

Journey and Humanism as a Poesis in Julia Kristeva's work

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Julia Kristeva often presents herself as a European citizen of French nationality, Bulgarian by birth and American by adoption. Her cosmopolitan self-identification not only reflects the course of her life and her remarkable career but mirrors a necessary intellectual journey. In her odyssey, like Ulysses, she is never fully at one place, in an enclosed discipline. Similarly to her character of *Murder in Byzance* (2004), who says that « she travels herself », Julia Kristeva describes her thought project, in *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2005 - tr.2012), as responding to her permanent « *desire to get out of the limits of herself* » (my translation). Beyond the personal motivation and history to this intellectual nomadism, Kristeva's interdisciplinary work in philosophy, linguistic, literature, art and psychoanalysis pertains to the development of human sciences in the 20th century which took the place of theology and philosophy by expanding knowledge on the complexity of the human mind. So for Kristeva, thinking at the borders of disciplines is embedded in an epistemological and methodological necessity to constantly question and interrogate our assumptions in order to counteract the dangers of the monolithic thinking that threatens our contemporary societies. For Kristeva, the journey among

our mental processes and disciplines is the warrant for the refoundation of new forms of humanism¹.

Interdisciplinary journey

Before addressing these new forms of humanism, it is important to appreciate the foundational role of early seminal concepts in Kristeva's work. Let's travel back in time in the 70ies and 80ies where Kristeva was highly involved in the Parisian intellectual life around the Journal *Tel quel* with Philippe Sollers, Roland Barthes and others, while at the same time she was starting to teach in American Universities. It is significant that her first translated book in English is *Des Chinoises* (1974), *About Chinese Women* (1975) inscribing her work directly in the midst of feminist studies in the United States. I will not reproduce here the feminist controversies around Kristeva's conception of the *feminine*, as a non gender defined category bringing already some estrangement in the debate, but I would rather underscore that in her earliest writings Kristeva's thinking is already traveling among disciplines. All through her work, the *feminine*², is a notion that has multiple derivatives accross human sciences. It is embedded in psychaoanalytic views, it inspires the translinguistic concept of semiotic and it relates to religions and art.

¹ Kristeva, *Pulsions de temps*, « Humanisme », Paris : Fayard, 2013, p 469-580.

² Texts related to this notion *About Chinese Women* and « Stabat Mater », or « Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini » (1975), *Tales of love* (1983) in her trilogy, around the *feminine genius*, Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein and Colette.

As Roland Barthes said of Kristeva in his article called « *L'Etrangère* »³ (1970), « she changes the order of things », namely her thinking *displaces* things. Thus Barthes explains that the novelty of Kristeva's theoretical thinking is that it is reflexive on what it says. It inserts in its very discourse a critical, or revolving, capacity that prevents the discourse from being fixated on one determined meaning. Kristeva's method, inspired by her reading of Husserl, points at the object like an arc and approaches it with the assumption that signification results from a dynamic intermingling between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*, process that she calls *sinifiance*.

The semiotic embraces non-symbolized components, which are manifest in rhythms, sounds, movements and mental images. These sensorial movements, or tropisms, contribute to and participate in the signifying process in as much as they aim at framing a meaning⁴. Therefore, the *semiotic*, in charge of organizing this reservoir of bodily movements into a process of meaning can only be an heterogeneous and disruptive force to the linguistic enclosed system of signs, that structuralist linguistic described. In her study of Lautrémaont and Mallarmé, in *Revolution of Poetic Language* (1974), Kristeva underscores the effraction of the pre-signifying elements into the symbolic order. She also hears these semiotic components in her analysands' narratives through variations in tonality, rhythms, contradictions, disruptions and silence.

³ Roland Barthes, *Oeuvre Complète*, tome III, p 477.

⁴ Psycholinguists have studied preverbal organizing activities in toddlers who develop the capacity to group concrete objects around shapes, colors, numbers.

To summarize the interdisciplinary place of the concept of *semiotic*, it can be said that, on the one hand, it draws on the psychoanalytic, by including in language the work of drives and affects ; on the other hand, it borrows from phenomenology by assuming an inherent movement⁵ of consciousness, called intentionality, towards a meaning. Thus the semiotic includes the non verbal process in the discourse or in the emergence of it. However, the *semiotic* also implies a speaking subject and its interlocutor.

Taking here a different approach from Lacan's « speaking subject », Kristeva draws on Benveniste's theory of enunciation and speech to define the possibilities of a new speaking intersubjectivity beyond the monadic psychological ego. Overcoming the psychoanalytic debate whether at birth the self is separated (Freud, Lacan) or merged with the object (Klein), Kristeva claims that the answer might be found in the speech act, which is embedded, for her, in an early embodied form of representation⁶, where the subject has incorporated the interlocutor in his/her enunciation. In fact, linguistically, the first person entity, « I », implies a second person, « you », who is external and internal.

