The female vampire: Chantal Chawaf’s melancholic autofiction

Julia Kristeva opens her text, *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie*, with the claim that ‘Ecrire sur la mélancolie n’aurait de sens, pour ceux que la mélancolie ravage, que si l’écrit même venait de la mélancolie’ (‘For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia’). This chapter explores the possibility of writing ‘de la mélancolie’ through focusing on the work of Chantal Chawaf, whose writing may be described as ‘melancholic autofiction’, melancholic autobiographical fiction. We know from interviews and publicity notices accompanying Chawaf’s texts that she was born during a bomb explosion in Paris in 1943 in which her parents were killed and she was extracted from her dying mother’s womb by Caesarian section. Since Chawaf’s first novel *Retable/La Rêverie* (1974), which features a melancholic orphan whose parents were killed in a bomb explosion in the Second World War, her novels have repeatedly returned to fictionalised scenes of parental death. This chapter deals with Chawaf’s 1993 novel, *Vers la lumière*, which is narrated by a woman, France, who witnessed the brutal murder of her parents as a very young child – or, perhaps, while in the womb – in the family home, Meininguel. France is melancholically unable to articulate and come to terms with her traumatic loss and remains haunted by the vampiric figure of her dead mother until she commits suicide by drowning at the end of the text. This text foregrounds the question of how to speak, or write, melancholia. In the first pages of *Soleil noir*, Kristeva assumes the subject position of a melancholic: ‘La blessure que je viens de subir’ (p. 13; my italics) (‘The wound I have just suffered’ (p. 13)). In speaking as a melancholic, rather than as an analyst, she seems to suggest that melancholia demands a first-person subject position.
Yet psychoanalytic theories of melancholia following from Freud repeatedly emphasise that melancholia precisely cannot be spoken in the first person. In this chapter, I focus on the figure of the female vampire in *Vers la lumière* in order to explore what it means to ‘write melancholia’ in the first person.

Chawaf’s stated aim is ‘écrire, pour que l’indicible puisse se dire’ (to write, so that the unspeakable can be spoken): Chawaf claims to write in order to give voice to the unspeakable in and beyond her own experience. She associates the ‘unspeakable’ with the body, with bodily sensations and symptoms that are excluded from language: ‘Écrire un roman, pour moi, aujourd’hui, c’est chercher à accueillir dans le langage ce qui était réellement hors du langage et restait bloqué à l’état de pulsions, confusion, symptômes’ (‘Donner aux émotions’, p. 10) (Writing a novel, for me, now, means trying to bring into language what was relegated outside language and remained blocked, on the level of drives, confusion, symptoms). If the ‘unspeakable’ is repeatedly linked to the body in Chawaf’s writing, it is also related to the mother’s traumatic death that recurs throughout her texts and yet can never be articulated as such, to the loss that cannot be mourned. In *Vers la lumière*, this unspeakable loss is given voice through the figure of the female vampire: this text draws on a longstanding tradition of dead mothers returning to their daughters as vampires and explores a specifically feminine melancholia. Yet the figure of the female vampire also offers a suggestive means of reading Chawaf’s writing as autobiographical fiction. A recurring figure of a bleeding female vampire in *Vers la lumière* shows up the ways in which melancholia stains and contaminates autobiographical writing, reconfiguring the relation between text and writing subject and even, perhaps, allowing unspeakable loss to be spoken.

**Melancholia and vampirism: Freud and Kristeva**

In his 1915 essay, ‘Mourning and melancholia’, Freud posits mourning and melancholia as different responses to the loss of a love object. Where the mourner gradually withdraws libido from its attachments to the lost object, the melancholic, unable to avow the loss, desires to incorporate the lost object into the self. This incorporation is oral: Freud writes that ‘The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself and [...] it wants to do so by devouring it’, so that the melancholic ego feeds vampirically off the lost object. Where the mourner must symbolically ‘kill off’ the love object, the melancholic directs the murderous impulses inwards and thus tends
towards suicidal fantasies. Melancholia, imaged as ‘a painful wound’ (p. 268), figuratively drains the subject of his/her lifeblood: it is like ‘an open wound [. . .] emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished’ (p. 262). Kristeva develops this vampiric imagery in *Soleil noir*, describing the melancholic as one of the living dead. Assuming the subject position of a melancholic, she claims that ‘Je vis une mort vivante, chair coupée, saignante, cadavérisée’ (p. 14) (‘I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized’ (p. 4)). In Kristeva’s formulation, the melancholic cannot bear to lose the object and thus vampirically tears open its flesh and devours it: in her words, ‘plutôt morcelé, déchiqueté, coupé, avalé, digéré. . . que perdu’ (p. 21) (‘Better fragmented, torn, cut up, swallowed, digested . . . than lost’ (p. 12)).

