

# Strange New Beauty : In Defense of Kristevan Sublimation

*Francey Russell*

University of Chicago

**Abstract:** In this paper, I suggest that Julia Kristeva offers a powerful account of the concept of sublimation, which, to use her terminology, involves the symbolic registration of the semiotic at the level of *symbolic form*. Kristevian sublimation involves the acknowledgment of the radical alterity of the semiotic-unconscious, and registers the impact of this alterity through a transformation of the symbolic. As evidenced in the analysand's speech or in works of art, sublimation attempts to present the unrepresentable in the very texture that represents (*Tales of Love* 368). For Kristeva, sublimation does not imply the articulation of new "things" (i.e., heretofore unexpressed or unconscious feelings, affects, thoughts, etc.) : rather it registers the symbolic demand for a new expressive form.

**Résumé:** Dans cet article, je suggère que Julia Kristeva propose le meilleur compte rendu de la sublimation qui, pour utiliser sa terminologie, implique l'inscription symbolique du sémiotique au niveau de la *forme* symbolique. Chez Kristeva la sublimation reconnaît l'altérité radicale du sémiotique-inconscient, et enregistre les répercussions de cette altérité à travers une transformation du symbolique. Comme en témoignent le discours de l'analysant ou les œuvres d'art, la sublimation tente de présenter l'irreprésentable dans la texture même qu'il représente (*Tales of Love* 368). Pour Kristeva, la sublimation n'implique pas l'articulation de nouvelles "choses" (c'est-à-dire, des sentiments inexprimés jusqu'alors ou inconscients, des affects, des pensées, etc.) : elle enregistre l'exigence d'une nouvelle forme d'expression du symbolique.

**Keywords:** sublimation – alterity – semiotic – symbolic – *chora* – Nietzsche – unconscious – consciousness



hile Freud never put forth a treatise on the topic, the concept of sublimation is crucial to the entire architectonic of psychoanalysis at both the theoretical and clinical levels. As Laplanche and Pontalis write, “in psycho-analytic literature the concept of sublimation is frequently called upon; the idea indeed answers a basic need in the Freudian doctrine and it is hard to see how it could be dispensed with” (433). Very broadly, sublimation is meant to designate a non-neurotic relationship between the unconscious and consciousness. It explains the means by which the unconscious drives can be channeled in a contributive manner into culture, or, put differently, how unconscious forces are transformed and

incorporated into social and symbolic forms. That is, if the unconscious could speak in a voice other than symptoms and dreams, that voice would be sublimation.

Despite its clear centrality to the psychoanalytic account of the human psyche, the role of sublimation remains imprecisely defined. It has been variously presented – by Freud and others – negatively, as the repressive domestication of the drives,<sup>1</sup> or as a form of defense,<sup>2</sup> and positively, as the ideal of psychic development,<sup>3</sup> or as a rare and exceptional capacity to satisfy drives through aesthetic creation.<sup>4</sup> Yet while these interpretations are clearly divergent, common to all of them is a tendency to frame the sublimatory relationship as one of antagonism or compromise, with the unruly impulses of the unconscious acquiescing to the orderly demands of consciousness. When conceived negatively, consciousness is regarded as a repressive tyrant, and when viewed positively, consciousness appears impressively flexible and capable of negotiating with an intractable unconscious, molding the latter's demands to suit the former's.

The problem is that if we regard these conceptions of sublimation from the perspective of a thinker like Nietzsche, sublimation appears to be an essentially *reactive* relationship, with the drives adapting to the impingements of consciousness or civilization, and the latter responding to the disruptive unconscious drives by “saying No to what is ‘outside,’ what is ‘different’” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy I* §10). According to the above interpretations, sublimation seems a basically defensive or conciliatory process that renders innocuous the drives and their potentially subversive force.

This essay works to offer an alternative to these conceptions of sublimation, an alternative motivated by the desiderata of Nietzsche and thinkers following him for a non-defensive relationship between heterogeneous registers of experience. With this

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<sup>1</sup> For example, for Adorno the concept of sublimation is simply “socially desirable activity naively glorified by Freud” (“Minima Moralia” 214), and constitutes “false reconciliation” in and with an unreconciled world. In response to such an interpretation, see for example Loewald’s essay “Sublimation” (in Loewald 2000) which works to undermine the strictly defensive interpretation of sublimation by demonstrating that the supposedly “defensive” secondary structures (like language) are not externally imposed vicissitudes of the drives but are in fact intrinsic manifestations of drive activity. Whitebook (1995) works to defend the concept of sublimation against the Adornian critique by employing Loewald’s notions of reconciliation and differentiated unity (which indeed bears resemblances to Adorno’s concept of “nonviolent synthesis”).

