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Sara Beardsworth

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A Meditation on the Power of Horror

Sara Beardsworth

Southern Illinois University - Carbondale

I have taken the task of giving a reading of the final chapters of *The Severed Head* as an opportunity to take a reflective stance in two respects.¹ I note, first, this text's dual historical element: not only the aesthetic trajectories themselves but an implicit history that belongs to psychoanalysis. Second, I underline the tone of possibility and invitation that inhabits Kristeva's capital visions, which suggests that she does not divide aesthetics off from ethics.

On the historical element generally, the course that Kristeva takes through images and symbols clearly presents a movement of modernization and secularization in them. Yet she imposes no historical discourse. That the theme itself is historical is sharply underlined in her statement that a history of decapitation *really does exist* in the various civilizations.² However, her aesthetic focus gives us the "secret genealogy" between the power of the Gorgons and aesthetic experience that follows the course of the centuries. Moreover, there are the *variants in temporality* in these images, as well as their contaminations—not least the distinction between the vertical time of the icon, on the one hand, and the "prophecy in actuality" of the Figure, on the other, the latter opening up the captivating logic of prefigure and precursor in this text.³ Above all, it is the connection of the aesthetic with *intimacy* that holds off any historical discourse as such. This connection is present from the outset, where it takes on an anthropological flavor. In skull worship the *worked exhibition* of the capital vestiges of the invisible (death) is the outset of a trajectory in which:

for hundreds and thousands of years, and by continually returning to...the interiorization [of human sacrifice] and [its] reproduction in art, humanity *carved out* the interior space in which representation is *harbored*: the space of *life for death*, the death that lives a human life and, in

achieving consciousness, represents, survives, and lives again.⁴

Here, side by side, lie Hegel's notion that "death lives a human life" and the Freudian psyche as harbor for representation, which is first only *unconscious*. Kristeva's words unify the production of psychic space itself with the genesis of the aesthetic. Henceforth the imaginary and symbolic fulfillments of the Freudian harbor are *alterations* in the transition between the invisible and the visible, going from the invisible as the "beyond" that is death and its powers, for skull worship, to the translating of an invisible "world beyond" into its visible lines in the economy of the icon, to John the Baptist, who, "prefigure par excellence, lends his figure to the figuration of the invisible par excellence: the *passage*." We come here to the passage of thought in gesture and lines that is itself conveyed in the self-portrait of Artemesia Gentilechi, whose head is in her painting arm.

What occupies the foreground in Kristeva's commentary is no doubt the rich interlocking of the styles and temporalities of these images and symbols. Nonetheless, the *alterations* in the transition between the invisible and the visible demonstrate shifts in the border between the conscious and the unconscious as regards these aesthetic powers. The macabre introjection to which skull worship attests begins the interiorization of mortality and so the production of psychic space. Yet the skillful hand imprinting itself in paint is not aware that it is the hand of a human creator, even as these sacrificers imagining the invisible and pursuing the visible are "inhabited" by the unconscious.⁵ It will be other moments, then, in which consciousness arises, to the point of self-knowledge of the draftsman—as of the interior space.

We can begin our approach to the other historical element in this text—a development since Freud on the presence of and relation to horror in psychoanalysis—by discerning a further twist in the transitions between the invisible and the visible in *The Severed Head's* penultimate chapter, "The Powers of Horror." Here the passage of thought in gesture and lines is overlapped by the passage that is the power of horror: figure *and* disfigure; source of modernist styles that "cut through the forms, volumes, and contours to expose the pulsing flesh."⁶ Because the power of horror is *contagion* the passage may become permanent: horror-fetish. Imaginary intimacy with death, which transforms melancholy or desire into representation and thought, is now confronted with intimate instability. Decapitation is rendered as the brutal admission of our internal fractures, the *self-perception* of a fundamental imbalance of that "dark work" that is the speaking being: divided and unreconciled. What kind of self-perception could this be, first, if not the recurring outer limit of that all-too-visible manifestation of a "demonic" power in the Freudian clinic: *repetition-compulsion*, the never-ending scenario of loves and hates whose clinical

location sets it apart from the passage to the act of murder but which is, like that passage, equally visible to itself *and* deprived of vision or reflection.⁷

