and Freud's theorisation of the uncanny, I want to turn to the text itself, Isaiah 29.9-16, and its excessive, affective bodies.

2. THE BODY AGAINST ITSELF: ISAIAH 29.9

Isaiah 29.9-16 consists of three poetic couplets (9-10, 13-14, 15-16), as well as a two verse prose interlude (11-12).³ The couplets and the prose verses form a literary whole, linked by the thematisation of ignorance and knowledge, the images of concealment, and the insistent interest in material bodies and objects. The text reads,

⁹Stupefy⁴ yourselves and be stupefied⁵; seal your eyes tight and be blind.

Be drunk, but not from wine; tremble, but not from strong drink.

¹⁰For Yahweh has poured out a spirit of deep sleep upon you,

And he has closed your eyes and covered your heads.⁶

¹¹And the vision, all of it, has become for you like the words of a sealed book.⁷ If they give it to someone who knows how to read⁸, saying, "Read this", then he will say, "I can't, because it's sealed". ¹²And if he gives the book to someone who can't read, saying, "Read this", then he will say, "I don't know how to read".

¹³Because this people approached me with their⁹ mouths, and honoured me with their lips, But alienated their hearts from me, and their fear of me is a commandment learned by rote.

¹⁴Look, I will act yet more marvellously with this people, marvellously and wondrously,

So that the wisdom of their wise men is destroyed, and the discernment of their discerning men shall disappear.

¹⁵Woe to the ones who bury plans deeply to hide them from Yahweh,

And, because they act in darkness, say to themselves, “Who can see us?” and “Who can know about us?”

¹⁶You’re so perverse! It’s as if the potter were the same as the clay,

As if the object were to say of its maker, “He didn’t make me”,

Or if the pot were to say of its potter, “He has no skill”.

Affect and experience challenge the primacy of both language and vision. The body is positioned against knowledge, beginning with the command “stupefy yourselves and be stupefied”. This command to stupefy conceals a paradox. For the imperative to succeed requires a rational subject of address, or at least a subject who understands language, to enact the command. However, this rational subject is also the object: “stupefy *yourselves*”. The success of the action undoes the very conditions of awareness that make it possible. The text simultaneously destabilises speech and suggests, as Massumi’s work does, the possibility of a bodily experience not reducible to language.

In the second half of the verse, the denial of understanding becomes explicitly somatic with the command “seal your eyes tight and be blind”. The verb *š*, *blind*, carries the more graphic meaning of pasting something shut¹⁰ – here, one’s eyes. This is a powerful figure for self-inflicted ignorance and a harsh judgment. As in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, the scene of self-blinding in Isaiah offers a vision of excess. There is a moment of horror when Oedipus blinds himself that exceeds the ethical and literary system that surrounds it. Perhaps this is why the dreadful act, like so many acts of violence in Greek drama, occurs offstage.¹¹ I am not suggesting that blindness in Isaiah serves the same function as in the *Oedipus* cycle, still less that the poetics of biblical and Greek texts are the same (Erich Auerbach [1946] has persuasively demonstrated that they are not).¹² Instead, I want only to draw attention to a certain horror latent in Isaiah, a horror that Sophocles develops more fully. This is a horror that finds somatic form in the scene of self-blinding, an action by – and against – the body that expresses what language alone cannot say. In Isaiah as in *Oedipus*, the action of bodies moves beyond the basic idea of the body as signifier that underlies much contemporary discourse.¹³

Returning to Isaiah 29.9, the crisis of the senses – in this case, sight – cannot be explained or integrated into the logic of signification. There is no compensatory wisdom that accompanies the loss of vision, just as there is no tragic catharsis in the moment of self-blinding. What is primary in the text is not a symbolic logic, but rather the act itself. To understand this non-signifying act requires another explanatory schema, one that takes sensation seriously, both in its excess – the pain of self-blinding – and in its lack – the blindness itself. We are in the realm of affect.

