

Julia Kristeva:

Tales of Horror and Love

Edward F. Mooney

I. Introduction

Julia Kristeva is a Paris-based psychoanalyst, novelist, and prolific contributor to debates about subjectivity and its intersections with matters of gender, writing, and religion. She has large intellectual debts to Freud and Jacques Lacan. Their presence in her writing is pervasive even as she differs from them significantly on particular issues. Kristeva figures persons as subjectivities always at risk and in process, lacking anything like assured or reliable identities. This places her as a formidable critic of French structuralist essentialism and of any psychoanalytic theory that takes “the ego,” say, or a particular adult psychic formation, say of “the feminine,” as anything fixed in the individual or “the same” across subjectivities. She has been a major figure defining what has come to be known as third wave feminism, which denies rigid identity constructions or fixed differences and instead endorses openness to a fluid range of gender identities across biological males and females.

Kristeva was raised and educated in Bulgaria in Roman Catholic institutions. Religious narratives, devotional images and art, in her view, serve to elaborate the place of subjects in ongoing relations to others, the world, and the limit conditions of birth and death. These images and narratives are part of what she calls “the imaginary”—the field of psychological and cultural symbols and practices that make distinctively human existence possible. Her psychoanalytic interpretations tie religious art and experience to facts of affliction and death, of mother-child and paternal relations. Her aim is not to deflate the

religious but to vivify its tales of terror, hope, and saving attachment in order to illuminate and ameliorate the pain of human life.

Kristeva's writing ranges from her striking religious meditation, "Stabat Mater", to her *Revolution in Poetic Language*.¹ Its span and tonality show in a sample of her titles: *Desire in Language; Powers of Horror; In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith; Tales of Love; Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia; Strangers to Ourselves*, and *New Maladies of the Soul*.² Since the mid-70s, she has taught at Columbia University, as well holding a chair in linguistics at University of Paris VII. In 1979 she completed training and began practice as a psychoanalyst. Her *oeuvre* is still growing.

Under a strong verificationist interpretation of "historical reception" there is little to say about Kristeva's reception of Kierkegaard. She has neither cited nor discussed him (to my knowledge) in her works. However a lenient interpretation of "reception" allows us to make fruitful inferences about Kierkegaard's impact on Kristeva. There are powerful but indirect and unacknowledged channels of cultural transmission. Kafka says little directly about Kierkegaard, but surely Kierkegaard is an enormous presence in his work. Kierkegaard was a dominant presence in the Parisian milieu Kristeva entered in her formative years. That Kierkegaard infiltrates her works becomes more than plausible in view of the cultural

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, New York: Columbia University Press 1984. Works by Kristeva are cited in English translation.

² Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press 1980; *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press 1982; *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, New York: Columbia University Press 1987; "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press 1987, pp.234-63; *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press 1989; *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press 1991; *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman, New York: Columbia University Press 1995. See also Julia Kristeva, *Female Genius: Life, Madness, Words: Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette: A Trilogy*, vols. 1-3, trans. Ross Guberman, New York: Columbia University Press 2001; *Crisis of the European Subject*, New York: Other Press 2000; "Reading the Bible," in *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, ed. by David Jobling, Tina Pippin and Ronald Schleifer, Oxford: Blackwell 2001, pp. 92-101; and *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1986.

complex within which she produced and in view of deep thematic convergences that resound as we listen to Kristeva through Kierkegaard's inventions.

Ernest Becker (1924-74) suggests that Kierkegaard's discussions of despair within a dynamic self-structure of relations makes him an important precursor of psychoanalytic thought.³ The American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1902-94) freely acknowledges large debts to Kierkegaard.⁴ Kierkegaard's Parisian presence included wide-spread appreciation of his championing a relational self, always at risk. There is every reason to suppose that Kristeva took this in. Kierkegaard's relational self could even be a resource for Kristevan feminist thought, as Tamsin Lorraine has shown.⁵ Bergson, not to mention Sartre and Proust, could contribute to her emerging formulation of a fluid self-at-risk. Her notion is culturally over-determined, but Kierkegaard was surely an inescapable force to be reckoned with.

As a young intellectual newly arrived in Parisian café life in the mid-1960s, Kristeva "cut her teeth" as an animated participant in ongoing debates centered on Lacan and Freud, with the thought of Sartre, Marx, Heidegger, and Lévinas playing a role as well. Discussions of subjectivity and of the place and responsibility of the individual person were conducted under the shadows of the Holocaust and of French resistance (and non-resistance) to the German occupation. These broadly existentialist concerns were gradually superseded by what came to be known as French Structuralism, spearheaded by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908). Its focus on broad, apparently universal, social and linguistic structures overshadowed the post-war individualism of Sartre and others. Kristeva arrived having adopted Russian formalism and became attracted to the structuralism of Lacan and others. She seems to have taken it as a starting point in the 70s even as she was developing critiques

³Ernest Becker, "The Psychoanalyst Kierkegaard," (chapter 5) in his *The Denial of Death*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1973, pp. 67-92.

