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BLACK SUN

DEPRESSION AND MELANCHOLIA

*Translated by Leon S. Roudiez*



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW YORK

1989

*Psychoanalysis—  
A Counterdepressant*

For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia. I am trying to address an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself. Such despair is not a revulsion that would imply my being capable of desire and creativity, negative indeed but present. Within depression, if my existence is on the verge of collapsing, its lack of meaning is not tragic—it appears obvious to me, glaring and inescapable.

Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation?

The wound I have just suffered, some setback or other in my love life or my profession, some sorrow or bereavement affecting my relationship with close relatives—such are often the easily spotted triggers of my despair. A betrayal, a fatal illness, some accident or handicap that abruptly wrests me away from what seemed to me the

normal category of normal people or else falls on a loved one with the same radical effect, or yet . . . What more could I mention? An infinite number of misfortunes weigh us down every day . . . All this suddenly gives me another life. A life that is unlivable, heavy with daily sorrows, tears held back or shed, a total despair, scorching at times, then wan and empty. In short, a devitalized existence that, although occasionally fired by the effort I make to prolong it, is ready at any moment for a plunge into death. An avenging death or a liberating death, it is henceforth the inner threshold of my despondency, the impossible meaning of a life whose burden constantly seems unbearable, save for those moments when I pull myself together and face up to the disaster. I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized, my rhythm slowed down or interrupted, time has been erased or bloated, absorbed into sorrow . . . Absent from other people's meaning, alien, accidental with respect to naive happiness, I owe a supreme, metaphysical lucidity to my depression. On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaninglessness of Being, of revealing the absurdity of bonds and beings.

My pain is the hidden side of my philosophy, its mute sister. In the same way, Montaigne's statement "To philosophize is to learn how to die" is inconceivable without the melancholy combination of sorrow and hatred—which came to a head in Heidegger's *care* and the disclosure of our "being-for-death." Without a bent for melancholia there is no psyche, only a transition to action or play.

Nevertheless, the power of the events that create my depression is often out of proportion to the disaster that suddenly overwhelms me. What is more, the disenchantment that I experience here and now, cruel as it may be, appears, under scrutiny, to awaken echoes of old traumas,

to which I realize I have never been able to resign myself. I can thus discover antecedents to my current breakdown in a loss, death, or grief over someone or something that I once loved. The disappearance of that essential being continues to deprive me of what is most worthwhile in me; I live it as a wound or deprivation, discovering just the same that my grief is but the deferment of the hatred or desire for ascendancy that I nurture with respect to the one who betrayed or abandoned me. My depression points to my not knowing how to lose—I have perhaps been unable to find a valid compensation for the loss? It follows that any loss entails the loss of my being—and of Being itself. The depressed person is a radical, sullen atheist.

*Melancholia—Somber Lining of Amatory Passion*

A sad voluptuousness, a despondent intoxication make up the humdrum backdrop against which our ideals and euphorias often stand out, unless they be that fleeting clear-mindedness shredding the amorous hypnosis that joins two persons together. Conscious of our being doomed to lose our loves, we grieve perhaps even more when we glimpse in our lover the shadow of a long lost former loved one. Depression is the hidden face of Narcissus, the face that is to bear him away into death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in a mirage. Talking about depression will again lead us into the marshy land of the Narcissus myth.<sup>1</sup> This time, however, we shall not encounter the bright and fragile amatory idealization; on the contrary, we shall see the shadow cast on the fragile self, hardly dissociated from the other, precisely by the loss of that essential other. The shadow of despair.

Rather than seek the meaning of despair (it is either obvious or metaphysical), let us acknowledge that there is

meaning only in despair. The child king becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words; this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother, a loss that causes him to try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in the imagination, then in words. Semiology, concerned as it is with the zero degree of symbolism, is unavoidably led to ponder over not only the amatory state but its corollary as well, melancholia; at the same time it observes that if there is no writing other than the amorous, there is no imagination that is not, overtly or secretly, melancholy.

*Thought—Crisis—Melancholia*

Nevertheless, melancholia is not French. The rigor of Protestantism or the matriarchal weight of Christian orthodoxy admits more readily to a complicity with the grieving person when it does not beckon him or her into *delectatio morosa*. While it is true that the French Middle Ages rendered sadness by means of delicate tropes, the Gallic, renascent, enlightened tone tended toward levity, eroticism, and rhetoric rather than nihilism. Pascal, Rousseau, and Nerval cut a sorry figure—and they stand as exceptions.

