

Religion, Atheism, and the Crisis of Meaning in Julia Kristeva's Critique of Modernity

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Daj mi słowa abym kres
nazwał umiejętnie kresem
i w nim tańczył (żebym
z radością zatoczył koła
które będą kołami nicości
i moimi kresami)

Lend me words that I may
call the limit: limit
and dance in its midst (that
I may move joyfully in circles
which shall be the circles of
nothingness
and of my limits)

Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki
"Piosenka o zależnościach i
uzależnieniach"
"Song of Relations and
Dependencies"

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Abstract

This study examines the development of Julia Kristeva's thought on religion and its relevance to her critique of modernity. The study argues that Kristeva's concern with the 'crisis of religion' occupies a central place in her work and permeates all of her inquiries into the linguistic, textual, literary, epistemological, subjective, social, political, and ethical dimensions of what she considers an all-encompassing 'crisis of meaning' in contemporary Western culture.

Chapter one considers the manner in which Kristeva's early textual practice emphasizes the necessity of a multifaceted response to the 'crisis of meaning' by situating her concepts of negativity, productivity, ambiguity and intertextuality between Maurice Blanchot's thought of the neuter and Jacques Derrida's thought of *différance*.

Chapter two addresses Kristeva's effort to affirm the capacity of modern literature to inscribe a new experience of meaning into the metaphysical void left in the wake of the 'death of God', with particular attention paid to the distinct ways in which she and Blanchot conceptualize the correspondence between literary experience and the experience of atheism.

Chapter three explores the critical tensions that accompany Kristeva's psychoanalytic engagement with religious texts and her changing assessment of their significance for the experience of contemporary subjectivity. The chapter also examines the proximity between Derrida's encounter with negative theology and Kristeva's encounter with 'the unnamable' at the intersection of psychoanalytic and religious language.

Chapter four investigates Kristeva's analysis of the 'crisis of secularism' at the turn of the millennium as well as her growing concern with the reduction of human knowledge and experience to techno-scientific and economic logic in late modernity, the limits and possibilities of liberal democracy, and the necessity of a fundamental reassessment of the religious dimensions of Western humanism.

Seen as a major thread that links all of her critical endeavors, Kristeva's engagement with religion allows for a better understanding of the nuances, transformations, and impasses of her thought. Consequently, this inquiry opens new questions concerning the 'religious' character of the 'speaking subject', offers extensive contributions to a critical reconsideration of the social, political, and ethical implications of the relationship between religion and secularism, and draws attention to the indispensability of an elaborate cultural encounter between religious and humanist discourses in the 21st century.

Résumé

Cette thèse a pour but d'examiner le développement du concept de religion chez Kristeva et d'analyser son importance par rapport à la critique kristevienne de la modernité. Dans cette étude, nous proposons que la 'crise de la religion' imprègne l'analyse kristevienne de la 'crise du sens' dans la société occidentale actuelle. Ainsi, la 'crise de la religion' est d'une importance primordiale dans l'œuvre kristevienne, se manifestant à tous les niveaux de sa pensée : linguistique, textuel, littéraire, épistémologique, subjectif, socio-politique et éthique.

Dans le premier chapitre, nous avançons que la pratique textuelle kristevienne nécessite une réponse polyvalente à la 'crise du sens'. Ce chapitre situe les concepts kristeviens de négativité, de productivité, d'ambiguïté et d'intertextualité par rapport aux concepts du neutre chez Blanchot et de la différance chez Derrida.

Dans le deuxième chapitre, nous suggérons que Kristeva trouve dans la littérature moderne une façon de remplacer l'abîme métaphysique résultant de la mort de dieu par une nouvelle expérience du sens. Nous examinons en particulier la façon dont Kristeva et Blanchot conçoivent la relation entre l'expérience littéraire et l'expérience de l'athéisme.

Le troisième chapitre aborde la tension critique qui accompagne l'engagement psychanalytique kristevien par rapport au texte religieux ainsi que la signification, pour Kristeva, de l'expérience actuelle de la subjectivité. Nous étudions également la signification du concept de 'l'innommable' chez Kristeva par rapport à la théologie négative chez Derrida, là où les discours psychanalytique et religieux se croisent.

Prenant comme point d'entrée la 'crise de la laïcité', le quatrième chapitre examine la préoccupation de Kristeva pour la diminution du savoir humain et l'expérience technoscientifique et économique de la modernité avancée. Il aborde aussi les limites ainsi que les capacités de la démocratie libérale et la mise en question nécessaire des aspects religieux de l'humanisme occidental.

Lien crucial entre les divers aspects de la pensée kristevienne, la religion permet de mieux comprendre les nuances et les évolutions -- ainsi que les impasses -- de cette pensée, et de poser de nouvelles questions concernant l'aspect 'religieux' du 'sujet qui parle'. Notre analyse est une contribution importante au discours contemporain sur la religion et la laïcité, et elle attire l'attention sur la rencontre culturelle complexe des discours religieux et humanistes actuels.

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ABBREVIATIONS

For Writings by Kristeva, Blanchot, Derrida and Others *

AfB	[2.2] Hill, After Blanchot, 2005
AP	[3.2] Caputo & Scanlon, Augustine and Postmodernism, 2005
BoC	[2.1] Blanchot, The Book to Come, 2003
BIR	[2.1] Holland, The Blanchot Reader, 1995
BIS	[1.1] Kristeva, Black Sun, 1989
CrES	[1.1] Kristeva, Crisis of the European Subject, 2000
DG	[2.2] Hart, The Dark Gaze, 2004
Dis	[3.1] Derrida, Dissemination, 1981
DL	[1.1] Kristeva, Desire in Language, 1980
DNT	[3.1] Coward & Foshay, Deconstruction and Negative Theology, 1992
FK	[3.1] Derrida, Faith & Knowledge, 1998
FeS	[1.1] Kristeva, The Feminine and the Sacred, 2001
FIG	[2.2] Bulhof, Flight of the Gods, 2000
HA	[1.1] Kristeva, Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative, 2001
IBL	[1.1] Kristeva, In the Beginning Was Love, 1988
InC	[2.1] Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, 1993
Interviews	[1.1] Kristeva, Interviews, 1996
Ire	[1.1] Kristeva, Intimate Revolt, 2002
KCR	[1.2] Lechte & Zournazi, The Kristeva Critical Reader, 2003
KrR	[1.1] Moi, The Kristeva Reader, 1986
Lim	[3.1] Derrida, Limited Inc., 1981
LU	[1.1] Kristeva, Language, the Unknown, 1989
MP	[3.1] Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 1982
NeMS	[1.1] Kristeva, New Maladies of the Soul, 1995
NWN	[1.1] Kristeva, Nations Without Nationalism, 1993
OCC	[2.1] Blanchot, Our Clandestine Companion, 2007
OG	[3.1] Derrida, Of Grammatology, 1974
OSp	[3.1] Derrida, Of Spirit, 1987
PoH	[1.1] Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 1982
PK	[1.1] Oliver, The Portable Kristeva, 1997
Pol	[1.1] Kristeva, Polylogue, 1997
Points	[3.1] Weber, Points.... Interviews 1974-1994, 1995
Positions	[3.1] Derrida, Positions, 2002
Post	[1.1] Garvin, Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism, 1980
RePL	[1.1] Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, 1984
ReSS	[1.1] Lotringer, Revolt, She Said, 2002
Ruin	[1.1] Kristeva, The Ruin of a Poetics, 1973
Seme	[1.1] Kristeva, Semeiotike, 1969
SiP	[3.2] Dugdale, Silent Prayers, 1993
SNB	[2.1] Blanchot, The Step Not Beyond, 1992

SNR	[1.1] Kristeva, <i>The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt</i> , 2000
SpL	[2.1] Blanchot, <i>The Space of Literature</i> , 1982
SpS	[1.1] Blonsky, <i>On Signs</i> , 1985
StO	[1.1] Kristeva, <i>Strangers to Ourselves</i> , 1991
TaL	[1.1] Kristeva, <i>Tales of Love</i> , 1987
TeR	[1.1] Kristeva, <i>Le texte du roman</i> , 1970
ThDT	[1.1] Kristeva, <i>Thinking in Dark Times</i> , 2006
TINB	[1.1] Kristeva, <i>This Incredible Need to Believe</i> , 2009
UtT	[4] Young, <i>Untying the Text</i> , 1981
WD	[3.1] Derrida, <i>Writing and Difference</i> , 1978
WoD	[2.1] Blanchot, <i>The Writing of Disaster</i> , 1986
WoF	[2.1] Blanchot, <i>The Work of Fire</i> , 1995

* See bibliography. – Other abbreviations are indicated in Siegfried M.Schwertner, *Internationa Glossary of Abbreviations for Theology and Related Subjects*. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992, 2nd ed.

Introduction

The Frailty of Words in Critical Theory

But is it really necessary to think that a language 'cannot be mad' in order to continue to 'do'? Let us imagine [...] that the language itself is going mad: that the community link itself, the 'extended mentality', the *consensus communis*, [...] can go mad, has been mad in the past, might again go mad. Then what? What can we do?

Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative* 2001, p. 87

If it is true that the era of humanism is followed by – something, as yet unknown, is it not indispensable to approach this unknown through language, which is and will always remain more unknown than man, and coextensive with his being? [...] Considering man as language and putting language in the place of man constitutes the mystifying gesture par excellence. It introduces science into the complex and imprecise zone of human activities where ideologies and religions are (usually) established.

Julia Kristeva, *Language, the Unknown* 1989, epigraph

The source of our stubborn search for 'reality' is our fragility, and this neither God nor Nature could prevent us from experiencing once He – or She, or They – had endowed us with the ability to express in language both the distinction between illusion and non-illusion and the uncertainty of our life. [...] [M]etaphysics [...] is an expression of the experience of human fragility [...].

Leszek Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror* 2001, p. 16

The purpose of the following inquiry is to offer a critical meditation on Julia Kristeva's complex and at times seemingly contradictory treatment of religion, as well as to consider the character of the relationship between Kristeva's readings

of religious texts and the ‘atheist’ character of her critical discourse. Emerging out of the context of what, in the English-speaking world, has become known as the ‘poststructuralist’ development in French critical and literary theory of the 1960s, Kristeva’s work stands in an intimate relation to the writings of such seminal figures in contemporary thought as Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), or Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) (Interviews 258-59). Kristeva’s intellectual interests are diverse and her influences include authors as different in orientation as Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Karl Marx (1818-1883), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), or Emile Benveniste (1902-1976). This diversity is itself one of the key features of the generation of French scholars among whom Kristeva came to prominence; according to her own autobiographical comment on the cosmopolitanism peculiar to the Parisian scene of the 1960s, “there was nowhere else in the world where one could, in the heart of the most official institutions and in the spotlight of the media, draw simultaneously on Marx, Saint Augustine, Hegel, Saussure, and Freud” (PK 7). In this respect, the manner in which Kristeva’s thought situates itself at the intersection of literary, philosophical and religious concerns finds a particular affinity with the writings of Blanchot and Derrida. Yet, while a number of important studies have addressed the question of religion in the works of the latter two authors (especially so in Derrida’s case) since the late 1980s, inquiries into Kristeva’s relevance to the study of religion have been relatively limited in scope.

To be sure, since the mid 1990s at least, a considerable number of publications have addressed Kristeva's engagement with religion. Notable among these are two volumes of essays – *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women, and Psychoanalysis* (1992), edited by David R. Crownfield, and *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives* (2003), edited by Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon – as well as individual journal articles such as James DiCenso, "New Approaches to Psychoanalysis and Religion: Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun*" (1995), Ann W. Astell, "Telling Tales of Love: Julia Kristeva and Bernard of Clairvaux" (2000), Joyce Ann Mercer, "Psychoanalysis, Parents, and God: Julia Kristeva on Subjectivity and the Imaginary Father" (2002), Thomas R. Hatina's "Intertextuality and Historical Criticism in New Testament Studies" (2003), William W. Young III, "Healing Religion: Aesthetics and Analysis in the Work of Kristeva and Clément" (2005), Arthur Bradley, "'Mystic Atheism': Julia Kristeva's Negative Theology" (2008), or Diane Jonte-Pace, "Julia Kristeva and the Psychoanalytic Study of Religion: Re-reading 'Mourning and Melancholia'" (2009). In addition, Sara Beardsworth offers a significant analysis of religion and nihilism in *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (2004).

This inquiry has been motivated by the predominantly fragmentary character of the above studies, all of which offer relatively brief reflections on a particular dimension of Kristeva's thought on religion: its critique of religion, its psychoanalytic interpretations, or its implications for feminist thought or for biblical studies. Furthermore, since the vast majority of scholars who specialize

in Kristeva's work come from fields outside religious studies, their inquiries tend to neglect the multidimensional character of Kristeva's engagement with religion throughout her linguistic, literary, political, ethical, and psychoanalytic explorations, as well as the complexity of her understanding of the 'death of God' and the dynamic interaction between religious and atheist discourses that her work presents. Thus, for instance, Beardsworth's accurate observation that "The significance of religion for Kristeva has not been sufficiently noted," is immediately followed by the rather hasty assumption – in an otherwise excellent study – that "where it is brought into the foreground, her thought on religion as a failure, or as a kind of failure, is not fully acknowledged [...]" (Beardsworth 19). Conversely, as Jonte-Pace points out in her essay, some critical and feminist theorists – including Gyatri Spivak – have accused Kristeva of being something of an apologist for Christian ideas and narratives.¹ The task of this study will be to address these complex issues in the course of Kristeva's changing discourse on religion, from her earliest to her most recent publications.