<sup>2</sup> In “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” Freud groups sublimation amongst modes of *defense*, i.e., operations aimed at the reduction of instinctual excitations (more specifically, their ideational representatives) liable to disrupt the equilibrium of the psyche.

<sup>3</sup> Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel contrasts the proper or genuine development characteristic of sublimation with the only seeming developed but in fact regressive economy of the pervert. See *The Ego Ideal: A Psychoanalytic Essay on the Malady of the Ideal* (1985) and *Creativity and Perversion*. (1996)

<sup>4</sup> For example, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud (1930) writes: “A satisfaction . . . such as an artist’s joy in creating, in giving his phantasies body, or a scientist’s in solving problems or discovering truths, has a special quality which we shall certainly one day be able to characterize in metapsychological terms. At present we can only say figuratively that such satisfaction seem ‘finer and higher.’ . . . The weak point of this method is that it is not applicable generally: it is accessible to only a few people” (26).

philosophical commitment in mind, the above conceptions of sublimation – albeit briefly sketched – appear plainly unacceptable, predicated as they are on de-radicalizing the demands of the unconscious, either by coercive incorporation or defensive refusal. A satisfactory post-Nietzschean theory of sublimation, then, must be able to describe a relationship between consciousness and the unconscious that is irreducible to either blind rejection or appropriative inclusion. Different though they are, both of these mechanisms refuse the task of tarrying with the alterity of the unconscious, both fail to heed its unique claims on consciousness. What Nietzsche calls the “tension of the soul” (*Beyond Good and Evil* §225) – the tension of a divided psyche – is in both cases reduced or denied, whereas a post-Nietzschean sublimation must respond to and even cultivate this tension.

To represent a non-defensive and even productive interaction between the unconscious and consciousness – a vision true to Freud’s own – sublimation must describe a dynamic form of coherence or collaboration, organized not only by the structures of consciousness but *also* by the enigmatic demands of the unconscious. If everyday language is predicated on the repression of or disengagement from the unconscious, while symptoms and dreams indicate the overwhelming of symbolism by the unconscious, sublimation functions as the cultivated expression in which the unconscious finds a voice of its own, its proper form. Thus sublimation is not a matter of translating the unconscious into a language already known with which consciousness is familiar, of expressing something unknown in the language of something known (Nietzsche, *Will to Power* §479), but rather of articulating new languages, a “strange new beauty” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* II §18). It is my claim that Julia Kristeva’s work displays a sustained effort to provide such an account.

In what follows, I will present Kristeva’s developmental psychoanalytic theory in general and her discussion of sublimation in particular as attempts to re-conceive sublimation in non-defensive terms. Specifically, I will argue that sublimation involves, to use Kristevan terminology (to be explained in the next section), the symbolic registration of the semiotic at the level of symbolic *form*. On this account, the unconscious or semiotic is not some kind of object to be described, nor is it pure force to be expressed or satisfied in a neutral symbolic receptacle. Responding to or expressing the unconscious does not leave the symbolic undisturbed, but results in a transformation of the very form of the symbolic itself. Kristevan sublimation works to attest to the radical alterity of the semiotic and register the impact of this alterity through the transformation of the symbolic order; as evidenced in the analysand’s speech or in works of art, sublimation works to present the unrepresentable in the very texture that represents (*Tales of Love* 368). This, we might say, is Kristeva’s account of a sublimatory grammar: sublimation does not involve articulating new “things” (i.e., heretofore unexpressed feelings, affects, thoughts, etc.), but demanding a new expressive form. If neurosis defends against the claims of the semiotic and only involuntarily registers these claims in the form of symptoms, sublimation is the

mechanism that responds to the authority of these claims by embodying them in the symbolic structure itself.

