POWERS OF HORROR
An Essay on Abjection

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POWERS OF HORROR

An Essay on Abjection

JULIA KRISTEVA

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Translator's Note

When the original version of this book was published in France in 1980, critics sensed that it marked a turning point in Julia Kristeva's writing. Her concerns seemed less arcane, her presentation more appealingly worked out; as Guy Scarpetta put it in *he Nouvel Observateur* (May 19, 1980), she now introduced into "theoretical rigor an effective measure of seduction." Actually, no sudden change has taken place: the features that are noticeable in *Powers of Horror* were already in evidence in several earlier essays, some of which have been translated in *Desire in Language* (Columbia University Press, 1980). She herself pointed out in the preface to that collection, "Readers will also notice that a change in writing takes place as the work progresses" (p. ix).

One would assume such a change has made the translator's task less arduous; in one sense it has, but it also produced a different set of difficulties. As sentences become more metaphorical, more "literary" if you wish, one is liable to forget that they still are conceptually very precise. In other words, meaning emerges out of both the standard denotation(s) and the connotations suggested by the material shape of a given word. And it emerges not solely because of the reader's creativity, as happens in poetic language, but because it was put there in the first place. For instance, "un etre altere" means either a changed, adulterated being or an avid, thirsty being; mindful, however, of the unchanged presence of the Latin root, *alter*, Kristeva also intends it to mean "being for the other." This gives the phrase a special twist, and it takes a reader more imaginative than I am to catch it.

As Kristeva's writing evolves, it also displays a greater variety
in tone. In this essay it includes the colloquial and the formal, the lyrical and the matter-of-fact, the concrete and the abstract. I resisted the temptation to unify her style and tried as much as possible to preserve the variety of the original. Only in a few instances, when a faithful rendition would in my opinion have sounded incongruous (e.g., translating *petard*, which she borrows from the text of a Celine novel, as "gat" or "rod"), did I consciously neutralize her prose.

A particularly vexing problem stems from the nature of the French language and its limited vocabulary as compared to English; words tend to point in a greater number of different directions. Usually, in expository prose, the context removes the ambiguities that poetic language thrives on. Kristeva is not averse to using polysemy to her advantage, as other French theorists like Derrida and Lacan have also done. The French word *propre*, for instance, has kept the meaning of the Latin *proprius* (one's own, characteristic, proper) and also acquired a new one: clean. At first, in *Powers of Horror*, the criteria of expository prose seemed to apply, but in several instances I began to have my doubts about this. When I asked Kristeva which meaning she intended the answer was, both. As a result I decided to use the rather cumbersome "one's own clean and proper body" to render the French *corps propre*, sacrificing elegance for the sake of clarity and fullness of meaning.

Examining my translation carefully, one is apt to notice anomalies in the text of the quotations. There are two reasons for this. When the original is not in French, Kristeva cites a published French translation and I refer to a published English one when available. Discrepancies are inevitable and for the most part inconsequential. In the case of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, however, the French version, in the excerpts quoted here, contains a couple of mistranslated words: *Inzestscheu* becomes "phobie de l'inceste" instead of the more accurate "incest dread," and *Genussgefähig* gets afflicted with the connotation of "objets comestibles" that belongs to *Geniessbar* instead of the more general and accurate "capable of enjoyment" of the English version. While this has required some vocabulary adjustment, it does not affect Kristeva's argument. Where Hegel's
works are concerned the situation is even more troublesome, for discrepancies between French and English translations are considerable. Referring back to the German text of *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* I find that the English text is faithful to it. What apparently happened is that the French translation was made from an earlier version of the *Lectures*, which, like Saussure’s famous *Cours de linguistique générale*, was published by Hegel’s students after his death. The second edition, on which the English version is based, is presumably an improved one—but that need not concern us here. In the excerpts quoted by Kristeva, the meaning is essentially the same even though the wording differs and in one instance a metaphorical development has been eliminated.

