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Chapter Five of the catalogue for Julia Kristeva's Louvre exhibition *Visions Capitales (The Severed Head)* is subtitled "Inscribing the Mother and the Void."¹ Here Kristeva makes the argument that the virgin Mary is implicated in the authorization of the Orthodox Byzantine icon, specifically in the experience of viewing the iconic image, which refers to nothing external, but rather to the passage between the order of the invisible and the visible. She invokes Marie-José Mondzain's work on the Byzantine icon,² which argues that the icon visibly manifests the invisible image of the divine economy itself rather than any specific sensibly accessible object. Kristeva maintains that this passage between invisibility and visibility parallels the conception (in both senses) of Christ as God's incarnation through Mary's divine impregnation. The economy of the icon embodies not what the icon seems to represent, but the entire chain by which God is incarnated through the body of Mary, a process that allows the divine to be "dispensed into history" by entering into the flesh and into the visible. Iconographic representation is not mimesis in the traditional sense, on this argument, because it takes account both of birth through the maternal body and the void (the kenosis, or "self-emptying" of the incarnation). The void is thus inscribed along with the divine image, giving it birth in the visible. The void itself, she argues, "is nothing other than the sign of the sacrificial cut," the invisible divine sacrificing itself to give birth to the visible.³ Kristeva adds to Mondzain's analysis by reading the cut psychoanalytically as the severance from the mother that allows for the emergence of representation in image and in symbol. She links this cut to the theme of the exhibit, the severed head.

The chapter concerns a trio of concepts specific to the articulation of the shift from Orthodox iconography to the Catholic tradition of figuring the divine, namely, economy, figure, and face (in French, both *visage* and *figure*).

Kristeva compares the tradition of making images of the divine family and of Biblical stories, as it flourished in Catholicism, with the Orthodox iconography of Byzantium. One of the causes of the split between the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church was that the latter was perceived by the former to worship idols, yet in the late ninth century AD, the Orthodox patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople introduced a novel argument in favor of the icon as a form of representation of the divine that did not blasphemously imitate it. Kristeva postulates that Orthodox iconophilia functions as the equivalent of the psychoanalytic concept of negation in that in the very act of negating the image in its traditional function of imitating or copying, it allows for some repressed element to appear that would otherwise remain hidden.⁴ Negation, on this reading, parallels Mondzain's argument about the way in which the icon brings forth the invisible.

The lines of the icon do not imprison the divine, as the iconoclasts would have it, but rather allow it to be seen, according to Mondzain. This is the "true saga of the image." The line of inscription of the icon, which literally marks a cut, indicates both where the divine begins or is incarnated and where the void ends.⁵ Byzantine icons, which both forswear and present the image, can be conceived, Kristeva argues, as a form of decapitation, just as the icon frequently depicts Christ as a head without a body. Decapitation, she writes, "creeps into the visible as an inscription of a void that gives birth."⁶ Thus the cut is not just a severance from the mother, but also a retrieval of her flesh in a transfigured form.

Mondzain writes that this new sense of mimesis does not refer to or represent empirical reality. Rather, "the icon attempts to present the grace of an absence within a system of graphic inscription." Against iconoclastic criticism, the specific tradition of the Byzantine icon does not *depict* Christ, but represents a movement *toward* Christ, "who never stops withdrawing"⁷; in the same way, in the psychoanalytic paradigm, entrance into language is said to cut us off from reality, while at the same time words and symbols aim to substitute for the lost thing, which also withdraws. Mimesis does not provide a material copy, but relates the human form to the divine Word: "it is *mimesis* of the incarnation itself."⁸

Kristeva reflects on the affinity of Medusa images with the iconic tradition by noting that the Medusa is also a forbidden vision only accessible to humans in the form of the *eikon*.⁹ The gaze of Medusa can turn the onlooker to stone, but her icon also protects the one who wears it, which is why Athena placed it on her shield. In psychoanalytic theory Medusa's head, or any head severed from the body that nourishes it and gives it life, operates as an image of the severed state of castration, according to Freud¹⁰; for Kristeva, in turn, decapitation is a figure for the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's account of the child's necessary developmental separation from fusion with the mother as provider of all needs, precisely in order to be able

to rediscover her in symbolic and imaginary life. As she writes in the introduction to *The Severed Head*:

A body leaves me: her tactile warmth, her music that delights my ear, the view that offers me her head and face are lost. For this capital loss I substitute a capital vision: my hallucinations and my words. Imagination, language, beyond the depression: an incarnation? The one that keeps me alive, on condition that I continue to represent, ceaselessly, never enough, indefinitely, but what? A body that has left me? A lost head?¹¹

