The Abject, The Object, and The Thing

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Abstract : Julia Kristeva's conception of the abject should be read as the legacy of the modernist aesthetics inaugurated by Kant. If Kant's *Critique of Judgment* opens up the possibility that aesthetic reflective judgment is a condition of possibility for scientific rationality, then Kristeva's "abject," as it relates to her conception of the sacred, situates this movement within the immanent sensuality of the world and the often-repudiated aspects of the body and their role in the production of meaning. Taken together, these themes offer a means by which to see philosophy itself as a work of historical mourning through its proximity or distance to its truth, and in turn, this reading suggests Kristeva's significant contribution to the philosophical tradition.

Résumé : La conception de l'abject de Julia Kristeva devrait être lue comme héritière de l'esthétique moderniste inaugurée par Kant. Si la *Critique du jugement* permet de considérer le jugement réfléchissant esthétique comme condition de possibilité d'une rationalité scientifique, alors l'"abject" kristévien, en ce qui concerne sa conception du sacré, situe ce mouvement au sein de la sensualité immanente du monde et localise les aspects souvent répudiées du corps et de leurs rôles dans la production du sens. Pris ensemble, ces deux thèmes offrent un moyen de voir la philosophie elle-même comme un travail de deuil historique, selon sa proximité ou sa distance de sa vérité. À son tour, cette lecture suggère la contribution significative que Kristeva apporte à la tradition philosophique.

Keywords : Kristeva – Kant – philosophical significance – abject – sublime – sacred – *expérience* – mourning – religion – fundamentalism – beauty – perfumatic

I would like to begin by proposing that the philosophical significance of Kristeva's work can be approached by situating the notion of the abject within the Kantian frame, more specifically in relation to *The Third Critique* (Kant 1987). It is here that a certain fragmentation of philosophy is inaugurated, creating an opening, a tradition of aesthetics that will blossom in the inheritors of Idealism that followed: Romantics, Modernists, Critical Theorists. It is here, one can argue, that Kant disrupts the gears of the sterile Newtonian universe, problematizing the potential overarching unity of philosophy, a unity elaborated as an architectonic. It is here too that *imagination becomes first philosophy*: the tradition of what will later be called "instrumental rationality," is first exposed to the threat of dethronement by a "poetic rationality," or a semiotics, for, as Bernstein argues, this event occurs prior to Hegel (7). It is precisely within the fracture of the architectonic, in

which the free play of the imagination comes to be seen as a necessary presupposition for determinate judgment, that literature and the fine arts can offer themselves as rivals to the efficient and unrelentless subsumption of the 'world' by science. The autonomy of aesthetic reflective judgment, in the spacing that it achieves from the epistemic and moral concerns, conditions the pathways that will split philosophy into the so-called Anglo-American and continental traditions. That is, the autonomy of the aesthetic domain is ambivalent: if it is taken to be wholly independent of the moral and epistemological interests of reason, the inextricable condition of philosophy and literature comes to be reduced to a Sunday evening affair, a kind of delicacy (Bernstein 5).

And thus, even if the *aporia* of aesthetics is to be only tenuously located within Kant's text itself, which is to say, it is located in the negative space of the text's failure at a reconciliation between the understanding and the imagination, or to put it another way, it is properly located in the reception of the text, and deduced from its implications as much as from the "text itself," there is nonetheless a Kantian origin of literature that might be seen here – one that cannot be separated from Kristeva and her framing of the work of philosophy within the Freudian theme of mourning (*Black Sun* 9).

We can see in the abject as defined by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, the legacy of the philosophical critique of the alienation of the world, the alienation that some have called 'aesthetic alienation' (Bernstein 5), expressed through certain dead-ends of epistemology and its slicing, excision, perhaps derision of world-relations and of our relation to this world. The abject poses the question which underlies, sustains, and in some respects confuses the Kantian system – a question that is made clear from the perspective of Hegel's critique: what does it feel like, beyond all philosophers' theoretical *apparati*, when a philosopher touches the world?