⁴See Lawrence J. Friedman, *Identity's Architect: a Biography of Erik Erikson*, New York: Scribners 1999, pp. 372-3; pp. 448-9; see also the entry on Erikson in this volume.

⁵Tamsin Lorraine, "Amatory Cures for Material Dis-ease. A Kristevian Reading of 'The Sickness unto Death,'" in *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. by Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press 1997, pp. 307-28.

that eventuated in her becoming a leading post-structuralist. On her arrival in Paris, she also became engaged by the work of Roland Barthes (1915-80) and others in developing semiotics as a theoretical approach to language, literature, and culture.

These Parisian debates in the '60s and '70s were in many ways a continuation of seminal pre-war discussions that placed Kierkegaard, Hegel, Heidegger and Marx in complex, many-sided debates.⁶ At stake were conflicting imperatives: the humanist imperatives of individual liberation from the suffocation of bourgeois conformity and fascist regimentation; the structural imperatives of a minimal social order providing stable institutions; the liberatory imperatives of social change and political revolution; the rational imperatives of science and critique in the formation of a viable society and culture; and the ever-present cultural imperatives of art and religion as these intersected social, political, and scientific imperatives. After 1945, Kierkegaard was a less obvious presence. Sartre's early atheistic humanism and later Marxism, Heidegger's anti-humanism, various forms of phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, and the increasing influence of Lacan and Foucault seemed to dominate the French milieu and put Kierkegaard in partial eclipse.

There was no city more intellectually adventurous, darkly flamboyant, and chaotic than Paris between the World Wars and in the decades after its liberation in 1944. Kristeva arrived there in 1965, having fled communist Bulgaria, where she had been writing a Ph.D. on inter-textuality in the work of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975).⁷ Lucien Goldmann (1913-70), who had fled Rumania in the mid-30s and knew the burdens of exile, became a mentor and friend. A decade later he was forced out of Paris by the Nazi occupation. Goldmann shared Kristeva's deep interests in literature. He had a passion for Kant and Marx as defenders of a socialist humanism. Kristeva made a name for herself fairly

⁶See Samuel Moyn, *The Origins of the Other*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2005, pp. 164-94.

⁷ Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov brought Bakhtin to the attention of the Francophone world, and beyond. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. by Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984.

quickly with a widely discussed paper on Bakhtin that focused on his development of the dual themes of polyphony and the carnivalesque, especially in Dostoevsky's work.

II. Polyphony and Carnival

Bakhtin argues that the polyphony of voices in a novel like *The Brothers Karamazov* marks a polyphony of authorial standpoints. Accordingly, the assumption of a unitary authorial voice becomes problematic. To attempt to find Dostoevsky himself, his true voice, behind the voice of one or another of the brothers, is ill-conceived. The author becomes not a singular voice but a multiplex spread throughout and between the voices of the characters so vividly delivered. The absence of a unified authorial identity will have its parallel in the absence, more generally, of a unified self, agent, or subjectivity. This is the issue Kierkegaard scholars face in their attempts to find a unitary authorial voice among the plurality of pseudonymous and veronymous writers in Kierkegaard's productions.⁸ Kristeva develops Bakhtin's insight in her psychoanalytic writings by transporting his multiplicity of voices inward. The plurality of contesting voices assumed in the novel becomes, in her account of personal unfolding, a fluid, elusive self whose putative unity is in fact a fragile multiplicity, a loose-knit polyphony.⁹ This is reminiscent of the polyphony of voices in the lyric sections of the pseudonym Johannes de silentio's *Fear and Trembling*. Johannes is a garrulous writer who remains silent about many things, including his true center. Lacking a unitary center of stability, "the" self, for Kristeva, becomes a Kierkegaard-like ensemble of dialogical internal relations, reflecting an unfolding matrix of interpersonal child-parent and self-other relations.

⁸See Joseph Westfall, *The Kierkegaardian Author: Authorship and Performance in Kierkegaard's Literary and Dramatic Criticism*, New York: Walter de Gruyter 2007 and my review in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 35, no. 7, 2009, pp 869-882.

⁹I interpret the field of self-relations in *The Sickness Unto Death* as a leaderless musical ensemble in *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-religious Psychology*, New York: Routledge 1996, Chapter 8.

