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# Kristeva's Severed Head in Iraq

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## Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

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### Part I: Castrations

Julia Kristeva's *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* is a formidable text to grasp theoretically. One can be easily fascinated by its enchanting language and subject matter: for example, a melting snowman, skull worship and decoration, Saint John the Baptist's heavenly face surrounded by an abundance of dark brown curls, puckered lips that invite a kiss, suggesting as Kristeva writes, "the most amorous of dreams,"<sup>1</sup> all served up on a glassy platter. But what exactly is the primary theoretical proposition, and do all the secondary propositions accord with it?

Chapter One, "On Drawing: or, the Speed of Thought," features an ostensibly charming anecdote about a radio show contest, during a wintry season in Bulgaria, that poses the question of "What is the quickest means of transportation in the world?" It is Kristeva's mother who cleverly comes up with the winning response—"thought"—that she in turn submits on a postcard on which she draws a liquefying snowman, "his head falling off, as though severed by the invisible guillotine of the sun,"<sup>2</sup> to illustrate her thought. That the mother is the one to represent a decapitation, which in the book stands for the child's separation from the mother, is noteworthy, to say the least. One might have assumed that the last thing a mother should model for her daughter is the need to commit matricide, since after such a demonstration, obviously, the daughter's very act of detachment would be sabotaged, by being instigated by a maternal act undermining the psychically necessary daughterly autonomy. But Kristeva makes no mention of this strange kink in her story and instead simply seems to take the mother's snowman drawing as being "in the direct line of Byzantine icons,"<sup>3</sup> in which a thoughtful inscription-to-be-contemplated rather than a mimetic visual representation is the salient idea. She weaves the drawing into her theory

without any apparent concern about the mother initiating her own (that is, the mother's) decapitation. One might even wonder if Kristeva's struggle to extricate herself from melancholia depends on such an encroachment by the mother on young Kristeva's effort to negate the object of loss. Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* begins by asserting that no writing on melancholia could be of value without emerging from such "an abyss of sorrow": "For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia."<sup>4</sup> Kristeva, that is, can inform us about depression because she has been there.

The central theory of the severed head (however) is that it is a way of making the invisible visible so that we may "stand up to the void."<sup>5</sup> It is *then* possible to compensate for the separation (or our loss), Kristeva writes, "by taking control. By concentrating on one's own ability to represent, by investing in the representations one can make, one's *own* representations of that other, the abandoner, . . . [G]rieving is dependent on sublimation."<sup>6</sup> One cannot but notice here Kristeva's emphasis on "one's *own* representations" as it is contradicted by her mother's snowman drawing and its entry into a contest that the mother wins for her daughter.

Chapter Two, "The Skull," poses another theoretical challenge. Kristeva lays out in great detail a history of various forms of skull worship, starting with the hominids of the Lower Paleolithic, two-million to one-hundred-thousand years before Christ, up to the present. She discusses the cannibalistic consumption of the brain as well as artistic embellishments that transform the skull into a work of art. Oddly enough, she points out, Freud (who clearly engaged in oral pleasure) overlooked that the cannibalistic ritual was "as much if not more an appropriation of the mother's power than a devouring of the father tyrant." To Kristeva, skull worship, and in particular cannibalistic and totemic meals, are ways of naming the loss of the nurturing body, envisioning it, appropriating it, consuming it so as (she also writes) *not* to "lose it," ways of rediscovering "the pleasure of the archaic orality that this breast, this mass, this head provided."<sup>7</sup> But isn't such appropriation a way of *losing* the maternal body rather than clinging to it? Is to consume or worship the maternal body to possess it or to detach from it? The critical question here would seem to be "how much" of the mother is retained in the "rediscovery"?

When Kristeva explicitly theorizes her findings, she in fact presents a doubleness. Skull worship had two psychoanalytic functions: it commemorated "the original loss of the *mother*, [the mother being] the source of *melancholy*, and the *phallic* trial, the threat of castration by the father." We have here, she continues, "a double celebration: that of the rival phallic father and that of the mother who abandoned us."<sup>8</sup> But if "the original loss of the *mother*" is being commemorated, how could that be in order not to lose it, as she earlier writes? Is to rediscover, or even to commemorate the loss, also not to lose? And perhaps I would not even pose that question were Kristevan theory less ambivalent about castration, as we shall see below.

