

**THE CREATIVITY
OF THE CRISIS**

Other Books by Évelyne Grossman

In English

The Anguish of Thought (University of Michigan Press, 2017)

In French

Éloge de l'hypersensible (2017)

Louise Bourgeois, Three Horizontals, avec F. Danesi et F. Vengeon (Ophrys, Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, coll. « Voir-Faire-Lire », 2011)

L'Angoisse de penser (2008)

Antonin Artaud, un insurgé du corps (Gallimard, coll. « Découvertes », 2006)

La Défiguration. Artaud, Beckett, Michaux (2004)

Artaud, l'aliéné authentique (Farrago-Léo Scheer, 2003)

La Traversée de la mélancolie (dir. avec N. Piégay) (Séguier, 2002)

Henri Michaux, le corps de la pensée (dir. avec A.-E. Halpern et P. Vilar) (Farrago-Léo Scheer, 2001)

Samuel Beckett : l'écriture et la scène (dir. avec R. Salado) (Sedes, 1998)

L'Esthétique de Beckett (Sedes, 1998)

Artaud / Joyce. Le corps et le texte (Nathan, coll. « Le texte à l'oeuvre », 1996)

As Editor

Derniers cahiers d'Ivry, février 1947–mars 1948 d'Antonin Artaud, édition, notes et préface, 2 vol. (Gallimard, 2011)

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Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu d'Antonin Artaud, édition et préface (Gallimard, coll. « Poésie/Gallimard », 2003)

Van Gogh le suicidé de la société d'Antonin Artaud, édition et préface (Gallimard, coll. « L'imaginaire », 2001)

ÉVELYNE GROSSMAN

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Translated by Rainer J. Hanshe

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If you want to apply biblio-biographical criteria to me, I confess I wrote my first book quite early, and then nothing for eight years. [...] It's like a hole in my life, a hole of eight years. [...] It's perhaps in these holes that movement takes place. Because the question is how to make a move, how to shatter the wall, to stop banging your head.

Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*

Crisis of Creativity

Everyone more or less knows the crisis of inspiration. There is no need to be a sanctioned writer, creator, artist, or inventor since its manifestations are, ironically, within everyone's reach: absence of ideas, sluggish cogitation, numb psyche, overwhelming emptiness. Depressive symptom? Excessive demand toward oneself (perfectionism...)? Severe superego prohibiting too much pleasure? It doesn't really matter since the causes and symptoms are flourishing, in contrast to the nothingness of ideas. The experience can arise regardless of the field in which the inventiveness is exercised, whether it is writing an article, a thesis or an essay, composing a novel, a piece of music, developing a plastic work, writing a film script. Sometimes it is enough to have something to write, a task to complete, even a very modest "paper," a priori without any stake, for the blockage to arise — the breakdown, the turbulence. Keeping our word, meeting deadlines, having something to say... Our time, always quick to imagine new psychic ailments, has conceived this term: "leucosélophobia," blank page syndrome, writing block. If we can doubt that the pathology really exists, we must honor the humorous creativity of the term: *leuco* referring to white, *sélo* to page. Proof that loss of inspiration inspires. It is true that the beauty of certain nothingnesses of thought, as in Mallarmé, do not fail to dazzle: "O nights! nor the deserted light of my lamp / On the empty paper that whiteness defends" ("Sea Breeze," 1865). It should be noted in passing that the Mallarméan reference remains startlingly

modern since the idle screen of the digital tool now replacing the blank page does not change the pain of the traversed torments.

When the young Antonin Artaud sends his poems to Jacques Rivière, the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue française*, it's in flamboyant terms that he describes to him this *powerlessness* of thought that suffocates him; not a simple crisis of inspiration, he specifies, but a true weakening [*déperdition*] of being: "a central collapse of the soul, a kind of erosion, essential and at the same time fleeting, of thought, [...] the abnormal separation of the elements of thought (the impulse to think, at each of the terminal stratifications of thought, passing through all the states, all the bifurcations, all the localizations of thought and of form)."¹

Is this what we call in more banal contemporary terms a crisis of creativity? No doubt not. The dark chasms where Artaud sometimes descends are fortunately very far removed from the ordinary torments of creation, those that everyone can one day cross. Faced with the white of inspiration, whether one is an affirmative thinker or a novice student, writer, or artist, the malaise felt is more or less the same; in the face of the crisis a certain democratic parity reigns. The fact remains that the modern crisis of creativity rarely opens up metaphysical abysses. At best, in its benign form, it generates the indispensable surge of adrenaline that permits, the ultimate deadline almost exceeded, one to finally get to work under the pressure of anguish, shame, or guilt. *Deadline* as the Anglo-Saxons say, due date: beyond this limit ... you are *dead* or almost. Should we speak here of a decline

¹ Antonin Artaud, "Correspondence with Jacques Rivière" [1924], *Selected Writings* (California: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976) 31–52; 35.

