JULIA KRISTEVA

Tales of Horror and Love

Edward F. Mooney

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. With regard to religion, Kristeva was raised and educated in Roman Catholic institutions, and is far from an atheist. Religious narratives, devotional images and art, serve to elaborate the place of subjects in ongoing relations to others, to the world, and to the limit conditions of birth and death. The are part of what she calls “the imaginary” – the field of psychological and cultural symbols and practices on which, beyond the strictly biological, humans are inescapably nurtured. She sees psychoanalytic interpretations of affliction and death,

of mother-child and paternal relations, for instance, not as unmasking but as illuminating and giving witness to the subtle intricacy of religious sensibilities and traditions at their best.

Kristeva's writing is wide-ranging and abundant. She is author of a striking essay, "Stabat Mater" and an early book titled *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Other of her titles display the range and tonality of her writing: *Desire in Language*; *Powers of Horror*; *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith; Tales f Love*; *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*; *Strangers to Ourselves*, and *New Maladies of the Soul*.[1] Since the mid-70s, Kristeva has taught regularly at Columbia University, as well holding a chair in linguistics at University of Paris VII. In 1979 she completed her training and began practice as a psychoanalyst. Since the 90s, Kristeva has published a number of novels.

At this writing, Kristeva's *ouvre* is still growing. She may yet shed light on her affinities with figures outside and earlier than French phenomenological and psychoanalytic traditions – say her affinities with Kierkegaard. But apart from any acknowledgement on her part of direct influence, there are a number of striking and deep thematic resonances that make a comparison instructive. Ernest Becker suggested in the early 70's that Kierkegaard's discussions of despair and his development of a dynamic self-structure of relations in *Sickness Unto Death* made him an important precursor of psychoanalytic thought.[2] The American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson

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[1] All works are cited in English translation: Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press,1987); "Stabat Mater", in *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); *New Maladies of the Soul* (New York: Columbia University Press1995). See also *Female Genius: Life, Madness, Words: Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette: A Trilogy*. 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); *Crisis of the European Subject* (New York: Other Press, 2000); "Reading the Bible" in David Jobling, Tina Pippin & Ronald Schleifer, eds. *The Postmodern Bible Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) pp. 92-101; and *The Kristeva Reader,* ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[2] Ernest Becker, The *Denial of Death* (New York, Simon and Schuster), 1973, "The Psychoanalyst Kierkegaard", Ch 5, 67-92.

freely acknowledges large debts to Kierkegaard.[3] Taking Kierkegaard as a psychologist of a relational self always at risk makes linking him with Kristeva potentially rewarding. He can be exploited, surprisingly, even as a resource for elaborating Kristeva's feminism. Tamsin Lorraine has fruitfully presented Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* as a resource for feminist thought.[4] Its account of a variety of self-relations and despair sit well with Kristeva's account of a fluid and relational self-at-risk. There are clear benefits in bringing Kristeva into proximity with Kierkegaard despite the fact that Kristeva has not acknowledged an influence from his quarter. In fact, Kierkegaard was something of an inescapable presence during her intellectually formative years, first in Bulgaria and then in post-war Paris.

As a young intellectual newly arrived in Parisian café life in the mid-1960's, Kristeva "cut her teeth" as an animated participant in ongoing debates centered on Lacan and Freud, with the thought of Sartre, Marx, Heidegger, and Levinas 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. 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 structuralism as a starting point in the 70s even as she was developing critiques that lead to her becoming a leading post-structuralist. On her arrival in Paris, she also became engaged by the work of

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

[4] Tamsin 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, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) 307-28.

Roland Barthes 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.[5] 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 audible 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.

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.[6] Lucien Goldmann, 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 quickly with a widely discussed paper on

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[5] See Samuel Moyn, *The Origins of the Other* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) 164-94.
[6] 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. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Bakhtin that focused on his literary development of themes of polyphony and the carnivalesque, especially in Dostoevsky's work.