When several translations are available, as they are for Sophocles, I used the one that seemed closest to the one used by Kristeva. For the Bible, I relied on the King James version; minor differences between biblical and anthropological terminology should pose no problem, and the reader will readily see that the latter’s pure/impure distinction corresponds to the biblical contrast between clean and unclean.

For an original quotation from the French, I have also used available published translations. Working with Celine’s novels, however, translators have endeavored to produce effective English-language fiction. As a result they were occasionally led to stray from a literal version of the text—and rightly so. On the other hand, for the purpose of Kristeva’s analysis, there are times when close attention to material details of the text is essential. I have therefore, in a number of instances, had to modify the published translation—but that should not be seen as a reflection on their quality. On a few occasions, though, especially where the early novels are involved, translators have tended to be squeamish; thus, in *Journey to the End of the Night*, the statement pertaining to women in wartime, "la guerre porte aux ovaires," becomes, "war goes straight to their tummies." I naturally put the ovaries back in.

Throughout this essay, Kristeva plays with the titles of Celine’s novels (and a few others: Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* makes a fleeting appearance toward the end).
Journey to the End of the Night is easily recognizable; the title From Castle to Castle, in this connection, needs to be changed to the more literal, "From One Castle to an Other," which produced the title of an earlier essay, "From One Identity to an Other" (collected in Desire in Language): I have rendered the untranslated Feerie pour une autrefois as "Enchantment for Some Other Time." For some features of her terminology, readers should consult the "Notes on the Translation and on Terminology" that appeared in Desire in Language. Here, however, instead of invariably rendering "écriture" as "writing," I have attempted to distinguish between the weak and the strong meanings of the French word. For the latter I used the term "scription," which I had introduced in my French Fiction Today (Rutgers University Press, 1972). There are in Powers of Horror a few additional items of Lacanian vocabulary that the context should clarify. The object a is mentioned twice, and it could be puzzling. A few lines from Stuart Schneiderman's Returning to Freud (Yale University Press, 1980) might prove helpful: "For the psychoanalyst the important object is the lost object, the object always desired and never attained, the object that causes the subject to desire in cases where he can never gain the satisfaction of possessing the object. Any object the subject desires will never be anything other than a substitute for the object a." I should like to thank those who have given assistance in areas I am less familiar with: Stuart Schneiderman for the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, Robert Austerlitz for that of linguistics, Marvin I. Herzog for Hebrew terms, Robert D. Cumm- ming for philosophy, and of course Julia Kristeva herself for clarifying a number of difficulties. I should point out, however, that while I sought assistance whenever I realized I had met with a problem, there may well have been problems I did not identify and on which I foundered. In such instances and in all others where mistranslations occur the responsibility is mine alone.
POWERS OF HORROR
An Essay on Abjection
I

APPROACHING ABJECTION

No Beast is there without glimmer of infinity,
No eye so vile nor abject that brushes not
Against lightning from on high, now tender, now fierce.
Victor Hugo, *La Legende des siecles*

NEITHER SUBJECT NOR OBJECT

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.

When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*. The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-ject, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of
a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. To each ego its object, to each superego its abject. It is not the white expanse or slack boredom of repression, not the translations and transformations of desire that wrench bodies, nights, and discourse; rather it is a brutish suffering that, "I" puts up with, sublime and devastated, for "I" deposits it to the father's account [verse au pere—pere-version]: I endure it, for I imagine that such is the desire of the other. A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.

THE IMPROPER/UNCLEAN

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fasciated start that leads me toward and separates me from them.

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging
sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel myself. I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that they see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death, During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects.

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irre- mediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I perma- nently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is
no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you—it is now here, jetted, abjected, into "my" world. Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. . . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law—rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles,* a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you.* . . .