The second half of verse 9 – “Be drunk but not from wine, tremble but not from strong drink” – implicates the entire body. Stable awareness and *habitus* are displaced, as when drunk, but this is a disorientation not preceded by – or explainable by – the consumption of wine. Wine, no less than blindness, is part of a rich signifying system. Wine is both the ordinary beverage of ancient Israel and an essential part of ritual and religious practice.¹⁴ Within the book of Isaiah, grapes and wine appears frequently, as a marker of everyday agricultural existence (16.10), a synecdoche for the land (3.14), a sign of God’s love for Israel (5.1-7) and a symbol of blood (63.3). The command “be drunk but not from wine” short-circuits this semiotic system. The metaphor is simultaneously activated and denied. The somatic effect remains, but without the events preceding it that render it comprehensible. Nor is the confusion looked upon favourably by the text, which as prophecy places a premium on linguistic communicability. The ignorance that ensues is a wholly negative state. The text again gestures toward – because it cannot represent it directly – the body exterior to signification.

3. EXCESSES: DEEP SLEEP AND UNREADABLE BOOKS: ISAIAH 29.10-12

The move outside signification is not a sustainable position, and the text quickly retreats. Verse 10 provides an explanation for the denial of knowledge demanded in the lines prior. “For Yahweh has poured out a spirit of deep sleep upon you, and he has closed your eyes and covered your heads”. Here agency is relocated to Yahweh, who brings sleep and closes eyes – the second action a more explicitly somatic reiteration of the first. This deep sleep, *tardēmāh*, is the bodily state of non-awareness that precedes extreme divine intervention.¹⁵ In Isaiah 29, this intervention is undeniably negative, a moment of contact between the human and the divine that only increases their estrangement. And yet even this is not enough to explain the drastic commands of the verse prior. There is a somatic excess in verse 9 that exceeds the tidy explanation furnished in the verse that follows. Even though verse 10 explains the source of the confusion, the summons to the people to stupefy *themselves* and to blind *themselves* imply an agency, however paradoxical.

The text pulls back further in verses 11 and 12, which switch from poetry to prose:

¹¹And the vision, all of it, has become for you like the words of a sealed book. If they give it to someone who knows how to read, saying, “Read this!”, then he will say, “I can’t, because it’s sealed”. ¹²And if he gives the book to someone who can’t read, saying, “Read this!”, then he will say, “I don’t know how to read”.

The resistance to signification in the initial command of self-stupefaction and self-blinding is not sustainable, and the text spins out into excursus. Verses 11 and 12 situate the sensory, non-signifying body in a larger epistemic framework; the excessive vision will become “like the words of a sealed book”. There is a certain tension in this image. The written text fixes knowledge into a discrete form and renders it transferable. And yet this book is sealed, its secrets inaccessible. The act of sealing connects the literary body – the sealed book – to the human bodies of verse 9 with their eyes sealed shut. The frustration of both the literate and illiterate likewise restages the radical failure of knowledge in that verse.

There is also a certain awkwardness to verses 11-12. The text lurches from poetry in verses 9-10 to a clumsy prose.¹⁶ But despite the suddenness of the transition, the central image of the sealed book is compelling, as its great currency in later interpretive history, including Daniel, Revelation and other apocalyptic literature, makes clear. However, as the description continues, it becomes flabby and unfocused. Verse 12, the presentation of the sealed book to the illiterate reader, has an associative link to what precedes it, but adds little to the original metaphor. Indeed, the overall effect of verses 11-12 is to counteract the tension of verses 9-10 by replacing extremity and difficulty with familiar material metaphors. This temporary slackening contrasts with the poetic verses, which remain, to borrow Auerbach’s memorable description of biblical style, ‘fraught with background’ (Auerbach 1953, 12).¹⁷

4. MARVELLOUSNESS, MATERIALITY, AND THE INADEQUACY OF LINGUISTIC METAPHORS: ISAIAH 29.13-16

As the text swings back to poetry, it is again fraught with background and, with it, linguistic crisis. Yahweh, through the prophet, continues,

¹³Because this people approached me with their mouths and honoured me with their lips,
But alienated their hearts from me, and their fear of me is a commandment learned by rote.

¹⁴Look, I will act yet more marvellously with this people, marvellously and wondrously,
So that the wisdom of their wise men is destroyed, and the discernment of their discerning
men shall disappear.