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.[7] 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 become, in her account of personal unfolding, a fluid, elusive self whose putative unity is in fact a fragile multiplicity, a loose-knit polyphony.[8] 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 becomes a Kierkegaardian ensemble of dialogical internal relations, reflecting an unfolding matrix of interpersonal child-parent and self-other relations.

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[7] See Joseph Westfall, *The Kierkegaardinan Author: Authorship and Performance in Kierkegaard's Literary and Dramatic Criticism* (New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2007), and my review, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol 35, no 7, 2009.

[8] I interpret the field of self-relations in *Sickness Unto Death* as a leaderless musical ensemble in *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-religious Psychology* (New York: Routledge, 1996) Ch. 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 Dostoevesky. The undercurrents of showmanship and spectacle are underappreciated features of the first third of *Fear and Trembling.* Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, an ongoing enclosed carnival, opened in 1843, the year *Fear and Trembling* was published. This is the slim book that takes up Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. Although this "dialectical lyric" questions Abraham's moral or religious defense (if any), Johannes de silentio does not spare us the aspects of the event that are frankly theatrical in their macabre celebration of the sensationalist, horrific, and grotesque. Johannes sketches four versions of the *Genesis* story. Could the presentation of these tableaux mimic the carnival excitements and spectacles on display in the just-opened theme park? Perhaps Johannes de silentio is an unsilent carnival barker, announcing 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.[9] Of course, once one gets past the side-show sensationalism there will be a legitimate religious horror to consider. But a suspect carnivalesque sensationalism that blurs the borders of the sacred and profane, and that indulges the excitement of a suspension of ordinary expectations, is surely present.

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 has 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

[9] I explore this possibility in "*Fear and Trembling*: Spectacular Diversions", Edward F. Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, Ashgate, 2007, Ch 8.

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. 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 theory of two faces of signification has a striking resemblance to Kierkegaard's contrast between 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 is what Kierkegaard calls direct communication and Kristeva calls the symbolic.[10] Both notice that theorists of signification typically bypass the particularities of embodied communication that allow the non-propositional imparting and transfer of affect, pathos and individualized perspectives.

In *Revolution and Poetic Language,* Kristeva argues that neither Husserl nor Saussure, despite their attention to "the subject" and "language", have a place for embodied speech, the voice of *this* person, speaking in *this* tone of voice -- in *this* physical posture, with *this* gesture,

[10] The 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*, Ch. 11.

among *these* attentive *particular* (embodied) persons. Such clean and detached language theory excises the dramatic, even theatrical context of living speech and expression. What gets theorized is impersonal, disembodied writing or speech, delivered *from* nowhere in particular, *to* no one in particular. But living speech has its genesis in a baby's coos, eyes fixed on its mother, who returns the look and the coo, and emerges later in an orator's sweating or calming exhortations, eyes fixed on the mesmerized crowd. That is not to denigrate the power of the symbolic but to bring into view the presence of speaking beings, who typically avail themselves of the symbolic *and* the semiotic. Performing well on a physics exam requires mastery of the symbolic. Teaching physics to an aversive, distracted student requires 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".[11]

As Kristeva sees it, humans participate in signifying practices from early on. The first babbles and cries of an infant are pre-linguistic, but they signify -- convey, perhaps, a worldly delight or the pain of abandonment. Semiotic signification is pertinent here. Drives or passions

[11] Kristeva, *Revolution*, 1974, p. 13.

are already present, as well as rhythmic and tonal modulation of expression.[12] The semiotic continues as symbolic capacities emerge, and never diminishes in force. Linguistic competence is marked by handling simple names, simple words for wants, simple words that 'point to facts'. This second layer of human signifying is "symbolic" in her usage because simple words will convey pathos but also match word to thing. For her, signification that has a referential meaning (asking for *that* apple) is symbolic or object-directed. A mastery of grammar is crucial here. Poetry, of course, picks up words and combinations of them that have ordinary "symbolic" meaning, and much more. It can order its words and their sounds, for utterance, in a way that mimics the rhythmic cooing or delight of a child, or evokes shrieking, pleading, or enticing. Then the semiotic and symbolic merge.