In *Soleil noir*, melancholia is associated particularly with the loss of the mother, with what Kristeva calls the ‘deuil impossible de l’objet maternel’ (p. 19) (‘impossible mourning for the maternal object’ (p. 9)). In Kristeva’s model, the melancholic subject, unable to mourn and thus exiled from language and symbolisation, remains attached to the mother. To move into the Symbolic order, Kristeva insists, means symbolically killing and mourning the mother, gaining access to a language and symbolisation that compensate for the mother’s loss. Yet this process is gendered: matricide – in her words, ‘notre nécessité vitale’ (p. 38) (‘our vital necessity’ (p. 27)) – is particularly difficult for a daughter, who sees her own image reflected in her mother and thus cannot symbolically kill an image of herself. Assuming the subject position of a melancholic daughter, Kristeva writes:

*Comment peut-Elle être cette Erinyes assoiffée de sang, puisque je suis Elle . . . Elle est moi? En conséquence, la haine que je lui porte ne s’exerce pas vers le dehors, mais s’enferme en moi . . . une humeur implosive qui s’emmure et me tue en cachette.* (p. 39)

(How can she be that Bloodthirsty Fury, since I am She . . . She is I? Consequently, the hatred I bear her is not oriented towards the outside but is locked up within myself . . . an implosive mood that walls itself in and kills me secretly. (*Black Sun*, p. 29))

The melancholic daughter in *Soleil noir* locks her death-bearing hatred inside her own body, and is thus symbolically inhabited by death, a ‘crypte habité par un cadavre vivant’ (p. 241) (‘crypt inhabited by a living corpse’ (p. 233)).

*Vers la lumière* extends this imagery of female melancholia as an eternal yet unspeakable living death, yet it is describing a different scenario...
from that presented in Soleil noir. For Kristeva, the loss of the mother refers not to her literal death but to the separation from the mother concomitant with the subject’s entry into the Symbolic order; Kristeva does not consider how traumatic bereavement may be experienced differently from physical separation. Vers la lumière seems to present us with an extreme loss: not the separation from the mother that every child goes through as s/he grows up, but loss engendered by a traumatic death, loss that is ‘unspeakable’ for different reasons. My aim here is not, however, to analyse different experiences of loss, but to focus on how the loss of the mother is articulated in Vers la lumière through the figure of the female vampire.

The female vampire

Since Dracula, most vampire stories have featured a bloodthirsty male vampire feeding off and seducing female victims, a plot used by Chawaf in her 1986 novel, L’Intérieur des heures and her 1989 novel, Rédemption.7 There is, however, also a long-standing female vampire tradition in which vampires are commonly associated with deceased mothers: in Paul Barber’s words, ‘although vampires are far more often male than female, the exception to this rule is commonly women who have died in childbirth’.8 Where the male vampire story tends to involve violent seduction, the female vampire tradition is rooted in an intimacy and identification between women that is often associated with the relationship between mother and daughter; the female vampire is often portrayed as a melancholic mother figure. This is exemplified in a founding text of female vampirism, Sheridan Le Fanu’s nineteenth-century novella, Carmilla, in which the vampiric Carmilla is likened to the dead mother of the narrator, Laura.9 Although it is Laura’s mother who is dead, it is Carmilla who seems melancholic; gradually, however, Laura seems to be contaminated by Carmilla’s melancholia. Carmilla declares to Laura, ‘I live in your warm life and you shall die – die, sweetly die – into mine’ (p. 21). The two women seem to merge into one another and share in a common melancholia figured as a shared living death (p. 35).