In Yahweh's explanation, the problem again assumes somatic form, with mouths and lips set against hearts. The body is split, at odds with itself. Yahweh's response is not to reconcile lips to hearts, but rather to promise overwhelming action. But situated as it is immediately after the wilful denial of knowledge, what can such a promise from Yahweh possibly mean?

I suggest that the content of this action is deliberately excluded from the category of the meaningful, comprehensible event. We have already seen how the command to "stupefy yourselves and be stupefied" turns the body against itself in an act that resists simple linguistic periphrasis. Yahweh's promise to act yet more marvellously is likewise not reducible to summary, paraphrase, or explanation through language. It exceeds representation or imitation. Here too we might think of Kierkegaard and his reflections on the marvellous faith of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard 1983). Like Kierkegaard, we can wonder at the performance, but not explain it. It has a meaning, but not one translatable into language, the medium of the universal.¹⁸

As in the speech from the whirlwind in Job, the divine address in Isaiah 29.14 is at once radically present and devoid of content. The body that receives this address, a body that stupefies itself and resists comprehensible signification, has a similar double presence-absence in the text. I will return to this dialectic of presence and absence in the final sections of this essay. For now, however, I want only to note what should already be clear – that the phenomenon I have been calling "non-signification" is not a negative speech act or a neat trick of apophasis. Instead, it indicates an affective realm of experience and sensation that is not reducible to linguistic metaphor.

The third couplet, 15-16, does not provide a content for Yahweh's speech or an explanation of his actions. Instead, it emphasises divine potency and picks up on the thematics of visibility and secrecy in the two preceding couplets:

¹⁵Woe to the ones who bury plans deeply to hide them from Yahweh,
And, because they act in darkness, say to themselves, "Who can see us?" and "Who can
know about us?"

¹⁶You're so perverse! It's as if the potter were the same as the clay,
As if the object were to say of its maker, "He didn't make me",
Or if the pot were to say of its potter, "He has no skill".

The first verse of the couplet (15) draws on the constellation of darkness, confusion and malfeasance that appears in verses 9-10 (and 7-8 of the prior poem as well – a motif linking the two originally independent poems together). The second verse of the couplet (16), like the references to blindness and drunkenness in 29.9, foregrounds materiality. And like that verse, it is rich in paronomasia, the language enacting the absurdity of the situation it describes. The triadic structure – 3 lines of 4 beats, if *lō'* is read together with *'āśānī*) closes the poem, though without imbuing Yahweh's action with content.

After Yahweh's promise to act "yet more marvellously", the talking pots and clay may seem homely, even as metaphor. And yet they serve a double purpose in the poem as a whole. First, the very contrast with the mighty acts and wonders of Yahweh heightens the distance between divine and human modes of action. At the same time, the notion of a talking pot – cast as absurd by the poem – highlights a deep incongruity between materiality and language. Though there is no somatic here – the human body is replaced by raw clay and sculpted form – the pots nevertheless serve a

similar function: they suggest the enduring presence of a physical reality that resists language, speech, and linguistic periphrasis. Materiality is non-signifying and insistently enfolded.

5. A GOD WHO DENIES KNOWLEDGE

This denial of knowledge in Isaiah 29.9-16, dually figured as cognitive and somatic, and its collocation with confusion, paradox, and non-signification, has much in common with the scene of Isaiah's theophany and call in chapter 6. Isaiah sees Yahweh seated upon a throne, surrounded by seraphim. God asks whom to send as a messenger to the people; the prophet volunteers. No sooner has Isaiah been commissioned than his mission is frustrated. Yahweh tells Isaiah:

⁹Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand". ¹⁰Fatten the heart¹⁹ of this people, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their heart, and turn and be healed. (6.9-10)²⁰

As in chapter 29, the mandated ignorance in chapter 6 touches both cognitive and sensory modes of experience. There is also a confusing slippage between the Hebrew imperatives in 6.9-10. The first imperatives, in 6.9, are clearly directed at the people (as in 29.9), although here they are more explicitly framed by a note directed to the prophet, "Go and say to this people". The subsequent verse, however, presents more complications. The third person pronominal suffixes (referring back to this people) suggest that the discourse has shifted and Isaiah is now the object of the address, instead of a mediating presence between God and the people. This change in the prophetic role complicates, however, the question of agency – is Isaiah to fatten the hearts of the people, or is this a task for God, or for the people themselves?

