

Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia. Julia Kristeva, translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. 240 pp. \$24. Paperback ISBN: 9780231561549.

In her book *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva, a renowned psychoanalyst and Professor Emerita of Linguistics at the Université de Paris VII, addresses the subject of melancholia with psychoanalysis, in the context of linguistics, art, philosophy, and the history of religion and culture. For her, depression is a language to be learned, rather than just a pathology to be cured. The book comprises eight chapters, each focusing on distinct and unique themes exploring the pervasive nature of melancholy. To maintain coherence, each chapter is further divided into several smaller sub-themes, ensuring a nuanced exploration rather than a sprawling narrative. Preceding the chapters, Kristeva features three poignant quotes from different authors, underscoring melancholia as a path to profound self-discovery. These quotes serve as a thematic preamble, delving into the historical evolution of melancholia and its role in facilitating personal growth.

The first chapter explores the intersection of melancholia and psychoanalysis, examining how profound depression can affect the psyche. It starts by noting that writing about melancholia gains meaning when emerging from deep sorrow, often linked to personal loss, leading to a life shadowed by despair and death. The chapter then transitions to philosophical and psychoanalytic perspectives, particularly Freudian analysis, which explores the intricate dynamics of love, hatred, and self-destruction related to a lost object, and how melancholia often exposes deeper narcissistic wounds. It frames melancholia as a challenge to language and representation, connecting it to a primal “thing” that drives both sorrow and creativity.

Additionally, it touches on anality within psychoanalytic theory, Freud's and Melanie Klein's contributions on “death drive” and “object” relations. Kristeva's critique of traditional psychoanalytic approaches is also discussed, proposing that incorporating literary and symbolic interpretations may offer a richer therapeutic response to depressive states, emphasising the complex interplay between the death drive, gendered experiences, and maternal loss.

In chapter two, Kristeva examines how depression disrupts language and cognition, leading to fragmented, monotonous, and repetitive speech. She links this to biological and chemical imbalances, and psychoanalytic and symbolic struggles, where denial further impairs the ability to express emotions meaningfully and distorts time. According to Kristeva, therapeutic intervention can restore the capacity for coherent discourse. Through an analysis of Melanie Klein's projective identification, Kristeva explores how early psychic processes involve projecting parts of the self onto objects, often asserting control through preverbal means. Kristeva also discusses Western and non-Western approaches to language and symbolic representation to highlight differences in how primal objects are conveyed.

Chapter three explores the nuanced interplay of melancholic identity, trauma, and repressed emotions in feminine melancholy. The chapter uses detailed case studies, such as *Helen's* case of maternal erotic fixation and frigidity, to highlight how feminine depression embodies a tension between loss of self and omnipotent control. Kristeva contrasts phallic jouissance with a deeper psychic jouissance, portraying feminine depression as a manifestation of revenge, power, and

destructive impulses. The cases of *Marie-Ange* and *Isabel* further explore themes of maternal neglect, phobias, and the dynamics of desire and perversion, revealing how their emotional struggles are intertwined with their identities and unresolved traumas. It aims to reconcile desire and loss, facilitating a psychic reordering that embraces conflict and separation, and promotes growth.

In chapter four, Kristeva analyses the complex interplay between artistic beauty, mourning, and sublimation. This chapter reflects on Freud's insights into mourning and melancholia, suggesting that beauty, despite its ephemerality, may serve as a sublimatory outlet that helps individuals process grief. Through prosody, polyvalence of symbols, and forgiveness, beauty allows for a psychic reorganization that transforms loss into a form of transcendence. The chapter draws connections between Western allegorical traditions, particularly Baroque art, and the role of beauty as a way to navigate the depressive void, creating a fragile balance between loss and resurrection. Beauty is presented as both an artificial construction and a profound means of confronting existential despair, intertwining imagination, loss, and meaning.

In chapter five, Kristeva contrasts Holbein the Younger's starkly realistic and disenchanted portrayal of Christ's death in his *Dead Christ* painting (c. 1521-1522) with dramatic and divine representations of earlier artists like Mathias Grünewald. Unlike the emotional Gothic and sublime Italian depictions, Holbein presents a subdued, clinical image of Christ's corpse, reflecting a Renaissance shift towards more personal and less idealized artistic expressions of death. By engaging with Hegel's philosophy of death, Holbein's depiction challenges viewers to confront the inevitable and somber reality of mortality and human existence, offering a contemplative perspective on the unresolved and tense intersection of life and death.

Kristeva analyses poet Gérard de Nerval's life and work in chapter six, focusing on "El Desdichado" and "Artemis." Nerval's work reflects his struggle with detaching from the material world and his quest for a mystical, lost paradise. Nerval's melancholic tone intertwines with themes of death, cryptic historical allusions, and personal grief, and Kristeva portrays him as a tragic Orpheus figure. Kristeva discusses his dual identification with masculine and feminine elements, the violence inherent in his depiction of love, and his poetic descent into and return from hell as a means of transforming trauma into artistic expression. Nerval's poetry is framed as a response to existential crises and nihilism, using symbolism to confront "black sun of melancholia" and seek connection with a lost or unattainable object, often represented as a maternal figure.

Kristeva delves into the complex relationship between art, suffering, and forgiveness through an examination of novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky's works in chapter seven. Suffering is portrayed as a fundamental paradox—destructive yet a source of creative and spiritual insights. This suffering is also aligned with Freud's notions of "death drive" and "primary masochism," presenting a near-preconscious struggle linked to philosophical debates. Dostoyevsky integrated biblical themes, especially from the *Book of Job*, into his exploration of forgiveness, portraying it as crucial for spiritual and moral rebirth. His works, influenced by Orthodox Christian theology, use suffering as a narrative tool for spiritual growth. Forgiveness is redefined as a symbolic and

artistic act that blends suffering, justice, and redemption, transforming writing into a medium of profound moral and emotional exploration.

The final chapter shows how contemporary literature, especially the work of Marguerite Duras, grapples with representing the profound invisible crises stemming from catastrophic events like the Second World War. It highlights how traditional rhetoric falls short, and art either uses stark imagery or avoids conventional language to convey the inexpressible. Duras' fragmented, unconventional writing immerses readers in raw grief and trauma, blending individual, socio-political, and historical suffering without offering catharsis. The chapter also explores how grief affects relationships and how Duras' fragmented language reflects contemporary, postmodern themes of disillusionment and the search for meaning. Kristeva critiques this shift from profound to superficial narratives, suggesting that despite postmodern trivialization, deep grief persists in new forms.

Black Sun is an in-depth exploration of melancholia that integrates narrative and theoretical insights to trace its origins and manifestations across historical and social contexts. Kristeva's analysis situates melancholia not just as a psychological condition but as a deeply ingrained cultural and existential experience, informed by Enlightenment thought, Christian theology, and psychoanalytic theories. Kristeva's work is valuable for those interested in psychoanalysis, literary theory, and cultural studies, and it offers rich insights into the interplay between melancholy, language, and artistic expression. Its interdisciplinary approach makes it a crucial resource for anyone exploring the dynamics of melancholia and its impact on human creativity and self-perception.

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