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“Pagan Poetry”, Piercing, Pain and the Politics of Becoming

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That the term body modification has today become commonplace, the topic of conferences and special numbers of journals such as this, is itself an indication of the fact that the body is no longer considered to be something essential, fixed and limiting, the stable element of the long-established Western mind-body duality. Indeed, Thomas J. Csordas writes in the introduction to a collected volume whose papers all address the notion of existential indeterminacy,

The kind of body to which we have been accustomed in scholarly and popular thought alike is typically assumed to be a fixed, material entity subject to the empirical rules of biological science, existing prior to the mutability and flux of cultural change and diversity and characterized by unchangeable inner necessities. The new body that has begun to be identified can no longer be considered as a brute fact of nature. In the wake of Foucault [?], a chorus of critical statements has arisen to the effect that the body is "an entirely problematic notion" [?], that "the body has a history" in that it behaves in new ways at particular historical moments [?], and that the body should be understood not as a constant amid flux but as an epitome of that flux. (Csordas 1999: 1-2)

The body is then now understood as something that is mutable, extendable, an entity that can be reconfigured in spite of ? or even because of ? its biological materiality and chemistry. Given the currency of the term body modification, it would seem that within the historical constellation in which we are presently situated this is truer than ever, that we are witnessing the body change before our very eyes. And yet, many modes of body modification and/or analyses of body modification practices seem loathe fully to engage the *process* of change inherent in the very concept of body modification, the body being merely reconfigured or reassigned to a new, modified state that, once achieved, appears as essential as its first incarnation or, in some cases, even more so since it is viewed as the realisation of the state that should have been there since the beginning. Whilst many body modification projects undoubtedly *do* conform to such a model and indeed deliberately engage in this kind of practice which aims always at a fixed goal, there are, it will be maintained herein, many body modification practices or, rather, practitioners that resist such essentialism and fixity at every turn, who straddle every dualism and for whom body modification is not an isolated and autonomous act with a defined goal but, rather, an entire mode of existence that can have no end.

Whilst the present discussion will concentrate only on the specific body modification practice of piercing ? and this in part through an analysis of the visual track of the video clip for Björk's song "Pagan Poetry" in which piercing and the notion of a body constantly in formation play a central role ? the invitation for each reader to conjugate the ideas to be expounded with other forms of body modification necessarily subtends this entire discussion.

The video clip for Björk's "Pagan Poetry" ? available through Björk's official website ? begins with a string strung with a pearl which is plucked in time with the music (although we do not see the pluck) and seen to vibrate, creating a kind of linear halo. A jet of what can only be meant to resemble (or perhaps it is not a case of resemblance) semen shoots up from the bottom of the screen, following the line of the string, hits the camera lens (or such is the intended impression) and slides down it, the shape that it creates morphing into a series of concentric lines, the resulting effect being much like a topographic representation of a mountain or isobars on a weather map. These lines and shapes pulse and morph into other shapes, the white space in between them occasionally being filled with zones of colour that give a hint as to the forms that lay behind these intensive contour maps ? intensive since the contour lines on a topographic map chart only those points situated at an equidistant altitude (or level of intensity we might say), the exact co-ordinates of all points on the mountain being impossible to ascertain since all points in between two contour lines are necessarily in tension, situated only in the differential relation that those lines establish and not therefore in a fixed position. The identities of the forms behind these maps are however gradually revealed to be lips singing the song's lyrics and flesh, nipples or earlobes being threaded with strings of pearls. Just as these forms are revealed, however, so they are redissolved in a constantly shifting point of focus in much the same way that the pure, unadulterated photographic images of Björk shot in high-definition digital video that the rupturing of these maps ? surface sometimes lead to always return to their topographic analogue.

