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Politics of Religion/Religions of Politics

 Springer

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Abbreviations

- Aesthetics* G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Trans. T.M. Knox. 2 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).
- Ästhetik* G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungenüber die Ästhetik*. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1970 [1835–1838]).
- Basic Problems* Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988 [1927]).
- Being and Time* Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962 [1927]).
- The Brothers Karamazov* Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Trans. and annotated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002 [1880]).
- The Gay Science* Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Trans. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 [1882]).
- Kants Werke* *Kants Werke: Akademie-Textausgabe*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 28 Vol. 1900 ff. References will be to named text and volume and page number, except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which will be referenced in the standard A/B format giving the page number of the first (1782) and second (1787) editions.
- Letter* John Locke, A letter concerning toleration. In *John Locke: The Second Treatise of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Tom Crawford, 113–153 (New York: Dover Publications, 2002 [1689]).
- Letter to d'Alembert* Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theater*. Trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960 [1758]).

<i>On Liberty</i>	John Stuart Mill, <i>On Liberty</i> (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956 [1869]).
<i>Phaedo</i>	Plato, <i>Phaedo</i> . Trans. CMA Grube. In Plato, <i>Complete Works</i> , ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
PhS	G.W.F. Hegel, <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> . Trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).
PhG	G.W.F. Hegel, <i>Phänomenologie des Geistes</i> , ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952 [1807]).
<i>Philosophical Investigations</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> . Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001 [1953]). 3rd edition. References are to section numbers.
<i>Republic</i>	Plato, <i>Republic</i> . Trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
<i>Rise and Fall</i>	Plutarch, <i>The Rise and Fall of Athena: Nine Greek Lives</i> (London: Penguin, 1960).
<i>Seventh Letter</i>	Plato, <i>Seventh Letter</i> . Trans. Glenn Morrow. In Plato, <i>Complete Works</i> , ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
<i>Twilight of the Idols</i>	Friedrich Nietzsche, <i>The Anti-Christ, Ecco Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings</i> , eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [1888]).

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Alistair Welchman

Most of the articles in this collection were first presented in a workshop held on and with Simon Critchley at the University of Texas at San Antonio in February 2010. Each participant in the workshop was invited to comment on some aspect of Critchley's work, or develop, in his or her own way, some theme that emerges from Critchley's work. The workshop was therefore not dedicated solely either to philosophical commentary or to common thematic engagement, but rather represented a hybrid of the two. And this volume inherits that hybrid nature: in part it is one of the first collections of secondary texts on Critchley; but in part it is also an autonomous elaboration or contestation of some preoccupations shared by Critchley and the authors.

In addition to the conference papers, this collection concludes with the transcript of an interview with Simon Critchley conducted at the North Texas Philosophical Association meeting in 2012.

Despite the broad theme of the conference, many of the papers and much of the discussions revolved around Critchley's analysis of the intersection of politics and religion; this provided the point of convergence for the papers and it constitutes the focal point of this collection.

Concerns about the intrication of the political and the theological are as old as political theory itself; perhaps as old as politics, as Agamben's work attempts to show (1998, 2011). But these concerns have taken on a new prominence since the European revolutions of 1989, which heralded the substitution, within the Western imaginary, of the former structural enemy of (secular) godless communism, with a new structural enemy closely aligned with an excess of religious, ultimately theocratic, fanaticism. This prominence has in no way been reduced in recent years. As I write this introduction, India, the largest democracy in the world has just elected a Hindu fundamentalist as prime minister. A recent article in the *New York Times* (Hamid 2014)

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articulates the tensions in a clear fashion: liberal politics is in a dilemma that is at its sharpest in Egypt, where the theological commitments of a majority of the population (manifest in the large degree of support for former and ousted president Morsi and the fact that a clear majority supports Shariah law) create a democratic mandate for the restriction of liberal rights. More worryingly still, and one of Critchley's abiding concerns, is that religion is able to motivate much more strongly, to provide a sense of commitment much more than liberalism is capable of doing; apathy, or what Critchley describes as ultimately a form of 'nihilism,' (Critchley 2007) is rife across liberal democracies.