One should not be too quick in assuming that a study of this sort could chart out a concrete, comprehensive 'theory of religion' within Kristeva's writings. Despite her strong tendency to psychoanalyze religious ideas and discourses, and beyond her explicit claim concerning the *irreducibility* of religious experience in human life, Kristeva's approach could be more appropriately characterized as entailing a series of questions concerning 'religion', questions that can be multiplied or displaced in a variety of directions but which, above all, remain

¹ Belzen 2009, p. 299. – For Spivak's comment on Kristeva's 'Christian apologetics' see Spivak 1988, p. 264 (in bibl. 1.2).

close to the problem of language or, in more general terms, ‘signification’: What sort of language is ‘religious language’? How is this language related to the history of Western metaphysics and how does it differ from, for instance, literary, psychoanalytic, or philosophical language? How should one speak to this language and to the peculiar ‘truth’ it claims to name? How is this language possible or impossible today, in the face of the alleged ‘death of God’? *Where* is it today? Does it have a fixed boundary? Is it, indeed, ever possible to speak in a manner that is *not* ‘religious’? Finally: What is the future of this discourse – with or without God, with or without Humanity? Must religious discourse disappear in order for human beings to be able to speak truthfully, or is it impossible to approximate any kind of truth beyond religious concerns?

This is not to say that the question of ‘religion’ – which, in Kristeva’s case, is virtually synonymous with the Judeo-Christian tradition – becomes defined here simply as a linguistic problem. While it would not be incorrect to assert that Kristeva and the critical and literary theorists of her generation share a fundamental interest in the relationship between language and truth, it is not, as is often assumed, due to their conviction that language constitutes the only ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ for the human subject, for they share an equally fundamental concern with the *limits* of language and the frailty of words. By the same token, there is an emphasis here on those kinds of language that continually seek to address the ‘other of language’ – including certain kinds of literary or religious language, whereby language as such seems to have an otherness inscribed within itself, withdrawing from the rules of syntax and logic and dissolving into something

obscure or, indeed, inexplicable. In this context, the relationship between language and God is anything but simple: 'God', as it were, slips through the cracks in language and refuses any convenient identification with a given signifier.

This is precisely why the so-called 'problem of meaning' appears, in the context of French poststructuralism, without the traditional formulation, 'What is...?' (as in: What is 'religion', 'God', 'evil', 'literature', 'language', or 'meaning'). Words name, designate, define – but they also obscure, fail, undo. It is equally important to point out that what is at stake here – the so-called 'crisis of meaning', as it has sometimes been designated in contemporary scholarship in an attempt to define a certain 'affliction' characteristic of 'late modernity' – cannot be reduced merely to an epistemological issue. For the critique of metaphysics that accompanies the poststructuralist enterprise, together with its emphasis on what is irreducible to language, echoes a deeper concern, one that is simultaneously epistemological, political, ethical, historical, psychological, literary, linguistic and, indeed, religious. In other words, if 'meaning' has become the most privileged notion of contemporary critical thought, the crisis it announces is all-encompassing and affects everything from the simplest of words to the most evident of concepts, including every social, cultural, and political institution. Becoming aware of himself as, first and foremost, a being who speaks, 'Man' – the central category of rational humanism – has suddenly, if inevitably, found himself in an eccentric position: condemned to speech, as it were, yet unable to speak himself fully and to fix his 'world' and its 'objects'

within his words once and for all. Or, as Kristeva declares in the prefix to her *Language, the Unknown*: “If it is true that the era of humanism is followed by – something, as yet unknown, is it not indispensable to approach this unknown through language, which is and will always remain more unknown than man, and coextensive with his being?” (LU, epigraph) To be more precise, the crisis of meaning as it is understood within the French poststructuralist context may be said to involve three separate, but closely intertwined, experiences: the fragility of words, their limited and fleeting capacity to hold on to stable meaning and hence to form a definite foundation for knowledge; the dissolution of the transcendental ego, standing before the world in itself as a rational, independent absolute observer; and the destabilization of social, cultural, political, moral, legal, and pedagogical ideologies, identities and institutions (Interviews 258-59) in the wake of two world wars and the dissolution of colonial powers.

It is important to point out, in this respect, that despite the occasional radicalism of her critical tone, it would be wrong to consider Kristeva’s work – or the work of some of her famous colleagues from *Tel Quel* or from the Parisian intellectual scene – as simply *subversive* in spirit (Interviews 260). The reception of French ‘critical theory’ in the English speaking world has tended, all too often, to fall into two categories: on the one hand, those who welcome it as a *necessary* subversion, which, having exploded the metanarratives of Western thought, set up the possibility of a ‘postmodern’ celebration of infinite plurality and play; on the other hand, those who accuse these discourses of a *dangerous* subversion, often synonymous with the very rejection of reason, academic integrity, and social

institutions. Both responses fail to grasp the fact that, if Kristeva and her colleagues remain intent on bringing a certain ‘discontent’ to the entire edifice of Western metaphysics and the social structure it produced – with its convenient repertoire of stable, ‘self-evident’, and often quite arbitrary truths, categories, concepts, conventions, discourses, methods, and practices – they are also keenly aware of the fragility of ‘meaning’ and of the necessity of continually renewing the capacities inherent in it. What is at stake in these discourses, then, is nothing less than the problem of *nihilism* in its *two* essential forms – the Scylla of positivism (truth without alterity) and the Charybdis of relativism (alterity without truth). Like many of her contemporaries, Kristeva avoids the kind of nihilism that finds rest in the denial of meaning while also positioning her thought against a nihilist tendency of another kind: a tendency common to philosophical, political, as well as religious discourses that accompanies the mere naming of ‘things’, which guarantees that we no longer have to *think* with respect to them and that, content with their ‘objective nature’, we no longer have to reflect on the nature of *thought* and its relation to language. Criticism, in this regard, becomes an attempt to *bring work and logic into play* as much as to *bring play to every work or logic*: first and foremost at the level of language.

By the same token, if the writings of critical theorists attempt to bring crisis to the heart of Western symbolic logic – whether by way of literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, or religion – through their emphasis on the uncertainty, indeterminacy, and ambiguity that inhabits all language, their work is also an attempt to address a crisis that, as it were, *had already arrived* and that is *yet to*

arrive. In other words, rather than being the *instigators* of the ‘postmodern’ crisis of meaning, by privileging a certain *deconstruction* of stable meaning and identity and exploring the themes of death, exile, or estrangement, they offer a variety of responses to a crisis that has, in a sense, been inevitable all along and whose full extent is yet to be realized. These responses simultaneously embody a profound dissatisfaction with the available philosophical, linguistic, political, and ethical discourses and their ability to respond to these crises. Understood in their proper cultural and historical context characterized by a certain experience of ruins in post-war Europe, their writings should therefore be regarded not as proclaiming *truth as dispersal* but, more accurately, as seeking a new *experience of truth* within a *dispersal* that had *already taken place*. Whether or not they affirm the *permanence* or even the continuing *necessity* of this dispersal, this crisis of signifying structures becomes a crucial question, and one that is inseparable from the encounter between literary and religious language. This encounter appears to take place (or fails to take place) at certain moments in Kristeva’s thought where much is at stake, at times more than she herself realizes, and it is in such instances that this study will become more critical in tone.

Kristeva, in any case, declares quite consistently from the very beginning that the crisis of meaning must be considered as equally and simultaneously religious (death of God) and secular-humanist (death of Man) in character. By the same token, this crisis establishes a profound ambiguity within the conventional modernist polarity between ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’, ‘theism’ and ‘atheism’, ‘faith’ and ‘reason’, ‘belief’ and ‘knowledge’, or ‘physical’ and ‘metaphysical’.

For this reason, and despite occasional appearances to the contrary, it would be more accurate to regard Kristeva's work as exploring this ambiguity, rather than offering some literal hyper-elaboration of Meister Eckhart's prayer, in an effort to rid humanity of 'God' once and for all. Although Kristeva regards the 'death of God' as the very figure of the dissolution of Western metaphysics, her work seems to assert, at the same time, that there is nothing final about this 'death' or what it signifies. Indeed, Kristeva's concern with the 'death of God' is intimately linked to her concern with the nihilism that underlies modern discourses, as though the hasty, unreflective dismissal of 'God' and an equally hasty imposition of humanist rationalism upon the presumed ruins of Judeo-Christian metaphysics do play a key role in bringing about the current crisis of meaning.

For this reason, Kristeva speaks toward religious discourse in a way that leaves little doubt as to its continuing importance as a question that is unavoidable in any contemporary discourse, whether philosophical, literary, political, feminist, or psychoanalytic: the 'dead God' of the Judeo-Christian tradition continues to haunt Western discourses, even in those instances where this discourse has to all appearances 'succeeded' in distancing itself from any 'religious', 'theological', or 'metaphysical' claims. Her writings, quite persistently, follow this 'haunting' along a variety of paths – literary, semiotic, psychoanalytic, feminist – and to attempt to categorize the effects of their labor as either 'religious' or 'atheist' would be to betray their aim in advance. It would be more accurate to argue that her thought remains *within* the discourse of the 'death of God', but *without* accepting that death as an unproblematic fact. The question in this regard is the

following: if Kristeva's work seeks an affirmation of both 'meaning' and 'nonmeaning' that threads the thin margin between a *literary* gesture (language as process, productivity, difference) and a *psychoanalytic* gesture (subjectivity as process, creativity, alterity), to what extent is the *religious* gesture (the task of thinking the death of God) situated between theology and atheism indispensable for her scheme? In other words, how is it possible for Kristeva to explicitly affirm 'atheism' while simultaneously asserting the 'irreducibility' of religion in human life? Does Kristeva's thought, despite its explicit 'atheism', call for a certain re-sacralization of language – at the point where religious, literary, and psychoanalytic languages cross (and wound?) each other – beyond both onto-theological and humanist dogmatisms?

The concern with religion in Kristeva's work is situated within a nexus of concerns shared by a number of her contemporaries, and it constitutes a portion of a more extensive conversation that remains enormously relevant to the study of religion today. Of particular interest, in this regard, is the special affinity between the literary and psychoanalytic concerns addressed by Kristeva and those that emerge in the literary criticism of Maurice Blanchot and in the deconstructive readings of Jacques Derrida. All three authors have an equally keen interest in the alleged 'disappearance' of religious discourse in modern Western culture, as well as its possible or factual 'reappearance' in the second half of the 20th Century. All three identify themselves more or less explicitly as 'atheist', while disavowing any naïve celebration of secularism as a replacement for religion; their critique of the positivist, instrumental understanding of the relationship between language

and truth paves way to regard a statement such as ‘God is dead’ as constituting an opening rather than a closing. The task here is not to engage in an extensive comparative study, but rather to insert parallel, critical reflections on aspects of Blanchot’s and Derrida’s thought at certain strategic points in order to indicate how Kristeva attempts to elaborate in her own manner the concerns she shares with them, particularly those pertaining to the relationship between religious and atheist language and to the ‘crisis of meaning’.

It is common among Kristeva experts to divide her work into three periods, each characterized by a somewhat different focus: the linguistic, semiotic, and literary writings of the 1960s and 70s; the psychoanalytic studies of the 1980s and 90s; and the political and cultural criticisms which have become predominant since the early 1990s. While this categorization can certainly be useful, it tends to obscure the fact that there are no simple, abrupt breaks in Kristeva’s work: like many complex thinkers, Kristeva weaves together a variety of themes, occasionally changing her terminology or emphases, privileging certain motifs while pushing others to the background; and yet many of the central ideas and insights that define her approach continue to reappear throughout her work. One finds, however, a visible change in the manner in which religion finds itself situated within Kristeva’s scheme, a change that is reflected in Kristeva’s language and the style of her readings of religious texts. This change in orientation has much to do with Kristeva’s increasing preoccupation with the crisis of meaning which, in her understanding, calls for a different response as Western societies move toward a certain displacement of traditional structures,

values, discourses, and signifying practices in general. For this reason, this inquiry is divided into four chapters.

The first two chapters consider Kristeva's early studies in semiotics and literary theory and the position of religious discourse in the context of her critique of language and meaning. More specifically, these two chapters discuss the development of Kristeva's theory of the text as well as the way in which her notions of 'intertextuality' and 'poetic language' constitute an attempt to correct what she regards as certain shortcomings in the 'poststructuralist camp', most notably Derrida's non-concept of *différance*; they also draw attention to the parallels and distinctions between Blanchot's and Kristeva's understanding of the relationship between contemporary literature – especially the emergence of 'avant-garde' literature – and the 'death of God'.

The third chapter focuses on Kristeva's re-examination of the significance and role of religious discourse in the context of her psychoanalytic and cultural concerns. The guiding question here will be: to what extent is psychoanalysis, in Kristeva's later thought, a replacement for religion, or a kind of 'religion without religion' in the sense in which this notion has occasionally been applied to describe Derrida's work, and to what extent does religion assume the role of the necessary 'other' to psychoanalytic discourse?

The fourth chapter addresses Kristeva's attempt to bring together psychoanalytic and political questions in her late thought, particularly the manner in which she responds to the 'revival' of religion in public life, while becoming

increasingly concerned with the limits and possibilities of secularism in the twenty-first century.

Chapter One

The Poetics of the Text: From the 'Crisis of Meaning' to the Meaning of 'Crisis'

One and the same history, bloody at times and always bitter, has linked together truth, the sign, and the text. But also, one and the same crisis, which started last century in the metaphysics of truth (Nietzsche), is being opened up today in the theory of language and literature, by the ideological critique of the sign, and by the substitution of a new text for the old one, that of the philologists.

Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text",
in UtT 1981, p. 33

We, as civilizations, we now know not only that we are mortal, as Paul Valéry asserted after the war of 1914; we also know that we can inflict death upon ourselves. Auschwitz and Hiroshima have revealed that [...] [a] tremendous crisis of thought and speech, a crisis of representation, has indeed emerged [...].

Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* 1989, p. 221

[T]he universalization of the word ['crisis'] is not perhaps the result of our linguistic carelessness, but betrays a vague feeling that all forms of life, social organization, thought, and feeling, all components of our civilization, are afflicted with a sickness for which nobody knows the cure – a feeling that uncertainty about the fate of humanity has become universal, although masked by aggressive platitudes.

Leszek Kołakowski, *Modernity on
Endless Trial* 1997, p. 86

[W]e have – despite all our obsession with discourse – virtually no means of articulating the essential frames of reference for our life [...].