Therefore, the intersubjectivity on which the psychoanalytic transference relies, occurs within the possibility of language. In the continuation of Husserl and Heidegger, Kristeva underscores that intersubjectivity, or the assumption of the other, is part of the structure of language. In the analytic experience for example, the analysand can

⁵ See the concept of *hylé* from Husserl's phenomenology that Kristeva explored in parallel of Plato's concept of *chora* in the first chapter of *The Poetic Revolution of Language* (1974).

⁶ Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, « The incarnate Metaphor » (2000).

only speak, or even stay silent, if, and only if, he/she believes that there is an other, a reliable one to whom the « I » can address words from within the transference.

This fundamental dialogic structure of language is not only foundational of the (psychoanalytic) subject but it also carries a pre-religious assumption of the other. In her project to reconcile tradition, modernity and postmodernity, Kristeva presents this latter conception of language as a secular version of the judeo-christian theological tradition founded on the dialog with the absolute other, absent and present, loving and loved, namely God⁷.

In the act of speaking, lies the premise of subjectivity and the pre-ethical tie to the other in whom one has to believe in order to get outside ourselves. As said before, an underlying belief in « you » sustains the capacity to say « I » : linguists (Benveniste, Pierce), theologians (Saint-Augustin and Theresa d'Avila), psychoanalysts (with the experience of transference) and philosophers (Levinas) would all agree on this statement. Through out her work, Kristeva explores their multiple versions to elucidate this transcendent appeal to relate to the other (God, Maman, Papa, the *Nebenmensch* or the analyst).

⁷ Kristeva explores this entanglement between language, love and religions *In the Beginning was Love : Psychoanalysis and Faith* (1985. Tr. 1987), *This incredible need to believe* (2007, tr. 2011), *Thérèse mon amour : Sainte Thérèse d'Avila* (2008).

Humanism

Singular/universal

We see that Kristeva's exploration of interdisciplinary responses to this question is bound to the fundamental notion of humanism.

Kristeva emphasizes the immanent appeal, or desire, to the otherness as a vital pressure to think. To some extent, one could say that the emergence of thinking, the need for it are the first manifestations of humanism, or homonisation. In *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2005), Kristeva defines the capacity to think as an *ex-tatic* exercise to exit the seclusion of our ego-centric inclinations. Inspired by Hegel's negativity of the subject, and Husserl's transcendental ego⁸, Kristeva recognizes this immanent desire for the external, the « not-me » (Winnicott), through the production of meaning. Additionally, she sees in the psychoanalytic experience, the opportunity for human beings to have a fearfree internal experience of their own otherness, or estrangement, through the exploration of unconscious thoughts. In an article, published in *Pulsions de Temps* (2013), called « De la modernité critique à la modernité analytique »⁹, Kristeva wrote that the capacity to be in a form of exile from oneself founds the very act of thinking. Thinking is a surviving act of estrangement from ourselves. It is an act of necessary separation to detach from our narcissistic experience of attachment. However, underlying Kristeva's plea for a new humanism in being hospitable to the otherness in our own thinking is the paradoxical

⁸ For Hegel, the subject exists by a movement that negates the being and for Husserl the transcendental ego is the consciousness that is out there, in the world.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Pulsions de temps*, Paris: Fayard, 2013, p 522.

assertion and protection of the singularity of the human subject. All through her work, the human subject has been the focal point: the concept of semiotic enhances the speaking subject vs the linguistic system of signs ; her psychoanalytic work reveals the singularity of the subject rather than addressing the symptomatic identity ; in her literary theories, Kristeva deciphers, the marks of a subjective experience of meaning vs a study of the forms. Because she believes in « shareable singularities », her appeal for new forms of humanism is a search for an articulation between the singular and the universal.

Modernity/ tradition

While in tune with the transformations and crisis of contemporary occidental societies, Kristeva explores the tenets of humanism in the greco-judeo-christian legacy, in a movement that aims at reconciling tradition and modernity. In *Pulsions de temps* (2013), Kristeva reminds us that the humanist project from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and beyond, based on a hyper-development of knowledge and an incremental trust, or belief, in the power of the human mind, resulted in a destructive impasse which the history of the twentieth century tragically illustrated and from which the twenty first century still struggles to recover. For Kristeva, modern and postmodern societies have failed to offer valid counter-models to theology and philosophy because it did not integrate enough Kant's concept of « radical evil » or Freud's the role of death drive in mankind.