This new imaginary is of course itself, in a dully familiar irony, partly the projection of a profound, and profoundly inconsistent, streak of theology within the self-articulation of Western liberalism itself. Such liberalism is, especially in the United States, and especially since 2001, shot through with messianism and theocracy, from George W Bush's claim that god wanted him to run for president to the Protestant rhythms of Barack Obama's best rhetoric. And thus global politics appears to take place simultaneously on military and metaphysical planes, as the clash between deities and their representatives rather than peoples and their representatives.

The practical dilemma can also be traced at the theoretical level, going back at least to Hegel's critique of the abstraction of Kant's moral and political theory, and recapitulated in recent political theory as the communitarian critique of Rawls's and Habermas's neo-Kantian liberalism exemplified by, among others, Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and Michael Sandel (1981). Proponents of this critical view argue that the conception of the self required by liberalism is in some sense too thin, too abstracted from the substantive concerns of actual people, embedded in local traditions, and, in particular religious traditions. Rawls's conception of the right as distinct from the good, for instance, requires political engagement to be based on one's identification with a self located behind the veil of ignorance, as removed from its actual characteristics and convictions as Kant's noumenal self (as also, of course from 'its' gender).

Although this critique is a general one, it is religious traditions, beliefs and orientations that pose a particular problem for liberalism. Strongly binding, such orientations are, in part, orientations towards the political itself. Liberalism's tolerant respect for religious 'points of view' in fact systematically misrepresents them as purely private matters of individual belief. The communitarian critique opens the way for an insistence that politics engage with religion, as the historically privileged site of substantive commitments, rather than present itself as above the fray of, and negotiating between, such values. This theoretical movement recapitulates the empirical movement, described above, from the observation that the Western other (both spatially and temporally, in the past of the West) integrates the political and the religious, to the realization that Western politics is itself indissolubly intricated in the religious, as exemplified most famously by Carl Schmitt's pithy phrase 'political theology', and as taken up most recently especially by Giorgio Agamben (e.g. 1998, 2011).

It is noticeable that both communitarianism in general and the claims of political theology in particular are associated with a broadly conservative movement, with an attempt to resist the most deterritorialized aspects of Western modernity and to recapture a supposedly lost era of belief and commitment. What Critchley, especially in his recent *Faith of the Faithless* (2012), has done is to reframe the issue of political theology from a progressive perspective.

This is an important move because it permits the left to occupy a space that would otherwise be the sole preserve of the right, increasing the dangers of fundamentalism. But it is, according to Critchley, also important for a different and more basic reason: to avoid nihilism. The argument of Critchley's 2007 *Infinitely Demanding* thus dovetails with his later position in *The Faith of the Faithless* (2012): in the earlier text, Critchley identifies the snare of nihilism in its characteristic symptom in liberal democracies—motivational lethargy; in the later book he argues that a certain moment of religiosity is necessary for any kind of politics to be effective, even, especially, for an effective progressive politics.

But this move is as delicate as it is significant, for progressive politics is tied to secularism and the dangers of religious fanaticism now arise on the left. Critchley's argument is correspondingly supple, and can be seen to take place across three axes, which correspond to the three points of application of the papers in this collection.

Political Theologies Left and Right

In the first place, Critchley takes on concrete, actual political theologies. In part he is critical of extant Schmittian right-leaning traditional political theologies; but he also has a richer range of religious reference that enables him to mine even just Christian theology's more recondite moments for revolutionary political theologies as a counter to the more usually reactionary political theologies of Schmitt and his contemporary neo-liberal followers: 'it seems to me,' Critchley writes, 'that the left has all too easily ceded the religious ground to the right' (2012, p. 25). The first three papers in the volume address this first move. Critchley himself, in 'You are Not Your Own: On the Nature of Faith' provides a supple re-reading of Paul and Paul's own significance for politics. In the second paper, 'Politics, Anthropology, Religion: Religious Particularism, Anti-Somatism,' Philip Quadrio takes on a different political theology presented by Critchley, his 'mystical anarchism,' finding it politically wanting. And the last paper, Welchman's 'Border Sovereignty,' argues that some of the apparently paradoxical features of the spatiotemporality of political borders are the effects of a quite particular 'political theology,' one that maps the creation of the *polis* onto a non-spatiotemporal act cognate with god's creation.