Peter Sloterdijk. *Ni le soleil ni la mort*
2003, p. 165

The notion of the 'text' plays a crucial role within French structuralist and post-structuralist thought of the 1960s and 1970s; it constitutes, as it were, the name

for a certain reorientation in thinking with respect to such traditional concepts as 'language', 'meaning', and 'truth', as well as for a certain erasure of the traditional distinction between writing and discourse. While the origins of the notion of the text can be located within the literary criticism practiced by Russian Formalists or the Prague School prior to 1939, it has found its most prominent contemporary elaboration in the critical writings of authors associated with the *Tel Quel* group, such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Philippe Sollers, and Julia Kristeva. Kristeva's contribution in this regard can hardly be overestimated: her knowledge and interpretation of Russian formalist thought (especially Bakhtin's *dialogism*) on language and literature on the one hand, and her attempt to move beyond formalist linguistics and structuralism through her practice of *semanalysis* and *intertextuality* on the other, had a significant impact on many of her contemporaries, and enabled her to become a leading voice of her generation of critical thinkers. Yet the reason for beginning with a discussion of her theory of the text is not simply historical: Kristeva's understanding of the text has important consequences for her understanding of truth and meaning, an understanding that carries profound consequences for the particular manner in which she undertakes her engagement with religion, as well as for the particular manner in which she treats the relationship between religious language and other kinds of language, especially literary, philosophical, psychoanalytic, and feminist.

This inquiry therefore addresses a number of issues around Kristeva's textual practice that are intricately linked. It begins with some preliminary considerations revolving around the question: What is a 'text' and how does the

concept of the ‘text’ transform the traditional understanding of the notions of ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’? This is followed by a more elaborate discussion of Kristeva’s contribution to the theory of the text, especially the manner in which this contribution reflects her dissatisfaction with certain tendencies in ‘poststructuralist’ thought of the period, particularly those of Blanchot (# 1.2) and Derrida (# 1.3)? Then, # 1.4 discusses the central reasons behind Kristeva’s privileging of literary language and her attempt to bring this language into the very midst of social and cultural activity. The goal is to clarify how Kristeva’s understanding of avant-garde literary practice comes to be paralleled with a certain kind of atheism, paying special attention to the way in which her thinking crosses a number of relevant themes in Blanchot’s writings. The final concern of this chapter is therefore: What place does religious discourse occupy within Kristeva’s textual practice, or, put differently, where is the text of religion in her theory of the text?

1.1 Language and Truth in the Theory of the Text

The conception of language as the ‘key’ to man and to social history and as the means of access to the laws of societal functioning constitutes perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of our era [...].

Julia Kristeva, *Language, the Unknown*
1989, p. 3

[W]e are not dealing with a cursory history that strings together sociopolitical events but the history that Nietzsche called monumental history: the history of mentalities, mutations in man’s relationship to meaning.

Julia Kristeva, *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt* 2000, p. 195.

At the heart of the ‘poststructuralist’ concept of the ‘text’ are two closely related ideas, which, although seemingly simple, carry enormous consequences. The first idea positions itself against the traditional definition of a (literary, philosophical, religious, or scientific) ‘text’ as a self-contained, transparent, accessible object, “inhabited,” as Roland Barthes’ puts it in his *Theory of the Text* (1973), “by one, and one only meaning, a ‘true’ meaning, a definitive meaning” (UtT 33). Kristeva is thus not uttering a mere platitude when she asserts that “The *reading* of a text is doubtlessly the first stage of a theoretical elaboration” (DL 119). Rather she draws the reader’s attention to an event that, all too often, is taken for granted in contemporary Western culture, keen on bypassing the difficulties of *reading* in favor of an untroubled *consumption* of ‘anonymous’ texts – which, in the final account, translates into an uncritical consumption of readily accessible, manufactured ‘truths’. On the contrary, the text must be regarded as constituting an infinite, dynamic *process* without a fixed center or point of reference, overflowing the limits of every reading, analysis, or interpretation – including its own author’s intention. The aim of the post-structuralist elaboration of the text, then, is to make the text tremble, so to speak: to inject heterogeneity and plurivocity into its content, to liberate it from its institutional, ideological, and theoretical enclosure, and to allow it to ‘wander’.

According to the second idea, which emerges directly from the first one, the term ‘text’ – as its etymology indicates – must be regarded as a kind of *weave* of different *signifying practices* – an intersection where different written texts,

discourses, images, ideas, or symbolic systems cross or encounter one another. At least three important consequences follow: 1. the term ‘signifying practice’ becomes crucial, since it no longer allows for the human subject to distance him or herself from the variety of ways in which s/he produces and participates in the production of meaning; 2. rather than being merely a collection of written signs, the text as a signifying practice effectively collapses any simplistic distinction between thought and symbol/sign, language and image, writing and speech, reading and writing, or private and public; 3. the text as an interpolation of signifying practices situates itself against the rather simplistic and, indeed, nihilistic division of the human experience into separate, largely self-contained and specialized spheres, such as philosophy, religion, art, science, or politics. This division remains implicitly attached to an entire series of problematic conceptual oppositions: theory and practice, fact and fiction, subject and object, body and mind, faith and reason, thought and feeling, contemplation and action, spiritual and secular, sense and nonsense, or work and creativity. The purpose of the text is to bring into play a certain erasure of these superficially imposed boundaries and categorical distinctions – not in order to destroy thought, but in order to reassess the very nature of thought in its relation to a wide variety of symbolic activities and experiences. The text presupposes a mutual ‘contamination’ of all discourses – and of signifying practices in general; therefore, it affirms a process that constantly traverses their imaginary boundaries. In Barthes’ own words,

For there to be a new science it is not enough, in effect, for the old science to become deeper or wider (which is what happens when one

passes from the linguistics of the sentence to the semiotics of the work); there has to be a meeting of different epistemes, indeed ones that normally know nothing of each other (as is the case with Freudianism, Marxism, and structuralism), and this meeting has to produce a new object (it is no longer a question of a new approach to an old object): in the event, it is this new object that we call text. (UfT 35)

By the same token, the problem to be found at the very heart of French critical theory from the very beginning is: How to exist *in several languages at once*? How to speak within the irreducible *plurivocity* of language, in a manner that would allow us to situate ourselves simultaneously towards several different discourses: literary, philosophical, religious, psychoanalytic, political, scientific, or economic?

A double gesture is thus inscribed into poststructuralist theory: the critique of the unity and the totalizing aspirations of (a certain conception of) Reason within the Western metaphysical tradition is simultaneously accompanied by a critique of the rather careless and to some extent arbitrary splintering of knowledge into separate, self-enclosed, or even mutually exclusive spheres. This double gesture has often been underestimated by commentators who regard this theory as being primarily concerned with the subversion of positivist conceptual systems and a mere celebration of plurality and difference; the impossibility of a Total System calls for a necessarily inter-textual or inter-disciplinary inquiry that involves an ongoing process of rigorous reading, thinking, and dialogue – as well as constant reintegration between different kinds of ‘language’. Hence, for instance, religion can no longer be read without an encounter with its literary dimension, just as literature can no longer be a merely aesthetic practice distinct from the question of knowledge or from the question of the religious character of

what is called ‘literature’. Indeed, one of the innermost insights characterizing poststructuralist theory is that the truth of every society – the *metaphysics* of a people, as it were – manifests itself symbolically on every level and in every sphere. In this sense, every ‘signifying practice’, from the political or economic system, to science and technology, to art or music, constitutes as much a religious or philosophical, as it does a political or literary event – so much so that it is often difficult to tell whether, for instance, a painting reflects the economic arrangement, or whether the political context manifests certain transformations in the literary culture.

Bringing together the above observations, the theory of the text leads then to the following suggestion: all history is, first and foremost, a history of signifying practices – of ways of organizing symbols, meanings, languages and discourses into some kind of comprehensive framework. Put differently, the history of every culture or civilization may be regarded as a history of a particular practice of logic, or of different determinations of ‘truth’ within language, including different conceptions of ‘God’, ‘religion’, or ‘the sacred’. What is at stake in the theory of the text is nothing less than the question of the nature of ‘meaning’, which is always also the question of the relationship between language and truth, as well as of the *crisis* that has allegedly come to ‘disturb’ that relationship in the course of the twentieth century. It is, above all, important to point out in this respect that the critique of any metalanguage intrinsic to the works of Kristeva, Derrida, or Blanchot does not simply constitute the origin of the contemporary ‘crisis of meaning’. Roland Barthes is correct in his

observation that “it is a part of the theory of the text to plunge any enunciation, including its own, into crisis” (UtT 35). And yet, as he himself points out, this assertion must be immediately qualified by adding that this act of bringing crisis to any meaning has everything to do with a certain denial inscribed within Western logic rather than with the destruction of ‘logic’ as such. The denial in question revolves around the fact that the experience of ‘crisis’ is inseparable from any experience of ‘meaning’.

It is not insignificant, in this respect, that the Greek term *krisis* evokes the necessity of *decision* rather than suggesting, as the term tends to do today, merely a *problem* to be *resolved* or *overcome*. Be that as it may, the poststructuralist development in critical theory suggests that the so-called ‘human sciences’ have been for the most part not only content to *ignore* the complexity of ‘meaning’, but also inclined to *deliberately* treat language as a mere instrument capable of expressing a given meaning in a transparent and predictable manner. Their denial of the ‘crisis’ peculiar to meaning is thus not only intellectually *convenient* but also *ideological* in character: admitting the extent or nature of this crisis would entail a profound – and profoundly difficult – reconsideration of the entire edifice of Western thought, including its understanding of language, knowledge, and subjectivity, as well as the inevitable *limits* of that understanding. This is precisely what Kristeva suggests in her text, “The Novel as Polylogue” (1974), when she asserts that: “When the most solid guarantee of our identity – syntax – is revealed as a limit, the entire history of the Western subject and his relationship to his enunciation has come to an end” (DL 178). In an important sense, it is the

negligent disavowal of such limits within metaphysical thought that has resulted in a certain alienation between language and truth, which manifests itself in all contemporary discourses – ‘secular’ as much as ‘religious’. If the aim of critical theory in its poststructuralist version can be, to some extent, characterized as a move beyond structural (or structuralist) limits and categories, it is nevertheless also accompanied by the ‘revival’ of the very notion of *limit* that passes as much through Kant and Nietzsche, as it does through Augustine and Negative Theology, thus preparing for a recovery of the hitherto ignored *positive* notion of finitude (more on this in #3.2 and #3.3).

In the textual practice of Kristeva and a number of her French contemporaries, language thus becomes at once an *opening* and a *border*, while truth becomes an *event* that continually *unfolds within language* without ever being permanently *fixed* within a given statement as though it were a self-transparent *fact* – indeed, without ever being entirely reducible to language as such. To say that truth is an event is to disentangle the notion of ‘truth’ from its common association with such problematic notions as ‘factuality’, ‘presence’, or ‘calculability’, rather than to attempt a total abandonment of truth. There is an infinity – both spatial and historical – at the heart of every (textual) event, which cannot be contained in a single statement, narrative, or interpretation. For Kristeva, as for Blanchot and Derrida, this implies that a certain undecidability can never be avoided: “The “truth” of textual productivity is neither provable nor verifiable. That is to say, textual productivity stems from a region other than that of verisimilitude. The ‘truth’ or relevance of scriptural practice is of another

order, it is undecidable (unprovable, unverifiable) [...].”¹ This is not to say simply that ‘truth’ is relative or fictional, as though ‘truths’ and texts’ were intrinsically incompatible events or, indeed, as though the word ‘truth’ could simply be abandoned for the word ‘text’ without a serious consideration of the complex character of their relationship. It would be more appropriate to affirm that, as soon as there is a ‘text’, the question of truth can *no longer be avoided*. Yet this question is never simply reducible to a single, final, and transparent answer, in accordance with the metaphysical and all-too human requirement for calculable and accessible ‘truths’ that behave like ‘objects’ of consumption. Put differently, this question can no longer be assigned some proper place that would correspond, in a self-evident manner, either to an ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of the event constituting the text. Truth is at once synonymous with the textual event and never entirely reducible to it; like the text, truth constitutes a weaving of threads, not a transparent, accessible fact that would deliver us from the burdensome task of ceaselessly learning anew how to think and speak with respect to truth. In Kristeva’s words, “The true is not a set affirmation, it is merely the path of correction and transformation, one and the other (in our terms: the true is both the symbolic and the semiotic, both *Bedeutung* and what breaks through it) [...]. The true is not the absolute positing of a transcendental ego; it is instead that part of it registered in a relation with the other.” (RePL 218)

¹ “La ‘vérité’ de la productivité textuelle n’est prouvable ni vérifiable, ce qui voudrait dire que la productivité textuelle relève d’un domaine autre que le vraisemblable. La ‘vérité, ou la pertinence, de la pratique scripturale est d’un autre ordre; elle est indécidable (improuvable, invérifiable) [...]” (TeR 76).

This approach bears witness to the inevitable limits language encounters in its attempts to grasp and communicate the event of 'truth'. Insofar as 'truth' is concerned, this implies, first and foremost, that one is always already in several places at once – and that one must learn to speak from this state of dispersion. Truth as such can never be named; nevertheless, it perpetually calls for the *process* of naming that, whether it remains turned towards or away from truth, can never be avoided. Every discourse is inhabited by echoes of other discourses, and every question echoes another. Kristeva's notion of textual *productivity* alludes precisely to this dynamic process of endless appropriation of truth, a process that necessarily entails the refusal of truth as a 'bounded text' – which she considers the symbol par-excellence of the reign of 'market value' and its merely human demand for an accessible, calculable product of consumption. At the same time, the notion of productivity brings into focus the manner in which the subjective experience is always inscribed into the event of truth. This notion recalls Augustine's suggestion, evoked by Derrida (see AP 4 & DNT 286), that truth, in an important sense, demands also our 'making' or 'doing' – that truth is inseparable from a certain *poiēsis*. At the same time, truth as event calls for more rigorous thinking, speaking, and writing, rather than their absolute displacement in an infinite, meaningless play of arbitrary variation: Mallarmé's 'throw of the dice', an image employed by Kristeva as much as by Blanchot or Derrida to indicate both the necessity and the unavoidability of play in thought and language, is not simply a game of random variations.