The symbolic can veer toward a limit case of "mere information" that can be "peeled off" the affections, desires, commitments, and feelings of any particular speaker or writer (the information contained in a restaurant's printed menu, for instance); and the semiotic can veer toward a limit case of non-verbal wheezing or coughing. Signifying in either dimension presupposes that the infant – and then the child, and the youth – can separate itself, say from its mother, or its peers. It will come to know that its pain, for instance, and its hunger and its 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.

[12] Lacan'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.

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 that I *ordered* from the menu, *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 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 my hand from a body that has stiffened in outraged resolve (or mild rebuke).

In living practice, the semiotic and the symbolic are interwoven. It's difficult, for instance, to imagine hearing a grade of salmon announced without some personal affect attached. If one were learning the Chinese for "D-grade salmon", perhaps a purely symbolic meaning would strip off any semiotic residue - our hearing would be free from a rasp of dismay or disgust. One typically says "A-grade" with some pride and delight, the semiotic and the symbolic well mixed. A Kierkegaard scholar might imagine pride or disgust rendered "indirectly" by a speaker – not through direct data transfer, but by giving another a taste of one's own pride or disgust, thus affording the recipient a taste *her own* pride or disgust or indifference. That would convey affect or pathos, one to the other, in a way that circumvented exclusively propositional communication.

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. 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 family tree 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 and more. Her sense of the uncanny and horror has roots in Kant's notion of the sublime.

A central theme in the tradition that Kristeva inherits in the 60s is the ubiquity of alienation, *unheimlichkeit*, and the hope of overcoming it. This is a theme that folds in and out of Kant's notion of the sublime, and that is prominent in Kierkegaard's notion of anxiety and the restlessness of the soul. It crisscrosses German romanticism, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and on to Freud. The analyses and remedies differ: wholeness or home might be won through social revolution, through return to poetry as a way of life, through psychoanalysis, or through better understanding and practical accommodation. And surely the notion of the *Unheimlichkeit*, "not being at home" underlies Kristeva's thematic of horror. Tracing progressions from Kant through Kierkegaard's anxious sublime finds the site of the sublime shift from wild nature – alpine peaks, ocean storms – to tumult and danger within the ambit of the self.

The sublime initially unseats us with a frightening sense of finitude. As Kant sees it, a clap of thunder jolts us forbiddingly, yet that jolt nearly simultaneously restores our humanity, based on the felt-assurance that our rationality is intact.[13] That fear – call it an existential *angst* – is replaced by wonder, the wonder that *it is I*, a creature of *rational dignity*, who is privileged to

[13] See *Lost Intimacy*, "On Death and the Sublime," Ch 4

access the sublime. Dogs and cats will only shake in fright, or flee. Humans can stand upright, proud that fearful sensory impacts can be moderated by rational judgments.

Of course Kristeva would not anchor the self in a disembodied reason but ground it in embodied affects, drives, and passions. Nevertheless, she'd agree that recurring interruptions, something like sublime interventions, constantly unsettle fledgling identities. Thunder snaps us out of ordinary, routine identities -- and then lets us return, refreshed. We could depict a sublime encounter – the peal of thunder – as a breakdown or shattering of pre-reflective ways of perceiving and orienting oneself in the world.[14] A return to the ordinary follows that shattering -- but the "ordinary", now, with a new sense of oneself and of the world's depths (or heights or darkness).