For the speaking being life is a meaningful life; life is even the apogee of meaning. Hence if the meaning of life is lost, life can easily be lost: when meaning shatters, life no longer matters. In his doubtful moments the depressed person is a philosopher, and we owe to Heraclitus, Socrates, and more recently Kierkegaard the most disturbing pages on the meaning or lack of meaning of Being. One must, however, go back to Aristotle to find a thorough reflection on the relationship philosophers have maintained with melancholia. According to the *Problemata* (30, I), attributed to Aristotle, black bile (*melaina kole*) saps

great men. The (pseudo-)Aristotelian reflection focuses on the *ethos-peritton*, the exceptional personality, whose distinctive characteristic would be melancholia. While relying on the Hippocratic notions of four humors and temperaments, Aristotle breaks new ground by removing melancholia from pathology and locating it in nature but also and mainly by having it ensue from *heat*, considered to be the regulating principle of the organism, and *mesotes*, the controlled interaction of opposite energies. This Greek notion of melancholia remains alien to us today; it assumes a “properly balanced diversity” (*eukratos anomalia*) that is metaphorically rendered by froth (*aphros*), the euphoric counterpoint to black bile. Such a white mixture of air (*pneuma*) and liquid brings out froth in the sea, wine, as well as in the sperm of man. Indeed, Aristotle combines scientific statement with mythical allusions as he links melancholia to spermatic froth and *eroti*, with explicit references to Dionysus and Aphrodite (953b, 31–32). The melancholia he evokes is not a philosopher’s disease but his very nature, his *ethos*. It is not what strikes the first Greek melancholy hero, Bellerophon, who is thus portrayed in the *Iliad* (VI, 200–3): “Bellerophon gave offense to the gods and became a lonely wanderer on the Aleian plain, eating out his heart and shunning the paths of men.” Self-devouring because forsaken by the gods, exiled by divine decree, this desperate man was condemned not to mania but to banishment, absence, void . . . With Aristotle, melancholia, counterbalanced by genius, is coextensive with man’s anxiety in Being. It could be seen as the forerunner of Heidegger’s anguish as the *Stimmung* of thought. Schelling found in it, in similar fashion, the “essence of human freedom,” an indication of “man’s affinity with nature.” The philosopher would thus be “melancholy on account of a surfeit of humanity.”<sup>2</sup>

This perception of melancholia as an extreme state and

as an exceptionality that reveals the true nature of Being undergoes a profound transformation during the Middle Ages. On the one hand, medieval thought returned to the cosmologies of late antiquity and bound melancholia to Saturn, the planet of spirit and thought.<sup>3</sup> Dürer's *Melancholia* (1514) was a masterful transposition into graphic art of theoretical speculations that found their highest expression with Marsilio Ficino. Christian theology, on the other hand, considered sadness a sin. Dante set "the woeful people who have lost the good of the intellect" in "the city of grief" (*Inferno*, III). They are "wretched souls" because they have lost God, and these melancholy shadows constitute "the sect of the wicked displeasing both to God and to His enemies"; their punishment is to have "no hope of death." Those whom despair has caused to turn violent against themselves, suicides and squanderers, are not spared either; they are condemned to turn into trees (*Inferno*, XIII). Nevertheless, medieval monks did promote sadness: as mystical ascesis (*acedia*) it became essential as a means toward paradoxical knowledge of divine truth and constituted the major touchstone for faith.

Changing in accordance with the religious climate, melancholia asserted itself, if I may say so, in religious doubt. There is nothing more dismal than a dead God, and Dostoyevsky himself was disturbed by the distressing sight of the dead Christ in Holbein's painting, contrasted with the "truth of resurrection." The periods that witness the downfall of political and religious idols, periods of crisis, are particularly favorable to black moods. While it is true that an unemployed worker is less suicidal than a deserted lover, melancholia does assert itself in times of crisis; it is spoken of, establishes its archeology, generates its representations and its knowledge. A written melancholia surely has little in common with the institutional-

ized stupor that bears the same name. Beyond the confusion in terminology that I have kept alive up to now (What is melancholia? What is depression?), we are confronted with an enigmatic paradox that will not cease questioning us: if loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it, it is also noteworthy that the work of art as fetish emerges when the activating sorrow has been repudiated. The artist consumed by melancholia is at the same time the most relentless in his struggle against the symbolic abdication that blankets him . . . Until death strikes or suicide becomes imperative for those who view it as final triumph over the void of the lost object . . .

#### *Melancholia/Depression*

I shall call *melancholia* the institutional symptomatology of inhibition and asymbolia that becomes established now and then or chronically in a person, alternating more often than not with the so-called manic phase of exaltation. When the two phenomena, despondency and exhilaration, are of lesser intensity and frequency, it is then possible to speak of neurotic depression. While acknowledging the difference between melancholia and depression, Freudian theory detects everywhere the same *impossible mourning for the maternal object*. Question: impossible on account of what paternal weakness? Or what biological frailty? Melancholia—we again encounter the generic term after having demarcated psychotic and neurotic symptomatologies—admits of the fearsome privilege of situating the analyst's question at the intersection of the biological and the symbolical. Parallel series? Consecutive sequences? A dan-

gerous crossing that needs to be clarified, another relationship that needs to be thought up?

