

An Indefinite Catharsis

The viscous is a state halfway between solid and liquid. It is like a cross section in a process of change. It is unstable, but it does not flow. It is soft, yielding and compressible. Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it. - Jean Paul Sartre

The rise of intelligence, from the obscurest animal consciousness up to that of man, is a progressive *loosening of the intellect from the will*. – Arthur Schopenhauer

In uncanniness *Dasein* stands together with itself primordially. - Martin Heidegger

Abjection can be described as a honey like substance pouring over the body, at once blissfully enveloping but at the same time sticky, paralyzing, and suffocating. The experience of abjection can be described as being honeyed; perhaps this sensation, both physical and psychological, is the closest recollection we can have of living within the body of another being covered in warm membranes, gestating, caressed by the throbbing pulsations of the other's heart. Compared to other mammals it is this long nine-month period of mutation inside the womb that makes humans properly human: Could the work of culture be the indefinite attempt to *ab-ject* from the primal intimacy of which we retain a semiotic trace?

The return to “womb” consciousness from the hegemony of the symbolic Law of the Father provokes a thrill that Kristeva calls *jouissance*. Kristeva likens this feeling to the pleasure of scratching. (27) It is evident that pop-culture has invested heavily in the abject, from the provocations of punk and post-punk, through Bowie's transformations, Ridley Scott's *Alien* series, to contemporary shows dealing with abject dimensions of depravity and filth such as *True Detective* and *Stranger Things*. The abject is here to stay like “an inescapable boomerang” which

leads to the question: Has the Other surpassed Pure Form in terms of performance, possessing a higher will to power as the power of addiction? (1)

In this paper I will investigate three moments of tension between Pure Form and the Other. This dichotomy provides a general definition of the infinite shades of difference between: form/content, knowledge/desire, being/becoming, consciousness/subconscious, inside/outside, speech/text, book/word, proper/improper, etc. Postmodern philosophy marks a shift into the territory of the Other as a form of aesthetic resistance. My trajectory of thought in this brief review will follow the intersections between boundaries/movement in Plato and Kristeva; knowledge/intuitive understanding in Schopenhauer and Heidegger; truth and translation as creative interpretation in Derrida and Nietzsche.

Infamia: A Question of Boundaries.

For the ancient Romans crossing society's imaginary borders, such as in the case of moral depravity or being a professional actor, was a breach on the laws of purity that secured the self-identity of the community. The stigma of separation is what the Latins called *infamia*, which became the Italian word for the abject, *infimo*. In Rome the *infame* was no longer protected by the purifying flame of Vesta and lost his legal rights, although he could well be a person of high standing; in fact, the English word *infamous* means both high standing and abject.

Reading between the lines, Kristeva suggests that the abject, as the excluded that threatens the symbolic order, is a fundamental element in the creation of culture. (2) The history of Rome begins with the abject scene of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a she-wolf. Later on, the first king of Rome, Romulus kills Remus for overstepping the tracing of the sacred precinct of the new city. This “mythic” challenge is echoed in Kristeva when she speaks of the

exile (the *stray*) that is set apart as the Other of symbolic law but retains an originary "charge":
"Once upon blotted-out time, the abject must have been a marginalized pole of covetousness."

(17)

Plato and Kristeva mark two ends of a circle that involves other philosophers in the tension between Pure Form and Other. Between Plato and Kristeva we see this tension between order as a setting of boundaries and the abject as that which crawls between boundaries. Abjection is the neither/or space suspended like "that skin on the surface of milk." (2) Kristeva refers to Lacan with the rupture of symbolic form in the experience of the abject: "The object of desire [...] 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 about the abject." (9) It is this divided nature "being opposed to I" that drives the abject form. (1)

In Plato's *Republic* the artists are exiled because they are cross-dressers, confusing different roles and putting social order in jeopardy. Plato reveres the poets for their skill but he is concerned about their mutable nature and the power it exerts on the untrained minds of non-philosophers, women, and children. (26) The ideal model for the *Republic* is eternal and unchanging: "God, then, is simple and true in deed and word. He does not change himself, nor does he deceive others, awake or asleep, through visions of words or the sending of signs." (Lit Crist 22)

In Plato's vocabulary the abject is aligned with change and multiplicity, something that oversteps the established boundaries: "Ours is the only city where we shall find a cobbler who is a cobbler and not a ship's pilot as well, a farmer who is a farmer and not a juryman as well, a soldier who is a soldier and not a money-maker." (38) Plato's concern is to maintain Pure Form intact against the transgressions of the Other, artists, actors that dabble in shadows. In Plato's

myth of the cave we see the abject as that which is muddled in shadow as opposed to the pure light of the sun. It is this realm of shadow that works against Pure Form as such: “On the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.” (Kristeva 207)

Noumenal Moods: Abstract Knowledge and Intuitive Understanding.