### Primary Narcissism, the Semiotic and the Symbolic: the Kristevan Topography

Kristeva's theory of sublimation is a key feature of her more general developmental account of subjectivity, which is premised on a re-thinking of both Freudian and Lacanian primary narcissism. Against both of these thinkers, for whom the Oedipal Father functions as the necessary third term which interrupts and supplements the mother-child dyad *from the outside*, Kristeva's notion of primary narcissism is an already ternary processive structure that precedes and conditions the relationship of terms that constitutes the Oedipal triangle. According to Freud, "originally the ego included everything" (*Civilization* 68) and its "development . . . consists in a departure from primary narcissism" ("On Narcissism" 100). While Freud never offered a precise definition of primary narcissism, this stage is characterized most significantly by its lack of differentiations; as Laplanche and Pontalis write, "the term [primary narcissism] is invariably taken to mean a strictly 'objectless' – or at any rate 'undifferentiated' – state, implying no split between subject and external world" (338), that is, no difference *for the infant*. Kristeva will challenge this interpretation, suggesting instead that while there are no binary differences or discrete others *as such*, the infant does experience differentiation and otherness. For Kristeva, the Oedipal triangle does not bring about subjectivity and language *ex nihilo*; both are prefigured in the provisionally differentiated structure of primary narcissism.

In Kristeva's developmental account, primary narcissism is not originary, but develops out of an earlier state that she calls the semiotic *chora*.<sup>5</sup> Prior "chronologically and logically" (*Desire in Language* 283) to the onset of linguistic capacities, the semiotic *chora* is constituted by affects and drives, "discrete quantities of energy" (*Black Sun* 264), structured and arranged in and according to its environment. As such, the *chora* is not self-contained corporeal life but is always already structured and organized in relation to the symbolic, insofar as the infant's environment (i.e., its caregivers) *is* symbolic. The drives are from the start related to pre-objectal difference, "not because they are already symbolic, but because within the semiotic body there is already an exposure to otherness" ("Desire in Language" 32), otherness irreducible to the binaries of inside/outside or subject/object. Thus while there exists a pre-symbolic or bodily register of experience, the semiotic cannot be disconnected from its relations with the symbolic, just as the symbolic is inextricably bound to the semiotic.

The infant's first exposure to otherness is organized and constituted by what Kristeva calls "maternal authority" (for instance, controlling what goes into the child's

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<sup>5</sup> Kristeva borrows this term from Plato's *Timaeus*. There, Plato describes the *chora* as something "which always *is*, admitting not of destruction and providing a seat for all that has birth" (52B).

body, holding the child, etc.), which provides the necessary foundations for the child's entrance into the symbolic, the social world of language, and shared meaning. The regulations within the symbiotic relation with the mother provide "the necessary conditions that . . . constitute the semiotic disposition and insure its maintenance within the symbolic" (*Desire in Language* 285). Again, this early stage cannot be conceived as the pre-objectal oceanic oneness Freud had envisioned,<sup>6</sup> or as an encompassing fusion of the child with the mother's body, but must rather be understood as the most tenuous and unstable moment of relatedness, the earliest exposure to otherness. The provisional, tentative regulation of the semiotic vis-à-vis the symbolic (m)other allows the order of the symbolic to map onto the proto-order of semiotic, so to speak, thereby creating a heterogeneous symbolic order, a symbolic infused with the energy and affect of the semiotic. This should not suggest that the symbolic either masks or overcomes the semiotic; rather the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic is best conceived as a hinge or pivot, with the symbolic both continuous with and differentiated from the semiotic.

Before the symbolic attains authority, the ego is "uncertain, fragile, threatened, subjected just as much as its non-object to spatial ambivalence (inside/outside uncertainty) and to ambiguity of perception (pleasure/pain)" (*Powers of Horror* 62). The child's entry into language is concomitant with the inauguration of a world of differences. Prior to that, the pre-ego is marked by the chaos of uncertain borders and affective fluctuation. This unstable stage is characterized by painful ambivalence and tension: proximity with the mother threatens to overwhelm even as it promises to comfort, while separation indicates both freedom and loss. If sublimation functions in part to enable a kind of revisitation of primary narcissism, this will not be a return to an idyllic origin, as Freud's "oceanic oneness" might suggest,<sup>7</sup> but rather will function as the rearticulation of an experience that registers the psyche's being torn between the realms of sign and affect, meaning and nonmeaning : on the brink of sense and nonsense.

In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva posits a two-fold psychic action that ensures the transference of the semiotic to the site of language, motivating the transition towards stability. The advent of a discrete other, of opposition, indeed of language is preceded by the concurrent mechanisms of *identification* and *abjection*, which articulate the

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<sup>6</sup> One problem with the Freudian picture of primary narcissism as a strictly objectless state is that it becomes difficult to account for the development of objects and object relations out of this entirely self-enclosed phase. In Kristeva's account, primary narcissism includes relations with otherness, with some form of externality, and thus allows for a development towards mature object relationships.