As a secular and an atheist intellectual, Kristeva undertook an exploration of the anthropological roots of monotheism in order to elucidate the *need to believe* in a unified principle, a god, a cause, a leader. To support this thesis about the psychic origin of religions, based on the assumption that there is an Other, Kristeva invokes the Freudian unconscious as the immanent estrangement to ourselves (familiar and strange, *Unheimlich*), being the common denominator between oneself and the other. Thus, being all foreigners, as Kristeva writes at the end of *Foreigners to Ourselves* (1991), she calls for the recognition of a transversal humanism based on the « consciousness of our unconscious ». Is it a utopian construction or rather an anthropological fact that we are creatures of desire, desire to know, and therefore aspire to what we are not?

Maternal reliance

To find valuable responses to that question, in our time of identity crisis, Kristeva explores the maternal experience, *reliance*, understood as an erotico fusal pre-religious experience of love, on the threshold of nature and culture. The religious version of this primary maternal form of love, that the history of occidental painting and music illustrates in exquisite forms¹⁰, presents the advantage of offering an aesthetic and religious understanding of the passion of motherhood as the first milestone of a relation to the other. Even Freud who is notoriously

¹⁰ See Kristeva's seminal article « Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini » (1975), « Stabat Mater » (1983).

known for his so-called phallogentrism, said in a letter to Fliess that the mother is « the prehistoric, unforgettable other person who is never equalled by anyone later »¹¹. Reminding us of this maternal foundation of love¹², Kristeva asserts that modernity and postmodernity have failed to provide a secular narrative on motherhood as the first ethical bio-cultural link to the other. Feminism has offered a political version of freedom for women, biology now allows women to choose to be mother or not, assisted reproductive technology supports the biological desire of motherhood but, according to Kristeva, none of these discourses or techniques addresses motherhood as a pre-organizing principle for our psycho-somatic origin and for our primary love and hate relationship. For Kristeva a new humanism will have to be a feminism, but differentiated from its religious and political version. Three facets of this feminism are illustrated in Kristeva's trilogy, the *Feminine Genius*, which embraces Melanie Klein, a psychoanalyst, Colette, a writer and Hannah Arendt a philosopher.

In her review of the origins of humanism, Kristeva draws on psychoanalysis as the only secular theory capable of tracing back in the psychic development the emergence of a primary intersubjective experience of love first with the mother, as we just saw, but also with a phylogenetic, *prehistoric*, or archaic father, different from the Freudian one in *Totem and Taboo*. Kristeva's archaic father fosters a primary identification with a mythical other that sustains the capacity to extract oneself from the fusional maternal passion and to identify to a

¹¹ Letter to Fliess, December 6, 1896.

¹² *In the Beginning was Love*, (1985)

necessary loving One, *Einführung*. Following Freud's study of religious traces in the human psyche¹³, Kristeva interprets the primary identification to this Other¹⁴ as a universal *need to believe* in a pre-symbolic structure that hosts the desire to project oneself in a third imaginary entity (the prehistoric father), distinct from the relation mother/child. According to Kristeva, the *prehistoric* father and the maternal *reliance* which have been institutionalized in the judeo-christian religions are the anthropological memory of humanism. Its immemorial traces can be heard in the psychoanalytic transference. « To talk to you, I need to trust *you*, to believe that I can invest myself in *your* capacity to hear *me* ». Psychoanalysts know that this usually unformulated thought is the indispensable « basic trust »¹⁵ to allow transference to develop.

These maternal and paternal imagos weave our singular and universal desires that shape our identity represented by and identified with one and the other. In our deconstructed societies, the lack of a representational space for this triangulation between the maternal, the paternal and the other, as fulfilling symbolic functions, is held responsible for what Kristeva calls the « new maladies of the soul »¹⁶. These *new maladies* in psychopathology such as addiction, anorexia, psychosomatic symptoms, false selves, aggressiveness are new because they do not fit into the classical classification of mental disorders. They

¹³ *Totem and Taboo* (1912), *Moses and Monotheism* (1930).

¹⁴ For Lacan it is the Law of language, the Symbolic.

¹⁵ Erik Erikson identified basic trust as the first developmental step in life. See *Youth : change and challenge* (1963), Basic Books.