The other focus of Kristeva's first paper is Bakhtin's figuration of the carnivalesque, a strange mixture of the grotesque, sensational, and satirically comedic in Dostoevsky. The undercurrents of showmanship and spectacle are underappreciated features of the first third of *Fear and Trembling*. Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, an ongoing carnival, opened in 1843, the year *Fear and Trembling*, was published. Johannes de silentio, its pseudonymous author, does not spare us the frankly theatrical, macabre celebration of the sensational, horrific, and grotesque in the story of Isaac about to be slain. Johannes presents four tableaux of the horror that might mimic the carnival excitements and spectacles on display in the just-opened Tivoli. Perhaps Johannes de silentio is a carnival barker for a kind of freak show—as if Abraham were a three-headed monster providing an occasion for gawkers to scream and crowds to line up for a view.¹⁰ Of course, there is a legitimate religious horror to consider. But the story is retold with a carnivalesque sensationalism that satirically blurs sacred and profane, and that indulges the excitement of a horror story. As her career proceeds, Kristeva will elaborate what we could fairly call the psychoanalytic carnivalesque of the inner life.

III. Speaking Beings

Before she turned to psychoanalytic theory and practice, Kristeva wrote on language and literature as modes of signification. She held that language and signification have two faces. Words can operate as general signifiers, where their meaning is relatively independent of personal engagement or context. Alternatively, words can signify in a personally charged situation to express a particular speaker's desires or needs or passions. Some levels of language can be stripped free of any embodied expression of an individual speaking being.

¹⁰ I explore this possibility in "Fear and Trembling: Spectacular Diversions" in my *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2007, Chapter 8.

Newspaper accounts of humdrum events can signify without my needing to focus on the writer as a speaking embodied presence. On the other hand, hearing my daughter relay a painful episode at school will focus my attention on her quite particular embodied presence—the pace and pitch of her words, the look of her eyes as she speaks, a trembling or stiffness in her limbs. Kristeva calls the first face of signification—the relatively disembodied and detached—the symbolic, and she calls the second—the embodied expression of a singular being—the semiotic.

Kristeva's two faces of signification has a striking resemblance to Kierkegaard's two faces of communication, what he calls the contrast between direct and indirect communication. Indirect communication resembles Kristeva's semiotic signification, the embodied speech and gesture that imparts a particular individual's feeling and passion. The contrast would be an occurrence of disembodied abstract words reporting banal facts or objective directions. Such information or prescription unhooked from any particular speaker or writer Kierkegaard calls direct communication and Kristeva calls the symbolic.¹¹ Both notice the ease with which theorists overlook the particularities of embodied communication, the non-propositional imparting and transfer of affect, pathos and individualized perspective.

In *Revolution and Poetic Language*, Kristeva argues that despite their attention to “the subject” and “language,” neither Husserl nor Saussure have a place for embodied speech, the voice of *this* person, speaking in *this* tone of voice—in *this* physical posture, with *this* gesture, among *these* attentive *particular* (embodied) listeners. To give language a sort of theoretical and abstract sheen excises the dramatic, even theatrical context of living speech and expression. What most often gets theorized, as Kristeva sees it, is disembodied writing or speech -- delivered *from* nowhere in particular, *to* no one in particular, the impersonal tightly

¹¹The qualifier ‘indirect’ can be misleading. The pathos of a cry for help—the urgency of its affect, not its informational content—can be direct, immediate, in its impact. Of course much pathos simmers inwardly, and our knowing what exactly that ‘inwardness’ is meant to convey may be available only, as Kierkegaard has it, “indirectly” through subtle interpretations. See my discussion in *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, Chapter 11.

secured at each pole of a communication. But living speech has its genesis in a baby's coos, eyes fixed on a mom, who returns the look and the coo. Later, it will emerge in an orator's sweaty or calming exhortations, eyes fixed on the mesmerized crowd. To insist on passion and embodiment is not to denigrate the symbolic but to resist the eclipse of particular speaking beings, who avail themselves of the symbolic *and* the semiotic. Performing well on a physics exam requires considerable mastery of the symbolic. Teaching physics to an averse, distracted student requires considerable mastery of the semiotic as well as the symbolic.

Kierkegaard uses pseudonyms, dramatic narrative, and a variety of genres to set words in living motion in particular contexts, uttered by singular, passionate souls. If he valorizes the singular individual, it is an *embodied* individual to whom he gives voice in the figures of Judge Wilhelm, Don Juan, the young man of *Repetition*, the seducer, and the professorial anti-professor, Johannes Climacus. And of course, it is the singular, embodied individual that Kierkegaard's writings will address: "My dear reader," as he would say. Kristeva has no use for a theory of language "removed from historical turmoil" written from a position "midair" and uttered, as she puts it, by "a sleeping body."¹²

As Kristeva sees it, humans participate in signifying practices from early on. The first babbles and cries of an infant are pre-symbolic, but they signify—convey, perhaps—a delight in the world or the pain of abandonment. Semiotic signification is altogether pertinent. Drives or passions are already present, as well as rhythmic and tonal modulation of expression.¹³ The semiotic communication of embodied significance continues even as symbolic capacities emerge. It never diminishes despite increasing dependence on the symbolic. Linguistic competence is marked by handling simple names, simple words for

¹²Kristeva, *Revolution*, 1974, p. 13.