<sup>7</sup> Freud writes: "originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it . . . the ideational contents appropriate to [this primary ego-feeling] would be precisely those of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe – the same ideas with which my friend elucidated the 'oceanic' feeling" (*Civilization* 68).

interpersonal and intrapsychic connections and separateness necessary for mature psychic functioning, symbolic capabilities, and a bounded self. Drives and affect find new satisfactions in and as symbolic forms, and the latter is filled out and given body through the force of the semiotic; while the two registers of meaning are analytically separable and it can be helpful to speak as though they were distinct, in fact the semiotic and symbolic remain inextricably intertwined from the moment they become articulated within primary narcissism.

The infant must separate from the intimate and potentially overwhelming maternal body by means of an ambivalent rejection and abjection, and must at the same time identify with what Freud called the father of “personal prehistory” (“The Ego and the Id” 31), or the imaginary father: put differently, the symbiotic proximity with the not-yet-other must be severed and a new, more dynamic connection with that lost other must be re-established in language. Only by losing the mother is a relationship with the imaginary father possible, only thanks to this loss do symbolic connections become properly meaningful. For Kristeva, this imaginary figure<sup>8</sup> is not the prohibitive Oedipal father, but a loving and promising presence that provides compensation for the child as it rejects the maternal body that continues to be the primary source of care even as it threatens to engulf. On Freud’s account, the third term that disengages the mother-child dyad is the punitive father of law (the voice of the super-ego), while for Kristeva the third term that marks the initial steps towards subjectivity is a more ambiguous figure, a “simple virtuality, a potential presence, a form to be cathected” (*Tales of Love* 43). Expanding upon Freud’s brief mention of the identification with the father of *pre*-history as direct and prior to any object relation (“The Ego and the Id” 31), Kristeva suggests that this first immediate engagement with the figure of mediation – a third – introduces not a first object, but the condition of possibility for that first object, the condition for the capacity to engage an other as both separate and related.

Early identification, for Kristeva as for Freud, is characteristic of the oral phase, “where what I incorporate is what I become, where *having* amounts to *being*” (Kristeva *Tales of Love* 25). Because identification constitutes a relation with otherness prior to the distinction of subject and object, that which is identified with is not an object *per se* but an outline or a pattern to be imitated, with which one’s relation is not interactive but mimetic; for Kristeva, the “material” that best lends itself to this slippage between having and being is precisely language (*Tales of Love* 26). The child’s oral incorporation of words, her identification with the meaningful gestures and speech of the other, results with her assimilating this structure, where *having* the speech of the other amounts to *being* (or becoming) a speaking subject. Kristeva writes, “[w]hen the object that I incorporate is the speech of the other – precisely a nonobject, a pattern, a model – I bind myself to him in a primary fashion, communion, unification. An identification” (26).

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<sup>8</sup> While Kristeva refers to this figure as the imaginary *father*, she is clear that this figure appears prior to the child’s awareness of sexual difference and thus contains attributes of both parents, both sexes (*Tales of Love* 26).

This identification with the language of the other already requires a kind of re-routing of drives or proto-sublimation on the part of the not-yet-subject, where pleasure is produced not merely by “the joys of chewing, swallowing, nourishing oneself” (26) but by words and gestures, or more broadly, by libidinal investment in psychic activity. This early internalization does not immediately endow the infant with meaning or the capacity for speech, but introduces possibility, initiating the transition from using the language of the other to becoming a subject of language.

This propulsion towards and identification with the speech of the imaginary father is predicated upon and concomitant with the rejection of the maternal body. In order to engage the world of discrete objects and language, the child must split the mother into the abject (that which threatens boundaries with confusion) *and* the object (of desire and language). Kristeva writes:

The abject confronts us . . . within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of the *maternal* entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. (*Powers of Horror* 13)

Abjection constitutes the earliest struggle with the mother who “will eventually constitute an object separated from the Ego” (*Tales of Love* 41), but who, at this stage, represents the fusion of the child with its environment, a fusion that permits no space for individuation or meaning. Abjection is the convulsive rejection of a non-object, an attempt to institute a boundary between myself and that which is still a part of me. Abjection is difficult and painful precisely because in rejecting the not-yet-separate maternal body, the child experiences and enacts a rejection of self, an auto-rejection. Because there is such ambivalence surrounding this necessary moment, the imperative to separate from the mother, who continues to be the source of support, indeed of life, must in fact be facilitated by the mother herself through her own interest in and *desire* for an *other*. Kristeva writes:

The loving mother, different from the caring and clinging mother, is someone who has an object of desire; beyond that, she has an Other with relation to whom the child will serve as a go-between. . . . Without the maternal ‘diversion’ toward a Third Party, the bodily exchange is abjection or devouring. (*Tales of Love* 34)

The revelation of the mother’s desire for something other than (providing for) the child directs the child’s attentions toward some *other* (“I am not my mother’s sole object, thus there must be more than she and I”): by indicating otherness, she indicates the world. As Kelly Oliver emphasizes, “this is the move from the mother’s body to the mother’s

desire through the mother's love" (70). Through the institution of a space between the self and the (m)other, and at the same time, the establishment of the mimetic relationship between the child and language, the initial, tentative space for thinking, for language, is established.

Through identification and abjection, the structure of primary narcissism secures the division and connection, the division *as* connection, both within the psyche and between psyche and world. This is an *essential* division, "the root of the human psyche," the alternative being non-differentiation (or at least inadequate differentiation), barring the child from desire and language. As Kristeva asserts, "narcissism protects emptiness, causes it to exist, and thus, as a lining of that emptiness, insures an elementary separation" (*Tales of Love* 23-24). Entry into language is only feasible by suffering loss: "sadness [is the] imprint of separation and beginning of the symbol's sway" (*Black Sun* 22). Without loss there would be no space for thinking, no motivation to re-establish a connection with the other by means of language. Primary narcissism is thus representative of the initial impact of otherness, the first registration of difference, both between the self and other, and within the self, in terms of the developing differentiation between semiotic and symbolic. Looked at from the perspective of the Oedipus complex, which secures the separateness of the other and the discreteness of the self, this period of insufficient differentiation can only appear threatening, potentially annihilating, pathological. Yet in her claim that primary narcissism, like the Oedipus complex, is never finally overcome but ever revisited and reworked, Kristeva is insisting that the apparent stability of the Oedipal or symbolic differences that characterize mature psychic functioning is continually undone and established anew by the insistence of primary narcissism. The life of the psyche is in part the negotiation of this undoing, where the unmediated (or insufficiently mediated) impact of otherness is experienced either as a traumatic blow, or as an occasion for transformation: to put it with Nietzsche, illness, undergoing, is also pregnancy (*Genealogy* II §19). For Kristeva, sublimation represents the possibility of a productive and creative re-negotiation of this tenuous moment of psychic life.

On the one hand, then, primary narcissism and the semiotic more generally must be repressed and overcome in order to engage the symbolic. Participation in the symbolic represents a psychic achievement, a capacity accomplished by way of transcending the semiotic.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the semiotic and the dynamics of primary narcissism cannot be repressed absolutely for to do so would result in psychic pathology, a kind of defensive splitting. For Kristeva, sublimation represents the psychic labor of engaging a non-defensive, non-pathologized relationship with the semiotic:

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<sup>9</sup> Even this language of transcendence is not quite correct, for in truth the symbolic and semiotic are generated concomitantly. The semiotic is misrepresented when figured as the merely bodily that the symbolic rests upon. Rather, the semiotic is the other of the symbolic and is hence nonexistent prior to the symbolic: there is only a semiotic for speaking beings. Nevertheless, the semiotic is the repressed other of the symbolic, and thus it is at least permissible to speak of transcending the former.

whereas neurotic symptom formation is indicative of an involuntary registration of the impact of the unconscious, sublimation is the attempt to undergo and in some sense *suffer* this impact, while at the same time giving it new form or expression. Whether as the excessive fullness of the drives or the gaping loss of maternal proximity, sublimation attempts to take up the traces of the impact of primary narcissism, not to endow it with symbolic sense, but in order to articulate the sense that is already immanent to the semiotic. Sublimation is thus a revival of the dynamics of primary narcissism in order to find articulation for this mode of embodiment and mindedness, this particular and exigent form of being in the world. Kristeva writes: “the aesthetic task – a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct – amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn” (*Powers of Horror* 18). What is re-experienced in sublimation *qua* retracing is precisely the axis connecting nonmeaning and meaning, self and other, the ambivalent and precarious moment of intimacy-becoming-separation, of affect-becoming-word. By contrast, certain forms of psychic pathology – neurosis and psychosis – can indicate the inability to engage in this retracing and an avoidance of the need to acknowledge the authority of the semiotic.