Half way through the video clip, something else happens; rather than change into their photographic analogue, the contour lines become instead individuated computer animated lines (just as the shades of colour seen in between the contour lines become autonomous zones of colour of different shapes) that show multiple abstract figures being formed and endlessly deconstructed as these lines continue on their trajectory. The effect is precisely that described by Deleuze in *The Movement-Image*, the first volume of his work *Cinema*, when, writing of the cartoon film he states that the animated drawing "no longer constitutes a pose or a completed figure, but the description of a figure which is always in the process of being formed or dissolving through the movement of lines and points taken at any-instant-whatevers of their course" (Deleuze 1986: 5). As is the case with the contour maps already seen, then, the cartoon film (or computer animation in the present case), as Deleuze continues, "is related not to a Euclidean, but to a Cartesian geometry. It does not give us a figure described in a unique moment, but the continuity of the movement which describes the figure" (Deleuze 1986: 5). Nonetheless, these lines eventually reform into a contour map which gradually reveals a shot of Björk singing against a black backdrop wearing an Alexander McQueen dress which, it becomes clear in close-up shots, consists of a skirt and strings of pearls wrapped around her neck and sewn into the flesh of her naked upper torso. This scene continues almost until the end of the video clip and is interrupted only by two close-up shots in rapid succession of nipples being pierced, after which the filmic representation of Björk is transformed one last time into a contour map which morphs into another which in turn reveals its own photographic analogue: a shot of a back criss-crossed with strings of pearls threaded through the heavy gauge rings that pierce the still-bleeding back in six places.

When one tries to reconcile these final images of a literal form of body modification with the other sections of the video clip it soon becomes apparent that it is the very notion of body modification that provides the link between all of the video clip's sections, all of which show a body of some kind *in the process* of being formed or *becoming perceptible* as an embodied form. In each case the body being formed ? whether the physical body of Björk, the individuated bodies of the animation or the pierced flesh bodies ? are not fixed bodies that have been definitively modified and cast into a new fixed state, but bodies still being modified, mapped by intensive (and mobile, therefore) relations, passing through a focal point, drawn by animated (and shifting, therefore) lines, not pierced but being pierced and not healed but still bleeding.

As such it can be posited that these bodies of various kinds are all eminently genetic bodies, bodies creating themselves, and as

such they might be termed bodies of desire, following Deleuze and Guattari's privileging of the notion of desire as that which is eminently creative? as are all forms of expression, philosophy, artistic endeavour and existence by their very nature. These bodies, then, are bodies traversed by a libidinal energy, a transversal relation which cuts through their fixed forms, or even bodies which are constituted by a libidinal energy which, as Elizabeth Grosz contends, is "governed by modes of intensification" (Grosz 1995: 196), an energy which, like the bodies observed throughout the video clip, can never stand still. As Grosz writes,

[libido] breaches the innermost regions, secret parts, of the body, but does not learn anything except that it cannot hold onto, cannot keep itself in its state of excitation. Lust cannot know itself, it does not know what it is or what it seeks. It does not discover, but immerses itself, insisting on a certain formlessness, indeterminacy, the very excess of materiality that makes any creature resist reduction to its functions alone. (Grosz 1995: 196)

Not only, then, is the entire space of the video clip orgasmic? since it is entered into via ejaculation? but each of the bodies in this space is a desiring, libidinal orgasmic body, a body which is not fixed in a long-established, immutable and rigid functional hierarchy but in which there is, rather, "a reorganization or [?] rebinding of bodily energies [?] passing along the body's surface" (Grosz 1995: 197). As Grosz points out, in the orgasmic body a zone of intensity is created which instigates a differential flow in all surrounding areas, just as the contour maps described above instigate differential flows in the space in between their various zones of intensity (zones indicated by the lines themselves). Grosz writes,

In order that one bodily part (whether an orifice, a hollow, a protuberance, a swollen region, a smooth surface) intensify its energetic expenditure, it must drain intensity from surrounding regions. It is impossible to conceive of a situation in which there is an even intensity throughout the whole body, a situation of pure equilibrium or stasis: any activity at all "prefers" or privileges some bodily regions over others, and even sedentary inactivity focuses on some parts of the body at the expense of others. This creates a gridding or marking of the body in terms of sites of uneven intensity, patterns of configurations of feeling, labyrinthine maps of voluptuous pleasures and intensities. (Grosz 1995: 197)