Critchley himself provides a re-reading of Paul that opens this volume. For Critchley, Paul is always reformation, and the return to Paul is always a call for reformation, a call that is, with Paul, constitutive of the gesture of the Christian. Indeed, since Paul does not call himself a Christian, one might say that the reform of Christianity actually *predates* its institutional existence: Christianity is reformed Judaism.

In a nuanced presentation, and in particular with an eye to the political implications of Paul's theological doctrine, Critchley argues that reform is not rejection but modification. To interpret Paul as a rejection (of Judaism and of the law, but also of the body) is in fact to identify him with the teaching of a different theological position, that of Marcion, an influential and astute early interpreter of Paul who, like the Gnostics, views reform as a complete rejection of bodily life, radically separating the god of redemption from the god of creation and understanding the re-birth of the self in Christ as a complete rejection of the law, a total antinomianism.

Where Marcion differs from the Gnostics is precisely on the issue of *gnosis*, knowledge: for Marcion, the god of redemption is so alien (a word whose paranoid and science-fictional resonances are not at all inappropriate) that even believers have no cognitive insight into it. It is here that a connection between Marcion's reading of Paul and the recent readings of Agamben and particularly Badiou comes into focus: Marcion's Paul is all about *faith* as a practical or, in Badiou's word, 'militant,' exercise, as opposed to an epistemic escapade. Critchley is sympathetic to this understanding of faith, of faith as what he terms 'performative.' But the life beyond law (in Agamben) and the radically transcendent nature of the 'event' of faith in Badiou suggest a conception of 'absolute' novelty that goes beyond reform, and indeed beyond Paul, to Marcion's complete break with Judaism, with the law and with the body. For Paul himself, Jewish law and Christian love are locked in a 'dialectic' in which law is never sloughed off completely: we are redeemed by the 'law of spirit,' not by the lack of law altogether.

Critchley's re-reading of Paul in this volume provides a weighty intellectual counter-point to his account of political anarchism in *Infinitely Demanding*, as well as to his own 'mystical anarchism,' as discussed by Philip Quadrio. Quadrio, in the next paper, makes a general case for the divisive nature of a 'theological anthropology' understood as grounding politics. Unlike a philosophical anthropology—that in principle could encompass everyone—its theological cousin can only ever be parochial. Of course the liberal response to such 'political theology' (whether Schmittian and authoritarian or Critchleyan and anarchist) is to separate the political from the religious spheres along the lines laid out by Locke. But, following recent scholarship on Locke, Quadrio claims that this very division of spheres is itself religious in origin, and in fact makes sense only parochially, to those who understand religion in a specifically Protestant way. There is therefore no easy way to avoid political theology, and this opens up a space for a progressive political theology that Critchley explores. Unfortunately, Quadrio argues, the theological anthropology Critchley chooses in his 'Mystical Anarchism' (2009, 2012, Chap. 3), based on the writings of Maguerite Porete, a French speaking Beguine of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, turn out to be extremely unpromising: parochial (elitist) in the extreme, otherworldly and virulently hostile to the body, indeed to all of creation.

In the last paper in this section, 'Border Sovereignty,' Alistair Welchman engages with Schmitt as a classical case of conservative political theology.¹

¹ This paper was not originally presented at the workshop.