If sublimation works to accomplish an incomplete return to the destabilized, initial moments of subjectivity, then accompanying profound sublimation is always the risk of psychic disintegration, radical meaninglessness, madness or silence. To descend to the foundations of the speaking subject without active transformation would result in a kind of psychosis or melancholia, whereas Kristeva is advocating sublimation as return and creative working through. For Kristeva, then, sublimation must involve a dialectic or dynamic where the movement of return is completed through symbolic articulation, for otherwise sublimation and regression would be indistinguishable. Further, this articulation does not amount to speaking *about* this experience or *about* certain repressed contents, but rather involves attesting to a fundamental disquiet and dissonance that founds and accompanies language and psychic life. This is accomplished, for Kristeva, through a transformation at the level of *form*, what Kristeva calls poetic language: symbolization that realizes the possibilities inherent in language by breaking from its strictly referential univocity and wandering “at the limits of the thinkable” (“Desire in Language” 276).

### **Sublimation: The Presence of the Unrepresentable in the Texture that Represents**

For Kristeva, primary narcissism represents the first and most fragile registration of difference, of both external and internal otherness, an impact as overwhelming as it is promising. While Kristeva acknowledges that this stage must in some sense be overcome, all of her work can be read as an insistence that the structure of primary narcissism cannot be neglected or repressed, as though inessential or merely propaedeutic. While the *stage* of primary narcissism must be transcended, its economy or

*structure* must be reinvested and attended. That is, if primary narcissism functions as the ground for subjectivity and language, as the first negotiation of body and world by means of the mind, then its rejection would constitute a pathological refusal of an essential aspect of what it means to be a self, what it means to have a world. Sara Beardsworth has argued that, each in its own, psychoanalysis, religion, and art, as analyzed by Kristeva, represents an attempt to facilitate this more intimate negotiation of semiotic and symbolic, which is to say that psychoanalysis, religion, and art function as revisitations of the structures of primary narcissism.<sup>10</sup> Such discourses – what we might call sacred discourses – work to provide social and symbolic mediation for the subject’s less mediated encounters with the semiotic, accommodating and giving sense to such pre-discursive dynamics. According to Beardsworth, Kristeva’s key insight lies in her recognition of a dimension of subjectivity and meaning – namely the point of tension or confusion between the semiotic on the symbolic – that requires specific forms of symbolic mediation, forms whose function is to mediate this tension. The reengagement of primary narcissism is necessary for a flourishing psychic life, and this must be pursued through shared symbolic forms. Importantly, it means that this process of revisitation, whether in religious practice, aesthetic experience, or on the couch, is precisely a *meaningful* experience, which is to say that it takes place in language, through the symbolic. Language is not abandoned in favor of immediacy or pure affect but is the very means by which this relationship with the semiotic is established.

However, while a meaningful relationship with the semiotic cannot take place independently of language, nor will an excessively intellectualized revisitation suffice. As Freud also perceived, a purely “intellectual acceptance of the repressed” will leave untouched “what is essential to the repression” (“Repression” 236), namely, the affective element. That is, any attempt to articulate the semiotic unconscious without the concomitant expression of affect would fail to transform the relationship with the semiotic, which is also to say such an attempt would not amount to sublimation. Thus, while affect without meaning – a pure cry – is insufficient for sublimation, similarly insufficient is a sterile conceptual description – a diagnosis, or a merely intellectual acknowledgment of an experience or feeling. In the former case, the distinction between affect and sign is collapsed, while in the latter the separation of the two is rigidified.

For Kristeva, sublimation is always a matter of a symbolic transformation at the level of *form*. To acknowledge the demands of the semiotic requires, not (only) an interpretation of the contents of the unconscious – memories, desires, or fantasies, for example – but the registration of the differentiating effects of the semiotic on the symbolic itself, on its very structure. A predominantly symbolic order represses the semiotic in favor of conceptual clarity, but when the symbolic engages the semiotic more emphatically, the former gives up some of this clarity or straightforward sense in favor of the kinds of metaphors, digressions, patterns, or breaks found, for example, in

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<sup>10</sup> See Beardsworth.