The second crucial moment of tension between Pure Form and the Other is between knowledge/reason (abstract knowing) and music/moods (intuitive understanding) respectively in Schopenhauer and Heidegger. Following Kant Schopenhauer believes art can provide delight, as a state of contemplation that relieves us from practical concerns or desires of the body. This idea of art is linked to Kant’s general epistemology where there are things we can know and others we cannot know, art remains knowable as a phenomena. The major difference with Kantian aesthetics is that for Schopenhauer there is the possibility to *know* the *thing-in-itself* through the experience of music. For Schopenhauer visual art can elevate us to a state of a *pure knowing* radicalizing Kant’s notion of *disinterestedness* although music, as Other, is the privileged site for entering the sphere of intuitive understanding of the Will. (121)

Heidegger highlights the crisis of scientific thought as thought that is imprisoned by lifeless abstraction. Science is in crisis because it cannot shift views having forgotten the moment of original insight and proceeding according to the established formula. To scientific factual truth, Heidegger posits *aletheia* as disclosure. This Other truth depends on an openness to Being on part of Dasein. This form of deep listening as *attunement* is akin to Schopenhauer's sensitivity to music as a revelatory experience of being-in-the-world.

The experience of music is not the abstract knowing of the Cartesian *je pense* but a deeper intuitive understanding of the dynamics of existence as a whole: “Music acts directly upon the will, *i.e.*, the feelings, passions, and emotions of the hearer, so that it quickly raises them or changes them, may be explained from the fact that, unlike all the other arts, it does not express the Ideas, or grades of the objectification of the will, but directly the *will itself*.” (Schopenhauer 227) All entities are objectifications of the Will but only music is a copy of the Will itself.

Heidegger’s project of a fundamental ontology in *Being and Time* wrests on the distinction between abstract knowing and intuitive understanding, between “scientific” knowledge and the disclosure of Being in the existential analytic of Dasein:

The *ego cogito* of Descartes, the subject, the " I ", reason, spirit, person. But these all remain uninterrogated as to their Being and its structure, in accordance with the thoroughgoing way in which the question of Being has been neglected [...] We understand this task [fundamental ontology] as one in which by taking the question of Being our clue, we are to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being—the ways which have guided us ever since. (44)

For Heidegger moods disclose Dasein’s being-in-the world, and through anxiety, as a fundamental *attunement*, Dasein feels the Nothing (*Das Nichts*). While Schopenhauer thought that music can give us access to *something* like the Will, as the Kantian thing-in-itself,

Heidegger's claim is much more radical as anxiety is the experience of the utter groundlessness of being as such: "Dasein's mood brings it face to face with the thrownness of its 'that it is there.' *But the state-of-mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being, is anxiety.* In this state-of-mind, Dasein finds itself face to face with the "nothing" of the possible impossibility of its existence." (310)

Traduttore Traditore: On Truth and Translation.

In a nutshell, Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence is that there never was a pure state of being, a perfect relation between man and nature, man and man, and consciousness and itself. Plato thought writing to be a means of preserving the truth of speech in which the *logos* presides over the *text*. This metaphysical assumption continued on into Christian mythology where the *verbum* (spoken word) is primary; whatever happened after that initial stage of pure God-breath was doomed to be secondary. In Plato's *Phaedrus* this passage from word to writing is an act of forgetfulness: "Writing, a mnemotechnic means, supplanting good memory, spontaneous memory, signifies forgetfulness. [...] Forgetfulness because it is a mediation and the departure of the *logos* from itself." (37)

In his essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* Nietzsche lays out his critique of truth as conscious presence, through what he calls "illusory consciousness." (142) For Nietzsche the whole issue of knowledge and truth is marred from the beginning when stimuli from the outside world are transformed into anxious metaphors: "Their [human] senses nowhere lead to truth; on the contrary, they are content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things." (142) Essentially, the "will to truth" implies the making of pictograms of reality for the comfort we find in making things present.