As Kristeva articulates it, in course of normal individual psychic development, “the ego takes shape by way of a depressive working through.”¹² In this version of standard child development, depression (from Melanie Klein’s “depressive position”) is caused by the child’s gradual and necessary separation, as it grows older, from its primary provider, and its subsequent assumption of a subjective identity in the “father”’s realm of language and social interaction. Because in order to function in the world we necessarily assume a position within the universal sphere of language and law, there is no going back, for the child, to the intimate fused sphere of maternal love. As Kristeva puts it, “there is no meaning aside from despair.” Such closure both is exhilarating and provokes anguish. The individual cannot return to the position of fusion with the mother, but she can and does attempt to recuperate her, along with other objects, in imagination and, later, in words.¹³

In her book on the French writer Colette, Kristeva explicitly links decapitation to the “decisive moment in our individuation: when the child gets free of the mother...[losing] her in order to be able to conceive of her”; she calls this moment an “Orestian matricide, a decapitation.”¹⁴ Colette’s imagination was stirred by images from ancient works depicting severed heads, to the point that she choreographed a ballet featuring the dance of a decapitated Sultaness. Kristeva speculates that the Sultaness could refer to Colette herself (who called her second husband “the Sultan”), or to Colette’s mother, for whose matricide she had to unconsciously assume responsibility, “so as to give free rein—and only on that condition—to her polymorphous body and her sublimations.”¹⁵ Here decapitation is not an expression of lack so much as a condition of creativity on Colette’s part. In the same way, kenosis is the condition for the possibility of representing the divine economy.

The iconic order read through this paradigm compensates for the original lack, but this lack can never be completely overcome. Thus the lack itself must also be inscribed, along with the plenitude to which it gives birth, and it is in this double movement of erasure and representation that a new logic of presentation, the iconic, comes into being. In its depiction of the

divine, the iconic also inscribes the mother and the lack or void. As Mondzain outlines at length, Nicephorus championed a version of iconophilia that could be reconciled with iconoclasm by negotiating an economy of divine presence that inscribes the appearance of (divine) Being as a sensible trace¹⁶ rather than directly manifesting it.¹⁷ Thereby the invisible is allowed to appear precisely in the injunction against mimesis. The polysemic term “economy” can refer at once to the conceptually distinct moments of the incarnation, or consubstantiation of God in his son, *and* to the tradition of representing the divine in icons, on multiple and different orders of similitude. This “double articulation” allows for a simultaneous preservation of the enigma of the divine in its incarnation, and the possibility of authorizing the specular through iconography without thereby reducing it to a *techne*.¹⁸ In articulating these two orders of resemblance, the economy produces the icon, which, Kristeva writes, “from then on, does not let an exterior *object* be seen, but only this *economy itself*.”¹⁹ In other words, the icon gives a visible form to the divine *Logos* itself, in all its manifestations, rather than representing through mimesis any particular divine figure. Nicephorus refers to this incarnation through the image with Plato’s word *chora*, indicating the receptacle or medium in which the cosmos was created.

Kristeva points out that the word “icon,” or *eikon* in Greek, is a homophone of economy, or *oiekonomia*, and that the economy of Nicephorus encompasses divine mystery and its potential inscription in a dialectic that is Platonic rather than Hegelian, in that it assures an open debate rather than a resolution of opposition.²⁰ Kristeva argues in *Black Sun* that the orthodox icon’s emphasis on difference and identity rather than autonomy and equality indicates the fullness of each person in the polyphony of her identifications. Orthodox art thus explores both suffering and mercy, disappearance and reappearance.²¹

The inscriptive tradition to which the iconic tradition belongs also encompasses accounts of the so-called mandylion of Abgar, a piece of fabric upon which the face of Jesus was said to be imprinted (unlike the shroud of Turin, the imprint is of a face, not an entire body). The important facet of the mandylion that Kristeva emphasizes is that it is an imprint, or indication, rather than a representation of Christ’s face. Nicephorus argued for a conception of mimesis that would signify not copying or circumscribing the divine, but inscribing it, where inscription indicates an emptiness or void beneath the sketch or imprint of the face.

Kristeva sees a continuity in this rich tradition of inscription that developed from the icon in some forms of contemporary art. In particular, she discusses the Italian artist Lucio Fontana, whose artworks often consist of incisions into paper or other media. She argues that through inscription Fontana invites the viewer to participate in a “visible” realm not limited to the gaze, but which “engages our entire affectivity,” thus unconsciously

invoking the icon's "oscillation" between the visible and the invisible.²² Here the "invisible" would refer not to the divine but rather to the unconscious, the entire unrepresented realm of affects and drives, as well as to the semiotic underbelly of symbolic life. The cut indicates the necessity of great artworks' relation to a founding emptiness, the link it provides between the spectator and "their invisible center." All great art, writes Mondzain, is "kenotic."²³