The practice of piercing (or being pierced, we should say) is ideally suited to this description not only because it marks the body in a very literal sense, but also because it brings about in the body of the piercee a massive concentration of intensity both physical (as the force concentrated in the needle is transferred to flesh until, at a critical point, flesh cedes to force and is reorganised by it), physiological (the piercee's entire sense of physical being being concentrated on the zone being pierced) and libidinal. But the practice of piercing also, of course, involves another key element that cannot be neglected in any analysis: pain. For some feminists, the pain of certain body modification practices merely partakes in a long tradition of patriarchal abuse of the female body. As Victoria Pitts remarks,

Radical feminists like Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, and others have depicted body alterations, even deviant ones, as instances of the patriarchal mistreatment of women's bodies. For MacKinnon, the sexualization of the female body, often achieved through adornments and body modifications, is the height of gender inequality. [?] In this view, body modifications represent both patriarchy's willingness to make literal use of the female body as well as women's internalization of its aims. Women's willingness to happily endure pain to shape the body, she and Dworkin argue, reflects women's self-abnegation in patriarchal cultures. Along with cosmetic surgery, Chinese foot binding, diet regimes, sadomasochism, and other painful or difficult practices, women's tattoos, piercings, scars, and brands have been described by radical feminists as representing women's "self-hatred of the flesh". (Pitts 2003: 53)

For others such as Kim Hewitt (1997) and Paul Sweetman (2000) the importance of pain in certain body modification practices takes on a far more positive aspect. For the latter, for instance, pain and the healing process involved in body modification practices such as piercing and tattooing bring about an intensified experience of subjectivity since the expression of pain and process of healing centre subjectivity in attention to the physical body, stabilising a sense of self-identity through "the establishment of a coherent personal narrative" (Sweetman 2000: 53). This anchoring of the body in the fixity of the flesh is, of course, the very opposite of the kind of radical body modification discussed herein (radical insofar as the actual act of piercing, for instance, is only one level of intensity, one aspect of a much larger and far-reaching modification) which precisely resists the fixity of the flesh, the delineated and delimited boundaries of the self. For us, it is rather the case that the *incorporation* of new forms in the body (*in corpus*) brings about not simply an even greater sense of self since subjective agency has been brought into the creation of a modified body, but rather an *incorporeal affect*.¹ Instead of reinforcing the self in a supposed knowledge of its own embodiment, this kind of body knows that it "is not defined by the form that determines it nor as a determinate substance or subject nor by the organs it possesses or the functions it fulfills" (Deleuze and Guattari 1997: 260). Increasing its capacity for incorporeal affects, this body, "defined only by a longitude and a latitude", modifies "the sum total of the material elements belonging to it under given relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness (longitude)", and brings about a concomitant intensification of its latitude, "the sum total of the intensive affects it is capable of at a given power or degree of potential" (Deleuze and Guattari 1997: 260). When a body modification project is analysed in these terms (and it is perhaps possible to analyse even those cases studied by Sweetman in such terms in spite of the apparent fixed intentionality he finds²), pain can no longer serve a grounding function that lasts only as long as the healing process. Rather, body modification such as piercing can be said *to be characterised by pain*. If this were not so, how could it be that the most common question posed to those pierced in places other than the earlobe and perhaps nose is, "Did that hurt?" To make this claim is not however to add fuel to the fire of the likes of Dworkin and MacKinnon, it is to suggest on the contrary that pain need not ground the body in a fixed discourse (be this a patriarchal discourse or a narrative of the fixed self) but can partake in the same process of radical body modification analysed thus far, that it can be part of an ongoing process of body modification that extends far beyond the crude notion of the mere modification of flesh with metallic (or other) objects whose interest in many cases, in spite of their semiotic function, lies primarily in themselves as adornment or statement.