Not to lose the mother, then, might seem to head in the wrong direction. And yet, if somehow to commemorate "the original loss of the *mother*" is a way not to lose her (as inconsistent as that may sound, since *not* to lose the mother is what generates melancholia), perhaps that is why skull worship is simultaneously necessary to militate *against* castration, in order to enable a certain amount, so to speak, of hanging on to the maternal body. Do we not have here a form of psychoanalytic sublation where to abolish is simultaneously to preserve, so that castration must be fended off, or somehow only partially accepted, for the sake of that preservation? In this case the abandoning mother *would* be celebrated at the risk of melancholia, and the rival phallic father would be pushed back. The key conundrum is (to reiterate) why, if separation from the mother is the primary goal, would resistance to castration (castration being tantamount to acceptance of that loss) be desirable? To worship the skull (for example) is to confront death in a way that carves out a psychic space facilitating creativity; then to turn the skull into, say, a goblet in which to have a drink of wine, is to gain control over one's fear of death, thus setting in motion a kind of protection. Yet the defense here (a goblet) embodies the very thing that simultaneously is being defended against (death/the mother), for the goblet itself carries a taste of the mother. To stay tied to her, one must resist "total castration." According to this understanding of why castration is a threat, Kristevan theory holds back from a full relinquishment of melancholia.

But, bracketing these double moves and apparent inconsistencies, let us for the moment simply state that the main idea of the worshipped and decorated skull as it provides a synecdoche for all representations of severed heads, to Kristeva, is "to pass through the 'arc of Nothingness' . . . so as to then move beyond it,"<sup>9</sup> to separate. Psychoanalysis insists on an interiorizing of mortality as indispensable to the execution of a pictorial act, whether it be through an artistic fashioning of skulls or prominent Western paintings. The "sliced-off head" must be confronted, its terror meditated on, and appropriated through a reflection or, better, an image. And yet, again, to return to a central theoretical complication, in invoking the severed heads cut from limestone by the Celts, Kristeva comments on the "seriousness and anguish of a melancholy of . . . implacable elegance" that is perhaps rivaled only by Nerval's "black sun."<sup>10</sup> Is a represented severed head emblematic of separation or of melancholic attachment to death/the mother? Or both?

"Who is Medusa?" Chapter Three, adds another theoretical puzzle. Kristeva understands the Medusa legend primarily as "a dialectic of representation" that is "formed between Perseus and the Gorgon that basically reproduces the ambivalent passions of the mother-child separation."<sup>11</sup> Here representation, the reflection of Medusa on Perseus's shield, enables the necessary killing, standing for the requisite "matricide."<sup>12</sup> The horror must be faced, not "face-to-face" but with the assistance of a "simulacrum" or an image.<sup>13</sup> Continuing to illustrate this notion, Kristeva

reads Cellini's magnificent bronze statue of Perseus in the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence as displaying the hero's "castration" through his "triumph over the mother"<sup>14</sup> insofar as he appropriates her face and head through representation. Thus the Medusa myth "prefigures an aesthetic of incarnation."<sup>15</sup>

However, in the middle of her analysis, Kristeva grants to Medusa a different, more narrow or particular meaning. Not only does Medusa stand for the mother, in the passionate tug-of-war between child and mother, but also she emblemizes the potentially consuming female genitals. Now the slimy abject creature turns into a "sexually aroused female" whose vulva-on-display possesses even "more than phallic power" that terrorizes, by wielding the weapon of the threat of castration. Thus to represent Medusa is to *protect oneself from* castration, whereas earlier to represent Medusa was to accept castration or in Kristeva's terminology to negate the loss. (To Kristeva, depressives "*disavow the negation*: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object [the Thing] of their loss"; negation is "the intellectual process that leads the repressed to representation" and that "inserts an aspect of desire and unconscious idea into consciousness"<sup>16</sup>) That is: why, if castration or the struggle to lose the mother, is ultimately desirable, is the mother-figure a castrating threat? Can she set in motion (perhaps like Kristeva's mother) the very castration that enables her "victim" to achieve liberation from her? And does she terrify men more than women, perhaps since their ambivalence over losing her is more intense: men fear losing the object of their desire, even as they know they must lose it to take on their masculinity, to be men, and so are horrified by the possibility of collapsing back into that black hole?