poetry or the speech of the analysand. Furthermore, sublimation does not work to interpret or make sense of the semiotic, but allows the semiotic to give rise to new forms of sense and sense-making. One can think of free association, where new connections and syntactic patterns evidence the impact and weight of the unconscious, infusing long familiar words with newfound resonance and apparently incomprehensible sentences with a kind of meaning. When signs become receptive to the force of affect, when they become properly *expressive* of that inarticulate force, the result is not a new intelligible object – a named pain, a claimed pleasure – but a new modality of naming, a new expressivity. As Kristeva notes, signs become loaded with affect, making them

ambiguous, repetitive or simply alliterative, musical or sometimes nonsensical. At that point, translation – our fate as speaking beings – stops its vertiginous course towards metalanguages or foreign languages, which are like many sign systems distant from the site of pain. It seeks to become alien to itself in order to discover, in the mother tongue, a ‘total word, new, foreign to the language’ (Mallarmé) for the purpose of naming the unnameable. (*Black Sun* 42)

Whereas the functioning of everyday speech is predicated on its distance from the semiotic, its clear separation of subject and object, which allows the former authority over the latter, sublimatory speech is characterized by its ambiguity or pathos, by a certain difficulty. Because of this, sublimation is not a matter of translating the unknown into the known while leaving both regions unchanged. Rather, sublimation involves both the transformation of the structures of the symbolic by the insistence of the semiotic *and* the conversion of the semiotic from a threatening or radical otherness to an other that is no less radically different but that exhibits a kind of sense, a different knowing. If the semiotic is and must remain the other of language, then those discourses that approach the unconscious will be to a certain extent “alien” or incomprehensible according to the logic of the symbolic. Such discourses make us not less but more fully strangers to ourselves. That is, sublimation does not offer us greater self-knowledge, but rather brings us to that which is necessarily and constitutively most different, most intimately strange.

For Kristeva, modern art represents a public discourse (as opposed to the private language of the clinical relationship) uniquely capable of registering and articulating psychic difference without falling into the trap of trying “to effect a passage of the repressed element . . . into the symbolic function” (*Revolution* 163). The semiotic cannot be encountered, in whole or in part. Rather the unconscious semiotic is “the unrepresentable [that] mak[es] its presence felt in the flaws of the texture (language, discourse, or narrative) that represents” (*Tales of Love* 368). The semiotic is not outside or prior to the symbolic but is its internal rupturing, it is the shudder of form. Sublimation takes place when the univocal economy of everyday symbolic systems are

disrupted, when the representational device itself is perverted in the process of turning towards the opaque demands of the unconscious.<sup>11</sup> This should not indicate that the symbolic is somehow weakened under the force of the semiotic; rather sublimation demands the greatest rigor from the symbolic, pressing it to its utmost capacities, the highest tension (see Nietzsche, *Will to Power* §260). Language – whether linguistic, visual, or musical – takes on a form that performs the differentiating effects of the unconscious by working to exemplify the ambivalence and dynamism upon which the organized whole rests.

One can think, for example, of the twisting bodies or distorted mouths of Francis Bacon: here, it is not simply a certain content that is presented, but form itself, the very taking shape of affective experience in a medium *other* than the affective body (the pure cry). That is, a Baconian figure is not the simple expression of anguish, but *the anguish of expression*, the agonism of the very movement from anguish to expression, from the semiotic to the symbolic. What is so striking is not that these forms are strange, though they are, but rather that they are deeply resonant, even familiar: while we do not strictly speaking *comprehend* these forms, they do have a kind of sense for us, a sense or meaning irreducible to available symbolic structures. Further, it is not that the familiarity or sense comes from seeing the outlines of a “normal” human face “behind” Bacon’s contortions; rather we see the sense in the contortion itself. We do not see the symbolic texture through the flaws but rather understand the language of the flaw. It is precisely through its resistance to determinate judgment, its appearing to be governed by a foreign though not incomprehensible logic, that art is best able to take on the weight of the unconscious. Kristeva writes: “the topography of poetic language appears as one that draws out, within a signifying device (which has been called prosody, art, and so forth), not the ‘ideational content’ of what remains outside first symbolization, but rather its *economy*” (*Revolution* 164).