In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children's shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.
THE ABJECTION OF SELF

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. One always passes too quickly over this word, "want," and today psychoanalysts are finally taking into account only its more or less fetishized product, the "object of want." But if one imagines (and imagine one must, for it is the working of imagination whose foundations are being laid here) the experience of want itself as logically preliminary to being and object—to the being of the object—then one understands that abjection, and even more so abjection of self, is its only signified. Its signifier, then, is none but literature. Mystical Christendom turned this abjection of self into the ultimate proof of humility before God, witness Elizabeth of Hungary who "though a great princess, delighted in nothing so much as in abasing herself."

The question remains as to the ordeal, a secular one this time, that abjection can constitute for someone who, in what is termed knowledge of castration, turning away from perverse dodges, presents himself with his own body and ego as the most precious non-objects; they are no longer seen in their own right but forfeited, abject. The termination of analysis can lead us there, as we shall see. Such are the pangs and delights of masochism.

Essentially different from "uncanniness," more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory. I imagine a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon, who frightens himself on that account, "all by himself," and, to save
himself, rejects and throws up everything that is given to him—all gifts, all objects. He has, he could have, a sense of the abject. Even before things for him are—hence before they are signifiable—he drives them out, dominated by drive as he is, and constitutes his own territory, edged by the abject. A sacred configuration. Fear cements his compound, conjoined to another world, thrown up, driven out, forfeited. What he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without a word for the words of the father; that is what he tries to cleanse himself of, tirelessly. What solace does he come upon within such loathing? Perhaps a father, existing but unsettled, loving but unsteady, merely an apparition but an apparition that remains. Without him the holy brat would probably have no sense of the sacred; a blank subject, he would remain, discomfited, at the dump for non-objects that are always forfeited, from which, on the contrary, fortified by abjection, he tries to extricate himself. For he is not mad, he through whom the abject exists. Out of the daze that has petrified him before the untouchable, impossible, absent body of the mother, a daze that has cut off his impulses from their objects, that is, from their representations, out of such daze he causes, along with loathing, one word to crop up—fear. The phobic has no other object than the abject. But that word, "fear"—a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess—no sooner has it cropped up than it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of the language with nonexistence, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer. Thus, fear having been bracketed, discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confront that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject.

BEYOND THE UNCONSCIOUS

Put another way, it means that there are lives not sustained by desire, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on exclusion. They are clearly distinguishable from those understood as neurotic or psychotic, articulated by negation and its modalities, transgression, denial, and repudiation. Their dynamics
challenges the theory of the unconscious, seeing that the latter is dependent upon a dialectic of negativity.

The theory of the unconscious, as is well known, presupposes a repression of contents (affects and presentations) that, thereby, do not have access to consciousness but effect within the subject modifications, either of speech (parapraxes, etc.), or of the body (symptoms), or both (hallucinations, etc.). As correlative to the notion of repression, Freud put forward that of denial as a means of figuring out neurosis, that of rejection (repudiation) as a means of situating psychosis. The asymmetry of the two repressions becomes more marked owing to denial's bearing on the object whereas repudiation affects desire itself (Lacan, in perfect keeping with Freud's thought, interprets that as "repudiation of the Name of the Father").

Yet, facing the ab-ject and more specifically phobia and the splitting of the ego (a point I shall return to), one might ask if those articulations of negativity germane to the unconscious (inherited by Freud from philosophy and psychology) have not become inoperative. The "unconscious" contents remain here excluded but in strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive position to be established—one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration. As if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other or, in more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside. As if such an opposition subsumed the one between Conscious and Unconscious, elaborated on the basis of neuroses.

Owing to the ambiguous opposition I/Other, Inside/Outside—an opposition that is vigorous but pervious, violent but uncertain—there are contents, "normally" unconscious in neurotics, that become explicit if not conscious in "borderline" patients' speeches and behavior. Such contents are often openly manifested through symbolic practices, without by the same token being integrated into the judging consciousness of those particular subjects. Since they make the conscious/unconscious distinction irrelevant, borderline subjects and their speech constitute propitious ground for a sublimating discourse ("aesthetic" or "mystical," etc.), rather than a scientific or rationalist one.
AN EXILE WHO ASKS, "WHERE?"