The terms melancholia and depression refer to a composite that might be called melancholy/depressive, whose borders are in fact blurred, and within which psychiatrists ascribe the concept of "melancholia" to the illness that is irreversible on its own (that responds only to the administration of antidepressants). Without going into details about various types of depression ("psychotic" or "neurotic," or, according to another classification, "anxious," "agitated," "retarded," or "hostile"), or concerning myself with the promising but still imprecise field in which one studies the exact effects of antidepressants (monoamine oxidase inhibitors, tricyclics, and heterocyclics) or thymic stabilizers (lithium carbonates), I shall examine matters from a *Freudian point of view*. On that basis, I shall try to bring out, from the core of the melancholy/depressive composite, blurred as its borders may be, what pertains to a common experience of *object loss* and of a *modification of signifying bonds*. These bonds, language in particular, prove to be unable to insure, within the melancholy/depressive composite, the autostimulation that is required in order to initiate given responses. Instead of functioning as a "rewards system," language, on the contrary, hyperactivates the "anxiety-punishment" pair, and thus inserts itself in the slowing down of thinking and decrease in psychomotor activity characteristic of depression. If temporary sadness or mourning on the one hand, and melancholy stupor on the other are clinically and nosologically different, they are nevertheless supported by *intolerance for object loss* and *the signifier's failure* to insure a compensating way out of the states of withdrawal in which the subject takes refuge to the point of inaction (pretending to be dead) or even suicide. Thus I shall speak of depression and

melancholia without always distinguishing the particularities of the two ailments but keeping in mind their common structure.

*The Depressive Person: Full of Hatred or Wounded, Mourned "Object" and Mourned "Thing"*

According to classic psychoanalytic theory (Abraham, Freud, and Melanie Klein),<sup>4</sup> depression, like mourning, conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning. "I love that object," is what that person seems to say about the lost object, "but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am nonexistent, I shall kill myself." The complaint against oneself would therefore be a complaint against another, and putting oneself to death but a tragic disguise for massacring an other. Such logic presupposes, as one can imagine, a stern superego and a whole complex dialectic of idealization and devalorization of self and other, the aggregate of these activities being based on the mechanism of *identification*. For my identification with the loved-hated other, through incorporation-introjection-projection, leads me to imbed in myself its sublime component, which becomes my necessary, tyrannical judge, as well as its subject component, which demeans me and of which I desire to rid myself. Consequently, the analysis of depression involves bringing to the fore the realization that the complaint against oneself is a hatred for the other, which is without doubt the substratum of an unsuspected sexual desire. Clearly such an advent of hatred within transference entails risks for the analysand as well as the analyst, and the

therapy of depression (even the one called neurotic) verges on schizoid fragmentation.

Melancholy cannibalism, which was emphasized by Freud and Abraham and appears in many dreams and fantasies of depressed persons (see chapter 3), accounts for this passion for holding within the mouth (but vagina and anus also lend themselves to this control) the intolerable other that I crave to destroy so as to better possess it alive. Better fragmented, torn, cut up, swallowed, digested . . . than lost. The melancholy cannibalistic imagination<sup>5</sup> is a repudiation of the loss's reality and of death as well. It manifests the anguish of losing the other through the survival of self, surely a deserted self but not separated from what still and ever nourishes it and becomes transformed into the self—which also resuscitates—through such a devouring.

Nevertheless, the treatment of narcissistic individuals has led modern analysts to understand another form of depression.<sup>6</sup> Far from being a hidden attack on an other who is thought to be hostile because he is frustrating, sadness would point to a primitive self—wounded, incomplete, empty. Persons thus affected do not consider themselves wronged but afflicted with a fundamental flaw, a congenital deficiency. Their sorrow doesn't conceal the guilt or the sin felt because of having secretly plotted revenge on the ambivalent object. Their sadness would be rather the most archaic expression of an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound, so precocious that no outside agent (subject or agent) can be used as referent. For such narcissistic depressed persons, sadness is really the sole object; more precisely it is a substitute object they become attached to, an object they tame and cherish for lack of another. In such a case, suicide is not a disguised act of war but a merging with sadness and, beyond it,

with that impossible love, never reached, always elsewhere, such as the promises of nothingness, of death.

### *Thing and Object*

The depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing.<sup>7</sup> Let me posit the "Thing" as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated.

Of this Nerval provides a dazzling metaphor that suggests an insistence without presence, a light without representation: the Thing is an imagined sun, bright and black at the same time. "It is a well-known fact that one never sees the sun in a dream, although one is often aware of some far brighter light."<sup>8</sup>

Ever since that archaic attachment the depressed person has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, that perhaps only devouring might represent, or an *invocation* might point out, but no word could signify. Consequently, for such a person, no erotic object could replace the irreplaceable perception of a place or preobject confining the libido or severing the bonds of desire. Knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing. The "primary identification" with the "father in individual prehistory"<sup>9</sup> would be the means, the link that might enable one to become reconciled with the loss of the Thing. Primary identification initiates a compensation for the Thing and at the same time secures the subject to another dimension, that of imaginary adher-



ence, reminding one of the bond of faith, which is just what disintegrates in the depressed person.