¹³Lacan's "semiotic" encompasses both of the fields that Kristeva has sub-divided; it is wider than her "semiotic" and is equivalent to her "signification." Kristeva's semiotic draws on what Freud designated as the pre-Oedipal phase of infant development, and Lacan calls the pre-mirror stage. It is elaborated by Melanie Klein and Object Relation psychoanalysis as a field of passion and primitive drives.

wants, simple words that “point to facts.” Kristeva calls this second layer of human signifying “symbolic” because the simple sounds that at first conveyed mostly pathos now do that, and in addition, become words that link up with things – that are ‘symbols’ pointing roughly to things. Signification can have a referential target (asking for *that* apple). Poetry, of course, picks up words and combinations of them that have ordinary “symbolic” meaning (“the apple of my eye”), and much more. Poetry orders its words and sounds in ways that mimic the rhythmic cooing or delight of a child, or evoke shrieking, pleading, or enticing, or enact the calm of a lyric. The semiotic and symbolic merge.

The symbolic can veer toward a limit of mere information “peeled off” the affections, desires, commitments, and feelings of any particular speaker or writer (look at a restaurant’s printed menu, and subtract your desires). The semiotic can veer toward a limit of non-verbal wheezing or coughing. Signifying in either dimension presupposes that the infant— then the child, then the youth—will separate itself, say from its mother, or its peers. It will come to know that its pain, hunger, interests, and desires are not directly its mother’s. From this vantage, patterns of verbal and non-verbal signification signal modes of coping with separation and difference. Only a speaking being has issues of identity and difference. And only a speaking being has the subtlety of differentiated human desire.

As children become youths and adolescents become adults the semiotic develops accordingly to carry embodied feelings and desires of considerable complexity. I *insinuate scornfully* to the waiter that the salmon *served* is not the salmon *ordered, implying, threatening*, that he should return from the kitchen with something *better*. My embodied complex of affect and desire has a more or less banal content—I refuse the dish and demand another. But that relative banality must be learned, and becomes artfully (or clumsily) transformed in the rhythm and pitch of my utterance, in the mocking stress on certain syllables, in a measure of anger or condescension, in a look that could kill, and in a

dismissive wave of the hand from a body that has stiffened in outraged resolve (or mild rebuke or exasperated condescension).

In living practice, the semiotic and the symbolic are interwoven. If one were learning the Chinese for “failing-grade salmon,” perhaps a purely symbolic meaning could free up from semiotic residues - our hearing the Chinese for “D-grade salmon” would not be encumbered by a rasp of dismay or disgust. But “D-grade” typically carries a negative charge of affect or emotion. Affect or pathos can be conveyed in ways that circumvent the simply propositional or symbolic.¹⁴

IV. Kant's Sublime, Kristeva's Horror

Horror plays a major role in the doing and undoing of a fluid, fragile identity or self. But Kristeva will hesitate to speak of “the” self, or “identity,” for it is exactly traditional notions of these that she labors to challenge and revise. Perhaps the self is little more than the site of a complex of copings and undergoings whose description, for Kristeva, is pitched at an unusually high intensity of interest. Nearly always, once we think of it, identity *matters!* Her figuration of self-identity in frames of horror or a dispersal or shattering of “the” self can be made less strange by providing a tentative genealogy. Such a tracing of roots of Kristeva’s figurations of self would run back from her immediate engagements with Lacan and Barthes to more mediated engagements with Freud and Heidegger, and then back further a century

¹⁴ A Kierkegaardian might at this point launch into a theory of “indirect communication” of affect or emotion. If we undergo a sense of revulsion, disappointment, or disgust at the sight of rotten salmon, our emotion or pathos will be directly evident to others. However in more complex cases I may want to instill affect in another by other means. My disgust might be modulated in a manner that opened to the recipient of my communication of it a chance to register *her own* disgust (or *Schadenfreude*, perhaps, or indifference, or contempt-for-my-disgust). My point in registering an emotion would be to evoke a proper emotion in another. And there’s no acceptably direct way of evoking something like reverence or gratitude in another. It’s not like fear, which I can evoke – *cause* – by popping a bag behind an unsuspecting child.

and more. Her sense of the uncanny and horror infusing and suffusing “the” self comes from Burk and Kant, who evoke the grotesque and the sublime as they unsettle the self.