Nevertheless, whereas an alignment between the mother and death (Kristeva rhetorically asks, "Isn't the life provided by the mother the life of death?") may be acceptable, allowing us to agree in turn with Kristeva's assumption that Medusa is "essentially the iconic human experience,"<sup>17</sup> an icon for all, once Medusa is taken to stand in particular for female genitals, the "human experience" shrinks to that of fearful men needing protection from castration by the all-engulfing female body. Are Medusan images of decapitation inscriptions of the abyss that gives birth, imprints of the void as a condition for thought and creativity, iconic strokes that feature the cut, in general, or a playing out of male fantasy, more specifically? (Kristeva accepts Freud's idea that men reap erotic excitement from their anxiety over castration.)

In "Beheadings," Chapter Seven, resistance to castration comes to the fore. Kristeva surprises us with her proposition that the mature speaking subject has at its disposal "the resources of . . . eroticism and language" to combat "the terrifying risk of castration,"<sup>18</sup> as though fear rather than acceptance of castration is foremost. Moreover, one would think that eroticism and especially language would help to effect castration (rather than

protect against it), facilitating separation. The meaning of castration seems to shift. It is a positive psychic move but also at times in the book poses a threat. Kristeva can seem to vacillate between an emphasis on a castrating acceptance/negation of loss/lack to effect desiring subjectivity and a castrating loss of power—emasculatation—so that castration swings from being psychically beneficial to terrifying.

Whether Kristeva has in mind men or women does seem to be a factor that alters the meaning of castration. She claims that “graphic and pictorial figuration . . . wonderfully explains, through the profuse, virtuosic treatments of the beheading theme,” two dominant anxieties that underpin “the course to the visible”<sup>19</sup>; here sexual difference splits the experience with the mother. For, in general, it is the man who feels anxiety due to a fear of the all-powerful mother’s ability to castrate him or strip him of power, while the woman fears the loss of the mother, and for that reason holds back from an advantageous castration/separation. The visible, Kristeva claims, is “a sublime defense against these two fears.”<sup>20</sup>

Kristeva’s discussion of Artemisa Gentileschi’s paintings implies, however, that women also have something else to fear—that they act and paint in response to men’s aggression. Women appear to have an “extra” problem beyond detaching from the maternal body—that is, protecting themselves from violations inflicted by men. Kristeva focuses on three decapitating women: Salome, whose dancing results in a “liberating violence,”<sup>21</sup> which as we know produces the gorgeous curly brown head; Judith, whose severing of Holofernes’ head turns her into a “positive version of the Gorgon,”<sup>22</sup> and whose triumph Gentileschi celebrates in the “most spectacular of her achievements”<sup>23</sup>; and the Philistine Delilah who, having discovered the source of the power of Samson, a Jewish judge, has his precious locks cut off. Where exactly do we situate the woman’s vengeance that leads her to become a decapitator in the broad picture of Kristeva’s theory? And how much does it matter that the painter of such vengeful women is a woman herself seeking revenge (Gentileschi was raped in her studio) or a man both gaining control over and excitement from the castrating woman? Also, how much consideration should we give to whether the woman is perceived as being politically on the “right” side and thus taken to commit a beneficial act (as in the case of Judith) or the “wrong” side (as in the case of Delilah)?

Toward the end of *The Severed Head*, Kristeva focuses on the veil—whose relation to the severed head we are prompted to ponder. Whether there is a correspondence between the veil and the severed head is an intriguing question. Kristeva asks if a veiled woman is “a venerated, protected woman, as the chador may seem to indicate and claim? Or a sacrificed, decapitated, immured woman?”<sup>24</sup> Her response comes across indirectly. For next she comments that “Seurat’s *Veil* is completely different.”<sup>25</sup> Kristeva delights in the idea that here we have a traversal of grief,

even a “passage”—“passage” being perhaps the most privileged concept in *The Severed Head*—that exceeds the limits of the visible. Kristeva highly praises Seurat’s *Veil* painting for resorbing the visible in the beyond at the same time as it dissolves the beyond in the visible, a perfect two-way *passage*. And yet, at the last minute, she hesitates—in order to wonder if Seurat’s unknown heroine is, after all, “a subtle version of that elusive female who simply melts away in a man’s gaze, like a piece of sugar.”<sup>26</sup> Does feminism again creep into, overshadow, and maybe even throw off Kristeva’s psychoanalytically based reading? Or do we have here (with the image of melting sugar) a reincarnation of Kristeva’s mother’s melting snowman? Or—a third possibility—does this image of Seurat’s veiled/decapitated, sugary woman not brilliantly embody the theoretical problem at hand, blending a psychoanalytically advantageous representation with a woman suffering from and struggling with “the male gaze”?