This is to suggest, then, that the pierced body, deploying incorporeal affects, partakes in what Alphonso Lingis has termed a "savage" practice. As he writes,

These cicatrizations, these scarifications, these perforations, these incisions on the bodies of savages?they hurt. The eye that looks at them does not read them; it winces, it senses the pain. They are points of high tension; intensities zigzag across them, releasing themselves, dying away orgasmically, into a tingling of pleasure. In voluptuous torments, more exactly, and not in contentment, that is, comatose states of equilibrium. In intensive moments when a surface, surplus potential accumulates, intensifies, and discharges. The savage

inscription is a working over the skin, all surface effects. This cutting in orifices and raising tumescences does not contrive new receptor organs for the depth body, nor multiply ever more subtle signs for the psychic depth where personal intentions would be being formed; it extends the erotogenic surface. (Lingis 1983: 33-34)

Like the body of desire, the incorporeal affect that emanates from the savage body, the body in pain, is, then, an intensity that marks the body not as an entity in stasis but, on the contrary, a process in action. In this sense, pain is merely a different level of intensity of the body of desire. This is not to propose for one instant a banal sado-masochistic reading of body modification practices but simply to point out that the fixed body, rather than being "made", anchored or grounded by pain is rather *unmade* by it, rendered intensive as it is by desire also. This is recognised by Elizabeth Grosz when she writes,

these sites of intensity?potentially any region of the body including various internal organs?are intensified and excited, not simply by pleasure, through caresses, but also through the force and energy of pain. Pain, as Nietzsche well recognized, is as capable, *perhaps more so*, of inscribing bodily surfaces, as pleasure. (Grosz 1995: 197; my emphasis)

But this assertion is also reinforced by studies of the very phenomenon of pain such as Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) and Jean Jackson's "Chronic Pain and the Tension Between the Body as Subject and Object" (1994). Whilst both of these studies concentrate on instances of extreme pain (chronic, pathological, enduring pain for Jackson, torture for Scarry) the like of which is generally not experienced in willingly undertaken body modification practices, their comments on the effects of pain on the subject can nonetheless be applied to practices which, as contended herein, can be said on one level to be characterised by pain.

Far from being an affirmation of the groundedness of the subject, pain would appear rather to be a form of abjection in that it is, as Scarry writes, "a pure physical experience of negation, an immediate sensory rendering of ?against,? of something being against one, and of something one must be against. Even though it occurs within oneself, it is at once identified as ?not oneself,? ?not me?" (Scarry 1985: 52). This is the first aspect of the typology of pain that Scarry constructs, each part of which problematises in some way the anchoring function generally attributed to pain in body modification discourse and analyses. For Scarry pain also brings about a double experience of agency in which "inside and outside ultimately give way to and merge with one another" (Scarry 1985: 52-53) and this "dissolution of the boundary between inside and outside gives rise to [?] an almost obscene conflation of private and public" (Scarry 1985: 53). Pain also destroys language, "the power of verbal objectification, a major source of our self-extension" whilst it simultaneously obliterates "the contents of consciousness" (Scarry 1985: 54). Pain is also a totality that "occupies the entire body and spills out into the realm beyond the body, takes over all that is inside and outside, makes the two obscenely indistinguishable, and systematically destroys anything like language or world extension that is alien to itself" (Scarry 1985: 55), and lastly, pain, when brought about through torture, instead of being "subjectively real but unobjectified and invisible to all others [?] is] hugely objectified, everywhere visible, as incontestably present in the external as in the internal world, and yet it is simultaneously categorically denied" (Scarry 1985: 56).

As perverse as it may seem, all of these assertions can be mapped onto the body modified by desire. Desire itself confounds all notions of inside and outside if thought of as an all-encompassing plane, a plane of immanence or consistency, an absolute outside (and totality therefore) inseparable from the subjects situated upon it since those subjects emanate from it as mere concentrations or infoldings of its energy. Desire (or libidinal energy) also resists objectification in language and obliterates the contents of consciousness. As Grosz writes, "lust cannot know itself, it does not know what it is or what it seeks. It does not discover, but immerses itself, insisting on a certain formlessness, indeterminacy, the very excess of materiality that makes any creature resist reduction to its functions alone" (Grosz 1995: 196). And the (visibly) modified body is also hugely objectified since stared at, incontestably present in the internal and external world yet simultaneously categorically denied ? for just as many will deny the pain of their piercing when asked, so many inquisitive observers, their eyes uncontrollably drawn to a body of desire, will deny their gaze if caught or questioned.