With those affected by melancholia, primary identification proves to be fragile, insufficient to secure other identifications, which are symbolic this time, on the basis of which the *erotic Thing* might become a captivating *Object of desire* insuring continuity in a metonymy of pleasure. The melancholy Thing interrupts desiring metonymy, just as it prevents working out the loss within the psyche.<sup>10</sup> How can one approach the place I have referred to? Sublimation is an attempt to do so: through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole “container” seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing.

I have assumed depressed persons to be atheistic—deprived of meaning, deprived of values. For them, to fear or to ignore the Beyond would be self-deprecating. Nevertheless, and although atheistic, those in despair are mystics—adhering to the preobject, not believing in Thou, but mute and steadfast devotees of their own inexpressible container. It is to this fringe of strangeness that they devote their tears and jouissance. In the tension of their affects, muscles, mucous membranes, and skin, they experience both their belonging to and distance from an archaic other that still eludes representation and naming, but of whose corporeal emissions, along with their automatism, they still bear the imprint. Unbelieving in language, the depressive persons are affectionate, wounded to be sure, but prisoners of affect. The affect is their thing.

The Thing is inscribed within us without memory, the buried accomplice of our unspeakable anguishes. One can imagine the delights of reunion that a regressive daydream promises itself through the nuptials of suicide.

The looming of the Thing summons up the subject's life force as that subject is in the process of being set up; the premature being that we all are can survive only if it clings to an other, perceived as supplement, artificial extension, protective wrapping. Nevertheless, such a life drive is fully the one that, *at the same time*, rejects me, isolates me, rejects him (or her). Never is the ambivalence of drive more fearsome than in this beginning of otherness where, lacking the filter of language, I cannot inscribe my violence in “no,” nor in any other sign. I can expel it only by means of gestures, spasms, or shouts. I impel it, I project it. My necessary Thing is also and absolutely my enemy, my foil, the delightful focus of my hatred. The Thing falls from me along the outposts of signifi<sup>11</sup>ance where the Word is not yet my Being. A mere nothing, which is a cause, but at the same time a fall, before being an Other, the Thing is the recipient that contains my dejecta and everything that results from *cadere* [Latin: to fall]—it is a waste with which, in my sadness, I merge. It is Job's ashpit in the Bible.

Anality is summoned during the process of setting up this Thing, one that is our own and proper Thing as much as it is improper, unclean. The melancholy person who extols that boundary where the self emerges, but also collapses in deprecation, fails to summon the anality that could establish separations and frontiers as it does normally or as a bonus with obsessive persons. On the contrary, the entire ego of those who are depressed sinks into a diserotized and yet jubilatory anality, as the latter becomes the bearer of a jouissance fused with the archaic Thing, perceived not as a significant object but as the self's borderline element. For those who are depressed, the Thing like the self is a downfall that carries them along into the invisible and unnameable. *Cadere*. Waste and cadavers all.

*The Death Drive as Primary Inscription of Discontinuity  
(Trauma or Loss)*

Freud's postulate of a *primary masochism* is consonant with aspects of narcissistic melancholia in which the dying out of all libidinal bonds appears not to be a simple matter of turning aggressiveness toward the object back into animosity against the self but is asserted as previous to any possibility of object positioning.

Brought up by Freud in 1915,<sup>12</sup> the notion of "primary masochism" became established in his work after the "death drive" turned up, particularly in "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924).<sup>13</sup> Having observed that living beings appeared later than the nonliving, Freud thought that a specific drive must reside in them, which tended toward "a return to an earlier state."<sup>14</sup> After *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), which established the notion of the death drive as a tendency to return to the inorganic state and homeostasis, in opposition to the erotic principle of discharge and union, Freud postulated that one part of the death or destructive drive is directed toward the outside world, notably through the muscular system, and is changed into a purely destructive drive, one of ascendancy or strong willpower. In the attendance of sexuality it constitutes sadism. Freud points out nevertheless that "*Another portion does not share in this transposition* outwards: it remains inside . . . and becomes libidinally bound there. It is in this portion that we have to recognize the original, erotogenic masochism."<sup>15</sup> Since hatred of the other was already considered "older than love,"<sup>16</sup> would such a masochistic withdrawal of hatred point to the existence of a yet more archaic hatred? Freud seems to imply that: indeed, he considers the death drive as an intrapsychic manifestation

of a phylogenetic inheritance going back to inorganic matter. Nevertheless, aside from those conjectures that most analysts since Freud do not endorse, it is possible to note if not the anteriority at least the strength of the disintegration of bonds within several psychic structures and manifestations. Furthermore, the frequency of masochism, the presence of negative therapeutic reaction, and also various pathologies of early childhood that seem to precede the object relation (infantile anorexia, merycism, some forms of autism) prompt one to accept the idea of a death drive that, appearing as a biological and logical inability to transmit psychic energies and inscriptions, would destroy movements and bonds. Freud refers to it thus:

If we take into consideration the total picture made up of the phenomena of masochism immanent in so many people, the negative therapeutic reaction and the sense of guilt found in so many neurotics we shall no longer be able to adhere to the belief that mental events are exclusively governed by the desire for pleasure. These phenomena are unmistakable evidence of the presence of a power in mental life which we shall call the aggression or destruction drive, and which we trace back to the original death drive of living matter.<sup>17</sup>

Narcissistic melancholia would display such a drive in its state of disunity with the life drive. The melancholy person's superego appears to Freud as "a cultivation of death drive."<sup>18</sup> And yet the problem remains: is this melancholy diserotization opposed to the pleasure principle? Or is it, on the contrary, implicitly erotic? This would mean that the melancholy withdrawal would always be an overturning of the object relation, a metamorphosis of the hatred against the other. The work of Melanie Klein, who attached the greatest importance to the death drive, seems

to have it depend, for the most part, on object relation, masochism and melancholia appearing then as imagos of the internalized bad object. Nevertheless, the Kleinian argument acknowledges situations in which erotic bonds are severed, without clearly stating whether they have never existed or have been broken off (in the latter case it would be the projection's introjection that would lead to such a withdrawal of erotic cathexis).

We shall take note particularly of the Kleinian definition of splitting introduced in 1946. On the one hand it moves backward from the depressive position toward a more archaic, paranoid, schizoid position. On the other, it distinguishes a binary splitting (the distinction between "good" and "bad" object insuring the unity of the self) and a parcellary splitting—the latter affecting not only the object but, in return, the very self, which literally "falls into pieces."

#### *Integration/Nonintegration/Disintegration*

For our purpose it is absolutely essential to note that such falling into pieces may be caused either by a drive-related *nonintegration* impeding the cohesion of the self, or by a disintegration accompanied by anxieties and provoking the schizoid splitting.<sup>19</sup> In the first hypothesis, which seems to have been borrowed from Winnicott, nonintegration results from biological immaturity; if it is possible to speak of Thanatos in this situation, the death drive appears as a biological unfitness for sequentiality and integration (no memory). In the second hypothesis, that of a disintegration of the self consequent to reversing the death drive, we observe "a Thanatic reaction to a threat that is in itself Thanatic."<sup>20</sup> Rather close to Ferenczi's concept, this one emphasizes the human being's tendency toward fragmen-

tation and disintegration as an expression of the death drive. "The early ego largely lacks cohesion, and a tendency towards integration alternates with a tendency towards disintegration, a falling into bits . . . the anxiety of being destroyed from within remains active. It seems to me in keeping with the lack of cohesiveness that under the pressure of this threat the ego tends to fall into pieces."<sup>21</sup> If schizoid fragmentation is a radical, paroxysmal manifestation of parceling, melancholy inhibition (psychomotor retardation, deficiency in sequentiality) can be considered another manifestation of the disintegration of bonds. How so?

Following upon the deflection of the death drive, the *depressive affect* can be interpreted as a defense against parceling. Indeed, sadness reconstitutes an affective cohesion of the self, which restores its unity within the framework of the affect. The depressive mood constitutes itself as a narcissistic support, negative to be sure,<sup>22</sup> but nevertheless presenting the self with an integrity, nonverbal though it might be. Because of that, the depressive affect makes up for symbolic invalidation and interruption (the depressive's "that's meaningless") and at the same time protects it against proceeding to the suicidal act. That protection, however, is a flimsy one. The depressive denial that destroys the meaning of the symbolic also destroys the act's meaning and leads the subject to commit suicide without anguish of disintegration, as a reuniting with archaic nonintegration, as lethal as it is jubilatory, "oceanic."

Hence, schizoid parceling is a defense against death—against somatization or suicide. Depression, on the other hand, does without the schizoid anguish of fragmentation. But if depression is not fortunate enough to rely on a certain *erotization of suffering* it cannot act as a defense against the death drive. The relief that precedes some

suicides perhaps translates the archaic regression by means of which the act of a denied or numbed consciousness turns Thanatos back on the self and reclaims the nonintegrated self's lost paradise, one without others or limits, a fantasy of untouchable fullness.

The speaking subject can thus react to trouble not only through defensive parceling but also through slowing down—inhibition, denial of sequentiality, neutralization of the signifier. Some immaturization or other neurobiological features tending toward nonintegration may condition such behavior. Is it a defensive one? Depressed persons do not defend themselves against death but against the anguish prompted by the erotic object. Depressive persons cannot endure Eros, they prefer to be with the Thing up to the limit of negative narcissism leading them to Thanatos. They are defended against Eros by sorrow but without defense against Thanatos because they are wholeheartedly tied to the Thing. Messengers of Thanatos, melancholy people are witness/accomplices of the signifier's flimsiness, the living being's precariousness.