Although I cannot claim that all the loose ends discussed here will be tied up in the following brief conclusion, it seems a valid and perhaps necessary move now to zero in on a paradox central to Kristeva’s thought. Psychoanalytic sublation—where to destroy is also to preserve or to lose is also to find—would seem to be the uniqueness and beauty of Kristeva’s theory of the severed head. We can also deduce from Kristeva’s various accounts of represented severed heads that women and men have distinct psychic predispositions toward, and needs in relation to, such representation, as women, given their identification with the maternal object, tend to pull away with reluctance, whereas men panic over their simultaneous desire for the mother and need to give her up. *The Severed Head* gestures toward all this and then manages subtly to add a feminist dimension, folding (as always in Kristeva) the psychic together with the social.

## Part II: What the Pomegranate Tree Knows

Kristeva absolutely distinguishes between real decapitations and represented ones. She believes, in fact, that “[s]laughter turned to image assuages the violence”<sup>27</sup>—so long as the image inspires contemplation, which, for example, *insubstantial* televised clips of violence cannot. In dismissing televised clips as beneficial representations of decapitation, Kristeva invokes the fundamentalist practice of slaughter and slicing throats in “Biafra, Vietnam, Rwanda, and Algeria.”<sup>28</sup> The combination of this allusion and her implication about the Muslim veil no doubt provokes the question of Islamophobia in some readers’ minds. But this would be to ignore, for one thing, that Kristeva devotes an entire chapter of *The Severed Head*, “From the Guillotine to the Abolition of Capital Punishment,” to acknowledging the atrocities of the guillotine in France. She points out as well that, “the 1981 abolition of the death penalty, which in France is bound up with the guillotine, should not let us forget that this decision does not have the support of a national majority even today.”<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, it is possible to find writing in the Islamic world that pushes back—specifically through Kristevan literary gestures—against real eruptions of the death drive. In other words, her theory operates in, and we might say cooperates with, the very Islamic world whose violence she makes one of her foci. Kristevan theory, in other words, does not distinguish between the Western and non-Western or, more specifically, Christian and Islamic worlds. Non-western writers take it up; it is not merely a Western theoretical phenomenon. In *Intimate Revolt*, Kristeva proposes that narrative and “the place it reserves for meditation” have the potential to offer a “minimal variant of revolt.” In part due to its ability to reach a wide number of readers, the genre of the novel is “privileged terrain” for psychic explorations that entail a “rehabilitation of the sensory” and a “questioning and displacement of the past”—two key elements of Kristeva’s concept of “intimate revolt.”<sup>30</sup> *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi author, not only fits this description of the novel, as it (in contrast to Western TV news) poetically highlights sensuous aspects of Iraqi life as well as questions its oppressive atmosphere, but it also enacts the theory of *The Severed Head* by making death a character, if not the main protagonist, of the book and featuring severed heads. *The Corpse Washer* responds to actual decapitations by giving them *substantial* aesthetic representation.

The novel’s narrator hears death telling him that it is a “postman” who delivers “letters,” the corpses, that the narrator opens and washes, dries, and perfumes, wrapping them finally for “their final reader—the grave.”<sup>31</sup> (The word “reader” certainly implies that they are delivered for us as well.) Death pervades the *maghasil* (the corpse-washing facility) to the point that it seems to be “the real owner”<sup>32</sup> for whom Jawad’s father works, rather than God, as the father seems to think. Jawad imagines death following him home and paying for the food on the table at their evening meals. And because of the mayhem the Americans cause in Baghdad, death becomes a soccer player: corpses pile up “like goals scored by death on behalf of rabid teams in a never-ending game.”<sup>33</sup> This novel unsparingly offers the reader a chance to confront the void, as dead bodies seem to litter almost every page.