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter—since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.

Instead of sounding himself as to his "being," he does so concerning his place: "Where am I?" instead of "Who am I?" For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never one, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. A deisher of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray*. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object! attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved.

TIME: FORGETFULNESS AND THUNDER

For it is out of such straying on excluded ground that he draws his jouissance. The abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered. Once upon blotted-out time, the abject must have been a magnetized pole of covetousness. But the ashes of oblivion now serve as a screen and reflect aversion, repugnance. The clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame. Then, forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning an operation
that, if it were thought out, would involve bringing together the two opposite terms but, on account of that flash, is discharged like thunder. The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.

JOUISANCE AND AFFECT

Jouissance, in short. For the stray considers himself as equivalent to a Third Party. He secures the latter's judgment, he acts on the strength of its power in order to condemn, he grounds himself on its law to tear the veil of oblivion but also to set up its object as inoperative. As jettisoned. Parachuted by the Other. A ternary structure, if you wish, held in keystone position by the Other, but a "structure" that is skewed, a topology of catastrophe. For, having provided itself with an alter ego, the Other no longer has a grip on the three apices of the triangle where subjective homogeneity resides; and so, it jettisons the object into an abominable real, inaccessible except through jouissance. It follows that jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [on enjouit]. Violently and painfully. A passion. And, as in jouissance where the object of desire, known as object a [in Lacan's terminology], bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones.

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what treatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because ab-
jection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be—maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out. To be sure, if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me. That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about an effect and not yet a sign. I speak to it in vain in order to exclude it from what will no longer be, for myself, a world that can be assimilated. Obviously, I am only like someone else: mimetic logic of the advent of the ego, objects, and signs. But when I seek (myself), lose (myself), or experience jouissance—then "I" is heterogeneous. Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt against, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise. Thus braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as alter ego, points it out to me through loathing.

This means once more that the heterogeneous flow, which portions the abject and sends back abjection, already dwells in a human animal that has been highly altered. I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be "me." Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody. Significance is indeed inherent in the human body.

AT THE LIMIT OF PRIMAL REPRESsION

If, on account of that Other, a space becomes demarcated, separating the abject from what will be a subject and its objects, it is because a repression that one might call "primal" has been
effected prior to the springing forth of the ego, of its objects and representations. The latter, in turn, as they depend on another repression, the "secondary" one, arrive only \textit{a posteriori} on an enigmatic foundation that has already been marked off; its return, in a phobic, obsessional, psychotic guise, or more generally and in more imaginary fashion in the shape of \textit{abjection}, notifies us of the limits of the human universe.

On such limits and at the limit one could say that there is no unconscious, which is elaborated when representations and affects (whether or not tied to representations) shape a logic. Here, on the contrary, consciousness has not assumed its rights and transformed into signifiers those fluid demarcations of yet unstable territories where an "I" that is taking shape is ceaselessly straying. We are no longer within the sphere of the unconscious but at the limit of primal repression that, nevertheless, has discovered an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom, and sign: repugnance, disgust, abjection.

There is an effervescence of object and sign—not of desire but of intolerable significance; they tumble over into non-sense or the impossible real, but they appear even so in spite of "myself" (which is not) as abjection.

**PREMISES OF THE SIGN, LININGS OF THE SUBLIME**

Let us pause a while at this juncture. If the abject is already a wellspring of sign for a non-object, on the edges of primal repression, one can understand its skirting the somatic symptom on the one hand and sublimation on the other. The \textit{symptom}: a language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire. \textit{Sublimation}, on the contrary, is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal. In the~symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being.
For the sublime has no object either. When the starry sky, a vista of open seas or a stained glass window shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, or think. The "sublime" object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory. It is such a memory, which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be. As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers—it has always already triggered—a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where "I" am—delight and loss. Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a something added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here, as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy—fascination.