Less skillful than Melanie Klein in presenting a new repertory of drives, the death drive in particular, Freud nevertheless seems drastic. As he sees it, the speaking being, beyond power, desires death. At this logical extreme, desire no longer exists. Desire becomes dissolved in a disintegration of transmission and a disintegration of bonds. Be it biologically predetermined, following upon preobject narcissistic traumas, or quite simply caused by inversion of aggressiveness, the phenomenon that might be described as a *breakdown of biological and logical sequentiality* finds its radical manifestation in melancholia. Would the death drive be the primary (logically and chronologically) inscription of that breakdown?

Actually, if the death drive remains a theoretical specu-

lation, the experience of depression confronts the observer as much as the patient with the enigma of mood.

### *Is Mood a Language?*

Sadness is the fundamental mood of depression, and even if manic euphoria alternates with it in the bipolar forms of that ailment, sorrow is the major outward sign that gives away the desperate person. Sadness leads us into the enigmatic realm of *affects*—anguish, fear, or joy.<sup>23</sup> Irreducible to its verbal or semiological expressions, sadness (like all affect) is the *psychic representation of energy displacements* caused by external or internal traumas. The exact status of such psychic representations of energy displacements remains, in the present state of psychoanalytic and semiological theories, very vague. No conceptual framework in the relevant sciences (particularly linguistics) has proven adequate to account for this apparently very rudimentary representation, presign and prelanguage. The “sadness” mood triggered by a stimulation, tension, or energy conflict within a psychosomatic organism is not a *specific* answer to a release mechanism (I am not sad as a response to or sign for X and only X). Mood is a “generalized transference” (E. Jacobson) that stamps the *entire* behavior and all the sign systems (from motor functions to speech production and idealization) without either identifying with them or disorganizing them. We are justified in believing that an archaic *energy signal* is involved, a phylogenetic inheritance, which, within the psychic space of the human being, is *immediately* assumed by verbal representation and consciousness. Nevertheless, such an “assumption” is not related to what occurs when the energies that Freud calls “bonded” lend themselves to verbalization, association, and judgment. Let us say that representations germane to

affects, notably sadness, are *fluctuating* energy cathexes: insufficiently stabilized to coalesce as verbal or other signs, acted upon by primary processes of displacement and condensation, dependent just the same on the agency of the ego, they record through its intermediary the threats, orders, and injunctions of the superego. Thus moods are *inscriptions*, energy disruptions, and not simply raw energies. They lead us toward a modality of signifi-ance that, on the threshold of bioenergetic stability, insures the pre-conditions for (or manifests the disintegration of) the imaginary and the symbolic. On the frontier between animality and symbol formation, moods—and particularly sadness—are the ultimate reactions to our traumas, they are our basic homeostatic recourses. For if it is true that those who are slaves to their moods, beings drowned in their sorrows, reveal a number of psychic or cognitive frailties, it is equally true that a diversification of moods, variety in sadness, refinement in sorrow or mourning are the imprint of a humankind that is surely not triumphant but subtle, ready to fight, and creative . . .

Literary creation is that adventure of the body and signs that bears witness to the affect—to sadness as imprint of separation and beginning of the symbol's sway; to joy as imprint of the triumph that settles me in the universe of artifice and symbol, which I try to harmonize in the best possible way with my experience of reality. But that testimony is produced by literary creation in a material that is totally different from what constitutes mood. It transposes affect into rhythms, signs, forms. The "semiotic" and the "symbolic"<sup>24</sup> become the communicable imprints of an affective reality, perceptible to the reader (I like this book because it conveys sadness, anguish, or joy) and yet dominated, set aside, vanquished.

### *Symbolic Equivalent/s/Symbols*

Assuming that affect is the most archaic inscription of inner and outer events, how does one reach the realm of signs? I shall accept Hanna Segal's hypothesis, according to which, beginning with separation (let us note that a "lack" is necessary for the *sign* to emerge), the child produces or uses objects or vocalizations that are the *symbolic* equivalents of what is lacking. Later, and beginning with the so-called depressive position, it attempts to signify the sadness that overwhelms it by producing within its own self elements alien to the outer world, which it causes to correspond to such a lost or shifted outerness; we are then faced with *symbols* properly speaking, no longer with *equivalencies*.<sup>25</sup>

Let me add the following to Hanna Segal's position: what makes such a triumph over sadness possible is the ability of the self to identify no longer with the lost object but with a third party—father, form, schema. A requirement for a denying or manic position ("no, I haven't lost; I evoke, I signify through the artifice of signs and for myself what has been parted from me"), such an identification, which may be called phallic or symbolic, insures the subject's entrance into the universe of signs and creation. The supporting father of such a symbolic triumph is not the oedipal father but truly that "imaginary father," "father in individual prehistory" according to Freud, who guarantees primary identification. Nevertheless, it is imperative that this father in individual prehistory be capable of playing his part as oedipal father in symbolic Law, for it is on the basis of that harmonious blending of the two facets of fatherhood that the abstract and arbitrary signs of communication may be fortunate enough to be tied to the

affective meaning of prehistorical identifications, and the dead language of the potentially depressive person can arrive at a live meaning in the bond with others.