Focused on a young man in Iraq whose father pressures him to walk in his footsteps by becoming a corpse washer but who yearns to be an artist, *The Corpse Washer* seems especially “Kristevan” in presenting the very issue of drawing the dead. A sublimatory act privileged in Kristeva as a way of channeling the death drive, such drawing in this Islamic context, however, is regarded as sacrilegious. After taking an art class, Jawad first draws his father’s face, a representation of what we might consider an appropriate decapitation, since he reproduces only the face. Coming even closer to the kind of depictions Kristeva encourages, Jawad draws again the face alone but now of a dead man in his father’s *maghasil*. Finding out about this drawing, his father has an angry fit, charging Jawad with shamefully destroying the peace and sanctity of the dead. In a violent act of its own that attacks the very



thing Kristeva promotes as a way of freeing the death drive, the father tears the drawing to pieces. However, Jawad's art teacher, in contrast, makes Kristeva's case, insisting that art is "intimately linked with immortality: a challenge to death and time, a celebration of life," noting as well that their "ancestors in Mesopotamia were the first to pose all these questions in their myths and in the epic of Gilgamesh, and that Iraq was the first and biggest art workshop in the world. In addition to inventing writing and building the first cities and temples, the first works of art and statues had appeared in ancient Iraq during the Sumerian era and now fill museums all over the world. Many still remain underground." And such an inheritance, he adds optimistically, is what enables modern Iraqi art to be "so fertile."<sup>34</sup>

*The Corpse Washer* itself extends this legacy and expands this fertile ground, as it self-reflexively argues for art in the Muslim world of Iraq and does so in a Kristevan vein, by offering two levels of critique. The novel presents an arduous melancholic struggle, replete with castration anxiety over detaching from the father, the mother, and death, through art, as a way of showing the especially thick melancholic quagmire of Iraq. The text in addition offers itself, like Perseus's shield, as a thorough reflection of death, riveted on the washing of corpses, many of which are described in horrific detail. Early in the book, a man burned to death at a petrochemical plant is brought in to be washed: "The fire had eaten away his skin . . . discolored all over." Jawad vomits that day and is "sick for days."<sup>35</sup> The reader as well wants to expel the horror.<sup>36</sup>

In his Preface Antoon situates the genre of the novel in "a liminal space between the real and the imaginary"<sup>37</sup>—a Kristevan ("sacred") intersection. *The Corpse Washer* commences with a beautiful dream of the narrator's long lost lover, Reem, but also of masked men who decapitate Jawad, the dreamer, with the "cold blade" of a knife that penetrates his neck, resulting in his head falling to the ground and rolling "like a ball on the sand."<sup>38</sup> Even more ghoulish or Kristevan, the narrator, or actually just his head, then observes his body as it kneels in a pool of blood. Variations on this nightmare portray Reem's talking "severed head" that requests, "Wash me, darling."<sup>39</sup> And no doubt the culmination of the entire book is the unforgettable chapter forty-five—in which a man brings in his dead son, Habib, in the form of "only the head."<sup>40</sup> Although he is "disgusted," Jawad washes delicately and with great care this severed head, and Antoon does not spare us a detailed description: "The edges of the severed neck were yellowish like the rest of the face. I could see the tattered skin tissue and flesh and the dried pink and gray ends of blood vessels. There was a huge scar on his right cheek and a black spot on his forehead."<sup>41</sup> Jawad scrubs Habib's hair "carefully from the forehead all the way to the neck," as his assistant pours the water, causing a "few clots of dried blood [to fall] off the neck."<sup>42</sup> Jawad washes a second time with camphor and then just water, dries the head and stuffs cotton into the nostrils and around the neck. He anoints the forehead, nose, and cheeks with camphor, and he

and his assistant wrap the head in a shroud. Jawad carries the head to its coffin and covers it as he recites to the father, "God have mercy on his soul."<sup>43</sup> Later, after long silence, Jawad notes in his book of the dead that he has washed: Habib, "severed head."<sup>44</sup>

Beaten back by what we might call his "castration anxiety," fear of loss of his origins, Jawad, however, struggles with the Kristevan meaning of the severed head. Throughout the book he oscillates between death and art. The novel's unmistakable non-chronological structure as well as its repetition of the Qur'anic verse "Every soul shall taste death" (which surfaces both in reality and in Jawad's dreams) reflects his capture by melancholic atemporality. For the melancholic, time is "erased or bloated, absorbed into sorrow,"<sup>45</sup> as Kristeva explains in *Black Sun*. Jawad is unable to accept multiple losses: his father (who dies), his brother (who dies in the war against Iran), Reem (who leaves him), and his friend Basim (who gets killed by the Americans; one of the men Jawad washes brings back into his mind an image of Basim to the point that Jawad says to himself, "I've already seen him dead in my own arms once before.")<sup>46</sup> As a result we find Jawad at the end of the novel clinging to his mother, for fear of another tremendous loss. His depression keeps him from being able to lose; he has, perhaps, failed to find "valid compensation for" his losses, since "any loss entails the loss of [his] being—and of Being itself,"<sup>47</sup> again to quote from *Black Sun*.