Unheimlichkeit, an uncanny sense of displacement from home, is implicit in Kant’s notion of the sublime, and prominent in Kierkegaard’s notion of anxiety and restlessness of soul. It crisscrosses German romanticism, and flows through Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In its 20th century French and American guise, estrangement or alienation becomes a ubiquitous literary and philosophical trope, especially after WWII. Wholeness or home might be regained by a return to poetry as a way of life, or by a stint of psychoanalysis, or by social revolution. Or deep alienation might be figured as an inescapable feature of the human condition. In any case, from Kant through Kierkegaard to Kristeva, the site of the sublime and grotesque shifts from wild nature—alpine peaks, ocean storms, gnarled tree trunks—to tumult and danger within the ambit of the self.

The sublime unseats us with a frightening sense of finitude. A clap of thunder jolts us forbiddingly. For Kant, a frightening impact is followed by a bracing sense of our infinitude, by the wonder that *it is I*, a creature of *rational dignity*, who is privileged to access sublimity. Dogs shake in fright, or flee; humans stand upright. Rational judgment prevails. Existential *angst* is no doubt harder to dispel. Infinite reason is replaced by infinite passion in Kristeva’s account. Subjectivity unfolds under the duress of terrible interruptions that appear like sublime interventions, constantly upending fledgling and partial identities.¹⁵ Anxiety punctuates time, and intermittency replaces uniformity and continuity. We live episodically, our time punctuated by intrusions of the horrific.

¹⁵ Thunder snaps us out of routine identities—and then lets us return, refreshed. A sublime encounter—the peal of thunder—shatters pre-reflective ways of perception and orientation. See Chapter 4 (“On Death and the Sublime”) in my *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*. Kant distinguished the “dynamic sublime” (encountered in views of ocean storms or alpine peaks) from the “mathematical sublime” (encountered, for example, in the infinite sky, sprinkled with stars). And there might be an (un-Kantian) nonspectacular “indifferent sublime,” as when Camus’ Meursault basks in “the benign indifference of the universe.” Of course “the” sublime is not a well-defined “thing” like a tree or mountain any more than “the” self is. The term calls up a broad and loosely knit family of strange, uncanny, or startling phenomenon traditionally arising in nature, but also arising in cities, and yet again in the streets and alleyways of one’s inner world.

In *'Poor Paris!': Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City*, George Pattison argues that the nineteenth-century European city became a site of disruptive anxiety and what he calls the urban sublime.¹⁶ A sense of anxious finitude is triggered by flashing night lights, hectic crowds, jarring traffic, tall buildings and banks of reflecting windows—not to mention the proliferation of media-distributed tales of violence and scandal. Cognitive and emotional overloads feed depression and neurasthenia, panic and paralysis. One might try throwing oneself into the whirl, the way a surfer casts herself into the wildness of crashing waves. One might try casting responsibilities aside for the whirl of color and taste. As a hedge on anxiety, a *flâneur*, street-poet, or sex-cruiser takes on the city as a feast to devour. Early in her career, among anxious Parisian spectacles, Kristeva draws directly from Guy Debord (1931-94), whose *The Society of the Spectacle* was first published in 1967.¹⁷ Her *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, and her *Strangers to Ourselves*, by titles alone, announce the Kierkegaardian themes of angst, despair, and estrangement. Suffering *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny or unhome-like, the German Romantics turned to art, especially poetry, to make suffering less insufferable by “living poetically.” In the dark years just before and following the First World War, this Romantic trope and life-strategy became suspect. In that period both Freud and Heidegger wrote of the uncanny but neither held out hope for “poetic living”.¹⁸ At best, it would be a cry of pain. Rilke declares, “Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure.”¹⁹

If Kant's dynamic sublime—lightening, or thunder—comes and goes, for Rilke or Kristeva, the uncanny seems sustained and inescapable, a pervasive malaise linked to the devastations of World War I (for Rilke), and to the even deeper horrors of World War II and

¹⁶George Pattison, *'Poor Paris!': Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1999 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 2), pp. 69-71. Kierkegaard's critique of the city parallels those we find in Rousseau, Thoreau, and early Marx.

¹⁷Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith, London: Zone Books 1995.

¹⁸Yet Heidegger's writing after 1935 seems to turn to the romantic option of poetic living.

¹⁹See Rilke's first “Duino Elegy.”

the camps (for Kristeva).²⁰ However, the horror she typically delineates after her turn to psychoanalysis is less overtly social or political than lodged in the dynamics of infant and child development. Early imprints of horror are occasioned by repeated separation from a mother—from a personal and reliable source of comfort and nurture. They do not disappear with adulthood but live on in subterranean secrecy and power. Kristeva finds irremediable horror at the center of the psyche, where it pulls “ordinary life” apart at the seams. At best, she hopes to replace a Cartesian “subordination of passions to thought” with the “experience of a loving subject,” related to others reciprocating such affection.²¹

V. Father-Son, Mother-Infant

Take moral orientation to be that sensibility, outlook, or attunement that holds a person more or less together, as well as can be expected in always troubled times. It is a sensibility built on trust and a sense of purpose, for example, though too often it is identified exclusively with explicit principles or ideals that a rational adult might embrace. The emerging sensibility of interest here can include a sense of rules and obligations but also a variegated sense of good and bad, better and worse, disgusting and attractive, as these play out in a shared way of life.