BEFORE THE BEGINNING: SEPARATION

The abject might then appear as the most fragile (from a synchronic point of view), the most archaic (from a diachronic one) sublimation of an "object" still inseparable from drives. The abject is that pseudo-object that is made up before but appears only within the gaps of secondary repression. The abject would thus be the "object" of primal repression.

But what is primal repression? Let us call it the ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat. Without one division, one separation, one subject/object having been constituted (not yet, or no longer yet). Why? Perhaps because of maternal anguish, unable to be satiated within the encompassing symbolic.

The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise
area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of 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". The difficulty a mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm—in other words, the problem she has with the phallus that her father or her husband stands for—is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion. The child can serve its mother as token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn. In such close combat, the symbolic light that a third party, eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject, the more so if it happens to be endowed with a robust supply of drive energy, in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting.

In this struggle, which fashions the human being, the mimesis, by means of which he becomes homologous to another in order to become himself, is in short logically and chronologically secondary. Even before being like, "I" am not but do separate, reject, ab-ject. Abjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony, is a precondition of narcissism. It is coexistent with it and causes it to be permanently brittle. The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed.

THE "CHORA," RECEPTACLE OF NARCISSISM

Let us enter, for a moment, into that Freudian aporia called primal repression. Curious primacy, where what is repressed cannot really be held down, and where what represses always
already borrows its strength and authority from what is apparently very secondary: language. Let us therefore not speak of primacy but of the instability of the symbolic function in its most significant aspect—the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo). Here, drives hold sway and constitute a strange space that I shall name, after Plato (Timeus, 48-53), a *chora*, a receptacle.

For the benefit of the ego or its detriment, drives, whether life drives or death drives, serve to correlate that "not yet" ego with an "object" in order to establish both of them. Such a process, while dichotomous (inside/outside, ego/not ego) and repetitive, has nevertheless something centripetal about it: it aims to settle the ego as center of a solar system of objects. If, by dint of coming back towards the center, the drive's motion should eventually become centrifugal, hence fasten on the Other and come into being as sign so as to produce meaning—that is, literally speaking, exorbitant.

But from that moment on, while I recognize my image as sign and change in order to signify, another economy is instituted. The sign represses the *chora* and its eternal return. Desire alone will henceforth be witness to that "primal" pulsation. But desire ex-patriates the *ego* toward an *other* subject and accepts the exactness of the ego only as narcissistic. Narcissism then appears as a regression to a position set back from the other, a return to a self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven. Actually, such narcissism never is the wrinkleless image of the Greek youth in a quiet fountain. The conflicts of drives muddle its bed, cloud its water, and bring forth everything that, by not becoming integrated with a given system of signs, is abjection for it.

Abjection is therefore a kind of narcissistic crisis: it is witness to the ephemeral aspect of the state called "narcissism" with reproachful jealousy, heaven knows why; what is more, abjection gives narcissism (the thing and the concept) its classification as "seeming."

Nevertheless, it is enough that a prohibition, which can be a superego, block the desire craving an other—or that this other, as its role demands, not fulfill it—for desire and its sig-
nifiers to turn back toward the "same," thus clouding the waters of Narcissus. It is precisely at the moment of narcissistic perturbation (all things considered, the permanent state of the speaking being, if he would only hear himself speak) that secondary repression, with its reserve of symbolic means, attempts to transfer to its own account, which has thus been overdrawn, the resources of primal repression. The archaic economy is brought into full light of day, signified, verbalized. Its strategies (rejecting, separating, repeating/abjacting) hence find a symbolic existence, and the very logic of the symbolic—arguments, demonstrations, proofs, etc.—must conform to it. It is then that the object ceases to be circumscribed, reasoned with, thrust aside: it appears as abject.

Two seemingly contradictory causes bring about the narcissistic crisis that provides, along with its truth, a view of the abject. Too much strictness on the part of the Other, confused with the One and the Law. The lapse of the Other, which shows through the breakdown of objects of desire. In both instances, the abject appears in order to uphold "I" within the Other. The abject is the violence of mourning for an "object" that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new signifiance.