Although Vers la lumière bears little resemblance to contemporary vampire fiction or to modern versions of Carmilla, Chawaf’s text implicitly refers back to Carmilla through the character of Carmilla, the woman who employs France to ghost-write her dead husband’s memoirs and to whom France refers as a ‘mère vampire’ (p. 167) (mother vampire). The most striking vampire in the text is, however, associated with France’s dead mother:
France claims that: ‘Moi, dans mon cœur inhabité, je sentais que j’étais la fille de la vampire’ (p. 89) (Me, in my inhabited heart, I felt that I was the daughter of the vampire). This vampiric figure embodies France’s melancholic fantasy that her mother’s death does not mark her loss, but rather the beginning of an eternal life in death. The presence of the vampire (even in fantasy) allows France to deny her loss: to rephrase Kristeva, better dead than lost. Yet, according to popular Eastern European folklore, vampires cannot be easily killed off, and abide eternally in a living death. In imaging the lost love object as a vampire, Vers la lumière highlights the near impossibility of symbolically killing it off and thus emphasises the extreme difficulty of overcoming melancholia.

The vampiric mother figure in Vers la lumière evokes and recalls the vampiric Carmilla but, where Carmilla moves between life with Laura and her father and death in her tomb, the vampire in Chawaf’s text exists in a perpetual state of living death. Like Carmilla, the vampire in Vers la lumière, named Vamypa Mélancholia, is, as her name suggests, a melancholic, haunting France throughout the text and calling for her to join her in death (p. 156). Vampypa appears to embody France’s own sorrow, performing the extreme grief that France cannot articulate directly, so that France projects her own melancholic refusal of loss onto the fantasised figure of the vampiric mother.

This projection of grief and reversal of roles is emphasised by France’s narrative deployment of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, a myth described by Anne Juranville as ‘un mythe de la mélancolie origininaire propre à la femme’ (a founding myth of female melancholia). France repeatedly alludes to herself as Persephone, ‘en langue infernale: la traduction de mon nom’ (p. 156) (in infernal language, the translation of my name), casting her husband Dagan as Hades and her mother as Demeter. In Homer’s Hymn to Demeter, Persephone is kidnapped by Hades and taken to the Underworld, whereupon Demeter grieves her daughter excessively. In Vers la lumière, France assumes the role of Persephone, abducted by Dagan, ‘le dieu des morts’ (p. 17) (the god of the dead), and taken to his underground home. The vampiric mother figure, like Demeter, searches obsessively for her daughter. Yet where in the myth, Persephone is symbolically ‘killed’ (by being abducted to Hades, the world of the dead) and Demeter grieves, in this novel it is the Demeter figure who is killed. In the myth, the living mother grieves for the dead child, whereas in the novel the dead mother grieves for her living child. This reversal highlights France’s projection of her unspeakable grief onto a fantasy of her dead mother as a
melancholic vampire. France’s first-person narrative of loss appears compelled to voice melancholia through the (fantasised) wounds of the other, the grieving mother.

Although this fantasised projection of grief does not figure in Freudian or Kristevaian accounts of melancholia, it plays an integral role in the account of melancholia given by Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham in *L’Ecorce et le noyau* (*The Shell and the Kernel*). According to Torok and Abraham, the melancholic constructs what they call an intrapsychic crypt inside the subject, in which secretly to preserve the lost object. The object, however, succeeds in escaping from the crypt to be, in their words, ‘réincarn[é] dans la personne même du sujet’ (‘reincarnated in the person of the subject’), like a vampire sustained through feeding off human blood. For Freud, this process marks the ego’s identification with the lost object, as the ego comes to imitate the object it cannot bear to lose (‘Mourning and melancholia’, pp. 259–61). Torok and Abraham take this further in proposing that, in the ego’s fantasy, the object also imitates the ego. In melancholic fantasy, the object embodies and acts out the subject’s grief, so that subject and object are united in sadness, a shared living death. This fantasy of a shared living death, Torok and Abraham suggest, may be used as a basis for successful mourning. In their model, as in Freud’s, melancholia marks a fantasy, a denial of so-called ‘reality’ (in Freud’s words: ‘a hallucinatory wishful psychosis’ (p. 253)) while mourning constitutes a gradual process of acknowledging the ‘reality’ of loss. Unlike Freud, however, they claim that it is through fantasy that loss can be realised. The melancholic is invited to ‘pousser à bout son fantasme de deuil: “Si celui qui m’aime doit me perdre pour de bon, il ne survivra pas à cette perte”’ (*L’Ecorce*, p. 275) (‘push his fantasy of mourning to its ultimate conclusion: “If my beloved is to lose me forever, he will not survive this loss”’ (*The Shell*, p. 138)). This melancholic fantasy that the lost object is so overcome with grief that she or he will commit suicide enables the melancholic to come to terms with the object’s death, not as a betrayal but as a sign of grief. Moving from melancholia to mourning, for Torok and Abraham, means using fantasy to accept the ‘reality’ of loss.