1.2 The Passion of the Neuter, or the Uncertain Solitude of Maurice Blanchot

Reading is anguish, and this is because any text, however important, or amusing, or interesting it may be (and the more engaging it seems to be), is empty – at bottom it doesn't exist; you have to cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*
1986, p. 10

It would be difficult to imagine many of the central developments in the theory of the text without the contributions of Maurice Blanchot. Although the notion of the text hardly appears in Blanchot's language, his critical writings of the 1940s, 50s and early 60s provide a kind of *pretext* for a variety of 'poststructuralist' textual practices of the 1960s and 70s, setting up a vast array of themes, motifs, terms, questions and concerns that resonate, in one way or another (albeit often in quite different terms), in the work of authors as diverse as Georges Bataille, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, or Julia Kristeva – to name but a few. Blanchot's contributions in this respect may be charted out along three intimately linked routes.

1.2.1 Work and Worklessness

In the first place, Blanchot's brand of literary criticism sets out to un-work every attempt to place the 'literary work' within the grasp of a conceptual appropriation or definition, although by way of a careful and patient reading that does not abandon the work. The 'work' is not a circumscribable object – a bound text, a finite collection of words, sentences, written pages whose theme, message,

or truth can, sooner or later, be extracted from it. “Literature, in its obscure self-assertion, excludes [...] the idea of a work, an *oeuvre*” (InC 397). Thus Blanchot considers it more appropriate to refer to that which constitutes the innermost essence of a literary work as “worklessness” – *désœuvrement* (InC 403, 417, 419, 424, 428), as the “ordeal of eternal unworking” (SpL 173), or indeed, as the “absence of the work/book” (InC 419, 423-25, 430-31). The work dissolves, as it were, before us, readers, before our every attempt to make it *work* for us; the more we speak of it, the more we extract from it, the more we mould it into something coherent, the more we open up a bottomless abyss in its very midst – which is its extreme limit – and the more the work withdraws into obscurity and inexplicability, remaining (mostly) beyond merely human categories and discourses (InC 398). In Leslie Hill’s words, the literary work “is possessed of a kind of spectral indeterminacy, which allows it to be traversed by this or that critical methodology, even as it mutely slips away. [...] To read [...] is always to be indebted to the work. But the [...] work itself cares little about how it is read, or even if it is read at all” (AfB 60-61). The work is thus “readable, yet essentially unreadable” (AfB 63). Complete within itself – for, in one sense, it cannot be altered as such (AfB 62) – the work nonetheless bears witness to the impossibility of completion, an impossibility within which even the author of the work must learn that his or her most proper task is disappearance or ‘dying’ (BoC 229). “To write is to produce the absence of the work (worklessness, unworking [*désœuvrement*]). Or again: writing is the absence of the work as it *produces itself* through the work, traversing it throughout. Writing as unworking (in the

active sense of the word) is the insane game, the indeterminacy that lies between reason and unreason.” (InC 424)

The work “alludes to a secret which cannot be divulged by the work, but which nevertheless lies within the work at an intangible distance from the work, as a kind of secret without secret, simultaneously veiled and unveiled, and in itself irreducible to any disclosure or disclosing of truth, visible or invisible” (AfB 65). Then, the only way to read the work – a task that must be meticulously put into practice by the literary critic – is to learn to follow and share its very incompleteness or inaccessibility (AfB 66). To read is to experience oneself at the limit; or in Leslie Hill’s excellent formulation, reading remains possible only insofar as it recognizes and accepts not only what *can* be read, but also what *cannot* (AfB 70). A silence inhabits the work, a peculiar, enigmatic, and untranslatable silence “that says both everything and nothing” (AfB 62-3), and that must be preserved in the act of reading. To read, then, “is to encounter the unfamiliarity, the strangeness, the otherness of the unreadable. In other words, to read is by necessity to strain towards the point at which its own possibility is put into *crisis*” (AfB 70; emphasis added). To read is also to remember that the absence intrinsic to the work – the ‘void’ that traverses the work and through which the work unworks or ‘deconstructs’ itself – is paradoxically also an excess which, properly speaking, is always *outside* the work. “*The absence of the book* [...] is not the book’s interiority, nor its continuously elided Meaning. Rather it is outside the book, although enclosed within it – not so much its exterior as the reference to an outside that does not concern it.” (InC 423)

1.2.2 Solitude and Otherness

The strangeness of all this can perhaps be partially translated if we bring it into relation with Blanchot's notion of the literary text as constituting an *essential solitude* (SpL 21-22) or, to be more precise, if we regard it as an attempt, on Blanchot's part, to transpose the notion of *solitude* beyond its associations with some kind of radical aestheticism, as though the work were entirely removed from the world of social, historical, or political experience. In *The Space of Literature* (French 1955) Blanchot associates this solitude with the "silent void of the work" (SpL 22) into which literary language continually disappears, refusing to declare itself either as finished or unfinished, and to which both the writer and the reader necessarily belong. At the same time, the exact meaning of this essential solitude of Blanchot's literary text is not at all certain, and this uncertainty itself may well be the only feature truly essential to it. For although it would be difficult to find another reader among twentieth-century literary critics as determined as Blanchot to remain *within* the text and to carry on a pious conversation with its solitary silence, all of Blanchot's writings bear witness to this seemingly simple affirmation, which will find its way into Derrida's work: there is *no* such thing as a text – a text closed in upon itself, fully coinciding with itself, and set aside beyond all worldly concern. Neither inside nor outside, and neither present nor absent in the traditional sense, the text corresponds to an impossible solitude that cannot be reduced to the strict sense usually attached to this word. Indeed, the only reason we can speak of the text's solitude is precisely due to the fact that every text contains a specter of something that does not quite

belong to it – an *otherness* that cannot be named or domesticated – and that what is at stake in this specter always remains, in a sense, *outside* the text.

Blanchot expresses this peculiar situation in the following manner, anticipating both Derrida's and Kristeva's own elaborations of this motif:

Unworking is at work, but does not produce the work [...].
[W]orklessness is always outside the work: that which has not let itself be put to work, the always un-unified irregularity (the non-structure) that makes it so that the work relates to something other than itself, not because it says or enunciates [...] this other thing – the 'real' – but because it only says itself in saying this *other* thing, saying it through this distance and difference, this play between words and things that is also between things and things, between one language and another. (InC 417)

Put differently, the literary work in Blanchot's scheme of things constitutes, on the one hand, a language that has become radically decontextualized – a language that withdraws from all final contextual appropriation and manifests itself only by way of a certain self-erasure with respect to every coherent meaning or discourse that surrounds it: "Literature remains distinct from culture. To make a poetic work is not to make a cultural work, and the writer does not write to enrich the cultural patrimony" (InC 398). And yet, on the other hand, the solitude or silence embodied in this self-erasure can, paradoxically, only be preserved through a process of perpetual re-contextualization, whereby the work overflows its somewhat arbitrary boundaries and, neither finished nor unfinished, continues to emerge elsewhere – and otherwise.

In the second place, then, Blanchot develops a practice of literary criticism in which the question of what is called 'literature' becomes inseparable from questions that would traditionally be regarded as ethical, political, or religious.

Within this practice language in general and literary language in particular come to be regarded in terms of ‘plural speech’ (InC 8, 82, 156, 341), which – refusing any single analytic method, conceptual category, or definition – demands, along with the necessity of constant border crossing and the impossibility of mere repetition, the interminability of *translation*. Characteristically, Blanchot explores the motif of plural speech along a variety of different lines, addressing it as ‘fragmentary speech’ (InC 152-53, 158-59, 308, 342), ‘speech as detour’ (InC 21), the ‘speech of the outside’ (BoC 80; InC 55, 78, 156, 159), speech as ‘interruption’ (InC 75, 78), ‘discontinuity’ (InC 9, 77, 81-2), or ‘difference’ (InC 81-82, 92, 162, 169-70, 309), as well as speech as ‘dialogue’ (InC 215-16). All these motifs resonate with the question posed at the very beginning of *The Infinite Conversation*:

How can one speak so that speech is essentially plural? How can the search for a plural speech be affirmed, a speech [...] founded [...] upon dissymmetry and irreversibility so that, between two instances of speech, a relation of infinity would always be involved as the movement of signification itself? Or, again, how can one write in such a way that the continuity of the movement of writing might let interruption as meaning, and rupture as form, intervene fundamentally? (InC 8)

The motivation behind the question is first and foremost to challenge any conceptual attempt to gain mastery over language by defining it in terms of a structuralist, grammatical or logical unity, by incorporating it into an ontological or theological foundation, or by subsuming it under the totality of any dialectical program. (InC 9 & DG 155)

Echoing Heidegger’s concern with the ‘plurivocity’ of speech – and especially his assertion that “it is only as conversation that language is essential”

(Heidegger 1949, 277) – plural speech bears witness to the irreducible plurality that is always at stake in language, and remains inhabited by an *outside* that overflows our habitual oppositions between negation and affirmation, sense and nonsense, presence and absence, identity and alterity. If it can be said to negate all meaning whose ‘coherence’ is synonymous with being fixed in place, it also carries the radical affirmation of infinite meaning beyond merely human laws of logic and contradiction (InC 153-54). Hence this definition: “Language: affirmation itself, that which no longer affirms by reason of, nor with a view to, Unity. An affirmation of difference, but nonetheless never differing. Plural speech” (InC 156). By the same token, one of the innermost characteristics of Blanchot’s writing is that it inserts itself into the writings of others, often in a manner that makes his reading indistinguishable from theirs, while nonetheless continually aiming to mark a more or less pronounced difference, or interruption. Sometimes remaining on the margins of a text, at other times placing himself directly within a certain void at the heart of a text, Blanchot radicalizes Heidegger and anticipates Derrida’s practice, offering a reading that loses itself in ceaseless detours, displacements, and deferrals.

By means of this approach, Blanchot bears witness to the radical otherness intrinsic to every engagement with language, whether textual or discursive; to the fact that all speech and all writing is always already a response, a translation, a re-contextualization: “to speak is always to put into play an essential duplicity” (InC 80); “as soon as one speaks, even in the most simple manner and of the most simple facts, something unmeasured, something always waiting in the reserve of

familiar discourse is immediately at stake” (InC 211). Thus, for Blanchot, ‘I speak’ means: I speak by way of the other, I am a subject by way of an irreducible and ex-centric otherness that can never be appropriated by me, that cannot be posited with a view to unity (InC 67-69) and that represents nothing for me but an inaccessible presence (InC 74). “The Other speaks to me and is only this exigency of speech. And when the Other speaks to me, speech is the relation of that which remains radically separate.” (InC 69)

All proper conversation, then, is the experience of exile, exteriority, and estrangement in which the ‘I’ is always simultaneously the ‘other’ (InC 215). This experience must, in Blanchot’s scheme, necessarily permeate all literary, philosophical, or religious speech. “Rather than dialogue, we should name it plural speech” (InC 215). In this manner, language in general and the literary text in particular constitutes what Blanchot calls the ‘relation without relation’: a relation that is both neutral and doubly dissymmetrical, throwing into question every simple distinction between subject and object (InC 57), myself and another (InC 403), plurality and singularity, or familiarity and foreignness – a relation that condemns the subject to a state of perpetual wandering in exile and that, according to Blanchot’s analysis, may well constitute “the [(im)possible] enigma of all speech.” (InC 73)

1.2.3 The Neutral

This leads us towards the third motif that informs Blanchot’s thought around the ‘work’, namely his ‘poetics’ of the neuter. While, as Christophe Bident points out in his excellent essay on the subject, the idea of the ‘neutral’

constitutes a “guiding thread” that runs throughout much of Blanchot’s thought (AfB 18), the term acquires its uniquely characteristic status in some of the writings collected in *The Infinite Conversation* (InC 298-301, 303-5, 310-13, 385-86, 396), as well as in *The Step Not Beyond*² (SNB 72-77). The ‘neutral’ or the ‘neuter’ (*le neuter*; from Latin *ne* not + *uter* either: neither the one nor the other) constitutes a kind of non-concept which, apart from distancing Blanchot from his more ontological discussions of the related Levinasian notion of *il y a* (‘there is’) by alluding to a purely linguistic effect, anticipates the critique of structuralism contained in Derrida’s non-concept of *différance*, refusing any positioning that would correspond either to a positive or negative term, and perpetually haunting every text and every speech in the spectral manner of an unanswerable question (InC 16, 305). Marking an irreducible neutrality that corresponds neither to sense nor to non-sense, neither to Being nor to non-being, neither to subject nor to object, neither to presence nor to absence, the neuter also constitutes a crucial aspect of Blanchot’s ongoing attempt to challenge the logic of dialectic thinking. If, on the one hand, the neuter remains on intimate terms with dialectic thinking, it nevertheless names, on the other hand, a process whereby any dialectic attempt at a total appropriation or mediation of all terms involved remains subject to endless self-dissolution. The neuter bears within it an affirmation that is beyond both positive and negative terms, affirming nothing but the exigency of the undecidable (SNB 74 and 77) – also linked, in Blanchot’s work, to the notions of

² This is Lycette Nelson’s translation of Blanchot’s *Le pas au-delà*, a phrase in which the term *pas* can signify either a ‘step’ or the word ‘not’. In the first case, one should read “le pas au-delà” as “The Step Beyond”, or in the latter case: “The Not Beyond”. The first possibility is the one Blanchot emphasizes.

‘the impersonal’, ‘the interminable’, ‘the inert’, ‘the idle’, or ‘the unworked’.

(AfB 22)

The thought of the neuter testifies to Blanchot’s conviction that language is characterized by a fundamental self-effacement that cannot be subordinated to any final statement, and which, for this very reason, prevents it from exhausting itself or, for that matter, from being reduced to mere grammar. There is an exigency of a ‘neither/nor’ at the very heart of language, “never saying only what it says but always more and always less” (InC 57). Or, as Leslie Hill puts it, in Blanchot’s work “Language and sense are never commensurate with one another; just as there are always too many words for too few meanings, so there are always too many meanings for too few words” (AfB 132). Meaning as such, therefore, can be experienced only by way of the neutral, which, nonetheless, forever eludes it (InC 304); neither present nor absent in the strict sense, the neuter maintains itself ‘elsewhere’ as an ‘unidentifiable surplus’ of meaning (IC 305-06). Language is at once radically *meaningless* and radically *meaningfull*, limited and limitless, removing any possibility of some final ‘name’ just as it carries within itself a ceaseless and always *heterogeneous* possibility of naming. The thought of the neuter thus indicates that, if there is anything in language that could be referred to as its ‘nature’, it is the infinite excess of words itself.