PERVERSE OR ARTISTIC

The abject is related to perversion. The sense of abjection that I experience is anchored in the superego. The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life—a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death—an operator in genetic experimentations; it curbs the other's suffering for its own profit—a cynic (and a psychoan-
16  APPROACHING ABJECTION

alyst); it establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss—an artist who practices his art as a "business." Corruption is its most common, most obvious appearance. That is the socialized appearance of the abject.

An unshakable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside. Religion, Morality, Law. Obviously always arbitrary, more or less; unfailingly oppressive, rather more than less; laboriously prevailing, more and more so.

Contemporary literature does not take their place. Rather, it seems to be written out of the untenable aspects of perverse or superego positions. It acknowledges the impossibility of Religion, Morality, and Law—their power play, their necessary and absurd seeming. Like perversion, it takes advantage of them, gets round them, and makes sport of them. Nevertheless, it maintains a distance where the abject is concerned. The writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language—style and content. But on the other hand, as the sense of abjection is both the abject's judge and accomplice, this is also true of the literature that confronts it. One might thus say that with such a literature there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality.

For the subject firmly settled in its superego, a writing of this sort is necessarily implicated in the interspace that characterizes perversion; and for that reason, it gives rises in turn to abjection. And yet, such texts call for a softening of the superego. Writing them implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacements of verbal play. It is only after his death, eventually, that the writer of abjection will escape his condition of waste, reject, abject. Then, he will either sink into oblivion or attain the rank of incommensurate ideal. Death would thus be the chief curator of our imaginary museum; it would protect us in the last resort from the abjection that contemporary literature claims to expend while uttering it. Such a protection, which gives its quietus to abjection, but also perhaps to the
bothersome, incandescent stake of the literary phenomenon it-
self, which, raised to the status of the sacred, is severed from
its specificity. Death thus keeps house in our contemporary
universe. By purifying (us from) literature, it establishes our
secular religion.

AS ABJECTION—SO THE SACRED

Abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears,
to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse.
Several structurations of abjection should be distinguished, each
one determining a specific form of the sacred.

Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution in the
paganism that accompanies societies with a dominant or sur-
viving matrilineal character. It takes on the form of the exclusion
of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution
of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up.

Abjection persists as exclusion or taboo (dietary or other) in
monotheistic religions, Judaism in particular, but drifts over to
more "secondary" forms such as transgression (of the Law)
within the same monotheistic economy. It finally encounters,
with Christian sin, a dialectic elaboration, as it becomes inte-
grated in the Christian Word as a threatening otherness—but
always nameable, always totalizeable.

The various means of purifying the abject—the various ca-
tharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that
catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side
of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience,
which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token
purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That
is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the
historical forms of religions.

OUTSIDE OF THE SACRED, THE ABJECT IS WRITTEN

In the contemporary practice of the West and owing to the
crisis in Christianity, abjection elicits more archaic resonances
that are culturally prior to sin; through them it again assumes
its biblical status, and beyond it that of defilement in primitive societies. In a world in which the Other has collapsed, 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, to the bottomless "primacy" constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, "subject" and "object" push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inscrutable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject. Great modern literature unfolds over that terrain: Dostoyevsky, Lautreamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Celine.

DOSTOYEVSKY

The abject is, for Dostoyevsky, the "object" of The Possessed: it is the aim and motive of an existence whose meaning is lost in absolute degradation because it absolutely rejected the moral limit (a social, religious, familial, and individual one) as absolute—God. Abjection then wavers between the fading away of all meaning and all humanity, burnt as by the flames of a conflagration, and the ecstasy of an ego that, having lost its Other and its objects, reaches, at the precise moment of this suicide, the height of harmony with the promised land. Equally abject are Verkhovensky and Kirilov, murder and suicide.