‘Cure’ and contamination

In *Vers la lumière*, the fantasy of mourning traced by Torok and Abraham is figured as a shared living death in which France and the vampiric mother figure are unable to identify themselves either as living or as dead. In this
text, melancholic subject and lost love object merge and bleed into one another. Feminist analyses of the mythology surrounding Demeter and Persephone have emphasised how these myths rewrite the psychoanalytic insistence on matricide and construct a more positive model of relationships between women based on love and sharing rather than on separation and symbolic murder.13 In Vers la lumière, however, this fusion between self and other, far from enabling a liberating interchange between mother and daughter, suspends both in a form of living death. France remains attached to the traumatic loss of her parents by an umbilical cord, a ‘cordon rouge’ (p. 9) (red cord). This umbilical cord that cannot be cut, even after birth, does not transmit life-giving nourishment from mother to child, but a destructive and contaminating death. France, ‘allaitée par une habitante des ruines sinistres’ (p. 88) (suckled by one who lives in the deathly ruins), sucks blood rather than milk from the mother’s breast.14 She feeds parasitically off her parents’ bloody deaths, not a foetus nourished by the mother, but a blood-sucking vampire. She is haunted by an insatiable vampiric thirst, ‘cette soif qui hante’ (p. 114) (this haunting thirst).

This contamination impedes a normative process of mourning: Vampyr blocks France’s ability to mourn and to move on to substitute love objects, leaving her symbiotically attached to her traumatic loss. Conventional rites of inheritance are impossible: France cannot claim her ancestral home, because the spectre of her mother will not bequeath it to her (‘Ma mère, la revenante, ne m’ouvrirait jamais la porte’ (p. 154)) (My mother, the ghost, would never open the door for me).15 France’s mother teaches her how to ‘mourir’ (p. 90) (die) instead of how to live. Vers la lumière traces an unending process of contamination, as France, increasingly obsessed by her mother’s death, in turn contaminates her daughter Jasmine, whose anguished voice blurs into France’s own.

This process of endless contamination culminates only in France’s suicide by drowning at the end of the text, when a third-person narratorial voice reports that ‘Le soir . . . on retrouva France Meininguel noyée’ (p. 190) (In the evening . . . France Meininguel was found drowned). In dying, however, France remains trapped in her own melancholic fantasy. She describes her death as a rebirth: ‘Je pousse le cri que lance le nouveau-né quand il est expulsé du ventre de sa mère à sa naissance’ (p. 189) (I let out the cry of a newborn baby ejected from the mother’s stomach at the moment of birth). It is as though she is dying only to be reborn as a vampire; death, far from ending her melancholic fantasies, seems bound up in the melancholic fantasies that have structured and shaped her narrative.
throughout. There is no possibility of mourning, no escape from melancholic fantasy, which, like the vampire it conjures up, pervades and contaminates the narrative on every level. The text is drawn into and infected by France’s fantasy, as even the third-person narrative voice remains unable to offer an external viewpoint on France’s narrative. The movement in the text between first- and third-person narrative almost passes unnoticed, as the third-person narrative voice adopts France’s imagery and perspective, as we see in the following quotation:

Terreurs et extases dont on retient un tempo assourdi qui continue de palper dans les artères, dans les vaisseaux, et nous congestionne, et pourrait nous pousser à mourir plus vite pour ne plus entendre cette musique obsédante du sang. (p. 60)

(Terrors and ecstasies leaving us with a muffled sound that keeps palpat ing in the arteries, in the vessels, and makes us flushed, and could push us into dying faster in order to hear this obsessive music of blood no longer.)