By contrast, the Latin conception of *figura*, or prophetic announcement of the coming of Jesus in Old Testament signs, as described by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*, lends itself to the growth of a representative continuum where the invisible economy is replaced by the network of signs of prefiguration. Every event of the tradition is rendered visible in its role as the herald of the next: the sacrifice of Isaac prefigures that of Christ, and so on. Such a conception of figuration sees a continuity in the Judaic and Christian traditions, as well as a continuity between the unrepresentable nature of God and his figuration in the material presence of Christ, such that no absence or void remains. In this tradition representation can be associated with *mimesis* in the traditional sense of copying, or circumscribing, and lends itself to a more familiar tradition of iconophilia. Kristeva discusses this separation between economy and figure as the determination of two distinct destinies for representation in the West.²⁴ Figure, as opposed to the icon, delineates an interpretive system in which "the Risen One accomplishes, increases, and exceeds the work of his Precursor" according to the logic of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*.²⁵

Kristeva draws a parallel between this movement from the invisible-visible economy of the icon to the representational plenitude of figuration and the development in the French language of the 18th century, when *visage*, the word for the human face, gradually took on the meaning of *figure*, so that now the two words are used almost interchangeably. While *vis* indicates "vision," a kind of "mirror of the soul," *figure* indicates "form" in a more abstract sense, and, she argues, "more or less unconsciously, its sense of prophecy in actuality."²⁶ She hypothesizes that the imbrication of *visage* and *figure* was achieved in Denis Diderot's defense of a new kind of painting, where the portrait painter both corrects and is corrected by what (s)he paints. Kristeva calls this new sense of *figure* one that "expresses a tension between two worlds, two logics, two types of action—a sort of 'prophecy in actuality' in the immanence of human experience."²⁷ Here, the new sense of face would be one in which the ideal is prefigured by the image, which would contain within it a striving toward a more perfect future iteration, like a prophecy of a better self.

In Chapter Six of *The Severed Head*, Kristeva contrasts the destinies of John the Baptist, whose life famously ended in decapitation, and Jesus, according to this schema. Is John the Baptist an ideal figure, or a "prophecy in actuality," she asks in the title. While he has been appropriated by

Christian art in the manner of *figura*, and known primarily as the one who announces the coming of Christ,²⁸ that is, as the very figure of figure itself, on Kristeva's reading we can also, through great artworks of John the Baptist's decapitation, experience his figure as severed. In this guise John would not prefigure the incarnation, but the image of his head would rather rest in severance in order to remind us of our origin in a cut, away from maternal flesh and through kenosis. On this reading John the Baptist is to Christ what Kristeva's interpretation of the decapitated head is to Hegel's version of dialectical sublation, both an emptying out and a "barbaric decapitation prefiguring a delicious peace to be won after death."²⁹ The death of John the Baptist is "the theme par excellence on which that figurability specific to the fate of the West had to be built, because it reconciles incision and perspective, sacrifice and resurrection."³⁰ This moment, resting in the vision of John's severed head, is "a capital moment of the destiny of the occident which no history book mentions," a crossroads where two destinies for representation in the West are determined.³¹ The tradition of *figura* and of mimetic representation dominated visual art for centuries. In the iconic tradition, by contrast, which has been taken up by some contemporary art, a possibility is opened up for a co-presence of the matriarchal and the patriarchal, for Mary and Medusa alongside Christ and John the Baptist, and for a visual reminder of the cut that gives birth to the image and to the symbol.

¹ This paper was presented as part of a roundtable on Kristeva's *The Severed Head* at the inaugural meeting of the Kristeva Circle on October 13, 2012.

² Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

³ Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 55.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Negation" (1925), in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963).

⁵ Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 93.

⁶ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 55.

⁷ Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 88.

⁸ Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 89.

- ⁹ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 30.
- ¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "The Medusa's Head" (1922), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 18, ed. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1955-1974), 274.
- ¹¹ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 6.
- ¹² Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, Vol. 2 of *Female Genius: Life, Madness, Word*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 89.
- ¹³ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 5.
- ¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Colette*, Vol. 3 of *Female Genius: Life, Madness, Words*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 239.
- ¹⁵ Kristeva, *Colette*, 239.
- ¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Crisis of the (European) Subject*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2000), 153.
- ¹⁷ Kristeva also points to Hans Holbein's position between iconoclasm and representation in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 124-125.
- ¹⁸ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 52.
- ¹⁹ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 53.
- ²⁰ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 49.
- ²¹ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 211.
- ²² Kristeva, *Crisis of the (European) Subject*, 154.
- ²³ Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 92.
- ²⁴ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 59.
- ²⁵ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 58.
- ²⁶ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 60.
- ²⁷ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 60.
- ²⁸ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 66.
- ²⁹ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 71.
- ³⁰ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 66.
- ³¹ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 59.