The Septuagint version of the text neatly sidesteps this difficulty by transforming the present/future-oriented imperatives into past tense verbs indicating a pre-existing state of affairs: "For the heart of this people has been fattened, and they have heard with their ears with difficulty, and they have seen with their eyes with difficulty, so that they may not look with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn – and I would heal them" (6.10, Septuagint). Of the Greek variant, Hans Wildberger writes, "(w)hether this was done intentionally or not, it completely removes the theological problem posed in the Hebrew, whether the prophet himself was actually supposed to cause the hardening" (Wildberger 1991, 250). The ambiguity and ambivalence of the Hebrew Masoretic text mark it as the superior textual variant; using the language of text criticism, we might identify it as the analytic and moral *lectio difficilior*. The Septuagint variant is, however, valuable as an early record of the discomfort the original textual ambiguity creates.

A similar impulse to explain away the strange imperatives often animates modern criticism. Scholars often read the deliberate blindness and sensory denial as the prophet's bitter self-reflection. Joseph Blenkinsopp, for example, writes, "(i)t is no doubt correct to read this disconcerting aspect of Isaiah's commissioning as a post factum justification of failure or, better, to suggest that the mission, which was precisely to harden hearts, in fact succeeded" (Blenkinsopp 2000, 224). The divine imperative of sensory denial is thus a late (though first-Isaianic) literary feature whose purpose is to explain the historical reality of the reception of the prophet's work. I will not argue this point. I want to stress, instead, that while historical circumstances may be summoned to explain Isaiah 6, they do not explain the self-blinding in Isaiah 29. Indeed, I suspect that the turn to historical explanation does not even exhaust the power of the image of blinded eyes and weighted hearts in Isaiah 6. The reality of failure of the prophetic mission is inadequate to explain the enduring strangeness of the command of ignorance.

The non-signifying bodies of Isaiah 29 and 6 challenge the privilege commonly accorded to linguistic and visual metaphors. While blindness is thematised, the visual is not privileged over other

forms of sensation. Nor are the bodies of Isaiah 29 reducible to linguistic metaphor – they do not “signify” or “perform”. Instead, sensation and affect precede identity, which is produced as a retroactive effect.

6. LANGUAGE AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

The non-signifying bodies of Isaiah 29 do not merely challenge contemporary historical and theoretical understandings. They also resist normative ideas of gender that span the Hebrew Bible and the present moment. In particular, the bodies in Isaiah 29 challenge the facile association of masculinity with rationality, discourse and representation, and of femininity with irrationality, sensuality, and the failure of language. Luce Irigaray argues that such an understanding of the feminine is necessary to sustain male subjectivity. Of the function assigned to woman, she writes, “She is the reserve of ‘sensuality’ for the elevation of intelligence, she is the matter used for the imprint of forms, gage of possible regression into naïve perception, the representative representing negativity (death), dark continent of dreams and fantasies, and also eardrum faithfully duplicating the music, though not all of it, so that the series of displacements may continue, for the ‘subject’” (Irigaray 1985, 141).²¹ Irigaray traces this dualism of masculine subjectivity and feminine materiality back as far as the Greeks and Plato’s allegory of the cave; we might trace it even further to the ancient Near East. It is also a salient dualism in the Bible, as commentators, ancient and modern alike, have noted. Much of feminist biblical criticism has worked either to document the misogynistic consequences of such a representation of the feminine or to draw on resources in the biblical text to deconstruct the binary.²²

I propose, however, another critical direction: treating the binary of male/spirit/rationality and female/embodiment/irrationality as native to the biblical text and working within its confines to explore the possibility of subversion and transformation. Furthermore, masculinity, not femininity, offers the better starting point for such a critique. Before turning to the masculine in Isaiah, however, I want to introduce a few more key ideas from Irigaray’s work. Irigaray insists that sexual difference is basic and ontological. She decries the “neutral”, which erases the feminine and attributes a false universality to the masculine (Irigaray 1993, 117-118). Language and the “economy of representation” are a part of this deceptive “neutral”. Irigaray argues that all language is sexed and that the realm of discourse is masculine (169-181). Women are denied the possibility of achieving subjectivity because they are forced to do so under the male economy of representation, which renders this task impossible (Irigaray 1985, 133-135). A space outside of the male economy of language is a necessary prerequisite for female subjectivity.