The bodily images of anguish – blood, arteries, death – echo France’s own descriptions of her state of mind cited above, while the long sentence, with its piled-up clauses, imitates France’s sentence construction. Moreover, the use of ‘on’ and ‘nous’ in relation to France suggests an affinity between the narrator and France, so that the third-person narrative voice becomes indistinguishable from France’s own voice. This blurring of the distinctions between subject positions or narrative voices is highlighted further through France’s job, ghost-writing a dead actor’s memoirs, which impels her to merge her narrative with his. The text foregrounds the difficulty, even impossibility, of narrating one’s own story and maintaining a stable subject position. The different narrative voices contaminate each other like France and the vampiric mother figure, blurring the distinctions between fantasy and so-called ‘reality’. It remains unclear whether the vampire is merely a product of France’s fantasy, or whether it is seen to exist outside that fantasy.

Whereas Torok and Abraham situate their psychoanalytic ‘cure’ in the distinction between melancholic fantasy and the ‘reality’ of loss, in Vers la lumière there is no analyst to draw such distinctions. The reader, like the third-person narrator, is unable to demarcate the boundaries between fantasy and ‘reality’ in this text and thus prevented from occupying the position of analyst in relation to the text. Vers la lumière does not offer a ‘case study’ of a melancholic, but, in exploring the relation between melancholia, fantasy and narrative, shows up the impossibility of describing
melancholia from one fixed and stable subject position. The merging of first- and third-person narrative voices highlights how in this text melancholia is always spoken from shifting subject positions that blur into each other. This also offers an alternative reading of Kristeva’s self-positioning in *Soleil noir* and of her claim that writing on melancholia must come ‘de la mélancolie’ (from melancholia). Although Kristeva initially assumes the subject position of a melancholic, she goes on to occupy the position of a psychoanalytic linguist (chapter 2), an analyst (chapter 3), an art critic and a literary critic without considering the differences in these positions. To write ‘de la mélancolie’ is perhaps not, as I suggested in the opening page of this essay, to write in the first person as a melancholic, but to speak from different subject positions without being able to fix one’s own position in relation to melancholia. If we read *Soleil noir* alongside *Vers la lumière*, it appears that melancholia, in refusing either an entirely external perspective or an ‘inside’ position implied in the use of the first-person narrative voice, destabilises subject positions. This is, of course, a crucial point to bear in mind in relation to writing described as *autofiction* such as Chawaf’s. In the last part of this chapter, I will address the question of Chawaf’s subject position in her own melancholic *autofiction*, not through reading *Vers la lumière* as a case study of Chawaf herself, but through the figure of the vampire that the text deploys to inscribe melancholic loss.

**Melancholic autofiction**

As we have seen, France gives voice to melancholia through a fantasy of staging her own loss in the vampire’s performance of death: she can express her loss only through the wounded body of the other. This is highly suggestive in relation to Chawaf’s writing, *autofiction* that foregrounds the fraught issue of the relation between writer and text and implicitly invites questions about the subject position of the writer in relation to the narrator. Literary critics working on autobiographical fiction and therapists who advocate a ‘writing cure’ have suggested that writing in the third person offers more space for self-revelation than writing in the first person. In her study of scriptotherapy, Louise DeSalvo insists that ‘Writing creative narratives about pain and loss can heal’, adding that this is more effective if the writing subject can project grief onto a fictional alter ego, a ‘semi-fictional stand-in’. Suzette Henke reinforces this: ‘What cannot be uttered might at least be written – cloaked in the mask of fiction’. For
these critics, *autofiction* in particular enables the writing subject to affirm a loss that would be unnarratable in the first person through projecting it onto a fictional double: the narrator is seen as a thinly veiled alter ego of the author.