But he argues that the theological premise that undergirds Schmitt's theory of sovereignty has not been correctly identified: it is the notion of an atemporal act, normally associated with god's creation of the world. Agamben's reading of Schmitt can be understood as drawing out some of the phenomenological consequences of this premise in its application to the political realm in the act of foundation of the *polis*, the construction of a certain non-empirical spatio-temporality of the state associated with its border. And these consequences have direct political effects, as Welchman shows in his analysis of the specific case of US-Mexico border. Welchman takes inspiration from the diversity of Critchley's political theologies to analyze the political presuppositions and consequences of a very specific theological doctrine.

Non-metaphysical Political Theology

Both this *agon* between Quadrio and Critchley, as well as Welchman's account of Schmitt's and Agamben's political theologies, show just how difficult it is to choose the correct theological model for progressive political intervention; but also how rich the vein of views and doctrines (heretical and otherwise) is, and how relatively unexplored in its political consequences.

However, this notion of a direct mapping—whether positively or negatively valorized—between the theological and the political does not on its own do justice to the subtlety of Critchley's views. For, at the same time as demanding a return to a certain kind of religiosity as a condition for combatting political nihilism, Critchley also affirms the death of god. How can these positions be rendered consistent? Through the application of a certain kind of flexible formalism. Critchley develops a view, similar to Heidegger's (and Derrida's) within which the formal structure of religiosity, and especially its practical, affective and motivational schemas, is retained, but without the purely cognitive aspect of belief in this or that metaphysical entity or entities.

It is this motivational aspect embedded in a certain form of religiosity that promises to solve the problem of nihilism or moral apathy under liberalism, and to do so without running the risk of any naïve return to an imaginary past or concomitant fundamentalist fanaticism. Critchley's argument here is sympathetic to the struggle for autonomy, both at the individual level, as in Kant (Critchley 2007, pp. 26ff) and at the level of the *polis*, as in Rousseau (Critchley 2012, Chap. 2). But he argues that ultimately this struggle is doomed to failure, and there must be a moment of heteronomy in any understanding of the moral or the political. In this he is following a counter-idealist post-Kantian tradition from Schelling to Kierkegaard (see Kosch 2006). But where this post-Kantian tradition arrives in the end at an effectively substantive commitment to Christianity (in Kierkegaard and the late Schelling), Critchley attempts, by contrast, to find the space for a moment of effective and affective religiosity capable of providing the motivational force that liberal apathy or even nihilism lacks, while also at the same time resisting a substantial, 'metaphysical' and cognitivist conception of this religiosity.

The next four papers in the volume address this non-substantive space of political community, the 'faith of the faithless' (Critchley 2012), the community of those who have no community or the polis, the a-political: Anne O'Byrne's 'The Gossip Circles of Geneva' questions whether Rousseau's conception of the motivational binding of social substance really can be as formal as Critchley maintains. In her 'Nihilists, Heroes, Samaritans and I,' Jill Stauffer contrasts Critchley's non-substantive religiosity with the explicit Christianity of Charles Taylor. Davide Panagia's 'Exposures and Projections,' uses conceptual resources from Critchley's aesthetics to map out the possibility of a shared democratic polity that does not presuppose substantive shared metaphysical commitments. And Roland Champagne's 'Simon Critchley's Problem of Politics and Hannah Arendt's Idealism for the USA,' compares the ethical and political efficacy of Arendt's notion of the 'pariah' to Levinas's critique of metaphysically substantial conceptions of the ethical.