Under the totally different circumstances of literary creation, for instance, the manic position as sheathing of depression—an essential moment in the formation of the symbol—can be manifested through the establishment of a symbolic lineage. We may thus find a recourse to proper names linked to a subject's real or imaginary history, with that subject declaring itself their heir or equal; what they truly memorialize, beyond paternal weakness, is nostalgic dedication to the lost mother (see chapter 6 on Nerval).

At the outset we have objectal depression (implicitly aggressive), and narcissistic depression (logically previous to the libidinal object relation)—an affectivity struggling with signs, going beyond, threatening, or modifying them. Starting from such a setting, the line of questioning that I shall pursue could be summed up as follows: aesthetic and particularly literary creation, and also religious discourse in its imaginary, fictional essence, set forth a device whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters, and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject's battle with symbolic collapse. Such a literary representation is not an *elaboration* in the sense of "becoming aware" of the inter- and intrapsychic causes of moral suffering; that is where it diverges from the psychoanalytic course, which aims at dissolving this symptom. Nevertheless, the literary (and religious) representation possesses a real and imaginary effectiveness that comes closer to catharsis than to elaboration; it is a therapeutic device used in all societies throughout the ages. If psychoanalysts think they are more efficacious, notably through strengthening the subject's cognitive possibilities, they also owe it to themselves to enrich their practice by

paying greater attention to these sublimatory solutions to our crises, in order to be lucid counterdepressants rather than neutralizing antidepressants.

### *Is Death Nonrepresentable?*

Having posited that the unconscious is ruled by the pleasure principle, Freud very logically postulated that there is no representation of death in the unconscious. Just as it is unaware of negation, the unconscious is unaware of death. Synonymous with absence of *jouissance*, imaginary equivalent of phallic dispossession, death could not possibly be seen. It is, perhaps, for that very reason that it opens the way to speculation.

And yet, as clinical experience led Freud to the notion of narcissism, ending in the discovery of the death drive and the second topography,<sup>26</sup> he compelled us to recognize a vision of the psychic apparatus in which Eros is threatened with domination by Thanatos and where, consequently, the possibility of representing death should be examined from a different standpoint.

*Castration fear*, glimpsed until then as underlying the conscious death anguish, does not disappear but is overshadowed by the *fear of losing the object* or *losing oneself as object* (etiology of melancholia and narcissistic psychoses).

Such an evolution in Freudian thought leaves us with two problems that have been emphasized by André Green.<sup>27</sup>

First, what about the *representation* of the death drive? Unknown to the unconscious, it is, with the "second Freud," a "cultivation of the superego," as one might put it in turning Freud's phrase around. The death drive splits the very ego into one component that is unaware of such drive while being affected by it (that is, its unconscious component) and another component that struggles against

it (that is, the megalomaniac ego that negates castration and death and fantasizes immortality).

More basically, however, does not such a splitting cut across all discourse? The symbol is established through a negation (*Verneinung*) of the loss, but a disavowal (*Verleugnung*) of the symbol produces a physis inscription as close as one can get to hatred and a hold over the lost object (see chapter 2). That is what one deciphers in the blanks of discourse, vocalizations, rhythms, syllables of words that have been devitalized and need to be restored by the analyst on the basis of an apprehended depression.

Thus, if the death drive is not represented in the unconscious, must one invent another level in the psychic apparatus where—simultaneously with *jouissance*—the being of its nonbeing would be recorded? It is indeed a production of the split ego, made up of fantasy and fiction—in short, the level of the imagination, the level of writing—which bears witness to the hiatus, blank, or spacing that constitutes death for the unconscious.

### *Dissociations of Forms*

Imaginary constructions change the death drive into eroticized aggression against the father or terrified loathing of the mother's body. We know that at the same time as he discovered the power of the death drive Freud shifted his interest not only from the theoretical model of the first topography (conscious/preconscious/unconscious) toward that of the second topography, but especially, and thanks to the shift, turned toward the analysis of imaginary productions (religions, arts, literature). He found in them a kind of representation of death anxiety.<sup>28</sup> Does this mean that dread of dying—which henceforth is not summed up in castration fear but includes it and adds to it the wounding and perhaps even the loss of integrity of the body and

the self—finds its representations in formations that are called “transconscious” in the imaginary constructions of the split subject, according to Lacan? Doubtless so.

The fact remains that another reading of the unconscious itself might locate within its own fabric, such as certain dreams disclose it for us, that nonrepresentative spacing of representation that is not the *sign* but the *index* of death drive. Dreams of borderline patients, schizoid personalities, or those undergoing psychedelic experiments are often “abstract paintings” or cascades of sounds, intricacies of lines and fabrics, in which the analyst deciphers the dissociation—or a nonintegration—of psychic and somatic unity. Such indices could be interpreted as the ultimate imprint of the death drive. Aside from the images of the death drive, necessarily displaced on account of being eroticized, the work of death as such, at the zero degree of psychicism, can be spotted precisely in the *dissociation of form* itself, when form is distorted, abstracted, disfigured, hollowed out: ultimate thresholds of inscribable dislocation and *jouissance* . . .