Derrida calls the originary imaginative mark-making work *archi-writing*, a hypothetical third term between speech (presence) and writing (metaphor). As Spivak points out in the introduction of *Of Grammatology* Derrida stresses the ambivalence of writing, both dead letter “supplement” and ultimate expression of human desire; *archi-writing* and *writing* is that which underlies signification/expression as such: “Writing in the common sense is the dead letter, it is the carrier of death [because it signifies the absence of the speaker] ... From another point of view, on the other face of the same proposition, writing in the metaphoric sense, natural, divine, and living writing, is venerated; it is equal in dignity to the origin of value, to the voice of conscience as divine law, to the heart, to sentiment and so forth.” (29, 17)

For Derrida writing should not be considered a transcription in the Saussurean sense of a faithful copy from speech to writing. A metaphysical tradition Derrida calls *logocentrism* delimitates the passage from pure to impure, wholesome to abject, original to supplementary. For Derrida writing is governed by a *play of differance* that has its own legitimacy, like art or metaphor, a point he might share with proponents of *l’art pour l’art*. In the same vein Nietzsche sees the establishment of truth as a play of illusions with due artistic merit: “One can certainly admire humanity as a mighty architectural genius who succeeded in erecting the infinitely complicated cathedral of concepts on moving foundations.” (147)

As Spivak points out in her introduction, the basic premise of Nietzsche’s critique of identity is that it is impossible to make a perfect equivalence between the world and our attempt to secure knowledge through language. Translation always produces a remainder. Truth is a collection of imperfect metaphors: “What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have

been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding.”
(Nietzsche 146)

Encore: An Indefinite Conclusion.

Kristeva suggests that the abject structures thought itself because thinking, especially in the literary form, is a mode of teasing out the abject and purging it: “Is it the quiet shore of contemplation that I set aside for myself, as I lay bare, under the cunning, orderly surface of civilizations, the nurturing horror that they attend to pushing aside by purifying, systematizing, and thinking; the horror that they seize on in order to build themselves up and function?” (209) The Other is cast out in an “indefinite catharsis.” (208) The abject can be thought of as “the itch” that triggers the creative process; certainly Otherness is a major “pole of covetousness” in postmodern philosophy and art, for example, in the work of Lyotard and Vito Acconci.

The abject relates to what Derrida calls *differance*. This neologism implies both difference and deferral. *Differance* is crucial in Derrida’s project of deconstruction, which is not simply a taking-apart of metaphysics but more of a deep scan in search for the echo/trace of the Other. The trace of the Other is what Freud might have called the expression of subconscious drives which appear in slips of the tongue and other *parapraxes*. The Other is a repressed order that underlies any metaphysical structure as its “inseparable obverse.” (Kristeva 208) In a ying yang game the Other is the negative coefficient to order, truth, language, speech, and subjectivity.

While Aristotle proposed a purging of the abject emotions of pity and fear, Kristeva seems to be advocating for an *alliance* with abjection through the creative act. In the absence of

public ritual or a religious order that deals in the business of abjection Kristeva puts her hope in art that has emerged from abjection such as the writings of Celine. Here the abject is not excluded but integrated, it is given a face. Literature is the primary site where the tensions with abjection take form: “Literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word.” (208)

Kristeva also suggests there is an abject “core” a “descent into the hell of naming.” (207) As the contemporary philosopher Byung-Chul Han says in his book *The Agony of Eros*, theory cannot operate without the fundamental “erotic” tension with the Other, without it theory become cumulative data without erotic *transformation*: “Without seduction by the atopic Other, which sparks erotic desire, thinking withers into mere *work*, which always reproduces the *Same*. Calculating thought lacks the negativity of atopia. It is work on the positive. No negativity inspires disquiet or unrest in it.” (Han 50) The question is, how to deal with not-being?

The tension between purity and the abject is perennial; the cathartic process can be worked through therapeutically or enacted violently as phobic rejection. The rise of neo-Fascism in Europe after the recent failures of the European Union and the immigration crisis is an example of the return of phobic catharsis. The same instances of phobia are happening in the United States whereas the Lacanian mirror image of “white America” is threatened by a racialized Other. It is increasingly important to reflect on our cultural and political constructions to see how the process of exclusion is taking place, and how catharsis is enacted. Art may keep us vigilant, and aware of this “primal” tension.

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