Kant's schema of the sublime underlies Kristeva's unstable subjectivities. Neither an isolated Cartesian "cogito" nor a Kantian transcendental ego are any part of these subjectivities – sites of an inner relational dynamic, punctuated by anxiety and horror. Commonplace attributions of identity are continually interrupted and on trial. We are, necessarily, matters of temporality, of constant revisions and angst, life appearing episodically, punctuated by crisis and by intrusion of the uncanny or horrific. As the fluid support for human becoming, pathos, relationality, and intermittency replace the uniform and discrete ego. Kristeva rejects a Cartesian "subordination of passions to thought" in favor of the "experience of a loving subject", related to others reciprocating such affection.[15]

Kristeva's thematic of horror is built on Kant's sublime and also resembles what George Pattison has dubbed Kierkegaard's anxious sublime, especially as it appears in our experience of

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[14] 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." In any case, broad patterns of "the ordinary" are disrupted.
[15] Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 297.

modern urban centers. In *'Poor Paris!': Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City,* Pattison argues that the 19th century European city became a site of anxiety and what he calls the urban sublime.[16] Stars or mountain peaks bring on humility and angst outside its walls, but within the city, finitude and anxiety are brought on by night lights flashing, the bustle of hectic crowds, the jarring noise of traffic, tall buildings and banks of reflecting windows -- not to mention the proliferation of media-distributed gossip and scandal. This sensory barrage is unsettling. 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 *flaneur,* street-poet, or sex-cruiser takes on the city as a feast to devour. But will these tactics disable the curse of disquiet?

Kierkegaard critique of the city parallels those we find in Rousseau, Thoreau, and early Marx. Early in her career Kristeva writes on and among Parisian spectacles, drawing directly from Guy Debord, whose *The Society of the Spectacle* was first published in 1967.[17] 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. Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, and her *Strangers to Ourselves*, by titles alone, announce the Kierkegaardian themes of angst, despair, and estrangement. In her work, as in that of Kierkegaard and Marx, alienation and dispiritedness signal psychic disruption. One response is to change the expectations of the self. Another is to alter (or to some extent abandon) the city that seems to produce, or exacerbate, anxieties.

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[16] Pattison George, *'Poor Paris!': Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City,* (Berlin: de gruyter, 1999).
[17] Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle,*trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Zone Books, 1995).

In the context of her revisions of psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva's understanding of horror bears comparison with Freud's exploration of the uncanny in his 1912 essay of that name. *Das Unheimlich* evokes something that places one 'not at home' in the world. The German Romantics, suffering *Das Unheimlich*, availed themselves of art, especially poetry, as a means of escape, or at least coping, making suffering less insufferable. One sought to "live poetically". In the dark years following the First World War, this Romantic trope and life-strategy began to seem suspect, despite being deeply embedded in German culture. Both Freud and Heidegger wrote of the uncanny in those years, and neither of them held out a hope of "poetic living" as a viable life-option.[18] At most, poetic living would be a cry of pain. Rilke declares simply, "Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure".[19]

Kant's dynamic sublime -- lightening, or thunder – is an impact that comes and then leaves. But for Rilke or Kristiva, the uncanny seems more like a sustained and inescapable condition, stronger than a pervasive malaise, and linked to the devastations of WWI (for Rilke), and for Kristeva, linked to the even deeper horrors of WWII and the Camps. However, the horror she delineates is not overtly social or political, but lodged in the typical development of an infant or child. These 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. Socio-political horrors led Adorno to declare that lyrical poetry could no longer exist. Kristeva finds irremediable horror at the center of the psyche, where it pulls "ordinary life" apart at the seams. 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.

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[18] Interestingly, in his writing after 1935, Heidegger turns more and more to this option.
[19] Rilke, the first "Duino Elegy", many translations.

Father-son, Mother-infant

In its broadest sense, moral orientation is that sensibility, outlook, or attunement that holds a person more or less together, as well as can be expected in times that severely challenge one's capacity to jell, inwardly and in community with others. It is a sensibility built on trust and a sense of purpose, for example, though it's often identified with explicit principles or ideals that a rational adult might embrace. That emerging outlook includes rules and a sense of obligation but also a broad and variegated sense of good and bad, better and worse, disgusting and attractive, as these are in play in a shared way of life.