Moral sensibility (or a moral-aesthetic sensibility) is ballast against those intrusions that disrupt the risky momentum of “the” self. It can manifest in an embrace (or rejection) of etiquette, in displays of good character (or of great failures to stand up). It can appear in the “aesthetic” predilections of one’s life, in its pace and ease (or restless scurrying), in one’s love of cats or smiles at strangers or attention to the fact that one’s niece loves purple. There

²⁰ Kierkegaard meant to make the trauma of Abraham on Moriah emblematic of the human condition. It is as if that horror was visited on survivors of the Wars and camps, not least, Parisian survivors. These horrors led Adorno to famously declare that lyrical poetry could no longer exist.

²¹ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 297.

is an aesthetic cast to one's sense of good and bad, better and worse, disgusting and attractive: the good overlaps the beautiful or alluring, just as the bad overlaps the repulsive or ugly. Moral sensibility or attunement then looks like the human way of being in the world, a way that permeates our political or religious sensibilities, as well. Kristeva locates such orientations in the field of "the imaginary." Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is a classic depiction of wholesale threat to "normal" moral sensibility. Abraham on Moriah puts at risk hallowed modes of father-son, father-God, and husband-wife relations. Like Kristeva, Kierkegaard, assumes a relational self-in-process under threat of rupture, upsetting the very assumption of stable moral sensibility. Like Kristeva's *Powers of Horror, Fear and Trembling* conjures a sublime disruption of interpersonal psychic orientation.

As a psychoanalyst, Kristeva is exquisitely attuned to the generative and dangerous drama of interlocking fathers, mothers, infants, and children. If thunder awakens us to mortality, finitude, and grandeur, and the chaos of cities awakens us to loss of a stable place, the family scenario awakens us also to the horrific, generative, and rejuvenating. Readers of Kierkegaard will appreciate elaborating Kristeva's schemas of familial tensions in terms of *Fear and Trembling's* familial scenarios of trauma, near-death, and rebirth.²² As Johannes de silentio stages it, the *Genesis* story becomes a collection of theatrical possibilities, even a collection of dreams, that awaken us to nightmarish undercurrents in father-son, mother-infant, and God-subject relations and hold out an "absurd" hope for a their "resolution".

Early on, Johannes sketches four versions of the God-Abraham-Isaac ensemble, framed as musings, almost daydreams, of an old man remembering a childhood story, as if to offer them to an attentive analyst's ear. Each frightening tableaux has an underlying caption containing reflections on a mother weaning her infant, transposing Abraham severing his

²²I discuss these scenarios in Chapter 8 in my *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, and in *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Albany: SUNY Press 1991, pp. 25-31.

relation to Isaac into a complementary version of Sarah severing her relation to Isaac. These transpositions away from nightmarish fright to a calmer setting, domesticate the horror of the near-sacrifice of the son. But the juxtaposition of a knife and weaning also increases the momentousness, even terror, of maternal severing. Handling this severing smoothly is of world-shattering import exactly on a par with the father's flirtation with a near-murderous sacrifice-to-be. A dreamy mother-infant scenario matches a dreamy father-son scenario -- both dreamed under the demanding gaze of God. The expectation of Isaac that his father will protect him, or of Abraham, that his God will protect him, or of a nursing infant, that its mother will protect her, are placed at catastrophic risk. Apart from grand moral theory, be it Christian, Kantian, or Hegelian, any decent middle-class burgher's moral sensibility—sense of up and down, good and bad, God and subjects, faith and reason—will be thrown into disarray. Yet we awake from these nightmares to a world more or less restored.

Kristeva's writes on "the imaginary father" (colloquially, a "father figure") and the powerful yet expelled "mother figure." Both are larger-than-life impostors with counterparts in Father-God, weaning-Mother, and knife-wielding Abraham. Viewed from the positions of an infant or Isaac or Abraham as under duress, the near-destructions and wondrous escapes imply a divine Wholly Other. The nightmare of God's demand is the fright of mammoth waves, and the release from terror mimics awakening from a bad dream, awakening, in the best of times, to a rejuvenating wonder and delight—*jouissance*.