Irigaray’s position is undeniably a radical one. However, the extremity of her work is also what makes it useful for reading the Latter Prophets, a collection of texts which are exemplary of the total exclusion of women from the economy of representation that Irigaray describes. The feminine is scarce in Isaiah – we have the haughty daughters of Zion (3.16-4.1), the young mother of Immanuel (7.14), the prophetess (perhaps the prophet’s wife) (8.3), the feminised city of Babylon (47.1), the association of divine and maternal compassion (49.15), and the recurrent metaphor of labor pains (13.8, 21.3, 26.17, 42.14). I do not believe that any of these represent an “authentic” feminine in the text, or even a “site of resistance” against its patriarchal arc. Instead, the feminine in Isaiah represents a masculinist fantasy. Judith Butler argues that there are two forms of femininity in Irigaray’s work – specular and excessive. She writes, “We might understand the feminine figured within the binary as the *specular* feminine and the feminine which is erased and excluded from that binary as the *excessive* feminine” (Butler 1993, 39). As soon as the feminine is represented in language, it is erased and replaced with a *specular* double. This specular feminine does not, however, represent in any way that which it has erased. Applying Irigaray to Isaiah, then, we can identify “the feminine” – whether literal or metaphoric, erotic, maternal, or otherwise – as what

Butler calls “specular figures which displace the feminine at the moment they purport to represent the feminine” (Butler 1993, 41). The text presents a thoroughly masculine economy.

The feminine is excluded from representation in Isaiah (as, indeed, in all the prophets) – this is not, in itself, a radical proposition. But consider, again, the body excluded from language – the body I have discussed in Isaiah. What happens to the male body that refuses to make itself legible and instead resists signification?

We find ourselves at the place in Hebrew prophecy where patriarchy stumbles over itself. The world of Isaiah, like ancient Israelite society in general, is deeply patriarchal. So too is the male God with whom the prophet is frequently aligned.²³ However, the total exclusion of the feminine creates a problem for the text. If women are already excluded from the economy of representation and from the category of addressee, then those bodies that are addressed – the bodies that are positioned outside of language – must be male bodies.²⁴ But these are male bodies that subvert the tight, reflexive association of masculinity, language and rationality, and femininity, embodiment and irrationality.

7. AFFECT AND UNCANNY BODIES

The excessive, non-signifying male bodies, while challenging the binaries of Irigaray’s account of sexual difference, also open a space for an interpretation that takes affect seriously – a critical move that is necessary, as we have seen, to move beyond the paranoia of the hermeneutics of suspicion.²⁵ Massumi describes affect as an intensity that “vaguely but insistently connects what is normally indexed as separate”, but “when asked to signify itself, it can only do so in a paradox” (Massumi 2002, 24). Foregrounding affect, moreover, makes clear the problem with binaries, like the classic split between transcendence and immanence: “No matter what one does, they tend to flip over into each other, in a kind of spontaneous Deleuzian combustion” (38). Affect is a non-signifying intensity that crosses binaries, that smudges the clear-cut differences of categories. Taking affect seriously requires us to grant primacy to movement and sensation. “REPETITION PRECEDES RESEMBLANCE (even to oneself)” and “PASSAGE PRECEDES POSITION”, Massumi writes in an analysis of the “bleed” between image and language that has much to teach us about Isaiah 29 (66, capitalisation in original). This makes it possible to think about the bodies in Isaiah.