Blanchot’s thought of the neuter thus reinscribes the Heideggerian notion of reading, writing, and speaking as *undergoing an experience with language*, while simultaneously affirming that the innermost feature of all human experience is a certain *impossibility* of experience – an impossibility that must nonetheless be

preserved within language. Blanchot inserts – by way of language – a fundamental anonymity at the very heart of subjective experience; in this process he pushes to its very limit Heidegger's own emphasis on man's inherent 'ex-centricity': his or her lack of capacity for a proper self-enclosure, a lack defined by the dispersal of the 'I speak' that remains irreducible to the Cartesian 'I think'. To be more accurate, the subject's innermost experience with language results not in *authenticity* but in a certain *passivity* which, beyond the active/passive dualism (WoD 13), resembles a certain affliction or suffering where the experiences of passivity, patience, and passion encounter and displace one another. In the midst of this passivity nothing is gained or grasped, and yet everything is at stake – beginning with the central no-place occupied by the 'I' and the perpetual crisis that characterizes this no-place. As though pushing to its limit Heidegger's enigmatic suggestion that language speaks as the "peal of stillness" (*das Geläut der Stille*), which "is not anything human" (Heidegger 1971, 205) – but abandoning Heidegger's sometimes subtle, but quite persistent, attempt to reassure his readers that there is nonetheless shelter and meaning to be found in this 'peal', if one only remains attentive – Blanchot asserts that language gives nothing and affirms nothing (if 'nothing' is still the proper word here) except its own uncanny character for which the *neuter* is an appropriate though *not* the final word. As far as Blanchot is concerned, if the speaking of language corresponds to anything at all, it is to a kind of incessant, interminable murmur without unity, purpose, origin, essence, or truth (InC 343). Language as such constitutes a fundamental refusal of allowing itself to be reduced to any kind of discourse.

Within this scenario, the eccentric dialogues that increasingly characterize Blanchot's writings of the 1960s onward, inhabited by the exigency of the neuter, disorient the reader. In a sense, no one speaks in these 'dis-courses' grounded in the *interval* of a 'relation without relation'; it would be more appropriate to say that they constitute an eccentric process whereby words echo each other (SNB 77), both repeating one another and differing via this repetition (InC 341), always attuned to the silence that separates them, the silence forgotten in order to speak, the silence of the unsaid or unknown towards which they are being borne by a movement of constant and mutual deferral. This silence of a neutral 'interval' or 'in-between' that can never be properly attained or made present in speech (InC 211) constitutes the space of interruption that figures at the very heart of every such dialogue (InC 75), both maintaining the correspondence between the interlocutors and the irreducible distance or difference between them (InC 81-82, 128) – a correspondence that prevents the possibility of proper closure and demands the renunciation of the mastery implied in 'having the last word' (InC 326, 341). As a kind of 'third term' within any conversation, the neutral resembles the narrative voice within a literary text, "a neutral voice that speaks the work from out of this place without a place, where the work is silent." (InC 385)

The neuter also corresponds to the notion of 'non-knowledge [*non-savoir*]' which emerged in Blanchot's exchanges with Georges Bataille (AfB 16-17). Indeed, in *The Infinite Conversation*, the term corresponds to the *unknown* as such: "an experience of the neutral is implied in every relation with the unknown"

(InC 299); “The unknown is neutral, a neuter” (InC 300). More precisely, the neuter presents a point of absolute impossibility to conceptual thought.

The unknown does not find its determination in the fact that it either is or is not, but only in the fact that relation with the unknown is a relation that is not opened by light or closed by light’s absence. A neutral relation. Which means that to think or to speak in the neuter, the neutral, is to think or to speak apart from every visible and every invisible, that is, in terms that do not answer to possibility.
(InC 301)

In this sense, the *neuter* signifies a *limit* – and first if all the limit of thought. In this sense, Blanchot’s observation that, “one can recognize in the entire history of philosophy an effort either to acclimatize or to domesticate the neuter” (InC 299) is taken up in Derrida in the opening to his *Margins of Philosophy* (1982 – French 1972), where he accuses philosophical discourse of having “always insisted upon assuring itself mastery over the limit (*peras, limes, Grenze*)” (MP x). The crucial aspect of Blanchot’s argument is that the neutral, which inhibits every text, every discourse, every knowledge, must never be posited merely “as ‘the not yet known’, the object of a knowledge still to come”; at the same time it can never be simply abandoned “as ‘the absolutely unknowable,’ a subject of pure transcendence, refusing itself to all manner of knowledge and expression” (InC 300). The neuter – the unknown as *unknown* or, in Derrida’s language, as the experience of *aporia* – must instead be constantly affirmed in every reading or discourse; it is precisely this affirmation that is embodied in Blanchot’s famous expression: “To *name* the possible, to *respond to the impossible*” (InC 65). Paradoxically, this in Blanchot’s scheme is also the heart of the experience of meaning as such, as he indicates in one of his dialogues: “*Thus the meaning of*

meaning would be neuter, neutral? – [...] if, already, both affirmation and negation leave it intact in its position of meaning” (InC 303). “‘Meaning would therefore only exist by way of the neutral’ – ‘But insofar as the neutral would remain foreign to meaning – by which I mean, first: neutral as far as meaning is concerned; not indifferent, but haunting the possibility of meaning and non-sense by the invisible margin of a difference’.” (InC 304)

Here Blanchot positions himself on a path that leads quite directly to Kristeva’s theory of poetic language: *“Neutral would be the literary act that belongs neither to affirmation nor to negation and...frees meaning as a phantom, a haunting, a simulacrum of meaning; as though literature were spectral by nature, not because it would be haunted by itself, but because it bears the preliminary of all meaning, which is its obsession” (InC 304).* Or, again, Blanchot speaks towards Derrida’s *différance*: *“The neutral: that which carries difference even to the point of indifference. More precisely, that which does not leave indifference to its definite equalization” (InC 305).* Much like *différance*, the *neuter* “cannot be represented, cannot be symbolized or even signified; moreover it is everywhere [within the text], inasmuch as it is borne by the infinite indifference of the entire narrative [...]” (InC 396). One might assert that, in a sense, Blanchot’s peculiar non-concept places itself somewhere within the interval between Derrida’s *différance* and Kristeva’s poetic language, without entirely corresponding to either one; more precisely, it anticipates a revolution in textual practice for which all names are still insufficient:

Interpreting: the infinite: the world. The world? A text? The text: the movement of writing in its neutrality. When we posit these terms –

positing them with a concern for holding them outside themselves, without however making them leave themselves – we are not unaware of the fact that they still belong to the preliminary discourse that at a certain moment has allowed them to be put forward. Thrown out ahead, they do not yet leave the whole. They prolong it by their rupture [...]. (InC 168)

Or, as Blanchot puts it elsewhere, even if a certain ‘sanctity of emptiness’ must be affirmed today, “it is only in the endless pursuit of works that worklessness [*le désœuvrement*] is to be found.” (BIR 206)

1.3 Jacques Derrida and the Context of *Différance*

There is nothing outside of the text.
Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*
1997, p. 158

The beyond of the closure of the book is neither to be awaited nor to be refound. It is there, but out there, *beyond*, within repetition, but eluding us there [...] like the shadow of the book, [...] the distance between the book and the book [...].
Jacques Derrida, “Ellipsis”, in WD 1978, p. 300

[O]ne imagines with difficulty a translation [...] without some *philein*, without some love or friendship, without some ‘loveness’ [‘aimance’] [...] borne [*portée*] toward the thing, the text, or the other to be translated.
Jacques Derrida, *Post-Scriptum*, in DNT 1992, p. 293

Blanchot’s acknowledgement that he is still speaking from amidst the language of metaphysics – although with the intent of making that language less comfortable with itself – goes a long way in indicating why Jacques Derrida, despite his unequivocal appreciation for the unceasing relevance of Blanchot’s work,³

³ Derrida’s praise for Blanchot is formulated in very similar, and similarly unambiguous, terms in both “Pas” (Gramma ¾, 1976, 150) and *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986, 55): “Blanchot waits for us

considers it necessary to transpose the motifs and terms that characterize Blanchot's writings into a slightly different – shall we say, less 'classical' in tone? – textual space, without for that matter doing away with their central concerns. Bringing together a certain radicalization of Saussurian linguistics on the one hand and a critical reading of Western metaphysics on the other, Derrida thus sets up a series of intimately linked non-concepts (*grammē*, *différance*, dissemination, supplementarity, iterability, or the trace) that resemble, without being reducible to them, a similarly linked series of terms employed by Blanchot: worklessness, interruption, discontinuity, the 'interminable', the 'outside', or the neuter. Above all, Derrida moves away from a certain verticality that characterizes Blanchot's language – a verticality which, passing through Heidegger's reflections, maintains reference to a kind of 'abyss' or 'groundlessness' that underlies the text – as well as from the notion of a 'void' within the work which constitutes a kind of movable center around which the work revolves, a center that is simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the work, and through which it escapes any interpretive closure. In Derrida's understanding, the otherness at play in every text spreads itself across the entire text in a 'horizontal' manner, as it were, haunting the text at the level of inscription, rather than emerging from some hidden depth, and, furthermore, dissolving any proper boundary that would mark the text's interiority from its exteriority. If there is no 'outside-text', it is in an important sense due to the fact that there is also no 'inside-text'. The term 'context' in Derrida's work thus marks the impossibility of any proper determination of an 'inside' and an

still to come, to be read and reread...I would say that never as much as today have I pictured him so far ahead of us."

‘outside’, while at the same time reminding us of the perpetual necessity of re-marking or determining differences – without assimilating them into the same total ‘text’.

1.3.1 Reading and Context

By the same token a minute yet significant difference announces itself in the respective manner in which Blanchot and Derrida *read* texts. Blanchot’s reading remains within the text’s innermost depth, as it were – a depth that, the more one immerses oneself in it the more it reveals only an impenetrable abyss that refuses proper contextualization. Derrida’s readings bear witness to the fact that what seems to be the text’s void is in fact nothing more than the infinite nature of the temporal and spatial context that produced it and that enables it to be always read differently. Derrida transposes Blanchot’s notion of the outside into different terms, without simply discarding it: the essence of the text is, as it were, not to be found inside but rather outside it; at the same time, ‘there is no outside-text’, for the text as such has no boundaries that would be properly fixed.

Blanchot’s readings – with the exception of his ‘dialogues’ perhaps – is therefore characterized by the tendency to *decontextualize* literary works, to insert his voice into the void of the text and to explore that void without simply filling it in with the conceptual schemas and categorical discourses that ‘surround it’. While Derrida certainly also pays attention to the gaps that mark a given text, he prefers to bring context – philosophical, religious, political, or ethical – to these gaps, in order to indicate the radical impossibility of closure within every text. In a sense, the lack of closure in Blanchot is due to the manner in which a text refuses full

contextualization; the lack of closure in Derrida has to do with the fact that there is no possibility of ‘text’ without exposure to its context. Another way of putting this would be to say that for *both* authors the text demands a process of endless *translation* or *recontextualization*. But whereas Blanchot prefers to expose the context – together with the knowledge and discourse that constitutes it – to the impenetrable void of the literary work in order to unwork that context (together with the particular translation that accompanies it) through the work’s own worklessness, Derrida’s gesture involves exposing every text to the context that constitutes it in the first place – through its particular logic, its discourses, or its institutions – and that, guaranteeing its existence, nevertheless always announces the text’s incapacity to rid itself of its own otherness, the otherness toward which it must necessarily speak (or translate itself) in order to maintain itself as text.

The complex and perhaps irresolvable tension that characterizes the correspondence between Blanchot and Derrida’s concerns can be detected in Derrida’s influential lecture, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966 – WD 278-293). Derrida’s critique of the notion of ‘structure’ as something that has always limited the element of *play* and guaranteed the possibility of closure and presence in Western metaphysics closely parallels Blanchot’s ‘deconstructions’ of the classical notion of the ‘work’ (or ‘book’) and its relationship to certain conceptions of reading, writing, knowledge, truth, presence, origin, or interpretation. Derrida asserts that what maintains the total coherence of the structure – along with its mobility – is the peculiar concept of a ‘center’ that is both “*within* the structure and *outside it*”, and that embodies

“in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play” (WD 279). The ‘center’ has thus been able to acquire a variety of determinations within the history of Western metaphysics: “It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence – *eidos*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth” (WD 279-80). The displacement of this concept, which as Derrida observes, has been under way for some time, and which he intends to pursue in his own work, recalls Blanchot’s attempt to posit the *neuter* as that which “does not create a center, does not speak from out of a center, but, on the contrary, at the limit, would prevent the work from having one [...]” (InC 386); as “in some sense the non-center of non-unity.” (InC 404)

For both authors, this necessary displacement is as much political, ethical, literary, economic, religious, or scientific, as it is philosophical in character. It is also necessarily ongoing, perhaps interminably so, for neither Blanchot nor Derrida is naïve about the possibility of simply abandoning the metaphysical logic that informs the Western text in its abundant variety. But while Blanchot seems intent on preserving, within the structure of metaphysics, a (literary) text that cannot be subsumed by its logic, a text that disturbs from the midst of its own void the fixity of that logic and prevents it from maintaining a proper center, Derrida’s aim is, in a sense, to allow a certain spectral void to inhabit *every* text and, rupturing the entire edifice by way of language, to expose all of its (still

metaphysical) terms to the infinity of play without *any* center and beyond the neutral circularity of discontinuity or interruption (WD 291). No longer a neutrality that plays with presence and absence – and that, to some extent, may be regarded as belonging to a mournful affirmation of loss and exile – refusing to be assimilated by either, Derrida’s argument will hence affirm a no-place that is, as it were, prior to both (WD 292) – if ‘prior’ is still the correct word – and that brings with it “the joyful affirmation [...] of a world of sign without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation” (WD 292). “*This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center.* And it plays without security. For there is a *sure* play: that which is limited to the *substitution* of *given* and *existing, present*, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace.” (WD 292)

In order to understand properly the subsequent development and nature of Derrida’s ‘method’ of textual deconstruction, it is important to clarify two popular misconceptions regarding this ‘method’. The first misconception regards deconstruction simply as an attempt to break up or undo the text, together with its self-assured coherence, through a kind of explosive reading. Such misconception arises from Derrida’s own rather Nietzschean declaration in the closing passage of the above lecture, concerning the arrival of something “yet unnamable” in the “terrifying form of monstrosity” (WD 293). It is certainly not without significance that an example of such misconception can be found even on the back cover of the 1997 English edition of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, which

includes the following statement from Roger Poole of *Notes and Queries* (evidently one of many careless readers – or careful non-readers – of Derrida):

“*Of Grammatology* is the tool-kit for anyone who wants to empty the ‘presence’ out of any text he has taken a dislike to. A handy arsenal of deconstructive tools are to be found in its pages, and the technique, once learnt, is as simple, and as destructive, as leaving a bomb in a brown paper bag outside (or inside) a pub.”