¹⁶ Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul* (tr. 1995), New York : Columbia University Press.

operate differently. For Kristeva, these new maladies of the soul reflect a deterioration in the capacity to represent, think and believe - without which psychic life stays frozen and unshareable. This deficit of symbolic representation in people's mental activity, mesmerized by a media-cultured society that flatten singularities in standardized behaviors, is not only palpable in patients's unspeakable suffering but also in the development of, what Kristeva calls, a death culture and social malaise in our contemporary societies. It is manifest in the escalation of delinquance, homicidal/suicidal violence, and more lately in terrorism among young adults. In addition to the socio-political explanations, Kristeva brings to these issues a psychoanalytic approach. She portraits the adolescent/young adult as a believer in an ideal alterity emancipated from his parental or society authority. Idealist and rebellious, the adolescent runs the risk of disappointing his/her desire of absolute. Violence, suicide, terrorism might be, in some historical contexts but also in canonical examples (Dante et Béatrice, Roméo & Juliette...), the radical solution to their desire of absolute. In the absence of a meaningful sense of self and the other, that can only develop with the capacity to think and reflect in an intersubjective manner, affects and death drives can get unleashed¹⁷ with no restrain because there is no subject, no object to be linked to nor to identify with. Before Freud, Marquis de Sade's novels gave an intentionally horrifying illustration of the mecanical power of the drives when they are not sublimated through the complex process of representation and signification.

¹⁷ Effect of desobjectalisation and desubjectivation that André Green conceptualised in the term of *déliasion*. See André Green, *La déliaison* (1992), and *Private Madness* (1990).

« Sublimation alone withstands death », Kristeva wrote in *Black Sun* (1989).¹⁸ Twenty five years later, she highlights, in many of her public interventions, the deterioration of the function of sublimation and idealization in our internal conflicts caused by frustrations/repressions, deficits, and lacks.

In an article published in a French newspaper after the terrorist attacks in Paris in Nov. 2015, Kristeva calls, after Kant this phenomenon the « radical evil » that points at the limits of our humanity.

In her response to the end of theology (the only way religions seem to be able to survive today is by their radicalization) and philosophy (confidence in the human mind), Kristeva claims¹⁹ for an psychoanalytic atheism based on the findings of the psychoanalytic experience which reveals the difficult outlet of drives when not escorted by idealization and sublimation, considered as the milestones of culture. At the end of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929), Freud could not guarantee which of the two forces would triumph, the drives or the meaning of them, the the id or the ego : « *The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of the communal life by their human instinct of aggression and self destruction* »²⁰.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, New York : Columbia University Press, p.100.

¹⁹ See “Psychoanalysis, Beliefs and Religious Conflicts” published in *Pulsions de temps*.

²⁰ *Civilization and its discontents*, Standard Edition, Vol 21.

Poesis

However, defying Freud's dark skepticism at the end of his life, Kristeva takes up the new challenges of our contemporary societies, not only by reinventing new theoretical models but also by rehabilitating creativity, or *poesis* in its aristotelitian sense of a transformative process. Since her early writings, Kristeva's study of literary and artistic practices (Mallarmé, Lautréamont, Céline...) has focused on the forms of *desire in language*, referring to her eponymous book published in 1980. Along with a sublimated melancholia, that she explored in *Black Sun* (1989), Kristeva identifies in these literary texts the marks of drives, in their semiotic representations, in order to enhance the power of erotization in thinking processes. In her study of Proust and Colette, Kristeva highlights the transformative power of language in translating, displacing, condensating, metaphorizing psychic processes like memory, desire, pleasure, sorrows... She contends, after Proust, that creative writing, that blends perception and intellect, allows a re-erotization of life, a sort of rebirth - that the logical and grammatical rules of speaking sometimes dry out. Kristeva's personal *poesis* lies in the blending of the abstract and the sensorial in her own writing.

As we know, Kristeva is not only a thinker and a psychoanalyst, but she is also a writer. Not so much because she writes fiction - fictionality is not what defines a writer - but because she uses language, not as a structure, but as a function to represent our psychic life. Thus her theoretical writings is a combination of argumentative rigor and erudition, but also flashes of associations, profusion of images and

neologisms. In her books, Kristeva, the writer, transcends the linguistic system and the theoretical disciplines. This is Kristeva's understanding of revolt, as a combination of a revolving movement and an upheaval, notions that she explores in *Sense and Non Sense of a Revolt*.

In this last decade, Kristeva's has taken the pulse of our times (*Pulsions de temps* (2013)), in her multiple interventions in public debates, in the social realm and in political and religious institutions. In these writings, she reveals her personal audacity, her confidence and her faith in the power of thinking to defy the intellectual, political and religious vacuum that opens the paths to new psychopathologies, terrorist acting outs, local warfares and nationalistic regression. Kristeva's conveys her faith to us and behooves us to develop her interdisciplinary legacy.

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