In the radically modified body, then, pain is synonymous with desire, it is a different level of intensity of the same and like desire it carries the body beyond the realm of the self conceived of as a sovereign and subjective entity. Jean Jackson comments that "we can draw no simple conclusions about pain as either subject or object" (Jackson 1994: 206) and goes on to note that,

Pain is not unique in this respect: people speak of many kinds of feelings as being both "me" and "not-me." In poetry about being in love, it is the poet's heart that is pierced, the poet's soul that has found bliss, yet we also find many descriptions of feeling possessed or of merging with the beloved. [?] Being profoundly in love, like being in severe pain, requires leaving the everyday life-world; in the alternate worlds of overwhelming love or severe pain the self is transformed such that "me" and "not-me" converge in some ways. (Jackson 1994: 206)

There is of course an important distinction to draw between the bodies in pain analysed by Jackson and Scarry and the modified bodies discussed here, namely that for the former set of bodies pain is characterised by aversiveness, it is that which is itself to be avoided or annihilated, it is "something so alien that it must right now be gotten rid of" (Scarry 1985: 52), whilst for the latter set of bodies pain is an unavoidable aspect of a willed act and is itself then desired, an accessory of desire. This difference however merely goes to show that the deliberate infliction of pain upon the body need not be symptomatic of self-loathing or, for women, an internalisation of a long-established phallogocentric discourse of violence and subjugation, it can be a desiring act that reorganises bodily energies, that, like a Thanatic drive,³ annihilates the structures of the body, reduces it to a point of zero intensity from which it is able to enter into an infinite number of possibilities or becomings. In this sense the modified body is a Body without Organs (BwO), that Deleuzian concept borrowed from Artaud that describes a body that resists the functional hierarchy that organs obey when petrified into an organism, that operates only by injecting anti-production into the process of production, that proceeds by breaks and flows, acting not according to pre-defined patterns, codes or behaviours but conjugating becomings out of immanent relations between itself and an infinite number of other partial objects and variables. Indeed, if the modified body through the use of differing intensities of desire unmakes the self rather than fixing it in a narrative perceived to be lacking in the postmodern arena of free-floating commodities and values, then to pretend otherwise is, like psychoanalysis in Deleuze's thought, to inscribe the body within a framework that inflicts neurosis and trauma upon the body rather than ridding it of them. As Deleuze writes, "Where psychoanalysis says, ?Stop, find your self again,? we should say instead, ?Let's go further still, we haven't found our BwO yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self?" (Deleuze and Guattari 1997: 151).

If the modified body can be a BwO, this means that it is a body always in process, always being modified long after healing is completed (just as, as suggested, it is *always* characterised by pain). "The BwO is not at all a notion or a concept but a practice, a set of practices. You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit", writes

Deleuze (Deleuze and Guattari 1997: 149-150). The modified body will always escape and exceed explanation, therefore, and yet at the same time, paradoxically, it demands interpretation precisely because it is always pain-full, suffering, and necessarily invoking *obligation*. As William E. Connolly writes, "suffering exceeds every interpretation of it while persistently demanding interpretation" (Connolly 1999: 125). If the most common question asked to the pierced is "Did that hurt?", the second most common is surely "Why did you do that?". So whilst the original act of incorporation (or modification) subsequently deploys incorporeal affects that people desire to understand, the irony is that there may be or can be no ultimate or essential explanation. It may just be, of course, that *I* am unable to give an answer, but when I do hear someone give an answer I always wonder whether I am truly hearing a reason or a phantasy after the fact into which the act is projected.