According to the second misconception, grounded in Derrida’s well-known but often misunderstood assertion that, “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (“there is nothing outside the text,” or, more accurately, “there is no outside-text”) (OG 158), deconstruction has something to do with reducing *everything* to the status of a text, and therefore of denying the existence of physical reality. The discussion that follows will consider Derrida’s non-concept of *différance* and its significance for his understanding of the text in the light of the above misconceptions.

Derrida himself has made it clear from the very beginning that his work has nothing to do with ‘demolition’ or ‘destruction’ of any sort and that, on the contrary, it is guided by a certain affirmative, albeit critical, faithfulness with respect to every text. For this very reason, Derrida has explicitly emphasized on a number of occasions that deconstruction is *not a method* (Points 83, 187, 356; Kearney 2004, 155) but, more accurately, a particular *manner of reading*. Furthermore, while there *are* certain normative critical assumptions involved in *every* deconstructive reading, such reading is not reducible to a straightforward technique or even to a critical analysis or interpretation. Several points can be made in this regard.

To begin with, deconstruction is not simply what *happens to a particular* text, but rather what *takes places within every* text – *of its own accord*, as it were. Deconstructive reading, therefore, is never simply a reading *against* the text but, more accurately, a reading *with* the text. As such, deconstruction may be said to involve a certain kind of post-critical – yet critically vigilant – passivity whose purpose is, as it were, to *bear witness* to the variety of ways in which the text deconstructs *itself*, to watch over that deconstruction, to *accompany* it along a variety of routes towards new openings – especially where it encounters resistances or attempts at closure. Like a skillful psychoanalyst who accompanies the analysand’s speech and echoes it, albeit with a shift in emphasis, allowing for a different, often barely detectable resonance or displacement to occur within that speech, and enabling different voices to inhabit it, Derrida accompanies the text he reads, imitating or repeating it – with a difference (at times, quite literally, merely by a breath). Unlike technique, interpretation or analysis in the traditional sense, Derrida’s approach is hence marked by a profound renunciation of *mastery* over any given text – so much so that Derrida’s admission, in one of the essays comprising *Margins of Philosophy* (1982), can be regarded as the central guiding motif of everything that goes under the name ‘deconstruction’: “We are not certain, and our reading will follow this incertitude” (MP 34). By the same token, if deconstruction constitutes an identifiable discourse of any sort, it is not merely one discourse among many because, properly speaking, deconstruction exists only insofar as it inhabits, and insofar as it opens itself up to, another discourse. Deconstruction, in its very essence, thus constitutes a *praxis* – rather than merely

a theoretical framework in the usual manner, i.e., a set of assertions designed to explain something. To put this differently, deconstruction is inseparable from its practice, which is *reading*. This practice constitutes, in each instance, a *singular event*, at least insofar as we understand this singularity not in the subjectivist sense, but rather as implying an event whose purpose is precisely to avoid a merely subjective calculation. The point here is *not* to arrive at some final interpretive position, but rather to make room within the text for other such singular events to take place.

1.3.2 Différance

This lack of proper closure – which deconstruction announces and whose preservation constitutes deconstruction’s task par excellence – in fact marks an essential plenitude that permeates all textuality: the seemingly infinite multiplicity of voices that inhabit every text. This does not imply a radical meaninglessness of texts as much as their radical meaningfulness – and, furthermore, a meaningfulness that is not reducible to mere relativism but which, on the contrary, demands a more vigilant, more responsible reading. If reading in this manner is always *being on the way*, never arriving at a final destination, it is also a *loss of way* – a loss that is necessary insofar as it demands a reading that is no longer merely an *act* of subjectivist appropriation, but an ongoing *experience* of a certain contamination by otherness. This loss, nevertheless, is not reducible to a total suspension of reference; indeed, it would be more correct to assert that, as far as Derrida is concerned, there is nothing *but* reference – yet even this must immediately be qualified by adding that Derrida’s approach does not posit

language as the only reality, but rather aims to displace the traditional, positivist distinction between language and reality. By the same token, Derrida's statement – "there is no outside-text" – serves as a reminder that no experience escapes the play of signifiers and the particular *context* of such play. In Derrida's readings, nevertheless, the very (self-) identity of the text itself is always at stake. There is nothing outside the text; hence deconstruction is constantly in search of context, be it philosophical, historical, cultural, political, religious, ethical, or economic. At the same time, deconstruction's most fundamental concern is precisely with that which remains 'outside' the text, as it were – excluded from it or irreducible to it: "The other, which is beyond language and which summons language [...]." (Kearney 2004, 154)

Derrida's thought of *différance* – which figures at the very heart of his understanding of language – marks precisely that irreducible opening which is simultaneously the possibility and the impossibility of every text or discourse. Offering a certain radicalization of both Saussure's notion that language consists of a play of differences and of Heidegger's thought of the '(ontological) difference' (between Being and beings), as well as elaborating Blanchot's notion of the *neuter*, Derrida's *différance* stands for "neither a word nor a concept" (MP 3). Therefore, it is not assimilable to any of the usual (metaphysical/ontotheological) oppositions that structure Western thought – for instance, presence/absence, nature/culture, being/nothingness, subject/object, or conscious/ unconscious. *Différance* spreads across the entirety of language in a manner that marks a minute, if significant difference from the 'neutrality' of

Blanchot's 'neither/nor' – which tends in the direction of a certain *refusal* of meaning, rather than *productivity* – while effectively escaping any sort of proper positioning between an 'outside' and an 'inside' or between 'positivity' and 'negativity'. In fact, it is impossible to affirm even that *différance* 'is' (or *presents* itself) (MP 6 & 21-22) – a determination still detectable in the Levinasian-Blanchotian *il y a*, despite the fact that it moves beyond the ontological givenness of Heidegger's *es gibt*. *Différance* constitutes the (non-essential) origin of all differences or, more precisely, "the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted 'historically' as a weave of differences" (MP 12); an origin that is not simply prior to them (MP 11), in a sense, an origin *without* origin, origin as a perpetual displacement of every *proper* origin (and every *proper* destination). It would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of *différance* as a kind of 'original' breach – or origin *as* breach – especially since the very term '*différance*' is constituted around a certain breach in proper spelling. This breach, which revolves around the purely graphic difference between the letters 'a' and 'e' that "cannot be heard" in speech (MP 3), dissolves the clean breach between spoken and written language that informs Western thought and, playing with the double meaning of the term (difference/deferral) posits an irreducible and essential undecidability at the very heart of thought. (MP 4-5)

1.3.3 Silence

Derrida's discussion of this misspelling in the essay *Différance* (1968) effectively sets up his entire thought of *différance* as a kind of elaborate

meditation on *silence*. This meditation effectively puts in question – in a manner that perpetually defers any conclusive answer – the simplicity of the traditional distinction between language and silence, between what is spoken and what remains unspoken, between language as presence and language as absence. By the same token, Derrida rejects any simple identification of silence with ‘lack’ – whereby the lack of words is simultaneously linked to lack of knowledge, lack of truth, lack of understanding, lack of consciousness, lack of subjectivity, even lack of being, while language remains associated with the ‘mastery’ of consciousness, intelligibility, or being. This rejection displaces the authority of the Heideggerian *ear* (still too subjectivist in its ability to appropriate things by proper listening) and links Derrida’s ‘project’ to negative theology’s constant refusal of any proper difference between speaking and *not* speaking entailed in its ceaseless deferral of linguistic closure with respect to God. In a sense, the entire movement of Derrida’s essay already situates itself around the question: How (not) to speak (*différance*)?

For this reason also, Derrida’s essay evokes the image of ‘pyramidal silence’. This is an allusion to Hegel’s configuration of the pyramid, first as the symbol of the sign and, later, as the prototype of symbolic art, displacing the self-presence of consciousness (MP 83-85); this refers also to Hegel’s discomfort with the ambivalence and polysemia of the Egyptian hieroglyph which, marked by an abysmal “lack of voice”, constitutes for Hegel the very symbol of the instability of meaning and the antithesis of the Greek model of truth as *alētheia* (MP 97-99). As such, the abysmal silence that figures at the heart of Derridean *différance*,

separating two letters in an act of infinite displacement, resembles a certain radicalization of that which, in Heidegger's work, occasionally appears as 'the Open' (or as a breach that separates earth and world), and, in Derrida's case, maintains the undecidability between difference and deferral. On the one hand, therefore, this silence opens up an irreducibly polysemic *place* within language: an "otherness," "dissimilarity," but also "an interval, a distance, *spacing* [...]" (MP 8), in which meaning is suspended, no longer in order to return to itself, having absorbed something outside itself, but indefinitely and in such a way that, strictly speaking, there is no 'meaning' prior to this indefinite, if *meaningfull*, suspension. On the other hand, it can be said to make *time*, to bring about a certain necessary *temporalization*, at least insofar as the word is understood not simply as an endless detour that refuses commitment or decision, but also in a certain French sense of "taking account of time" as a making time for thought beyond the mere calculation of a subjective will (MP 7-8) and beyond any reduction to what Bataille would call a 'restricted economy' (MP 19). As such, the silence that constitutes *différance* finds an essential affinity with Heidegger's claim, in *Identity and Difference*, that "The time of thinking [...] is different from the time of calculation" (MP 108) – a claim of which one might say that it is at once very *near* and very *far* from – though *never synonymous with* – what amounts to *relativism* and hence to *nihilism* in the estimation of those who consider thought and calculability as inseparable.

On several occasions Derrida emphasizes that the thought of *différance* does not constitute a mere rejection or a final overcoming of all metaphysical

discourses – including those discourses that made this thought possible, whether Platonic, Hegelian, Nietzschean, Heideggerian, Freudian, or Saussurian. For, as he puts it, *différance* necessarily passes through these discourses and, as such, demands that we “stay within the difficulty of this passage, and repeat it in the rigorous reading of metaphysics [...]” (MP 22). If *différance* disposes with proper beginnings, it calls for nothing less than the necessity of a constant beginning that at the same time dissolves all pretense which calls for this or that ‘end’. Indeed, every such end – whether it be the end of metaphysics, Being, truth, the author, the text, the subject, or God – remains a *task* without the convenience of proper completion. From this perspective, it would not be inappropriate to assert that the ‘crisis of meaning’ that is said to define the ‘current age’ has to do not so much with the alleged dissolution of the certainty of ‘meaning’ (MP 319), along with the impossible question of the ‘meaning of meaning’ (MP 81), as with the profoundly necessary and belated realization of the limits of (merely human) ‘meanings’, which in Derrida’s, but also in various ways in Heidegger’s and Blanchot’s work, corresponds to a number of interrelated, unavoidable questions: the question of the *margin* (MP xxiv), of *context* (MP 310 & 320) or – what amounts to the same – of what is ‘outside the text’ (MP 25), of *translatability* (MP 14 & 25), or of iterability/citability. (MP 320-21 & 325)

These questions turn out to be inseparable from questions concerning the ‘limit of the limit’, the “name of the name” (MP 27) or, indeed, the ‘question of the question’ (MP 80-81 & 171). This rather confusing configuration, whereby every question disseminates itself and comes into an intimate relation with

another suggests that in Derrida's case the question of *différance* is always already a question of *correspondence*. Or, put differently, there is no difference *without* correspondence and, conversely, *no* correspondence *without* difference. It is perhaps for this very reason that Derrida places such a central emphasis on the problem of *translatability* – or the “transformation of one language by another” (MP 14). Displacement, as the task of deconstruction, fundamentally involves translation as transformation, whereby a fundamental and, indeed, loving concern with another language replaces the destruction of one language by another. Hence even *différance* necessarily remains a metaphysical name, even if, in a sense, it is ‘older’ than “Being itself”, and even if, strictly speaking, *différance* is nameless (MP 26). Derrida's final words in the essay thus serve to return the question of this nameless *différance* to its ‘proper’ context (rather than to remove it from any context), while simultaneously suspending the absolute propriety of that context and the ‘unique’ names that constitute it, insofar as it refuses the ‘law of translation’. Heidegger's statement – “Being / speaks / always / and / everywhere / throughout / language” – hence necessarily re-appears exposed to the *différance* that permeates its every word and is ‘hinted at’ by *spacing* as indicated; it no longer remains closed in upon itself as a simple, unproblematic affirmation. (MP 27)

1.3.4 Translatability

The attempt to dislocate philosophical language by way of literary language that guides the essays comprising Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy* cannot be divorced from the context of the question of translatability – which is, as it were,

the other side of the question of the *limit* or *margin* which figures at the heart of this work (MP xxiii). Derrida himself makes it quite clear that the purpose of these essays is precisely to *endure*, rather than *answer*, this question (MP xvi) posed here at the intersection of philosophy and literature; a complex intersection that brings to attention as much the irreducibility of these two kinds of language as the impossibility of their proper closure with respect to each other, as much as with respect to other kinds of language, whether religious, political, or scientific.⁴ In a sense, Derrida offers an ironic reinscription of Heidegger's question, 'What are poets for?' by asking: 'What are philosophers for?' The point is not to suggest that philosophy is disposable, but to disturb the comfortable manner – rationalistic as much as idealistic – in which philosophical language has always assured itself of mastery over every *limit* and every *other* (MP x), absorbing into itself every *outside*,⁵ especially that which, granted its supposed 'arbitrariness' or 'irrationality', is most likely to slip away from its grasp (MP xvi). Philosophy's uncanny ability to achieve this aim is so pervasive that no concept of alterity has ever succeeded in overflowing its borders (MP xiii). From the very onset, Derrida leaves little doubt that even Heidegger's work, despite offering the most radical critique of philosophical reason, reappropriates – in its very *proper*, if far reaching, thinking of Being, truth as *alētheia*, language, or death – everything back into philosophical language (MP xvi & xix). For this reason, Derrida declares that, "in question will be, but according to a movement unheard of by philosophy, an other which is no longer *its other*" (MP xiv) – an other, that is,

⁴ See Derrida's comments in *Points*, pp. 217- 221 and 224.