VI. Abjection

With the exception of her introduction of "abjection" and "the abject", for the most part Kristeva avoids technical jargon. Facing a world of things, a subject takes them in, throws

them out, or is thrown by them. In dejection we are thrown out of sorts, out of place. In introjection, we take in something and “throw” it inward. Thus a child might ward off fears of the dark by introjecting the image of a protective, powerful father or a nurturing, loving mother. These “introjects” become present for the child even if no adults are in the room. A child may “project” a pet as friendly—throw a “friendliness wrap” over the pup that otherwise might appear dangerous. In abjection, a child may throw out or expel something taken as disgusting or repulsive—again, as a protective tactic. Fear a mother’s rejection, say, during weaning, a child may “abject” or expel the mother. Verb then becomes noun, a repulsing creating something repulsive. Repulsing a mother is repulsing the repulsive, just as hating the father is hating the hateful. Abjection or expulsion of the mother becomes abjecting the abject. She is thrown out because in fright the child takes her as intermittently withholding warmth or nourishment or protection from pain.²³

What can be exiled or expelled, in the fantasy of the child, cannot harm. Snakes or feces may become “abjects”, colored with disgust. A culture’s taboo behaviors isolate “abjects,” things that are abjected. Some things are treated with disgust because they can harm (snakes or rotten fish or excrement), but other things are found fearful and rejected because they lack determinate boundaries: they are blobs, or slime balls. Ordinary things or objects usually have relatively secure borders or outlines, visually, tactilely, cognitively, and emotively. We like things that way, neat and clean. What Kristeva calls an “abject” is not ‘neat and clean’ but a squirrelly indeterminately fluid mess that has threateningly shifting non-boundaries—semen, jellyfish, slugs, guts, spittle. But abjecting is seldom fully satisfying or successful. A teenager desires to expel a mother but cannot. One turns from a rotting corpse, but it continues to haunt. Abjects can survive even as we institute rituals of cleansing. The mother unreliable and rejected has as its inevitable counterpart, *Stabat Mater*.

²³See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, Chapter 1.

Lacan's "*objet petit a*", an elusive ever-receding allure, allows one to reconcile and organize desires, facilitating stability in the symbolic order of meanings. In contrast, the abject undermines meaning-as-order. As Kristeva sees it, the abject "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses."²⁴ In disgust or horror, self-other boundaries collapse, the repulsive "thing" is both inside and outside oneself. Rotting flesh triggers vomiting, as if throwing up lunch throws out the repulsiveness, and cleans out the world. A corpse reminds us of our death and the deaths of friends and lovers, a thought we would just as soon expel. Accordingly, we preemptively denude it of allure, letting it cause--and be--vomit.

A corpse lies dangerously close in Johannes de silentio's Abraham-Isaac scenarios. The climb to Moriah can be a nightmare of infanticide, an image of the disgusting-to-be-expelled. In *Fear and Trembling*, the tale is framed as a childhood memory in the mode of a beautiful fairy tale. Thus by inversion we handle our fears. But the possibility that God could make such a demand and that a father could heed it, remain disgusting, taboo, like mangled flesh.²⁵ These are thoughts to vomit out, but they remain powerfully there, marking the possibility of breakdown of meaning, a fate to which any self is heir. Expelling the horrific (than which no greater can be conceived) is fantasized protection. Writing and rewriting this disgusting possibility is Johannes' purifying rite to rid himself of exactly that possibility.

From a different angle, Moriah might be emblematic of a crisis of separation (and separation-survival). Abraham's freedom might require casting off his internalized Isaac, setting Isaac free of him, and freeing him from Isaac; and it might also require letting God cast off his (Abraham's) God-relation—temporarily suspending it. Just so, an infant's independence rests on a mother's severance or casting off at weaning. A son's survival requires a father's and mother's ever-greater relinquishment of control and sovereignty

²⁴Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

²⁵In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva incorporates the anthropologist Mary Douglas' work on rites of purity and pollution.

—without relinquishing love. It is as if these difficult relinquishments were collapsed into three days approaching Moriah and a moment of restoration, freedom, and independence.

Kristeva unabashedly defends the necessity of matricide—surely a hyperbole.²⁶ Yet that is exactly the hyperbole at work in the Moriah tales of near-infanticide. Matricide is the necessity that the child separate from its mother in the name of independence: there is the necessary severing of the umbilical cord, and the later severing at weaning. Each of these cuts are at the initiative of the mother, however, not of a matricidal child. Johannes gives primary initiative to the mother who blackens her breast (rather than to the infant). Likewise, Abraham's ordeal begins on the initiative of the Father who orders fathers. God thus flirts with the death of Abraham, at least with the death of Abraham as father of faith. Abraham is set a dilemma that can kill faith. By any reasonable light, he will die of grief and betrayal whether he obeys or disobeys, whether he loses Isaac (and retains God) or loses God (and retains Isaac). But perhaps there is method in this madness. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard says that God's interest is in giving independence to persons over against himself.²⁷ God's various withdrawals, including apparent withdrawal of all succor to Abraham, might be severings in a *libratory* vein.