A big fire at night always produces an exciting and exhilarating effect; this explains the attraction of fireworks; but in the case of fireworks, the graceful and regular shape of the flames and the complete immunity from danger produce a light and playful effect comparable to the effect of a glass of champagne. A real fire is quite another matter: there the horror and a certain sense of personal danger, combined with the well-known exhilarating effect of a fire at night, produce in the spectator (not, of course, in one whose house has burnt down) a certain shock to the brain and, as it were, a challenge to his own destructive instincts, which, alas, lie buried in the soul of even the meekest and most domesticated official of the lowest grade. This grim sensation is almost always delightful. "I really don't know if it is possible to watch a fire without some enjoyment."
NOTES

i. APPROACHING ABJECTION


10. Artaud, p. 72.


12. Artaud, p. 155-.


2. SOMETHING TO BE SCARED OF


1953-1974), 10:83. Later, when he referred to "the enigmatic phobias of early childhood," Freud explicitly defined them as "reactions to the danger of object loss." He suggests that the reactions are (phantasmatically?) very archaic when he considers the possible connections between childish phobia of small animals or storms, for instance, and "the atrophied remainders of congenital preparation for real dangers that are so clearly developed in other animals." He nevertheless concludes that, "in the case of man, the only portion of that archaic inheritance to be appropriated is what pertains to object loss" (Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, in Complete Psychological Works, 20:160). That clearly locates the reflection on phobia within the problematic scope of object relation. What remains to be clarified is the latter's dependency on symbolic function, particularly on language, on which rest not only its very existence but all of its variants.

3. "It may well be that before its sharp cleavage into an ego and an id, and before the formation of a super-ego, the mental apparatus makes use of different methods of defense from those which it employs after it has reached these stages of organization." Freud, Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, p. 164. To begin with, Freud had pointed out that the word "defense," in opposition to the more precise term "repression," included all the protective devices of the ego against the demands of drives; with the statement I have just quoted, Freud seems to proceed to areas where, without the ego existing as such, modalities of defense other than repression are at work. Does this have to do with defensive capabilities that are elaborated along with primal repression? With the power of the symbolic alone, always already present but working within its pre-sign, pre-meaning (trans-sign, trans-meaning) modality, which I call "semiotic"? Would not the phobic "object," and the abject as well, be located on that trail, which was blazed by Freud?


6. Freud, Analysis of a Phobia, p. 139.


8. "Voyeurism is a normal moment of evolution during pregenital stages; if it remains within limits, it allows a very sophisticated approach to the Oedipal conflict. Paradoxically, it becomes a perversion as a result of its failure to provide assurance against the possible destruction of the object." Michel Fain, "Contribution à l'analyse du voyeurisme," Revue Francaise de Psychanalyse (1954), 18:177-192.


14. See *Negation* (1925), in volume 19 of the *Complete Works*.
15. One might compare that definition with what Andre Green says concerning the trauma-object: "Thus, within the series, precocious trauma-defense (this set establishing fixation)-latency-breaking out of neurosis-partial return of the repressed, I should like to emphasize the confusion between drive (represented by affect) and object, for the danger stems from the violence done to sexuality in the Ego as well as from violence done to the object. Consequently it will be understood that the problem involving relationship between Ego and object is that of their limits, their coexistence. [. . .] When I speak of trauma-object I basically refer to the threat that the object holds for the Ego, to the extent that it forces the Ego to modify its operation through its presence alone." Andre Green, "L'angoisse et le narcissisme," *Revue Francaise de Psychanalyse* (1979), 1:52-53 and 55.

3. FROM FILTH TO DEFILEMENT

5. Freud quoted from T. W. Atkinson's *Primal Law, Totem and Taboo* (London, 1903); see p. 184m
12. Douglas, p. 113-
13. Douglas, p. H3-
15. "For the Lele evil is not to be included in the total system of the world, but to be expunged without compromise" (Douglas, p. 171).
26. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 120.
27. Dumont, p. 53.
29. Dumont, p. 120.
31. Bougie, pp. 3, 25, etc.
32. Bougie, p. 18.
33. Bougie, pp. 36-37.
34. Bougie, p. 64.
36. See Vernant and Vidal-Naquet and also the publications of L. Gernet.
37. R. C. Jebb's translation has been used; it comes somewhat closer than more recent ones to the French translation by Jean Grosjean quoted by Julia Kristeva [trans.].