in “motivation,” to use that catch-all term, somewhat irritating in its consoling flatness, a flatness that tends nowadays to replace the inflexibility of our old moral sanctions: idleness, neglect, sluggishness, lack of will ... or even “lazy bones”? What is motivation? An energy that drives us ... or not. That morale (prohibitive and guilt-invoking) tends to be replaced by an energetic force (positive and encouraging) seems to confirm the diagnosis of the sociologist Alain Ehrenberg: “We were entering the modern era of depression: the subject made ill by her conflicts was giving way to the individual paralyzed by her inadequacy.”² “Motivate” (from the Latin *movere*, to move), is understood here in the proper sense: to take the blocked individual out of his psychic immobility, to shake him, to put him in motion. The modern market can then be opened to various “coaches” and experts, specialists of personal development promising everyone to rediscover “the paths of creativity.”

The sociologist Edgar Morin, inventor in 1976 of the term “crisology,” readily emphasizes that “crises generate creative forces.” The relationship between crisis and creation would then be more complex than it seemed at first glance. Beyond a banal affirmation of the fruitful nature of crises, in the systemic thought of Morin, the crisis involves both disorganization and reorganization: “Any increased disorganization effectively carries with it the risk of death, but also the luck of a new reorganization, of a creation, of a going beyond. As McLuhan said, *breakdown is a potential*

² Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010) 130.

breakthrough.”³ This is to say once again that breakdown [*l’effondrement*] can lead to many creative breakthroughs [*des percées créatrices*]. However, let us not hasten to see in it a new avatar of the notion of “creative destruction” defended by the economist Joseph Schumpeter.⁴ Morin’s analysis, joined by many other thinkers, rather opens onto another type of observation, that of a current crisis engendered by the loss of faith in a progress supposed to bring wellbeing to the whole of humanity in accordance with the ideal of the European philosophy of the Enlightenment. We have long believed, he emphasizes, that science, technology, economics could solve the world’s great problems. However, despite the undeniable benefits, the alleged “side effects” are in fact cataclysmic and the potential “collateral victims” are counted in the millions. In this model, the crisis is first a sign of disillusionment with the promise of an unlimited progressive development. It does not work or it no longer works; the engine has stalled, skepticism arises about the promised opening of a bright future. The depressed ritornello: “it was better before!” signals the collapse of our hopes in the future. Nostalgia for the past then conceals a painful complaint: I no longer have a future; before me, there is nothing (*no future*, as the *punks* used to say, in the last century). Depression, Freud suggests, is a disease of time.

It is possible that this famous ideal of limitless progress is not foreign to the infantile dream that psychoanalysis calls

³ Edgar Morin & Thierry C. Pauchant, “For a Crisology,” *Industrial & Environmental Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1993) 5–21.

⁴ The economic processes described by Schumpeter combine destructive and creative effects in so far as they are linked, according to him, to the innovative dynamics of modern capitalism. Cf. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1942).

the “fantasy of all-powerfulness.” To believe that there is no limit to the forward march of progress, no border to human power, would then be akin to a fantasy of immortality, a refusal of human finitude.⁵ Many are indeed the psychoanalysts who, after Freud, have evoked the archaic spaces of a symbiotic mother-child sphere, the first state of indifferentiation, of omnipotent fusion with the mother, in which the “I” is not differentiated yet from the “non-I,” where the inside and the outside only gradually come to be perceived as different.⁶ From this limitless maternal body-world, the very young child (the *infans*: the one who does not yet speak) must separate, in other words lose it, to be. At the frontiers of this loss, the first formative crisis is developed, which Melanie Klein calls the “depressive position”: separation, with the mother recognized as having a life of her own, the mother-object with finite limits.⁷ What Klein calls the maternal body, let us remember, is not necessarily that of a mother but of anyone who fulfills the maternal function of nourishment and protection against intrusion and the anguish of death. This first crisis is therefore essential for accessing the human symbolic order in the sense of being part of a Law that limits but also relieves (everything is not possible, I am not all-powerful). The fantasy of omnipotence can however resurface in certain poetico-psychotic universes such as those of Artaud. If his *Theater of Cruelty* wants to

⁵ On the astronomical and metaphysical question of the “limits” of the infinite, see Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (1957), in particular ch. II, 25–57.

⁶ See in particular Margaret Mahler, whose first work on the subject dates to the 1950s: *On Human Symbiosis and the Vicissitudes of Individuation: Infantile Psychosis* (New York: International Universities Press, 1968).

⁷ Melanie Klein, *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis* (1921–1945) (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), in particular, the chapter “Mourning and its Relation to Manic Depressive States.”

“challenge man organically,” to remake the human body, it is because it intends to give back to man the immortality of unfathomable spaces: “This leads us to reject man’s usual limitations and powers and infinitely extends the frontiers of what we call reality.”⁸

⁸ Antonin Artaud, preface to *The Theatre and Its Double* [1935] (London: Alma Classics, 2010) 7.