According to Massumi, the privileging of movement over position requires a rethinking, as well, of “the kinds of codings, griddings, and positionings with which cultural theory has been preoccupied” – importantly for our analysis, gender among them (Massumi 2002, 11). He argues, “gender, race, and orientation are what Ian Hacking calls ‘interactive kinds,’ logical categories that feed back into and transform the reality they describe (and are themselves modified by in return)” (12). Following his suggestion, I want to rethink masculinity as it is figured in the bodies of Isaiah 29. This does not mean, however, that I am ready to cede that the feminine in Isaiah is anything other than spectral. Rethinking the relation of experience and identity does not necessarily reverse patriarchy. Nor does Massumi argue that an attention to affect entails sudden, dramatic reversal. Look again at his language – affect “vaguely but insistently connects what is normally indexed as separate”. This does not inscribe a femininity in the text, so much as challenge the normative production of masculinity, a masculinity that is dependent upon (and necessarily second to) embodied sensation. It is rethinking masculinity, not attributing reality to a spectral femininity that is deeply patriarchal, that offers the best hope of re-imagining gender in the prophets.

I have already described the non-signifying, self-stupefying body as a present absence in the text. This ambivalence, I would now add, is deeply unsettling. There is something unnerving in the disconnect between overly present physicality and the absence of meaningful language. There is also a second disjoint, between the body that resists representation and the text that reports this non-

representation. Both of these tensions – between embodiment and non-language, between text and non-representation – are uncanny. The “uncanny”, according to Freud, is the peculiar dread and fear caused by the familiar unfamiliar – that which is simultaneously recognised and strange.²⁶ There are two levels of uncanny in Isaiah. First, the excessively corporeal, non-signifying body is uncanny. It is at once too-present (materially) and too-absent (linguistically). Second, the representation of non-signifying bodies is also uncanny. It marks a place where language folds in on itself. As much as the bodies in Isaiah resist language and subvert gender, it is essential also to remember that they are bodies located in texts. We know about the bodies in Isaiah because they are written about *in a text*, albeit a text that represents their non-representability. The effect of this present-absence, or absent-presence, of the body is uncanny.

Identifying the non-signifying bodies in Isaiah as uncanny serves a descriptive function, in that it explains a literary phenomenon in the text. But this is not all. Articulating a theory of uncanny bodies also has a transformative function because it opens a new space for critique in the text. In particular, a theory of uncanny bodies makes a textually grounded critique of gender possible. In Irigaray’s theory, the total exclusion of the feminine, and of feminised embodiment, from the masculine economy of representation renders a critique of this very same masculine economy extremely difficult. If the feminine is wholly excluded from and denied representation, then how can its complaint be represented? Without speech, how can we speak, and from where? The uncanny body provides a possible solution to this problem of exclusion. Simultaneously present and absent, the non-signifying male body is at once allowed under the masculine discursive order and excluded from it. This opens a space within the text from which to challenge its normative assumptions.

The uncanny is particularly useful as a border category, which connects embodied experience – the non-signifying, alien to representation – to the familiar realm of language. The uncanny allows sensation and experience to intrude into the masculine economy of representation. This intrusion comes in the form of bodies, which at once defy language and are situated within it, as in Isaiah’s prophecy. At the same time, the move from language to sensation is never a complete one – the body, however unspeakable in language, remains, and its presence in texts is uncanny. Thus the body, and the uncanny body in particular, is an exemplary starting point for a critique of the gender economy of the text.

8. RE-IMAGINING GENDER IN THE PROPHETS

I began this essay with Massumi’s call to start thinking about bodies outside of language. This means both that we should pay attention to bodies and the features of embodiment that resist linguistic representation – affect, experience, sensation – and that we need to find a way to make bodies thinkable without recourse to the linguistic frameworks of the body as signifier or bodily action as legible performance. In Isaiah 29, embodied experience and sensation are of greatest importance, even as the body remains non-signifying.

Placing this body against Irigaray’s theoretical work raises the question of gender. Following Irigaray, language is masculine, as is the economy of representation. Instead of the feminine embodiment that Irigaray opposes to such masculine discourse, however, here we have male bodies. Women have already been excluded from the economy of representation. And yet still we have bodies that resist this linguistic order – bodies that are sexed as male. The collocation of somatic excess, linguistic failure and male bodies challenges the glib assumption that men exist only under the masculine economy of the logos, and women outside of it.