⁵ Derrida's concern at this point finds itself in a very close proximity to Blanchot's attempt to preserve literature as that which remains *outside*.

which cannot be translated into any existent, but also any merely *not-yet existent*, *philosopheme*.

A double gesture is involved here. On the one hand, to place *différance* at the very heart of philosophical discourse – or, more accurately, of the philosophical *text*. Insofar as it constitutes a particular language, the philosophical text has no proper ‘inside’ over which it presides with an undisputable authority and which would guarantee the immunity of its borders (MP xxiii). On the other hand, to affirm the existence of *another* text ‘outside’ the philosophical text, to present the latter with what, properly speaking, is *not* presentable or reducible to philosophical presentation (MP xxiii). This other text, Derrida suggests, may be identified under a variety of names (history, politics, sexuality, religion, literature), even if it is with *literary writing* that Derrida claims to be concerned above all – or, more precisely, with the kind of writing that overflows the traditional category of ‘literature’ and its “dialectics of the Book” (MP xxiv). In the end, the fundamental aim of this double gesture is to undermine the self-evidential character of *both* the philosophical and the literary border: not by *erasing* their margins, but rather by indicating – beneath the language of ‘inside/outside’ or ‘within/without’ – that, regardless of its purpose, *every* text (whether philosophical, literary, or religious) is inevitably subject to the “inexhaustible reserve” of the margin (MP xxiii). Understood in a certain sense, *all* writing is always already the writing of the margin; which is also to say that, insofar as the human being is a being who speaks, s/he is a being of the margin.

It is to this speaking being – and to the uncertain margin it occupies at the crossroads of ‘meaning’ and ‘nonmeaning’ – that Julia Kristeva’s text addresses itself first and foremost, even as it echoes Blanchot and Derrida in declaring that the dissolution of the classical notion of the text is necessarily synonymous with the death of Man.

1.4 Kristeva’s Textual Practice

[F]ar from being simply a semiological preoccupation, the renewal of the conception of meaning and of the subject as practice and process concerns an entire socio-historical horizon.

Julia Kristeva, “The Speaking Subject”,
In Blonsky, *On Signs* 1985, p. 220

Language is *fragile* because any *particular* language as the object of linguistic scrutiny, along with the variations of discourse particular to linguistic communication in that language, is merely an infinitesimal yet minimal part of the totality of symbolic experience.

Julia Kristeva, “*Postmodernism?*”
In Garvin 1980, p. 137

[T]here is no ‘absolute’ anonymity of the text.

Julia Kristeva, “How Does One Speak to Literature?” In DL 1980, p. 105

If we are to bring Kristeva into the above dialogue between Blanchot and Derrida, we must do so with some caution. No simple assertion can be made concerning the exact relationship between their immensely complex writings. On the one hand, their concerns vis-à-vis metaphysical thought in its various manifestations – dialectics, positivism, phenomenology, structuralism, linguistics – and their critical elaborations around ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ run parallel to one another,

often sharing common terminology: text, difference, alterity, the other, estrangement, exile, death, or desire. Indeed, their central organizing motifs – for instance, Blanchot’s *worklessness* and the *neuter*, Derrida’s *différance* and *dissemination*, or Kristeva’s *negativity*, *productivity* and *chora* – remain on very intimate terms with one another, insofar as all three evoke that which is unthinkable, unknowable, or unspeakable, but without which no language or logic would be possible. On the other hand, each author’s work leaves the reader with a sense that, on some level, it develops a singular language that can never be entirely translated into another, even when it constantly affirms the necessity of precisely such translation. It would hence be appropriate to follow Juliana de Nooy’s observation in her study of Kristeva’s and Derrida’s textual approaches and to speak of the intersection of the three author’s engagement with the text as “the site of rupture-at-a-point-of-absolute-proximity” (de Nooy 201).

The purpose of what follows is not to offer a comparative study, but rather to indicate a few significant points of convergence in order to make Kristeva’s concerns resonate more fully within the broader cultural and historical conversation of which they are an intricate part. As an outsider who arrived in Paris in 1966 from a different cultural and political context (communist Bulgaria), Kristeva brought with her influences that were mostly foreign to the French intellectual scene (Russian Formalism and its offshoots). By the same token, her early thought must be understood as a response to what she considers as certain inadequacies or excesses in French critical thought (Interviews 56), even if, in

some respects, these responses are themselves, to some extent, the products of hasty or inaccurate readings.

Kristeva's textual practice may be regarded as an attempt to negotiate between Blanchot's and Derrida's respective treatment of the text, namely reading/writing as a descent into the silent, bottomless abyss of the text (Blanchot), and reading/writing as an endless movement across a textual surface through deferral, dissemination, iterability and supplementarity (Derrida).

Kristeva accomplishes this by placing emphasis on three problems that, in her view, have been somewhat marginalized in the theory of the text:

1. The relationship between textual practice and the experience of the human body, particularly with respect to questions of suffering and desire;
2. Textual practice as political-social engagement, whereby questions of exile, solitude, or estrangement on the one hand, and the affirmation of play on the other, become explicitly linked to ethical concerns and their historical implementation;
3. Textual practice as the practice of *intertextuality*, in terms of both relationality and difference.

In each case, Kristeva's intention is to take up the experience of the crisis of meaning that permeates the works of Blanchot and of Derrida, albeit in a manner that would, beyond the necessary intensification of this crisis at the intersection of sense and nonsense, enable an individual and also a collective response to it first and foremost through language. By the same token, her textual practice is a deliberate attempt to negotiate between the kind of neutrality Blanchot tends to

emphasize in his work and Derrida's attempt to bring – somewhat excessively in Kristeva's estimation – the radical dispersal of *différance* to every text, discourse, and meaning; to negotiate, in a sense, between the self-effacement of the former's anguish and the self-assertion of the latter's play (Interviews 55-56). In the end, Blanchot's and Derrida's textual practices haunt Kristeva's, as her thought haunts theirs.

1.4.1 The Text as Productivity

Kristeva's complex and highly technical theory of the text was charted out in a series of essays written between 1966 and 1973; many of them were originally published in *Tel Quel*, and some remain untranslated today. The motifs explored in these writings became elaborated in Kristeva's doctoral thesis published in 1974 under the title *La révolution du langage poétique: l'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle. Lautréamont et Mallarmé*. Kristeva's earliest writings echo Derrida's attempt to bring to the language of science and philosophy a linguistic practice that cannot be reduced to a conceptual structure. Bringing together the ideas of Saussure, Freud, Bakhtin, Jacobson, Benveniste, and Barthes, she refers to this unassimilable practice as 'the text'. Her early definition of this concept, expressed in 1966 (see Seme 24) in an essay entitled "Le texte et sa science," and reiterated in 1969 in "The Bounded Text" as well as in *Le texte du roman* in 1970, sets up the text as a *translinguistic* practice that is neither separable from language nor reducible to any of the categories used to describe it and to classify its various components (see Seme 184; DL 36; TeR 12). As such, the text "redistributes the order of language by relating communicative

speech, which aims to inform directly, to different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances” (DL 36; see Seme 184 & TeR 12). By the same token, the text constitutes a *productivity*. This notion positions itself close to Derrida’s notions of *différance* and *dissemination* insofar as productivity brings to language a process of ongoing “redistribution” Kristeva considers at once “destructive” and “constructive” (DL 36). On the other hand, productivity elaborates the Bakhtinian notion of *dialogism* by positing every text as transposition or “permutation of texts, an intertextuality.” (DL 36)

These two notions – productivity and intertextuality – remain fundamental to Kristeva’s thought until the mid-1970s. Although they eventually disappear from her vocabulary, the event that they mark continues to occupy a central place in all of Kristeva’s subsequent explorations of literature, psychoanalysis, religion, and politics. Kristeva’s theory of the text acquires a number of its unique nuances particularly in response to Derrida’s deconstructive project. The question that needs to be posed here is: in what sense is Kristeva’s early thought on meaning distinct from Derrida’s explorations of *différance*, on the one hand, and from his declaration that “there is no-outside text” on the other?

In a number of instances in her early work,⁶ Kristeva approvingly evokes Derrida’s contributions to a new kind of textual practice and the concept of meaning implied in it.⁷ Her most explicit and elaborate attack on Derrida occurs

⁶ Juliana de Nooy’s study offers an excellent resource for the consideration of Kristeva’s favorable references to Derrida in her early writings: her employment of Derrida’s terminology (KrR 83, Seme 38, 110, 292 & 279), her praise of his critique of logocentrism (Seme 28-29, 37-38, 89, 136; KrR 76 and 83), and her general enthusiasm for his approach (Seme 89 & 211) (de Nooy 79-80).

⁷ French original 1974. – Although she acknowledges that Derrida’s ‘grammatology’ presents “the most radical of all the various procedures that have tried, after Hegel, to push dialectical negativity further and elsewhere. Difference, the trace, the grammè, writing [*écriture*], contain, retain, and

in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (French 1974). Kristeva's skepticism with respect to deconstruction has to do with what she considers to be its radical neutrality and undecidability, and also with what she understands to be Derrida's denunciation of the symbolic dimension of signification and his 'positivization' of negativity (RePL 141-2), which would result in an excessive privileging of the ceaseless deferral of meaning and the constant self-erasure of every signifying structure. "Neutral in the face of all positions, theses, and structures, grammarology is, as a consequence, equally restrained when they break, burst, or rupture: demonstrating disinterestedness toward (symbolic and/or social) structure, grammarology remains silent when faced with its destruction or renewal" (RePL 142). According to Kristeva's analysis, *différance* is a significant precedent to her concepts of productivity and negativity. And yet, the purpose of these concepts is to emphasize and account for the transformative processes – social and subjective as well as logical or linguistic (KrR 16) – at play in a given text, rather than to undo the metaphysical structure of their logic through the play of chance. "Negativity is not reified directly as lack or as the impossible real: it is reintroduced into every reality [*réel*] already posited to expose it to other realities, make it dynamic, and effect its *Aufhebung* in an endless mobility [...]"⁸ Kristeva regards *différance* as a kind of linguistic extension of Nietzsche's 'philosophizing with a hammer'⁹ – one that lacks the necessary compensation of a

harbour this dialectic in a way that, while avoiding totality, is nevertheless definite and precise [...]" (RePL 140).

⁸ RePL 99. – Kristeva's complex understanding of the concept of *negativity* finds its most detailed elaboration in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984, 109-126.

⁹ Kristeva would likely feel ambivalent even towards Derrida's affirmation, in his later work, that "There is no opposition, fundamentally, between 'social bond' and 'social unravelling'" (FK 64).

new, productive language or logic. In her definition, “The text signifies the un-signifying: it assumes [*relève*] within a signifying process [...] the dialectic of two heterogeneous operations that are, reciprocally and inseparably, preconditions for each other.”¹⁰ Indeed, Kristeva is convinced that Derrida’s terminology operates on a purely linguistic level and that, consequently, the critical possibilities contained in deconstruction perpetually dissolve themselves, offering nothing more than yet another version of poststructuralist “contemplation adrift” (RePL 145; see RePL 95-99). From this perspective, Derrida’s work abandons the crucial question of subjectivity and has “nothing to say about social structure or its collapse.” (de Nooy 90, in bibl. 1.2)

To some extent at least, Kristeva’s readings of Derrida, like the readings of many of his contemporaries – even those sympathetic to his project – appear rather superficial: they often misunderstand the multi-layered nuances embodied in his terminology and the constant struggle to preserve the possibility of meaning that characterizes deconstructive readings. She fails to note that Derrida’s famous assertion - “There is nothing outside the text” – is actually an affirmation, not a denial, of that which remains ‘outside’ language, grammar, or logic, and also that ‘deferral’ always already assumes its place within a certain positioning – irreducible difference *within* identity – and is not defined by arbitrary movement or the play of pure chance. By the same token, Kristeva ignores the fact that Derrida’s *iterability* is as much about the recontextualization of meaning as it is about the slippage of meaning, or that the ‘undecidability’ that propels Derrida’s

¹⁰ RePL 65-66. - Kristeva is referring here to the *semiotic* and *symbolic* modalities of meaning (more on this in #2).

inquiries constitutes is, in a sense, another name for *thinking as practice*: since nothing can be decided from the ‘beginning’ and once and for all, undecidability, along with *différance* and every other deconstructive non-concept, entails a profoundly and necessarily ethical and political imperative. Derrida would certainly concur with Kristeva’s perspective, expressed here in Kelly Oliver’s words, that “Without negativity, ethics is mere conformity. And without ethics, negativity is mere perversion” (Oliver 1993a, 1). Juliana de Nooy is quite correct in suggesting that Derrida’s scheme is capable of accommodating Kristeva’s thought within its logic (de Nooy 170), together with notions such as productivity, negativity, or intertextuality.

In a 1971 interview Derrida himself points out that Kristeva’s critical elaborations run parallel to his own concerns in both the ‘theoretical’ and the ‘practical’ sense.¹¹ Be that as it may, it is equally true that Derrida’s project develops some of its important nuances only with time, placing explicit emphasis on issues of political justice and ethical responsibility¹² and gradually allowing his critics to acquire a clearer understanding of the full complexity of his early work. By the same token, although Kristeva’s critique of deconstruction is somewhat careless and unnecessarily antagonistic, it is not entirely without merit insofar as it seeks to bring into greater focus aspects of textual practice that find more explicit elaboration only in Derrida’s later work: subjective experience, both ‘spoken’ and ‘unspoken’, and social transformation in its multiple dimensions as well as

¹¹ Positions 89-90. – For a more detailed analysis of this question, see de Nooy, 80-93.