4- SEMIOTICS OF BIBLICAL ABOMINATION

8. There are other words, with different origins and semantic variants, that are used to signify purity and impurity at various points and stages of the biblical text. See H. Cazelles, "Purete et impurete dans l'Ancien Testament," in *Supplement au dictionnaire de la Bible* (Paris: Letaizy et Ame, 1965), pp. 491-508.
15. Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Mishnah Law of Purities* (Leiden: Brill, 1974-

5. ... QUI TOLLIS PECCATA MUNDI

2. "If Man is not by nature what he should be, then he is implicitly rational, implicitly Spirit. [...] in the state of nature he is not what he ought to be"; "it is reflection of knowledge which makes him evil"; "knowledge or consciousness is just the act by which separation [...] comes into existence"; "Man regarded in accordance with his conception or notion [...] is consciousness, and consequently he enters into this state of disunion"; G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, E. B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson, tr. (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), 3:5°. 52, and 55.
3. Such osmosis of separate terms, such heterogeneity, appears to have been glimpsed by Hegel when he considered "sin" as inseparable from "re- mission of sins" and concluded, "Between sin and its forgiveness there is as little place for an alien thing as there is between sin and punishment. Life has severed itself from itself and united itself again." The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate in Early Theological Writings. T. M. Knox, tr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 239.


5. The Speirs translation of Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion reads, "This is the extraordinary combination which directly contradicts the Understanding" (3:76). It corresponds to the text of the Samtliche Werke (Stuttgart, 1959), 16:268: "... diese ungeheure Zusammensetzung ist es, die dem Verstande schlechtthin widerspricht." See "Translator's Note" in this volume.


6. CELINE: NEITHER ACTOR NOR MARTYR

1. Louis-Ferdinand Celine, Journey to the End of the Night, John H. P. Marks, tr. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1934), p. 213. Subsequent references to this work, abbreviated as J, will appear in the body of the text.


7. SUFFERING AND HORROR


8. THOSE FEMALES WHO CAN WRECK THE INFINITE


9. "OURS TO JEW OR DIE"

6. From an interview with Ivan-M. Sicard published in *L’Emancipation Nationale*, November 21, 1941- 7- It would not only seem that, to the end of his life, he never clearly renounced anti-Semitism ("I disown nothing at all ... I have not at all changed my mind ... I simply put in a modicum of doubt, but people will have to prove that I was wrong rather than me showing that I was right"— "Entretien avec A. Zbinden," *Romans II*, p. 940), but even when he entertains the idea of a reconciliation with Jews (he specifies, "not a Defense of the Jews
but a Reconciliation") he is led to advocate a new racism, a decidedly permanent feeling of love/hatred for the other: "We must create a new racism upon biological bases" (letter to Hindus, August 10, 1947, L'Herne, 5:90).

8. Catherine Francklin has presented a very lucid analysis of Celine's anti-Semitism in an unpublished master's essay entitled "Celine et les Juifs." I am indebted to her for the following development.


10. IN THE BEGINNING AND WITHOUT END . . .

5. Entretiens avec le professeur Y., p. 104.
8. Same letter, p. 75.
9. Same letter, p. 75.
15. Entretiens, p. 28.
16. Entretiens, p. 35.
21. See Jean Perrot, "Fonctions syntaxiques."
22. Spitzer, L'Herne, 5:162.
23. See Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics.
24. See Fonagy, "Prelangage et regressions syntaxiques."
25. See Rossi, "L'Intonation et la troisieme articulation, and Hagege, "Intonation, fonctions syntaxiques, universaux."
29. Ibid., pp. 933-934.