From yet another angle, the infant-weaning scenarios seem to highlight natality. Kristeva seems to privilege the moment of separation that is death, and the wide-screen drama of Isaac and Abraham haunts us as a moment of death. But there is the moment of life that occurs as the infant's cord is severed in birth and as the breast is blackened at weaning, not to mention the moment of rebirth at Isaac's restoration. If we figure separation not in mortality alone but in natality, then the infant's weaning becomes a foretaste of life, and the weaning of Isaac and Abraham, a foretaste of rebirth, as in the return of Isaac from the dead.

²⁶See Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, pp. 27-30.

²⁷SKS 7, ? / CUPH, 218.

VII. *Chora: The Place of Unnamable Swirl?*

How are we to imagine the “roots” of becoming, the “place” from which emerges all that has been, and all that is and will be? A hopeless question, perhaps, but it is hard to abandon. All tales of origins or genesis are uttered hope against hope. Not just philosophers or priests but all of us can wonder where everything came from, or why there is something rather than nothing, or whether order or chaos is at the bottom of things, or whether creation is a muscular making or a matter of subtle midwifery. At one point, *Genesis* has creation begin in answer to a sovereign proclamation: “Let there be light!” But it is also figured there as handiwork, as the waters above are separated from the waters below. Initially it seems that God peers into emptiness, or into a formless void, or as Robert Alter renders “*tohu vabohu*,” into “welter and waste,” or as Catherine Keller has it, the “face of the deep.”²⁸ But is it desert in which welter and waste reside? As Melville might ask, what holds the watery deep? Does a womb-like bowl hold all that becomes, and God reaches into it to touch and deliver?

Chora is a word Kristeva favors for the place (or abyss, or bowl, or womb-like wilderness) from which all things are born. *Chora* is a Platonic term for a matrix-like nourishing expanse that is unnamable and prior to any *individual* thing, place, person, or process. Kristeva borrows the term to gesture toward a primal frame, the source of the pre-symbolic semiotic, the non-individuated place of all places and things.²⁹ Heady stuff, poetic through and through. But hardly anyone fully escapes wandering, at one time or another, toward such enigmas of beginnings.

²⁸Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, New York: W.W. Norton 1997, p. 3; Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, New York: Routledge 2003, pp. 4f.

²⁹In *New Maladies*, p. 204, she characterizes Plato’s *chora* approvingly as “a matrixlike space that is nourishing, unnameable, prior to the One and to God, and that thus defies metaphysics.” See *Timaeus* 50-52. In *Revolution*, p. 25, however, she defines *chora* as “a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated.” In *Revolution*, therefore, *chora* does not defy metaphysics. It is (impossibly) located in a prior meta-psychology (or metaphysics) of drives.

It is striking that Kristeva ventures beneath language, signification, psychoanalysis, and politics, to hazard an image of primal place. It is daring to venture beneath those discourses, disciplines, cultural practices, and institutions that crystallize, mould, shape, articulate, or edit our worlds—to imagine an unimaginable bottom line. *Chora* is not the *stuff* that creation (cultural, psychological, or otherwise) edits, organizes, or constructs. It is whatever *holds* or *contains* that stuff—is whatever “stuff” and its processes are “placed in.” It’s easy to remember that stuff is born from its predecessor, generative stuff. But Plato and Kristeva venture further to think that it is also primally born from a womb that holds both it and its generative-regenerative processes.

Socrates is midwife, male and female. He brings souls to birth, helps them emerge as individuals, emerge, that is, from *wombs*. Kristeva is enough of a Bakhtinian and Socratic dialogical thinker to take psychoanalysis as a midwife’s venture. Insight comes as she helps readers or clients trace a genealogy of formative mothers, fathers, siblings, teachers, and neighbors—trace generative ensembles working in embodied, speaking space. These deeply rooted familial and wider ensembles are all held in play in an unnamable place of fright, but also of nurture and rejuvenation. Kierkegaard would call it the place of God. Kristeva lets it be the place of primal natality that answers the pain of separation, dispersal and mortality’s abyss.

Bibliography

I. References or Uses of Kierkegaard in Kristeva's *Corpus*

??

II. Sources of Kristeva's Knowledge of Kierkegaard

??

III. Secondary Literature on Kristeva's Relation to Kierkegaard

Lorraine, Tamsin, "Amatory Cures for Material Dis-ease. A Kristevian Reading of 'The Sickness unto Death,' " in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. by Martin J. Matustík and Merold Westphal, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 1995, pp. 98-109. (Reprinted in *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. by Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, pp. 307-28.)