Although Jawad admires Giacometti who wanted to sculpt "not man but the shadow he left behind,"<sup>48</sup> as though death itself could be sculpted, and paints his own "variation on Giacometti" in depicting "a naked, wire-thin woman walking toward a white horizon,"<sup>49</sup> Jawad eventually accepts his father's sense of art, or at least acts on it in not acting at all, even at the level of his unconscious (we detect this failure in his guilt-ridden dreams). Jawad's father repeats the word "painter" "as if it were a disgrace."<sup>50</sup> Although Jawad imagines his father worrying that Jawad will "sever" his "last bonds to him" and succeed "in leaving his sphere," and he even confronts his father's dead body as a kind of severed head (in wrapping him in a shroud, Hammoudy leaves "only his face exposed"<sup>51</sup>) and boldly states to his father that he will give up working as a corpse washer, a "mysterious force"<sup>52</sup> sucks him back. "Did you have something to do with it, Father? Are you happy now?"<sup>53</sup> Jawad asks himself as he addresses his father. He turns out to be no more free than the "stupid fly" who, earlier in the book when Jawad works as a house painter, buzzes into the "sticky surface of paint and struggle[s] there for a few seconds before dying."<sup>54</sup>

In the end Thanatos governs Jawad just as for him Eros is blocked: he cannot explain even to himself why he let his second love interest, Ghayda', go. Although his mother urges him to marry Ghayda', Jawad is now bogged down, as one of his dreams makes clear, over "leaving [his] mother alone."<sup>55</sup> Rather than become a sculptor, Jawad in one of his dreams takes a Giacometti statue onto his washing bench. As he pours water over its "tiny head," the

entire sculpture “dissolves into tiny fragments,”<sup>56</sup> as though cancelling a Kristevan severance with a complete disintegration. At the very end, Jawad’s heart is like a “shriveled pomegranate beating with death and falling every second into a bottomless pit,”<sup>57</sup> in other words, into a void that, in striking contrast, the *novel* confronts, or we might say stands up to, with full force.

Jawad fails to traverse Kristeva’s “arc of Nothingness,” as he engages death without mediation (unlike Perseus with his shield). In acquiescing to corpse washing, Jawad embraces death literally in a way that disallows a distancing interiorization of mortality indispensable to a creative act. He joins death instead of recognizing that life and death are, as the pomegranate tree knows, “conjoined, sculpting each other.”<sup>58</sup> Despite his admiration of Giacometti, in the end Jawad fails to sculpt or to appreciate such sculpting. Finally, it is true, he identifies himself with the pomegranate tree that receives a great deal of attention in the novel mainly for drawing its sustenance from the water that spills off corpses, the water of death. This “wondrous tree” imbibes the water of death and yet, for decades, has flourished: “budding, blossoming, and bearing fruit every spring.”<sup>59</sup> But Jawad depicts himself as a pomegranate tree all of whose “branches have been cut, broken, and buried with the dead.”<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the pomegranate tree, Jawad has not been able to sublimate death, to transfer its force into something beautiful, as the pomegranate tree, we might say, dissolves the beyond in the visible, effecting that crucial passage.

Echoing Kristeva, *The Corpse Washer* cautions against failing to write, to draw, to sculpt, or to produce images that assuage the violence. It bombards us with images of the dead, culminating in a severed head to do so, and is consequently able to conclude with a luminous tree that exfoliates Kristeva’s main idea, that the void is the condition for thought and creativity. It is *that* “remedy” for Jawad’s “malady” that the “pomegranate tree alone knows.”<sup>61</sup> Sitting next to the tree, Jawad hums, “Pity me, pity me / O Pomegranate tree / I’ve become skin and bones / And nobody knows / My malady / And nobody knows / My remedy / Pity me, pity me / O Pomegranate tree.”<sup>62</sup> While the tree grounds its roots “in the depths of hell,” Jawad, as a victim of a “random and violent” history, “storming and uprooting everything and everyone without ever turning back,”<sup>63</sup> has lost his bearings.