In the first of these papers, 'The Gossip Circles of Geneva,' Anne O'Byrne gives a close reading of Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater* in order to answer the question whether the particular forms in which social substance is given, what she terms (exploiting both the English and French resonances of the word) 'moralizing,' are a necessary condition of political life or not. In a nuanced discussion of the semantic field of this term, O'Byrne nevertheless makes it clear that it would in many ways be good to think not. In particular, Critchley's anarchism is intended to respond to the motivational deficit of liberalism in a way that avoids falling back into a particular social substance, 'moralizing' in a coercive sense, or in Mouffe's sense, in which it represents the death of the political. In the *Letter*, O'Byrne follows Rousseau's vehement objection to d'Alembert's article in the *Encyclopedia* in which he praises Geneva, but bemoans the absence of theaters. For Rousseau the theater is a social solvent, standing in stark contrast to the informal single-sex 'sewing' or 'gossip' circles that he thinks synthesize an appropriate social substance, a set of *moeurs*. These circles are more important even than civil religion, and this form of 'social Calvinism' is indeed essential to political life, at least for Rousseau, and at least in his Geneva.

In the second of the papers in this section, Jill Stauffer addresses the question of the political lethargy associated with liberalism, of 'moral motivation' and of 'political disappointment.'² Her paper takes the form of a dialogue between two different ways of answering or at least addressing the issue: a Christian emphasis on the necessity of a substantial religious moment in the renewal of political motivation (given by a reading of Charles Taylor) and the atheist—or at least not explicitly theist—response of Simon Critchley to the same question. Both reject Kant's autonomy thesis: the self finds its ethical aspect only in something outside of that self: god, for Taylor, a 'demand' for Critchley (2007). For Taylor the rise of secularism—the avowal that the world of human existence is meaningless—does not make political motivation impossible, but it does make it unlikely, consigning it

²This paper was not the paper that Jill originally presented at the workshop, which was destined for publication elsewhere.

to a heroic mold that effectively deprives most of us of a proper political engagement. Critchley takes up this theatrical image, but argues that the tragic hero is not the only model for (self)transcendence: the *comic* can have the same effect. Stauffer defends Taylor's understanding of the problem, but sees no particular reason to think that *only* Christian universalism can solve it.

The third paper in this section is by Roland Champagne. Champagne addresses Hannah Arendt's conceptual enthusiasm for the United States and positions her, following Critchley, in a kind of Levinasian role: as the political representative of an individualism whose resistance to the 'totalization' of the state is analogous to Levinas's view of the ethical. On Champagne's reading, Arendt's cleaving to the private/public distinction ought to be viewed in relation to the questions of social substance and political motivation that animate both Critchley's work and several of the chapters in this collection.

In the fourth and final paper in this second set, Davide Panagia pursues a two-fold project. First, following some of Critchley's comments in *Infinitely Demanding*, Panagia seeks to substitute an ethics of appearance within democratic theory for an ethics of substance (social group, community etc.). For Panagia—as for others: Kant, Heidegger—appearance is itself most intimately encountered in the art object, and so Panagia begins with a link between aesthetics and ethics. But it is easy to make a mis-step here, and, in the second aim of his paper, Panagia develops from Critchley's remarks a cleft between two ways in which aesthetic objects thematize an appearance: first, by exposing themselves for intelligible cognition; and second, by constituting a 'screen' on which the unintelligible core of the ethical demand may be projected, granting us simultaneously access to it, while also protecting us from it—exposure and projection. In a close reading of Butler's rejection of Sontag's thesis that photographs only yield to interpretation by means of their *hors-textes* (captions, titles etc.), Panagia reveals the stake of an ethics of exposure: it betrays the specifically aesthetic value of the art object, its relation to *aisthesis*, to sensation, by reducing it to an ideological text, whose only value lies in its cognitive decoding. By contrast, reading Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in tandem with Stanley Cavell, a political aesthetic of projection emphasizes the ability of an art object to produce new views (something that Cavell shows applies even to language: the projective capacity of words is what makes metaphor possible). Allowing and provoking projections permits us a mode of connection that is not mediated by substantial similarity but rather 'immediated,' as it were, by what Panagia calls an 'intangible sympathy' that prevents substantive consensus from being the condition of democratic polity.