I suspect, listening to Kristeva closely, the world feels dirty : a far cry from the affective ocean that Freud criticizes and an even further cry from the orgasm of truth, beauty, and the good that one finds pristine and cleansed within a mathematician's Platonism. With Kristeva, we move beyond the intellectual intuition of the Gods *and* the philosopher, following Nietzsche's injunction that we learn to philosophize with the nose, instrumentally characterized thought as "grasping." In a text such as Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva's *The Feminine and the Sacred* (2001), one can locate a perfumatic ontology of porousness that outstrips and permeates the clean pane of glass that is representation – one that both protects us from an overexposure to the world and at the same time cuts us of from it. The world takes on its full meaning in relation to the fullness of sensation, strongly tied to the most primordial forms of memory when we smell the world in all its weight, in its all too enticing and simultaneously repulsive, post-utopian fullness.

What then does philosophy have to learn from Kristeva? The abject, as between subject and object, inside and outside, self and other, as tied to the affective drive-body of the most contemporary subject of philosophy (a subject of imminence and

embodiment), simultaneously suggests a work of mourning that underlies meaning itself. Philosophy, it could be argued, is itself a sublation, a higher-order repetition of abjection, a work of historical mourning that operates in the shadow of an ambivalent utopianism, a tending towards and distancing from its ideal object (an object that, as Hegel shows us, turns out to be nothing other than itself, trying in vain to fully comprehend itself). And while for Hegel this aim that is to say, the Absolute, may be just within our grasp, we suspect that we are no longer so fortunate. This question, however, of the proximity, or more properly the mutual constitution of world and subject, and their original co-presence that 20th century figures have outlined in the wake of our problematic Cartesian heritage, is difficult to locate within the contemporary discourses on the secular, the sacred, and the religious, as they relate to our modern immanent frame. Is the experience of dispossession that Kristeva describes, the experience of a depression that is set into motion through the absence of effective structures of psychic investment in the secular world, due to a loss of the Absolute, the Absolute that Hegel attempts to rescue from Kantian prudishness? Is the work of philosophy a work of mourning – a work of sublimation that circulates around the loss of philosophical utopia (the failure of the total system or the discovery of the unstable fluctuations that Being turns out to be, and which, in turn, demands our participation in the production of truth)? Or can this loss be seen, not just as a yearning for an object or thing but as the specificity of that condition of art's diremption from truth. If taken as inseparable from aesthetics, philosophy, like art, now dwells in a place in which perhaps its best effort is the designation of its own limits, its failures, the beyond of any grand reconciliation.

My claim, which is perhaps an obvious one, is that we should see the abject in light of this discourse on mourning. The problem here that the abject might address, as it plays out across the intricacies of today's global field, is an equivocation between loss and lack, an equivocation that necessarily entails the movement from the absence of psychic substance within the secular world, to the violent but drive-ridden return to fundamentalism. The suture of loss and lack is the inverse of a gentrified ideal – the false fullness that underlies the merely abstract ideal of religious fanaticism and many former philosophical systems. In fact these expression represent false idols; their ideality is deprived of substance in being cleansed of the abject.

Is it justified to move so quickly from the aesthetic condition of philosophy to religious violence? This is precisely the gravity of the aesthetic question: that it is not as if the resolution of a philosophical stance might, in and of itself, dissolve terror in the world, but rather that philosophy is no longer immune to the state of the world's condition, as we now know. That loss reduced to lack deprives the secular world of the fullness of the substance of living experience, and in turn, or in conjunction with this, quietly erodes the possibility that structures of sociality can effectively function as sites within which the psyche can meaningfully invest, whether it be in language itself, institutions, or political parties. In contrast to the reduction of loss to lack, I want to

point toward the specificity of the abject here, in four respects: its materiality, its fragmentary excess, its standing outside the limits of the understanding's capacity and demand for unity, and finally, to use a term already laden with philosophical baggage, its *substance*. In other words, to return to the Kantian frame, with the abject we can detect the presence of the sublime, or its structure or function, within a time when the sublime, as such, no longer seems to be strictly possible. To put it another way, if Kant claims to offer a sublime from the starry skies above, Kristeva offers us, through the abject, a sublime that erupts from whatever it is that comes from below. Whatever this is, whether the sensuality of the body, the primordiality of meaning through the drives, or the fluids and bodily excesses that reside on the crater of meaning's eruptions, it is not to be confused with the heavenly canopy.