Furthermore, the uncanniness of the non-signifying body, its simultaneous familiarity and alterity as a body, and its simultaneous presence and absence within the text, offers a critical opening into theorising the body. Instead of the spectre of the unrepresentable embodied feminine, excluded

from discourse, the uncanny body provides a place within the text from which to stage a critique. The uncanny bodies of Isaiah 29 employ affect to challenge the primacy of the linguistic, while suggesting the possibility of a new gender order and a new embodied poetics situated in experience. Only when we move beyond the tyranny of linguistic privilege and think seriously about embodiment, experience and sensation, is such a new practice of reading the prophets possible.

ENDNOTES

¹ A version of this essay was presented at the 2009 SBL meeting (“Reading, Theory and the Bible”).

² The rendition “stupefy yourselves and be stupefied” follows the Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate, and Targum versions, against the Masoretic text (henceforth MT). See note 3 below. The text under discussion, Isaiah 29.9-16, is presented in its entirety in the section entitled “The Body Against Itself”. All other text critical comments are presented in the notes (2-8) on that section.

³ Verses 11 and 12 are almost certainly a later addition to the text. They are written in prose, not poetry, and interrupt the structure of 3 couplets. However, the author of these lines does manage a thematic resonance with the older text in 9-10 and 13-16, including the thematisation of knowledge and ignorance, as well as the significance—and crisis—of sight. The literary function of these verses is discussed further in the body of the essay.

⁴ Read hittammehû (root tmh; cf. Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate, Targum) for MT hitmahmehû (root mhh). The same form appears in Hab. 1.5.

⁵ Two consecutive imperatives in Hebrew are frequently causally linked, yielding the construction do X so that Y.

⁶ MT adds, after “eyes”, “the prophets”, and after “heads”, “the seers”. Both are later glosses that found their way into the text (Wildberger 2002, 81) and not, contra Jepsen in *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vocatives (Jepsen 1980, 287). The Septuagint also includes a similar set of explanatory glosses; the second half of the verse reads, “he will close their eyes, and those of their prophets and of their rulers, the ones who see hidden things”. In the course of the expansion, the second part of the verset, “and cover their heads”, has been lost. The Greek also replaces the second-person pronouns with their third-person equivalents, apparently under the influence of the introduction of the prophets and rulers as the object of the action.

⁷ A general word for something written, including a letter or a scroll.

⁸ Literally, “who knows the writing”—a standard biblical expression. Here reading sēper with MT qere and IQIsaa; MT ketiv has hassēper. See Blenkinsopp (2000, 403), but compare Wildberger 2(002, 80) who argues, following Bredenkamp, that the article is generic. The meaning is the same in either case.

⁹ Here and subsequently, the possessive suffix is 3ms, with ha’am hazzeh (“this people”) as the antecedent. I have translated as “their” to reflect more standard English usage.

¹⁰ See Wildberger (2002, 81).

¹¹ The messenger who tells the chorus of Iocastê’s death and Oedipus’s blinding begins his speech, “the full horror of what happened you cannot know / for you did not see it” (Sophocles 1949, 79).

¹² See in particular the first chapter of *Mimesis*, “Odysseus’ scar” (Auerbach 1946, 3-23).

¹³ Oedipus’s self-blinding is a horrific, arresting act, and undeniably forms the climax of *Oedipus Rex*. However, the end of Oedipus’ sight is not the last we see of Oedipus. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the second play of Sophocles’ Theban trilogy, the blinded and exiled king assumes a certain wisdom and grace before his death, and is absolved of his crimes by no less an authority than Zeus. Blindness, Sophocles suggests, sometimes brings insight. This is consonant with the multiple significances of blindness to the ancient Greeks. The trope of blindness, while generally negative, nevertheless leaves positive space for the blind poet (Homer) and the blind seer (Tiresias); Hebrew literature, in contrast, never looks favorably on lost vision (Hartstock 2008).

¹⁴ For a good discussion of the significance of wine, see Matthews (1999).

¹⁵ This “deep sleep” is poured out on Adam before the creation of Eve (Gen. 2.21), overcomes Abram in the Covenant of the Parts (Gen. 15.12), and strikes Eliphaz before his night vision (Job 4.13). This term is also used in Job 33.15, 1 Sam. 26.12, and Proverbs 19.15.