Sublimation functions as the formal or structural acknowledgement of the semiotic. Without suggesting an untenable form-content distinction, for Kristeva, sublimation is a matter of a specific, semiotic form of articulation and not the referent of the speech. As such, Kristeva ensures that sublimation is not confused with lifting repression in order to welcome in some pure semiotic *content*. That sublimation continues to speak, that it remains bound to a symbolic economy, ensures that destabilization, or the return to the semiotic, is always coupled with stabilization,

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<sup>11</sup> For example, in *Tales of Love*, Kristeva writes of Bataille’s *Ma Mère*: “the simple designation, the univocal naming of perverse relationships, their ‘scientific’ description, do not measure up to the ‘excessiveness’ specific to the anguish of loving. Precisely in order to respond to such excessiveness, the narrative becomes incoherent . . . it evokes the twilight state of consciousness perturbed by desire” (367). Thus, on the issue of sublimation, it is not a matter of the kind of content or characters but it is rather what becomes of the symbolic economy of the narrative itself, how it is changed by the force of the unconscious. To simply represent, for example, an “unconscious” desire for the mother, is to de-radicalize the radically unknowable and truly *different* economy of the unconscious. Representing it in this way frames the unconscious as opposite but logically similar, rather than radically different.

articulation: if sublimation wanders at the limits of the thinkable, it always remains on the near side of such limits. This is inevitable; so long as we continue to speak, to symbolize, to sublimate, we continue to operate within the symbolic, which is dependent on the differentiation from and repression of the semiotic: “as long as we speak, we shall never get rid of repression” (*Tales of Love* 366).

Freud discovered that the repressed unconscious has an inherent tendency to return; that is, these internal differentiations and psychic recesses are not benign or stabilized but make demands on the subject and compel a response. For Freud, the unconscious drive just is “the demand made upon the mind for *work* in consequence of its connection with the body” (“Instincts” 122, emphasis added). If the unconscious is experienced as a threat to the coherence and solidity of the ego, then the response – the “work” – will be defensive, reactive, neurotic; the demand will be experienced as a compulsion to separate and dissociate from the unconscious. On the other hand, it is possible that, in response to this demand, the subject can assume a less fearful position, and the work can be less reactive. We do not thereby misrecognize ourselves any less and the unconscious does not become any less unknown, but this self-strangeness might be felt less as a sickness that forecloses possibilities than as an occasion that opens onto new capacities, new structures of sense. Kristeva writes: “the foundation [that] will be repressed or reorganized by the constraints imposed by signifying social reality, will nevertheless return, *projecting itself* onto the structured surface – disturbing and reorganizing it (as ‘poetry’) or piercing and annihilating it (in ‘madness’)” (*Revolution* 169). In the latter case, the ego takes itself as a stratified and solid unity, such that the return of the repressed is experienced as traumatic and potentially annihilating. Rigid defense works until there occurs a break in the structure (a “piercing”), followed by destabilization or breakdown bordering on destruction. In the former case, the repressed semiotic returns, makes its claims, but on a system that is already open, destabilizing-stabilizing. The proximity with the semiotic reorganizes the symbolic, infusing and disrupting it, but without the catastrophe of annihilation. Sublimation (referred to here as poetry) effectuates a creative reconciliation or return *to* the repressed in order to prevent or lessen the symptomatic and damaging return *of* the repressed.<sup>12</sup> At the level of individual psychic experience, a non-defensive or sublimatory relationship with unconscious facilitates the formal registration of the call for a new kind of work, or working through. An open system, engaged in the ongoing work of destabilization-stabilization and the creation of new forms of expression: this is Kristeva’s dialectic of growth.

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<sup>12</sup> Freud puts it pithily in his essay on Da Vinci: “sublimation, instead of an irruption from the unconscious” (80).

### Conclusion: Strange New Beauty

Kristeva's theory of sublimation articulates how a non-coercive form of difference in unity might be achieved, however transiently, at the level of psychic experience and representation. Taking her lead from both the Freudian edifice and the ethos of post-Nietzschean Continental philosophy, Kristeva describes a creative or productive relationship between the unconscious and consciousness without framing that relationship in terms of defense against or rejection of the former. Instead, as I have argued, as a *formal* transformation of our modes of representation, sublimation bears the demands of the semiotic without imposing a symbolic framework or refusing semiotic authority. Rather sublimation is an acknowledgment of the authority of the semiotic as an organizing principle for psychic life, a principle not *opposed* to the symbolic – as though it was its mere negative – but radically different. Through this engagement with self-difference, sublimation is that mechanism that can give rise to “strange new beauty” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* II §18), namely representational forms that are not self-transparent but paradoxically work to pronounce their internal opacity, their self-strangeness. Kristeva's essential point is that in attending to the semiotic we acknowledge the salience of this other mode of mindedness and the claim that it has on psychic life. Crucially, to acknowledge a claim is not the same as to answer or understand it; sublimation, art, poetic language, register the demands of an enigma that can neither be silenced nor deciphered. Sublimation responds, neither as coercive incorporation, nor as defensive refusal, but as creative acknowledgment, as a different kind of work.

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