The power of the sublime being that which demands a post-cognitive confrontation with something beyond us, something that suspends our standard operating procedures, something which questions our individual sovereignty. It both haunts and assaults the understandings demand for unity while exceeding its capacity. In other words, it is a full experience in which our everyday narcissisms, and perhaps our everyday symptoms, grind to a halt. They are reduced in the face of something that can be seen as a core of experience, perhaps something properly described without hesitation or negotiation as "an *experience*." The thought here is that the abject captures a fullness of experience that is not a false idol, that is not from the outset cleansed, and that continues to capture something beyond individualism within secular life. Is this secular religion or its equivalent? It is certainly a question worth posing, but I will not attempt to resolve it here.

In the critique of the secular, in Kristeva's own work, fundamentalism is a predictable reaction in the face of an often-bankrupt cultural frame of mere distraction and spectacle, an emptying out of substance from the world, which results in a staring contest with the meaningless void. It is at once hard to imagine, yet, patently obvious from the news reports we observe: the price that people are willing to pay for the slightest taste of the substance of life – from the extreme acts of humiliation that make up so-called "*reality*" TV to the all-to-eager sacrifice of the suicide bomber. As much as suicide, the failed act *par excellence*, serves as a self-contradictory preservation of the imaginary self (a brilliant insight that Kristeva offers to help us understand the potential dangers of contemporary neuro-pharmacology). Suicide also seems to have taken on the sense of a demand for a taste of life, or at least the demand for this demand.

What is clear from the imaginary that surrounds these accounts is that the small taste of life offered here tends to be deprived of the fullness of the abject, in its ambivalence – the abject which both underlies the appearance of beauty, the intensity of being a lived creature, a bodily creature, and an agent of speech, but that always threatens to revert, like the drive, into the appearance of the vile. The ideal that is offered there (as deprived of the abject) is an old image, as abstract and masculine as it is false. We are now forced to confront a new notion of beauty altogether, one

inextricable from the abject and, quite frankly, a superior image, which entails a greater freedom, a larger intensity of life, and a great achievement over the pristine cosmological detritus of the gods. This is the modern condition that arises when the old gods have fallen and truth can no longer be separated from the work, the process, the abjection to and fro, that engenders our subjectivity. The pre-history that Kristeva describes is in a certain sense like Hegel's history. One might say that becoming a subject entails the *slaughter bench of our own personal prehistory*.

That is all to say, however, that while such claims are inseparable from a certain conception of philosophy as a work of mourning, such positions of finitude should not, in fact, appear as wholly disheartening. Perhaps the upshot, if one can put it this way, of the dissolution of social bonds that seems to paradoxically constitute the activity of contemporary society is that the process of mourning, while infinite, *is at the same time possible* at this point in history (that is to say, the activity itself, not the mere result, is possible). That which philosophy, through or with aesthetics, mourns is also the condition that establishes the possibility of a new freedom from determination by the various possible domains of infringement. By this I do not suggest a naive sense of acquiring the absolute *as absolute*, but that the work of sublimation operates and does so despite the implicit recognition, which can eventually come to be explicit through practices such as psychoanalysis, that this work is no longer guaranteed by some abstract other. If there is a Big Other, this other is nothing other than "the meaning of discourse" (Kristeva, *Tales* 13). This is the good news. If something has been lost in modernity, then this loss is also the precondition of a new and unforeseen freedom. It is not merely the freedom of a failed Enlightenment, but a new and yet-to-be-conceived freedom.

The bad news is, of course, that the practical fulfillment of this freedom and space of creativity is most precarious at the time in which it is also the most possible. It is clear that such fulfillment often fails. The aim of practices like psychoanalysis, to which I would add the practice of philosophy, is not to determine this freedom – that is to say their aim is not simply to realize this possibility of sublimation for all, ahead of time, as it were – but to develop the institutional, or at least social, structures allowing for the universal possibility of this work to take place. This is at least the ideal.