Moral sensibility (or more accurately, a moral-aesthetic sensibility) is ballast against those intrusions that disrupt the risky momentum of 'the' self. It can be manifest in etiquette (or in its rejection), in displays of good character (or great failures to stand up). It can also appear in the more '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 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. From this angle, moral sensibility or attunement is the human way of being in the world. Kristeva calls it the field of "the imaginary". It leaks over into our political or religious sensibilities or orientations, as well. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* conjures a kind of 'sublime' disruption of such broadly 'moral' personal and psychic orientations. Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is a classic depiction of suffering through, and survival of, a wholesale threat to 'normal' moral attunement. At risk in the account of Abraham on Moriah are hallowed modes of father-son and father-God and husband-wife relations. Kierkegaard, like Kristeva, assumes a relational self in process whose center can be pushed to

the breaking point, bringing into question the very assumption of a center of moral attunement – though a loose fabric of interweaving strands no doubt endures.

As a psychoanalyst, nothing is more important to Kristeva than the generative and dangerous drama of interlocking fathers, mothers, infants, and children. Although this shift toward the interweaving strands of the familial may seem to leave behind the schema of the sublime, it does not. Thunder awakens us to mortality, finitude, and grandeur; the exciting chaos of cities awakens us to loss of a stable place; the family scenario awakens us, as Kristeva has it, to something at once horrific, generative, and rejuvenating – call it the sublime. In place of Kristeva's examples, readers of Kierkegaard will appreciate elaborating her schemas of familial relations in terms of the scenarios that are sketched in *Fear and Trembling*.[20] That story of trauma, near-death, and rebirth awakens us to the fragility of goodness, justice, and obligation, and the fragility of those moral-aesthetic attunements that provide a tentative and shifting sense of orientation and place. And that story – really, a collection of interlocking stories, or a collection of dreams -- awakens us at last to a hopeful "resolution" to the nightmarish undercurrents in father-son, mother-infant, and God-subject relations.

In his early "Attunement" section, Johannes de silentio sketches four versions of the God-Abraham-Isaac ensemble. The sketches are framed as musings, almost daydreams, of an old man remembering a childhood story. They might be "stream of consciousness" musings offered to an attentive analyst's ear – say, Kristeva's. Each of these memorably frightening tableaux has an underlying caption, a shorter musing in counterpoint to the musings on Abraham. The captions contain reflections on a mother weaning her infant, transposing, as it were, a version of Abraham severing his relation to Isaac into a complementary version of Sarah, or a mother, severing her

[20] I discuss these scenarios in *On Søren Kierkegaard*, Ch.8, and in *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

relation to Isaac. These immediate transpositions away from nightmarish fright to a setting apparently calmer, domesticate the horror of the near-sacrifice of the son. But the juxtapositions also increase the easily overlooked momentousness of maternal severings. This makes mothers of world-shattering import to an infant's survival and necessary faith (in case we had forgotten). The flirtation with a near-murderous sacrifice-to-be moves toward the gentleness of maternal weaning-to-be, and the troubled if gentle moment of weaning-to-be moves toward the violence of a near-murderous sacrifice-to-be. A dreamy father-son scenario is supplemented by a dreamy mother-infant scenario, and both are under the demanding gaze of God. A God-mother-infant ensemble supplements a God-father-son ensemble. The captioned tableaux speak to Abraham's apparent severance from God, at least to a suspension of any routine conception of a God-relationship, as well as to Abraham's and Sarah's severance from Isaac. If we let the subtext supervene, these are multi-tiered dreams of primal traumas of weaning.

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. Christian, Kantian, and Hegelian orientations are equally shattered by this "Abraham event" – so it seems. And apart from grand moral theory, any decent middle-class burgher's sense of moral propriety -- of up and down, good and bad, God and subjects, faith and reason -- will be thrown into disarray, as well. Yet we awake from these nightmares to a world where Isaac is restored.