The chapter on powers of horror offers the image as a possible challenge directed at the horror “through the invention of an *unprecedented form*, which doesn’t shrink from abjection but reshapes our vision so that we see it with new eyes”—and this means traversing the feminine powers of horror, given that “the power of horror is *nothing without* the power of the feminine.”⁸ For example, Kristeva discerns in Flaubert’s final work a conflict between two powers and an indecision over two identifications: on the one hand, an identification with *insolent feminine desire* in Salome’s dance, the Psyche-butterfly, and the complicity between mother and daughter over its reward; on the other, Flaubert’s identification with the *promise* offered by the sacrifice of man. *Salome* or *John the Baptist*? Kristeva finds a moment of resolution for this in Flaubert’s phrase for the disciples’ intervention upon the feminine powers of horror in the complicity between mother and daughter. “Because the head was very heavy, they took it in turns to carry it.” But she does not leave us with the words of a novelist at the end of his life, more inclined to identify with the promise of man’s self-sacrifice. She exercises her own capital act of writing on his phrase, by shortening it, and thereby turning it into a logic of relay *for us*: “Because the head was very heavy, they took it in turns.”⁹ Women psychoanalysts and detective writers now surge forth as “passionate pilgrims to the high places of carnage,” masters of an absolute humor “that is the desire for [the] knowledge... of *where the human desire to kill one’s neighbor comes from*.”¹⁰

This brings me to the thought of a minor history of horror in psychoanalysis. Its first moment is the horror with which the law of universal love struck Freud: his recoil from the pain that his neighbor has in store for him.¹¹ The second moment comes where Lacan takes this up in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, whose speeches on the relation to the other and who the other is for us foreground “the *evil* in which he [Freud] doesn’t hesitate to locate man’s deepest heart.”¹² In Lacan’s words: “I retreat from loving my neighbor as myself because there is something there that is engaged in some form of intolerable cruelty.”¹³ This leads him to an ethical *stance* that he produces directly before his audience. “*I who stand here right now* and bear witness to the idea that there is no *law* of the good except in evil and through evil,” adding the hesitation “should I bear such witness?”—this hesitation underlining the uncertainty of the interpreting being, the analyst, who in every case, for Lacan, is the sole ground of his interpretations. From horror as original pain in the relation to the other, to horror as evil and the lonely, uncertain absolute master, we come to the third moment, our current one, where Kristeva presents the *power* of horror that is nothing without the power of the feminine, for it is to the power of the feminine that she has accorded the infantile and *unconscious* terror of death and fear of castration, the latent meanings of the capital act. Julia

Kristeva brings us, not to *beauty* as the final barrier to the zone of death (as does Lacan in his treatment of Antigone in *Seminar VII*) but, rather, to *graphic economies* that saturate and exhaust those latent meanings. Our alternatives to the realization of the passion for death in the passage to the act of murder that is without vision or thought are, in the end, *gifts of the time for reflection*—precisely what the “other passage” is not accorded: time for self-reflection as image and as meditation. We have been invited to cherish *in* the graphic economies their very real effects, even political consequences. Image and meditation *could* be intimate resistance, including to *rationalized* murder: capital punishment.

The tone of possibility and invitation takes on a rare imperative note at the point where Kristeva marks “the first crossroads in modern figuration” and the Figure as a representational stance whose flowerings “remain for us to explore.” The imperative note quietly echoes Freud’s opposition of preparedness for anxiety to trauma. Beginning from the invitation in the Figure to *regard by reading*, to join the image to the text, the visible to the history and the myth, she writes: “we must be prepared to experience the figure severed *and* whole... to inhabit it... horror *and* promise.”¹⁴ From Freud’s horror at the source of the commandment of love to Lacan standing, not long after the atomic explosion, before evil at the source of a certain philosophical, Western culture of ethics, to the powers of horror is not of course a linear movement. Yet it is a minor history of psychoanalysis. Kristevan power of horror, circling on the archaic feminine, allows her to bring to pain and to this “evil” not a resolution but, in her own terms, their *interim*: imaginary and symbolic achievements of deferral and detour, where lies an invitation to the time and space of exploration of the flowerings of the imaginary intimacy with horror and death.

Recalling that she briefly counts herself among those who, after Hannah Arendt, denounce the suspension of judgment, one “must” answer her invitation with: “Should I?” I would underline Kristeva’s preference in her final chapter of *The Severed Head* for Picasso’s *Woman with Ruff*: the triumph for the head and *love*, the beloved intimacy in which the capital act of painting a woman’s head is an *affectionate* flaying.¹⁵ So I partially accept her vision of the final depths of the sacred that is the capacity for representation, and her answer to the question: “what do they make of it, man and woman, when they know where *that* comes from?”—“They remember. They pass it and pass it again. And they laugh at it.” So I thank Kelly Oliver for the absolute humor of her choice of text for a marvelous academic form of the pass: panelized decapitation!

- ¹ This paper was presented as part of a roundtable on Kristeva's *The Severed Head* at the inaugural meeting of the Kristeva Circle on October 13, 2012.
- ² Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 74.
- ³ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 36.
- ⁴ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 23.
- ⁵ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 23.
- ⁶ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 103.
- ⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume 18, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001).
- ⁸ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 108, 110.
- ⁹ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 114.
- ¹⁰ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 118.
- ¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume 21, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001).
- ¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1992), 194.
- ¹³ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 190.
- ¹⁴ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 65-6.
- ¹⁵ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 125.