As a refusal of both the imaginary claims of religious promise and the naive claims of scientific hegemony, the sacred appears as a third term that partakes of the abject and that aims to disrupt the simple binary opposition between scientific knowledge and religious ignorance. That which "proposes figures of consolation and of healing omnipotence…" (Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine* 26), whether it be religion or science, is ultimately the expression of a desire to escape from finitude. The sacred strives to designate or at least indicate the impossibility of any such final transcendence or consolation. Instead, with it, we dwell in an irreconcilable rift that is precisely the space within which new meaning can arise. Writing to Clément, Kristeva wonders:

> What if the sacred were the unconscious perception the human being has of its untenable eroticism: always on the borderline between nature and culture, the animalistic and the verbal, the sensible and the nameable? What if the sacred were not the religious *need* for protection and omnipotence that institutions exploit but the *jouissance* of that *cleavage* – of that power/powerlessness – of that exquisite lapse? (26-27)

The crises of meaning in secular society are carefully transposed from the cry for omnipotence to an "exquisite lapse," the borderline between body and meaning: the power that is experienced in and harnessed by religious experience need not lead directly to the fundamentalist demand for transcendence. Instead, the meaning of meaning operates within a context of an immanent mystery; the irreducible inextricability of meaning, the body, *jouissance*, sensuality, and representation. The sacred is the captivating mystery of this irreducibility: "What if what we call the "sacred" were the celebration of a mystery, the mystery of the emergence of meaning?" (Clément and Kristeva 13). The melancholic desire for the transcendent object, or perhaps the Thing in a Kantian sense, can be exchanged for the meaning of meaning as mystery, through rituals and communication, artistic creation and analytic speech. We move from silent melancholia to a new kind of mourning. It is the "conjunction of thought and of nothing that can and ought to be celebrated as 'sacred'" (49). The intersection of domains – biological and meaningful, bodily and psychic, "inside and outside, being and nothingness, neither one nor the other, both at once, sorrow and delight…" (60) – is thus characterized by dynamism and relationality, as opposed to the order, hierarchy, and identity that drives the institutionalization of religious life and the appropriative metaphysics of science. This intersection is signaled in the terms "difference" and "resistance" (37) : Kristeva asks, "What if the truth were only that? Not 'a meaning' but a 'tension toward' . . . Let us work toward meaning, but let us leave it … indefinite, always 'to come' . . . paradoxically, that transitory quality is its strength. A nondescript but true strength" (142). A counter-conception of feminine being as porous, or *perfumatic*, suggests the character of this other kind of mourning, and its organization into a perfumatic ontology: "I propose *perfume* as a figure for that problematic repression, that troubling porousness of women. The 'glass' of representation does not withstand the pressure of an internal reality: the female ego . . . is 'vaporous'" (Clément and Kristeva 14). The term *perfume* signifies the non-identical, the dynamics in meaning, with its emphatic connotations of embodiment. The domain of being, its history of abstraction, can no longer be detached from the entire range of odors that emanate from the body, euphemistically characterized as perfume. The domain of being is not distinct from filth and bodily secretions. What can be derived from this other logic is an overcoming of the sacrificial logic that arises when the cleansed, merely abstract, ideal seems just within reach. The sacred as it appears here is not merely an opposition or exclusion from the symbolic norm that sustains it but an indeterminable presence that

constitutes the tension of both exclusion and inclusion. The sacred appears on both sides of the border, a "stranger" within the symbolic norm, irreducible to its order. The sacred thus comes to be thought as non-sacrificial.

In its imaginary economy, terror is that which sacrifices the other in the name of the transcendent One, an offering to what Lacan calls, in *Seminar XI*, the "dark God" (275). The result of a calculation within an economy of exchange, it establishes a tenable link between the scientific and capitalist economies. Beyond the calculation, sublimation thrives through undecidability, and this tarrying with the undecidable *prevents* nihilism rather than produces it. It is, perhaps to our surprise, the separation and irreducibility that engender creativity: in Kristeva's words, "Creation comes out of a cut, the gap that opens within the signifier, and there is no Word there" (Clément and Kristeva 152). The teleology of thought, which is disrupted by Kant's own implicit self-critique becomes essentially thematized here. Representation as teleological, as merely rule-bound, as directed toward a guaranteed end, as an element within the whole of reason's totality, is not the condition for meaningful articulation, but merely an appearance that sustains meaningful activity in its "infantile" stages. Sublimation, understood in the complexity of Kristeva's conception, develops and refines this insight. In this way, sublimation aims to address the crises of secular meaning by offering an alternative framework to the stilted oppositions that are commonplace in secular thought:

> Supposing that a non-sacrificial sacred exists, might not the *imaginary* be one of its possible variants? The imaginary as eternal return, which opens the mind and body to an *inquiétude* without end, and makes it possible to stand straight and lithe in this world? (Clément and Kristeva 137)

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