The focus in Kristeva's writing on horror and psychic disintegration can be linked to her writing on "the imaginary father" (colloquially, a "father figure") and the powerful yet expelled "mother figure". Both are larger-than-life "imposing others" that find their counterparts in *Fear and Trembling's* father-God, weaning-Mother, and Abraham. Viewed from the subordinate positions of an infant or of Isaac or of Abraham, the terrible destructions and miraculous

restorations will imply the initiative of a most imposing Other – a divine Wholly Other. And in shifting toward the religious, we have not abandoned the sublime. The nightmare of God's demand is the fright of mammoth waves, and the release from terror occasioned in Isaac's safe return mimics awakening from a bad dream to the comfort of a safe and softly lit room, a moment, in the best of times, of rejuvenating wonder and delight -- *jouissance*.

Abjection

For the most part Kristeva avoids technical jargon. One exception is her introduction of the terms "abjection" and "the abject".[21] Dejection, projection, abjection and introjection designate modes of a subject's taking in or throwing out or being thrown. In dejection we're emotionally thrown out of sorts. In introjection, we take in something available to the self and "throw" it inward. A child might ward off fears of the dark by internalizing 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. In projection, a child may "project" a pet as friendly – throw a "friendliness wrap" over the pup that otherwise might appear dangerous or indifferent. In abjection, a child may throw out or expel something taken as disgusting or repulsive – again, as a tactic of protection. Against the fear of a mother's rejection, say, during weaning, the child may 'abject' or expel the mother. In that act of expulsion, as Kristeva sees it, the mother becomes abject, repulsive; or she's thrown out because in fright the child takes her (defensively) as repulsive. Stepping back in disgust, the child also attains a necessary degree of separation and independence.

[21] See *Powers of Horror*, Ch. 1.

What can be exiled, in the fantasy of the child, can't harm – at least not as much as if it stayed wholly and exclusively within. Snakes or feces may become “abjects” -- things colored with disgust and expelled, then seen as repulsive “in themselves.” A culture's taboo behaviors or those “objects” that Kristeva construes as “abjects”, are things that are abjected. Ordinary things or objects that we encounter in the world usually have relatively secure borders or outlines, visually, tactilely, cognitively, and emotively. In contrast, what Kristeva calls an “abject” is a squirrelly indeterminately fluid ‘thing' having threateningly shifting non-boundaries – slime, semen, jelly fish, guts. But abjecting is seldom fully satisfying or successful. A teenager desires to expel the mother figure but can't. More viscerally, one turns from a rotting corpse in disgust, but it continues to haunt. An aspect of horror can survive even as we institute rituals of cleansing. The mother-as-abject has as its inevitable counterpart the *Stabat Mater*.

Kristeva distinguishes ‘the abject” from Lacan's "object of desire" (the “*objet petit a*”). His “orienting object” allows one to reconcile and organize desires, facilitating stability in the symbolic order of meanings and in the correlate community. In contrast, the abject undermines meaning-as-order. As she sees it, the abject "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses".[22] In the dizziness of horror, self-other boundaries collapse, the horrifying ‘thing' is both inside and outside oneself. A rotting corpse can trigger vomiting -- as if throwing up lunch would throw out the repulsiveness inhabiting the corpse. A corpse reminds us of our own death and of the death of friends and lovers, a thought we'd just as soon expel. Accordingly, as already expelled, as akin to vomit, a corpse can cause vomit.

Kristeva's development of this theme can throw light on otherwise baffling aspects of Johanes de silentio's Abraham-Isaac and mother-child scenarios. The climb to Moriah might be a

[22] *Powers of Horror*, 2.

nightmare of infanticide shared by father and son, an image of the disgusting and horrifying to-be-expelled. In *Fear and Trembling*, the tale is introduced, not quite tongue-in-cheek, as the childhood memory of an old man, in the mode of a beautiful fairy tale or alluring dream. Thus do we handle nightmares. The nightmare – the possibility -- that God could make such a demand and that a father could heed it, belongs in the same psychological register as taboo violations, as if mangled flesh were mixed with fresh fruit.[23] These are thoughts to vomit out, but they remain powerfully there, marking the possibility of breakdown of meaning, a fate to which a self is heir. Expelling this horrifying possibility (than which no greater can be conceived) is fantasized protection, through the purifying rites of writing and rewriting, against exactly that possibility.