In *Vers la lumière*, however, the narrating subject, France, cannot project her loss onto a fantasised double: the vampire figures France’s melancholic loss without enabling her to mourn. This melancholic vampire should not be seen as France’s fantasised alter ego, who embodies her melancholic refusal of loss. Like all vampires, Vampyra cannot survive in isolation: she exists only in and through her contaminated relationship with France. The vampire problematises any fixed, stable relation between subject and object through collapsing the boundaries between self and other: France’s narrative voice is contaminated by the vampire it inscribes. The shifting, contaminating relation between France and the vampire may, in my reading, be seen to figure the relation between Chawaf as implied author and her text. Where critics like Henke and DeSalvo working on scriptotherapy posit a direct relation between writer and text, *Vers la lumière* points only indirectly to Chawaf’s own loss. Chawaf’s parents died during the Occupation, while she was in the womb, whereas France’s parents are murdered in their ancestral home before her very eyes. If Chawaf’s writing indirectly suggests her own traumatic loss, it can never incorporate that loss as such.

Chawaf’s text seems to suggest, then, that the writer cannot simply project her own loss onto her fictional characters; moreover, her own voice, bleeding into other blurred textual voices, cannot easily be distinguished in her text. The figure of the melancholic vampire recurs throughout Chawaf’s texts, which blur into each other, as do each of the melancholic heroines: as Valerie Hannagan points out, ‘There is a single wounded, merged identity running through the whole corpus’. An indistinguishable figure of a melancholic female orphan recurs throughout Chawaf’s texts, from her earliest novel *Retable/La Rêverie* to *Issa*, published in 1999, with no significant development or alteration. Hannagan emphasises that Chawaf’s female characters are largely indistinguishable: ‘Despite the fact they are given different names, *they are the same woman*’ (p. 185). The vampire highlights a fusion and contamination between texts, characters and writer, emphasising the impossibility of individuation in Chawaf’s writing. The vampire also, however, as we have seen, points to the impossibility of mourning, showing how Chawaf’s texts cannot reach curative closure but remain suspended in a melancholic disavowal.
The figure of the melancholic vampire in Chawaf’s writing does not, then, denote a liberating fusion or interchange between self and other, writing subject and text, text and reader, that is so often associated with contemporary French women’s writing. Vers la lumière, which has hitherto been read almost exclusively in relation to Cixous’s work, may thus offer a different understanding of the fusion between self and other in contemporary women’s writing. In Vers la lumière, self and other merge in a crippling, inescapable living death, that offers none of the possibilities of self-reinvention and renewal implied by Cixous in ‘Le rire de la Méduse’ or Photos de racines. Yet Chawaf’s writing should not only be read as a point of comparison with Cixous’s writing or as a way to rethink what we mean by écriture féminine. Vers la lumière also, as we have seen, explores the possibilities of inscribing traumatic loss and melancholia in narrative. The melancholic vampire who haunts the text marks an incurable traumatic loss that is constantly reiterated throughout Chawaf’s writing. In Chawaf’s autofiction, text and writing subject constantly traverse each other’s boundaries painfully, bleeding into and contaminating each other without resolution. Each text reinscribes the orphaned, melancholic female writer unable to come to terms with her loss. This traumatic loss, repeated throughout Chawaf’s textual corpus, marks the unspeakable, invisible link between ‘auto’ and ‘fiction’ in her writing, embodied in the recurring, bleeding figure of the melancholic vampire.

Notes


2 See in particular the publicity notice that accompanies L’Intérieur des heures (Paris: Des femmes, 1986), in which Chawaf states that her mother died before she was born.


14 Joan Copjec has written a fascinating (Lacanian) article on the relation between vampirism and breast-feeding: ‘Vampires, breast-feeding and anxiety’, October, 58 (autumn 1991), 25–43.

15 This contamination of inheritance may also be seen in Carmilla, as the vampire Carmilla is also called ‘Milkara’ and ‘Mircalla’ (Carmilla, pp. 73 and 78).


19 Issa (Paris: Flammarion, 1999). See also notably Elwina, le roman fâé and L’Intérieur des heures.

20 See, for example, Susan Sellars, ‘Learning to read the feminine’, in Helen Wilcox, Keith McWatters et al. (eds), The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 190–5.