This is not to rob body modification of its importance, to pretend that it is a kind of unmotivated gratuitous practice devoid of meaning, nor is it to deny a political dimension to body modification. On the contrary, it is precisely because it deploys incorporeal affects and demands interpretation whilst refusing reduction into a closed framework that it creates an over-abundance of meaning and deploys a politics of becoming that can act as a model for all kinds of political and social bodies. Connolly maintains that as a stigmatised identity, an identity that has suffered, attains a more positive standing in the particular historical constellation in which it is situated, it deploys a politics of becoming by placing a new identity on the cultural field that changes the shape and contour of established identities as well (Connolly 1999: 136-137). This "new movement", writes Connolly, "might thereby enable some new positive possibilities by engendering new modes of intrasubjective and intersubjective suffering not yet crystallized as injuries" (Connolly 1999: 137). In reconfiguring pain and suffering in the body as positive accessories of desire, performing a kind of self-abstractification, modified bodies also call for a reconsideration of intrasubjective and intersubjective relations since they force a reconfiguring of our relationship to our physical bodies and deliberately and desirously create a stigmatised body that demands acceptance and cuts a transversal relation through hegemonic social discourse (which is to say discourse for which "the universalized natural body is the gold standard" (Haraway 1990: 146)) since it is a body modified and created through the free will of the now crumbling sovereign subject.⁴

Notes

¹ Whilst it is not ultimately productive to engage in an extended polemic on this point, it should be noted that the incorporeal affect brought about through action on the flesh is in blatant contradiction to Terence Turner's claim that contemporary social theory is antipathetic towards flesh and that it also has the capacity to unite the poststructuralist attitude towards the body that he so vehemently criticises and in which there is a concentration purely on "the singular and individual aspect of the body as the subject of sensations of erotic pleasure or pain" with the "authentic social bodies" whose disappearance he laments and in which there is a privileging of "the carnal aspects of reproduction, involving as it does the biological interdependence of bodies (male and female, infantile and adult)" (Turner 1999: 44, 46 and 44 respectively).

² To clarify this somewhat provocative statement: whilst Sweetman finds in contemporary body modification practices a desire for the creation of a fixed, individual narrative in which pain (as initiation) partakes in a grounding of the sign which is thus saved from its status as a free-floating commodity as all appears to be in postmodern society, a view similar to the conclusions drawn by Klesse in his analysis of the neo-tribalism of "Modern Primitive" movements in which there is a return to a sense of community in a world of alienation and fragmentation, it could just as well be argued that "due to the destabilizing impact of social processes of commodification, fragmentation, and the semiotic barrage of images of body parts, [?] the human body can no longer be considered a "bounded entity" (Csordas 2000: 2, paraphrasing Kroker and Kroker 1987: 20) and that body modification practices only compound this fragmentation by marking out individual body parts and thus isolating them from the body conceived of as a whole.

³ Scarry notes that death and pain are "the two most intense forms of negation, the purest expression of the anti-human, of annihilation, or total aversiveness" (Scarry 1985: 31).

⁴ To articulate this political becoming to another kind of artistic practice, to perform one of the conjugations which this paper invites, I wish merely to add that whilst the forced body modifications carried out upon intersex infants can obviously not be included within an analysis such as this, the photographic work of artists such as Del LaGrace Volcano (<http://www.disgrace.dircon.co.uk/>) and performance of artists such as Shorona se Mbessakwini (<http://www.geocities.com/greenpiratequeen/>) which often consists of *consciously showing* the site of pain which is indeed a mark of suffering *not yet crystallised as suffering let alone an injury in the eyes of society at large* can indeed be said to instigate such a politics of becoming. In light of this, it may be desirable to redeploy Terence Turner's notion of "anti-bodies" positively (a term which he employs somewhat disparagingly to signal contemporary social theory's tendency to neglect the body of flesh as an authentic social body) and argue that these modified bodies are indeed anti-bodies in the sense that they are deployed to counter a disease in the social body.

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