¹⁶ As discussed in note 2, above, this is a commonly cited argument for treating verses 11 and 12 as a late, proto-apocalyptic prose addition. However, my central concern is not with composition history, but rather with the literary effects of the text in its final form.

¹⁷ Erich Auerbach attributes a similar function to the detailed descriptions in the *Odyssey*. The detailed account of Odysseus's scar in book 19 and other such moments ease the tension of the narrative (Auerbach 1953, 3-23). Auerbach contrasts this narrative mode with its biblical counterpart, exemplified by the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). In Isaiah 29, I suggest, the text vacillates between the "biblical" mode, exemplified in the poetic couplets (29.9-10, 13-16) and the "Homeric" (29.11-12), even as it challenges the neat partitioning of Hebrew and Greek forms of thought.

¹⁸ *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard 1983) takes up the difference between ethical and religious subjectivity. According to Kierkegaard, that which is ethical is necessarily universalisable. The universal, moreover, is characterized by language. Abraham, however, offers the exemplary case of what Kierkegaard terms "the teleological suspension of the ethical" (54). Kierkegaard returns again and again to the Abrahamic failure of language—both Abraham's failure to speak and his own failure to speak about Abraham.

¹⁹ "Fatten the heart" is a Hebrew expression, used only here, that is generally taken to mean something like "dull the mind". The heart is commonly associated with intellect, reason, and conscience. The Septuagint uses epakhunthê, from the verb pakhunô, which means to fatten or to make thick or dense, as well as to become fat, thick, or dense. The Vulgate uses "excaeca", make blind, offering a neat poetic resonance with Isaiah 29.

²⁰ My translation follows MT against the Septuagint. In MT, the verse is a succession of three imperatives (fatten—stop—shut). In the Greek, however, epakhunthê is an aorist passive subjunctive third person singular, while the subsequent two verbs are third person plural aorist indicative active. Thus the Septuagint reads, "For the heart of this people has been fattened, and they have heard with their ears with difficulty, and they have seen with their eyes with difficulty, so that they may not look with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn—and I would heal them". The first person "I would heal them" is different from the Hebrew as well. I discuss the significance of this variation, and why the Hebrew is preferable, in the body of the essay.

²¹ This gendered binary is not merely a concern for Irigaray or for French feminism. Thus Susan Bordo (2003), for example, writes, "Insofar as the 'spirit's motive' is the guiding force, clarity and will dominate; the body, by contrast, simply receives and darkly, dumbly responds to impressions, emotions, passions. This duality of active spirit/passive body is also gendered, and it has been one of the most historically powerful of dualities that inform Western ideologies of gender ... it is a practical metaphysics that has been deployed and socially embedded in medicine, law, literary and artistic representations, the psychological construction of the self, interpersonal relationships, popular culture, and advertisements—a metaphysics which will be deconstructed only through concrete transformation of the institutions and practices that sustain it" (11, 13-14).

²² This is, of course, a simplification of a complicated question. For a helpful taxonomy of feminist biblical criticism, see McKay 1997.

²³ The God's-eye view of the hyper-masculine God and its relation to the prophet and the prophetic text is a question that deserves further exploration.

²⁴ In *God's Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism*, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has written about the troubled relation between the glorious male body of God and the limited bodies of human men. While Eilberg-Schwartz is interested "in understanding the image of a male God as a symbol that generates conflicts for men" (Eilberg-Schwartz 1995, 19), I want to take up masculine embodiment without reference to the divine male, embodied or otherwise. It is not only Yahweh's male body that complicates the experience of embodiment. Instead, as my engagement with Massumi has shown, the excess of sensation and the crisis of signification in Isaiah 29 (and 6) are already radically present in the text, without necessary recourse to the veiled-but-magnificent divine phallus.

²⁵ See Sedgwick 2003.

²⁶ Freud (1997, 193-233) gives a number of examples of things that are uncanny—doubles, twins, mannequins, mirror images, mechanised dolls, getting lost and repeatedly returning to the same spot. The uncanny is also insistently somatic. Many of Freud's examples involve bodies, or their images—mannequins, wax dolls, mirror images. Our reaction to the uncanny is also embodied, a sort of shiver or skin crawling sensation.

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