Tragedy, Comedy and the Grounds of Political-Ethical Life

The last two papers in the collection (prior to the concluding interview with Critchley), by Costica Bradatan and Tina Chanter, follow the lead set down by Panagia's paper and seek to address the variety of ways in which art has an

important role to play in Critchley's understanding of politics and religion. The first of these, Costica Bradatan's essay 'The World as Farce,' tables a novel proof for the existence of god derived from his reading of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: the very disorder and meaninglessness of the world renders it farcical; but something can be a farce only if there is someone—a god—to laugh at it. There is therefore a toehold against nihilism in even the most abyssal situations, one that we can use to lever ourselves into meaning even in the degradation of the ridiculous; there is transcendence not necessarily through laughing at our situation, but simply through the idea that we are in fact ridiculous. Bradatan uses this idea to explore a variety of themes, from Primo Levi through Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* and culminating in a detailed analysis of Milan Kundera's *The Joke*. On the way it becomes clear that the theological is at the same time the political, for the structure of minimal redemption that Bradatan lays out does not in fact need god, not even the evil demiurgical creator god of the Gnostics. Any force that makes us ridiculous will suffice, and, as he points out, many Central European intellectuals, including Kundera, understand themselves not as the pawns of god but as the pawns of history. These readings are framed by concerns characteristic of Critchley: god's laughter is a concretization of Critchley's injunction, in *Very Little... Almost Nothing* (1997), to extract meaning from the meaningless, but it is also related to Critchley's suggestion, in *On Humor* (2002), that comedy could succeed in providing the minimal self-distance required for the development of an ethics where the tragic has failed. The comedy that can do this is directed at oneself, not, in the contrast Critchley provides, towards others. But Bradatan effectively argues for the redemptive potential of a different contrast case, not laughing at others, but being laughed at.

Tina Chanter's paper starts from a different, but equally potent, site of the intersection between the religious and the political: the Antigone myth. Chanter gives an extended analysis of Hegel's interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy as foreshadowing a reconciliation between love (Antigone) and law (Creon), and finds—aided by close readings of some post-colonial re-imaginings of *Antigone* set in Northern Ireland, Nigeria and Robben Island, South Africa—an altogether more unsettling political meditation on borders, identity, political subjectivity, slavery and the foreign. In part this reading picks and opens up the irreducible ethical remainder identified by Critchley's political reading of Levinas (Critchley 2004), a remainder that cannot be reabsorbed by the dialectical sublation of Antigone into the law. But part of Chanter's point is to highlight the extent to which it is theatrical re-productions of *Antigone* that have made its political stakes explicit, where the philosophical tradition is still entangled in the dialectic between love and law—religion and politics—albeit in a way that complicates their relation and refuses any simplistic subordination of love to law: following Critchley's understanding of faith as essentially performative, Chanter traces the efficacy of tragedy itself back to its performances. In the necessity of an appeal to art in negotiating the religious and the political, Chanter follows Critchley closely; but her analysis of the significance of the *tragedy* of Antigone resists Critchley's critique of the 'heroic' and the notion of 'authenticity' with which he argues it is

freighted (Critchley 2007, pp. 73ff). For Chanter there is still room for tragic effects of sublimation, and still a need to come to terms with the legacy of colonialism within both *Antigone* and the political context of its reception, a reception still dominated by Hegel's reading (see Chanter 2011).

The last chapter of this collection comprises an interview with Simon Critchley conducted on April 14th 2012 at the annual meeting and conference of the North Texas Philosophical Association, at which Simon Critchley was keynote speaker (many thanks to Trish Glazebrook for kindly finding us a room in which to conduct the interview). In the interview, Critchley ranges over the relations of mutual imbrication between the religious and the political that form the concern of this collection, sometimes updating the political references, especially in the case of the Occupy movement, but also the Arab Spring, that had not started when the conference from which these papers originated took place in 2010. But in the interview, Critchley also moves into new areas of interest, which, especially in Davide Panagia's and Tina Chanter's papers, are foreshadowed in this collection, most especially into the aesthetic realm. Indeed, Critchley has recently co-written a book on *Hamlet* (Critchley and Webster 2013).

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