Furthermore, the unrepresentable nature of death was linked with that other unrepresentable—original abode but also last resting place for dead souls, in the beyond—which, for mythical thought, is constituted by the female body. The horror of castration underlying the anguish of death undoubtedly accounts in large part for the universal partnership with death of the penis-lacking feminine. Nevertheless, the death drive hypothesis compels a different reasoning.

### *Death-Bearing Woman*

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, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances and can be eroticized—whether the lost object is recovered as erotic object (as is the case for male heterosexuality or female homosexuality), or it is transposed by means of an unbelievable symbolic effort, the advent of which one can only admire, which eroticizes the *other* (the other sex, in the case of the heterosexual woman) or transforms cultural constructs into a “sublime” erotic object (one thinks of the cathexes, by men and women, in social bonds, intellectual and aesthetic productions, etc.). The lesser or greater violence of matricidal drive, depending on individuals and the milieu’s tolerance, entails, when it is hindered, its inversion on the self; the maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows, instead of matricide. In order to protect mother I kill myself while knowing—phantasmatic and protective knowledge—that it comes from her, the death-bearing she-Gehenna . . . Thus my hatred is safe and my matricidal guilt erased. I make of Her an image of Death so as not to be shattered through the hatred I bear against myself when I identify with Her, for that aversion is in principle meant for her as it is an individuating dam against confusional love. Thus the feminine as image of death is not only a screen for my fear of castration, but also an imaginary safety catch for the matricidal drive that, without such a representation, would pulverize me into melancholia if it did not drive me to crime. No, it is She who is death-bearing, therefore I do not kill myself in order to kill her but I attack her, harass her, represent her. . .

For a woman, whose specular identification with the mother as well as the introjection of the maternal body and self are more immediate, such an inversion of matri-

cidal drive into a death-bearing maternal image is more difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, how can She be that bloodthirsty Fury, since I am She (sexually and narcissistically), She is I? Consequently, the hatred I bear her is not oriented toward the outside but is locked up within myself. There is no hatred, only an implosive mood that walls itself in and kills me secretly, very slowly, through permanent bitterness, bouts of sadness, or even lethal sleeping pills that I take in smaller or greater quantities in the dark hope of meeting . . . no one, unless it be my imaginary wholeness, increased with my death that accomplishes me. The homosexual shares the same depressive economy: he is a delightful melancholy person when he does not indulge in sadistic passion with another man.

The fantasy of feminine immortality perhaps has its basis in the feminine germinal transmission, capable of parthenogenesis. Furthermore, the new techniques of artificial reproduction endow the female body with unsuspected reproductive possibilities. If that feminine “all-mightiness” in the survival of the species can be undermined through other technical possibilities that, or so it seems, might make man pregnant as well, it is likely that this latter eventuality could attract only a small minority, even though it fulfills the androgynous fantasies of the majority. Nevertheless, the essential component of the feminine conviction of being immortal in and beyond death (which the Virgin Mary so perfectly embodies) is rooted less in those biological possibilities, where it is hard to discern the “bridge” to the psyche, than in “negative narcissism.”

In its climax, the latter weakens the aggressive (matricidal) affect toward the other as well as the despondent affect within oneself and substitutes what one might call an “oceanic void.” It is a feeling and fantasy of pain, but anesthetized, of *jouissance*, but in suspense, of an expect-



tation and a silence as empty as they are fulfilled. In the midst of its lethal ocean, the melancholy woman is the dead one that has always been abandoned within herself and can never kill outside herself (see chapter 3). Modest, silent, without verbal or desiring bonds with others, she wastes away by striking moral and physic blows against herself, which, nevertheless, do not give her sufficient pleasures. Until the fatal blow—the definitive nuptials of the Dead Woman with the Same, whom she did not kill.

One cannot overemphasize the tremendous psychic, intellectual, and affective effort a woman must make in order to find the other sex as erotic object. In his philogenetic musings, Freud often admires the intellectual accomplishment of the man who has been (or when he is) deprived of women (through glaciation or tyranny on the part of the father of the primal horde, etc.). If the discovery of her invisible vagina already imposes upon woman a tremendous sensory, speculative, and intellectual effort, shifting to the symbolic order *at the same time* as to a sexual object of a sex other than that of the primary maternal object represents a gigantic elaboration in which a woman cathexes a psychic potential greater than what is demanded of the male sex. When this process is favorably carried out, it is evidenced by the precocious awakening of girls, their intellectual performances often more brilliant during the school years, and their continuing female maturity. Nevertheless, it has its price in the constant tendency to extol the problematic mourning for the lost object . . . not so fully lost, and it remains, throbbing, in the “crypt” of feminine ease and maturity. Unless a massive introjection of the ideal succeeds, at the same time, in satisfying narcissism with its negative side *and* the longing to be present in the arena where the world’s power is at stake.

## *Life and Death of Speech*