BOOK REVIEW

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Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia by Julia Kristeva. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. 300 pp.

Depression (in all its forms, from neurotic depression to melancholia) is as mysterious as it is widespread and everyday. Why do depressives continually intoxicate themselves with bottomless, incommunicable sorrow? Physicians assure us that depression is primarily a physiological disorder. Psychoanalysis finds the sources of depression tucked away in the niches of our memories, conscious and unconscious. In a curiously nonpolemical argument which looks to medicine as well as psychoanalysis for answers and refuses to see these two discourses as exclusive and diametrically opposed, Kristeva elaborates in *Black Sun* a theory of depression which builds upon and departs from the insights of Freud. Although she recommends the use of chemical anti-depressants to a point at which psychotherapeutic work becomes possible, Kristeva sees depression not as an illness to be corrected with drugs, but as a discourse to be listened to and analyzed.

This perspective on depression is, of course, Freudian. The psychoanalytic theory of Freud and Melanie Klein concludes that depression conceals a hatred toward a lost love object, usually the mother of infancy. Through the mechanism of identification, the depressive's aggression is directed away from the object and inward on the self, resulting in self-hatred and cannibalistic fantasies of a cut up but regained lost object. The treatment of depression, according to Freud, requires a bringing to consciousness that the devalorization of oneself is actually an unconscious hatred of the other. With this recognition there must also be a naming of the sexual desire which underpins that hatred.

Freudian psychoanalysis is central to *Black Sun*. Nevertheless, Kristeva's work moves her beyond this initial psychoanalytic understanding of depression as the concealed hatred of a lost love object.

Working from her own clinical observations as well as the research of André Green, Kristeva attempts to identify and theorize another form of depression, a narcissistic melancholy in which the depressive mourns not the object but the "Thing"—a kind of archaic, unnameable pre-object. Denied a "primary identification" (with an imaginary father) which secures a subject's link to the symbolic order, the depressed narcissist embraces suffering—a mourning for the "Thing"—as a defense against the violent separation and fragmentation which is a part of the pre-Oedipal journey to language and subjectivity.

The language of the depressed—repetitive, empty, and monotonous, if not absorbed into silence—does not, as in psychoses, signal abandonment of the world of signs. Depressives know how to use signs; yet, they see with a hyperlucidity the arbitrary nature of meaning in signs. To them language seems absurd, ambiguous, and powerless. For Kristeva, a professor of linguistics and a psychoanalyst trained in France, the study of language plays a fundamentally important role in her theory. Her view on the interrelations between language and the unconscious is not the same as Lacan and the Lacanians, however. Kristeva insists "the unconscious is not structured like a language" (204). The analyst must also consider the affects, moods, as well as the tones, rhythms, and silences in an analysand's speech.

In her incisive analysis of Holbein, Gérard de Nerval, and Dostoyevsky, Kristeva moves beyond linguistic and clinical concerns to illustrate her point that melancholy is an important psychic source for artistic inspiration. While loss stimulates artistic imagination, the creation of artistic and literary texts also represents a struggle against depression. Her essay on Nerval's "El Desdichado" shows us how the poem works as a polyvalent sign as well as an empty signifier. For Nerval the creation of a prosody with undecidable meaning was a temporary, sublimatory attempt to fend off recurring bouts with melancholic madness.

Kristeva links melancholy not only to polyvalent poetry, aesthetics, and beauty, but also, significantly, to women. Kristeva (as a Freudian) sees in feminine sexuality the key to understanding the greater frequency of depression in women. According to Kristeva, a woman faces a staggering task in attempting to gain autonomy from her mother and in creating restorative erotic attachments. She elucidates these insights with four detailed and deftly interpreted case studies of feminine depressives and a brilliant closing essay on Marguerite Duras. Rather than explaining "the hidden meaning" of the awkward gaps and disquieting silences of Duras' novels, Kristeva instead uses

these texts as a site for tracing the interactions between history and melancholia, between society and depression as they manifest themselves in postmodern literature. Duras' fiction, like the depressive's speech, points to but cannot name the melancholic malaise which swallows up individuals and afflicts whole civilizations.

Black Sun will likely draw criticism from readers more familiar with and more in agreement with the Kristeva of *Tel Quel.* In *Black Sun* Kristeva is more concerned with therapy than revolution. Elsewhere she labels the distinction between masculine and feminine as "metaphysical," but that distinction is operative and significant to most of what she has to say in *Black Sun.* But, before critics launch attacks against Kristeva's supposed retreat into apolitical, ahistorical, bourgeois subjectivism, they should pay careful attention to her thoughts on the construction of feminine depression and feminine identity. For Kristeva, the personal is always already political. The civilization that gave us Nerval and Duras also produced Hitler, the Gulag, and the atomic bomb and continues to stifle women's "longing to be present in the arena where the world's power is at stake" (30). The totalitarian impulse in contemporary civilization is not unrelated to feminine depression, its fantasies of terroristic revenge and its painful hollowing out of women's psyches. The dark emptiness of melancholia is not, for Kristeva, a concern removed from the noise of politics.