From a different angle, the sacrifice of Isaac might be emblematic of the moral crisis of separation (and separation-survival) that is necessary in a subject's becoming. 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 over him -- without relinquishing love. It's as if these difficult relinquishments were collapsed into three days approaching Moriah, or into a single moment there. It's presented as the nightmare of near-sacrifice of the son, and as the restorative moment of delivering new life -- to the son, to the infant that he was and is, and to Abraham, each born anew in the moment of weaning.

Kristeva unabashedly defends the necessity of matricide -- surely a hyperbole.[24] Yet that is exactly the hyperbole at work in the Moriah tales of infanticide. Matricide is the necessity that

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[23] In *Horror*, Kristeva incorporates the anthropologist Mary Douglas' work on rites of purity and pollution.
[24] See *Black Sun*, 27-30.

the child separate itself from the mother in the name of its independence. But there is the earlier and necessary severing of the umbilical cord at birth, and the severing of weaning. Each of these cuts are at the initiative of the mother, not at the initiative of the child acting violently against the mother. Johannes de silentio likewise gives primary initiative to the mother who blackens her breast (rather than from the side of the infant taking initiative). Similarly, the near-sacrifice is told from the side of the Father who orders and the father who complies – not from the side of the youth or infant.

If Abraham flirts with the death of Isaac, God flirts with the death of Abraham -- at least with the death of Abraham as father of faith. God sets Abraham a dilemma that can kill faith: Abraham will (apparently) die of grief and betrayal whether he obeys or disobeys. But perhaps there is method in this madness. In *Postscript*, Kierkegaard says that God's interest is in giving independence to persons over against himself.[25] God's various withdrawals, including apparent withdrawal of all succor to Abraham, might be severings in a *libratory* vein.

Finally, in the infant-weaning scenarios, Johannes might be taken to acknowledge the importance of 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 reverse privilege by figuring separation not in mortality alone but in natality, the weaning of the infant 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.

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[25] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 218.

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's 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 a matter of sovereign proclamation: "Let there be light!" But it is also figured 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 Catherine Keller's "face of the deep". [26] Does it make sense to ask in what sort of landscape welter and waste reside -- what holds the watery deep (as Melville would have it)? Perhaps there is a womb-like bowl that holds all that will become, and God reaches into that bowl to touch and deliver.

Chora is a word Kristeva favors for the place (or abyss, bowl, womb, or wilderness) from which all things emerge or are born. It's a Platonic term for a matrix-like opening that is nourishing and unnamable and prior to any *individual* thing, place, person, or process. Plato is thinking of the primal frame or non-individuated place of all things.[27] Kristeva has *Chora* become the unnamable place of the pre-symbolic semiotic, the womb (or fluid matrix or shapeless bowl) from which all things, energies, places, and persons emerge. This is heady stuff,

[26] Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary,* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997) 3; Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 4f.

[27] In *Revolution*, Kristeva defines chora as "a nonexpressive totality formed bv the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated". 25. In New Maladies 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." 204. See *Timaeus* 50-52. Note, however, that in *Revolution*, a metaphsyics of "drives and their stases" is prior to Plato's unnamable *chora*; she has inserted the notion into a prior meta-psychology,

poetic through and through, but hardly anyone fully escapes wandering, at one time or another, toward such enigmas of beginnings.

It is striking that Kristeva ventures beneath language and signification, beneath psychoanalysis and politics, to hazard an image of primal place. It's daring to imagine whatever underlies 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 edits, organizes, or constructs, but whatever *holds* or *contains* that stuff -- whatever "stuff" and its processes are "placed in". Of course we know, easily enough, that stuff is born from its predecessor, generative stuff. But Plato and Kristeva venture further to think that it's also born from wombs that hold 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 dialogic 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. Kristeva lets *Chora* and natality answer the horrors of separation, dispersal, and mortality's abyss.

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