The novel, however, exerts itself to displace that history by settling in those same “depths of hell” in order to bear fruit. Grounding itself firmly in those hellish depths, *The Corpse Washer* enacts a Kristevan psychoanalytic sublation as it confronts, distances itself from, and thereby psychically cancels Iraqi losses only to preserve them now in elegant writing. One might say that Antoon does an even better job than Kristeva—who writes that in her “endless mourning, in which language and the body revive in the heartbeat of a grafted French,” she examines “the still warm corpse of [her] maternal memory”<sup>64</sup>—of keeping corpses warm. Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* is in line with all art that, in Kristeva’s description, projects “cuts, castrations, and

wounds of every kind, to acquire . . . a bit of meaning, a little distance, some air, a certain freedom," carving out an abyss so that the suffering and carnage can be "resorbed into the black of the line that draws the violence with economy."<sup>65</sup> In the last chapter of the book, the pomegranate tree's "red blossoms [open] like wounds on the branches, breathing and calling out."<sup>66</sup> Antoon's novel serves as a passageway through an arc of Nothingness to conjure the invisible and deliver it to visibility.

Although this Kristevan reading of *The Corpse Washer* focuses specifically on an Arab/Muslim culture, which cannot be translated into a racial category, like my analyses elsewhere of Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* (set in Turkey) and Cha's *Dictée* (focused on Korea),<sup>67</sup> it is meant to show the pertinence of Kristevan psychoanalytic theory in a non-Western context. One might go about linking such psychoanalytic work on non-Western writing to "race" in two ways. Insofar as *The Corpse Washer* demonstrates the validity of Kristevan psychoanalytic theory for non-Western art/artists, it implies the universality of that theory, despite ethnicity, race, religion, etc. Or if we presuppose the universality of Kristevan psychoanalytic theory, we may think of such work as testing the assumption that psychoanalysis can traverse all such culturally constructed boundaries. Kristeva's recent involvement with Islamic youth in the suburbs of Paris would also shore up the notion that her theory is by no means limited. And to those critics who challenge Kristeva on the grounds that she focuses on Arab violence, it needs to be said that she opposes all fundamentalisms and in particular nationalist radicalism, such as (for example) that promoted by Marine Le Pen.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 25-26.

- <sup>11</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 30.
- <sup>12</sup> As Kristeva explains in *Black Sun*, “For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation” (27-28).
- <sup>13</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 30.
- <sup>14</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 35.
- <sup>15</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 36.
- <sup>16</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 43-45.
- <sup>17</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 32.
- <sup>18</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 83.
- <sup>19</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 83.
- <sup>20</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 83.
- <sup>21</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 76.
- <sup>22</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 77.
- <sup>23</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 79.
- <sup>24</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 123.
- <sup>25</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 124.
- <sup>26</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 124.
- <sup>27</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 74.
- <sup>28</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 26.
- <sup>29</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 98.
- <sup>30</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, Vol 2, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 5.
- <sup>31</sup> Sinon Antoon, *The Corpse Washer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 3.
- <sup>32</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 11.
- <sup>33</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 108.
- <sup>34</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 31.
- <sup>35</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 23.
- <sup>36</sup> Kristeva describes the corpse as it “takes on the abjection of waste in the biblical text” in flagrant detail in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 109.
- <sup>37</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, vii.
- <sup>38</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 2.
- <sup>39</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 3.
- <sup>40</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 155.
- <sup>41</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 156.

- <sup>42</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 157.
- <sup>43</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 157.
- <sup>44</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 158.
- <sup>45</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 4.
- <sup>46</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 55.
- <sup>47</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 5.
- <sup>48</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 42.
- <sup>49</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 147.
- <sup>50</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 77.
- <sup>51</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 65.
- <sup>52</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 122.
- <sup>53</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 122.
- <sup>54</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 79.
- <sup>55</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 159.
- <sup>56</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 141.
- <sup>57</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 184.
- <sup>58</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 184.
- <sup>59</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 183.
- <sup>60</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 184.
- <sup>61</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 184.
- <sup>62</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 183.
- <sup>63</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 184.
- <sup>64</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Crisis of the European Subject*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2000), 169.
- <sup>65</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 85.
- <sup>66</sup> Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 183.
- <sup>67</sup> "A Black Passion: Voiding Melancholic Obsession in Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*" came out in *American Imago* (Vol. 73, No. 1) in the spring of 2016, and "Dictée's Postmodern Mourning: A 'line connects the void'" was just published this fall, 2018, also in *American Imago* (Vol. 75, No. 3).