¹² By 1988 Derrida was unequivocal in his assertion that his notion of undecidability “calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility. It is even its necessary condition (Lim 116). Such unequivocality has as much to do with the pressure placed on him by his early critics, Kristeva included, as with a ‘natural’ maturation of his thought.

the manner in which these two aspects remain connected through signifying practice. In short, Derrida's early project is primarily focused on deconstructing the metaphysics of presence in all of its manifestations and on displacing subjectivity in favor of 'writing': "Writing can never be thought under the category of the subject" (OG 68).¹³ However for Kristeva, "it was essential to 'dynamize' the structure by taking into consideration the speaking subject and its unconscious experience on the one hand and, on the other, the pressures of other social structures." (PK 9)

Kristeva's often quoted assertion from 1975 resonates throughout all of her early writings: "[...] every language theory is predicated upon a conception of the subject that it explicitly posits, implies, or tries to deny. Far from being an 'epistemological perversion,' a definite subject is present as soon as there is consciousness of signification" (DL 124). The emphasis on the inseparability of subjectivity and textuality can be found already in Kristeva's earliest published essays, contained in *Sēmēiotikē* (1969): "The interlocutor being a text, the subject is also text."¹⁴ Kristeva's subject is not reducible to the transcendental ego of the Cartesian or Husserlian models (DL 24); rather, it is a process that unfolds on both the conscious and unconscious levels, between bodily affects and signifying practices, never without the presence/absence of another subject and the socio-political context of that relationship. Every textual unfolding is parallel to the unfolding of subjective signification "endowed with biography, body, and history, which are to be inserted in the text in order to define its 'lower' limit."

¹³ OG 68. – Derrida later protested that he had never, in fact, declared that writing and subjectivity are mutually exclusive notions (see, for instance, *Positions* 88).

¹⁴ "L'interlocuteur étant un texte, le sujet est aussi un texte" (*Seme* 182).

“Language thus becomes not only a germination of empty and infinite meaning making its way through linguistic and semiological relationship and units, but at the same time it becomes a practice, a relationship to heterogeneity, to materiality.” (DL 105)

Unlike Derrida, whose writings aim to speak to the other of language but which, in the end, appear to consider the body as an ‘impossibility’, since it cannot be communicated by words, Kristeva constantly attempts to inscribe this impossibility within language – with the help of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and literature – in a manner that remains as comprehensive as it is anti-positivistic and anti-metaphysical. This approach does not entail a simple interpretation where personal biography is employed to explain the true meaning of the text (RePL 8); rather, the ‘biography’ is itself constituted by way of a particular mode of textual production and, in a sense, does not exist without it: the subject “is not a fixed point – a ‘subject of enunciation’ – but instead acts *through* the text’s organization (structure and completion) where the *chora* of the process is represented” (RePL 126). Kristeva considers every text to constitute, first and foremost, a sensual, bodily *experience*, even if the term must be understood here as implying both self-positing and self-loss and, as such, becomes subsumed under the notion of *practice* (RPL 195-96) and, more accurately, the notion of *experience-in-practice* (RePL 209). Furthermore, reading and writing alike would be little more than a logical or stylistic exercise if they did not involve, in a fundamental way, the experiences of desire, pleasure, or *jouissance* (DL 117-120) on the one hand, and suffering, loss, or melancholia on the other.

Kristeva is determined to follow these experiences throughout her textual practices with more consistency and determination than most of her contemporaries, whom she accuses of attempting to “put an end to human subjecthood (to the extent that it involves subjection to meaning), by proposing to replace it with *spaces* (Borromean knots, morphology of catastrophies), of which the speaker would be merely a phenomenal actualization” (DL 280). Her work has played a crucial role in calling attention to the problematic way in which the embodied subject tends to be absorbed into analyses of signs or else abandoned altogether as a kind of void at the heart of texts and discourses.¹⁵ According to Kristeva, the gaps and silences that inhabit or puncture a given text are not merely arbitrary openings in the ever unstable relation between signifiers endowed with arbitrary possibilities; they follow a logic that is *otherwise* than the logic of grammatical reason, including grammatological or deconstructive reason. If they descend into a ‘nameless void’, this void nevertheless seethes with bodily affects and significations that mark the emergence of the subject in relation to nature, materiality, and another body – particularly the maternal body. For Kristeva, “Significance is indeed inherent in the human body.” (PoH 10)

¹⁵ Kristeva often emphasizes the positioning of the subject at the crossroads of body and language by referring to him or her, following Lacan’s suggestion, as a ‘speaking being’ [*parlêtre*]. She clarifies this notion explicitly in her later work: “I will situate the Lacanian formulation of the speaking subject as *parlêtre*: a play on words echoing Heidegger’s *Dasein* that expresses the unavoidable insistence of *being* (outside-subject, outside-language) at the heart of human speech as it unfolds its negativity. *Da*, there, ‘I’ speak, thrown out, cast out as ‘I’ am, by being. My speech joins the historic meaning that exceeds the subjective signification of my discourse” (SNR 58).

1.4.2 *Chora*

Kristeva's term for the 'space' of this emergence and scission on which all language depends and "where the subject is both generated and negated" (RePL 28) is *chora*. This notion, identified by Plato in *Timaeus* 48-53 as a kind of primordial 'receptacle' (PoH 14) or 'interval' between being and non-being, is defined in *Revolution in Poetic Language* as "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movement and their ephemeral stases" (RePL 25); "the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse – all discourse – moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the *chora* can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited [...]" (RePL 26). The last point is of absolute importance here, for it distinguishes Kristeva's thought on *chora* from material or biological essentialism, which she has since been accused of by such prominent feminist critics as Judith Butler.¹⁶ Kristeva is not interested in merely reversing the emphasis on signs in French critical theory and returning to some original, pre-textual reality that exists prior to and separate from symbolic processes:

[O]ur view is very different from that of an immanent semiotics, anterior to language, which explores a meaning that is always already there, as in Hjelmslev. Equally apparent is our epistemological divergence from a Cartesian notion of language, which views thought as *preconditioned* by or even *identical* to natural factual data, and gradually considers it innate. (RePL 31)

Kristeva's purpose is to remind us that there can be no meaningful text that does not speak towards its 'other', while simultaneously allowing that other to speak

¹⁶ For Butler's criticisms of Kristeva's 'essentialism' see *Gender Trouble*, pp. 101-118 – bibl. 1.2.

within the text. In this respect her logic repeats the logic of Derrida's "there is no-outside text," albeit with what she considers to be some necessary corrections to it – or at least some necessary clarifications of that which remains, for the most part, only implicit in Derrida's early work. Although Kristeva's *chora* does not completely coincide with any of Derrida's terms – including his own version in his later work *Khôra* (1987 & 1993) – it has much in common with his *différance*, insofar as it marks a 'presence-absence' that can never be properly posited, spoken, or inscribed in the text, but which nevertheless haunts every text (see Boutin 1996, 815-29, particularly 927 – bibl. 3.2). At the same time, the thought of *chora* seeks to move beyond the overly theoretical focus of Derrida's work: as for metaphysics before it, so for deconstruction (according to Kristeva's interpretation) "materiality is a hole, a lack [*manque*], whose existence it suspects and coverts but never reaches" (RePL 96). In this sense, *chora* may be regarded as *différance* that descends below the textual surface of signs (DL 179) and parallels its effects by inscribing the otherness of psychic affects and bodily sensations into the undecidable difference of a certain heterogeneous, mute materiality (DL 180) *prior to* linguistic *différance*, so to speak, and manifesting itself through all of its activity without being reducible to any social context (Interviews 53). If *différance* bears witness to the fact that metaphor 'goes all the way down', *chora* stands as a reminder that materiality 'goes all the way up'. Thus, the "expenditure of *drives* returns – notably in the text – to shatter difference and introduce, through its play, what silently acts on it: the scissions of matter" (RePL 160). Language as a process constitutes a fold between biology

and culture in a manner that displaces the fixed, metaphysical meaning of both terms and dissolves the possibility of any simple opposition. Nonetheless, there is an extra-linguistic component to every experience of language, a *heterogeneity* that cannot be subsumed within the movement of *différance* (RePL 144). For this reason, Kristeva would find Derrida's later claim that his understanding of the text includes all that is not 'properly' linguistic (Lim 148) as insufficient. For Derrida, "If there is no extratext, it is because the graphic – graphicity – has always already begun, is always implanted in *prior* writing" (Dis 357). While this places him on more intimate ground with certain aspects of Kristeva's intertextuality, it leaves rather unclear his attitude toward that which, in Kristeva's model, manifests itself as *chora*, heterogeneity, materiality, or drives.

More importantly perhaps, if *différance* is, first and foremost, the name for the impossible necessity of thinking the difference of the difference that constitutes all meaning, *chora* as 'receptacle' may be said to constitute, first and foremost, the name for the impossible necessity of thinking the relation of the relation through which all meaning is generated.¹⁷ For both Derrida and Kristeva difference and relation imply one another; but while Derrida's early work tends to emphasize difference, Kristeva's early work formulates itself around a certain privileging of relationality. By the same token, bodily processes and the semiotic *chora* are never treated in isolation, but always 'ascend', through the textual surface, to their social and historical context and, indeed, can never be fully separated from it.

¹⁷ The coincidence of the motifs of division and unity, or difference and identity, in fact appears to be equally common in both authors' early work; see for instance de Nooy, pp. 211-15.

In this regard, Kristeva simultaneously repeats and corrects Derrida's emphasis on context (Interviews 53): there is nothing outside context, but there can be no 'context' without 'pre-text' – that is, the always historically and socially mediated experience of embodied subjects, of their sexual differences, their desires and sufferings, their pleasures and repressions, their love for and estrangement from one another. In a sense, the (speaking) body *is* the *original context* into which the subject is born, *through* which it enters the world of signs and symbolic logic (RePL 101). Yet the body in Kristeva's scheme is neither properly a text nor merely an impossible 'real' (in the Lacanian sense) beyond meaning (RePL 99); it is a process associated with drive affects: "Neither inside nor outside, drives are neither the ideational interior of a subject of understanding, nor the exteriority of the Husserlian Force. Drives are, instead, the repeated scission of matter that generates *signifiance*, the place where an always absent subject is produced" (RePL 167). Just as language always consists of a certain 'materiality', so the body and its drives are never reducible to something purely biological (PK xvii). Kristeva's theory does not allow for any kind of simple dualism, even when it explores the oppositions embedded in Western discourse. The body that gives life to every text, marking its desires and afflictions, always carries within itself the experience of the body of the other (first and foremost, the maternal body). Intersubjectivity and intertextuality coincide in a fundamental sense (DL 66 & Interviews 189-90), and the question of the subjective body turns out to be inseparable from questions that are 'social', 'political' or 'literary' in character.

To some extent, then, Kristeva's well-known opening to *Revolution in Poetic Language* can be regarded not only as an accusation aimed against the abuses of positivist thought, but also as an attempt to awake post-structuralist theory to its own anxieties and resistances vis-à-vis 'nature', 'body', 'experience', 'physical reality', and to its attempts to escape their claim by regarding them merely as incommunicable:

Our philosophies of language, embodiments of the Idea, are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs. Fascinated by the remains of a process which is partly discursive, they substitute this fetish for what actually produced it. [...] These static thoughts, products of a leisurely cogitation removed from historical turmoil, persist in seeking the truth of language by formalizing utterances that hang in midair, and the truth of the subject by listening to the narrative of a sleeping body – a body in repose, withdrawn from its socio-historical imbrication, removed from direct experience. (RePL 13)

Kristeva believes that while poststructuralist theory has played a crucial role in collapsing the traditional oppositions between nature and culture or body and mind, it has also radicalized the opposition between signifier and signified to the point where the signifier seems no longer to correspond to anything in the 'real' world, and, as such, it ends up repeating the positivist gesture in a reverse manner. For this reason, already in the 1960s, Kristeva asserts that "in language and social history, the text *establishes* itself in the real that generates it."¹⁸ If the text is necessarily characterized by a polyvalence deprived of a proper center and the possibility of a final unity (Seme 11), Kristeva's understanding of 'le réel' as a crossroad between biology and culture and sense and nonsense (Seme 16) and no longer as the impossibility of Lacan's schema (Interviews 23) emphasizes the fact

¹⁸ "[...] dans la matière de la langue et dans l'histoire sociale, le texte se *pose* dans le réel qui l'engendre [...]" (Seme 9).

that this textual polyvalence is always grounded in experiences that are never arbitrary, even if they respond to a logic that is irreducible to the logic of signs and grammar.

For Kristeva, although deconstruction has played an important role in bringing critical vigilance to the ideological arbitrariness of historical and social texts, it falls short of providing insights into how the social and historical context can be transformed in a meaningful manner without deserting either the always embodied, *speaking* subject on the one hand, or the requirements of social cohesion on the other. Kristeva's own continuing insistence on the notion of the 'speaking subject' or the 'speaking being' is thus a response to the poststructuralist – and especially deconstructionist – privileging of the written text and its independence from both author and reader. It is also an important reminder of the irreducibly social and physical constitution of the human subject through discourse. If Kristeva's entire oeuvre is an engagement with different discourses and an attempt – at the intersection of these discourses – to mark the no-place that radically opens them to one another, it is the speaking subject in his/her perpetual emergence – rather than simply a theory, method or a concept – that constitutes the proper name for this no-place. Hence the experience of this subject at the invisible border between body and society is precisely what is at stake in every text, although only insofar as the subject is never fully self-present or unified in the sense of a rational, detached ego. To be the subject of language is to be already in a kind of exile in both the Blanchotian and Lacanian sense: the speaking being is inevitably *le sujet-en-procès*, or subject-in-process/on trial

(RePL 37; see also 55-106). Also for this reason every ‘context’ must be experienced in all of its dimensions: metaphysical, social, historical, political, ethical, linguistic, but also as simultaneously semiotic *and* symbolic, biological *and* cultural, conscious *and* unconscious, communicable *and* incommunicable, rational *and* irrational (RePL 9; see Allen, 2000, 47 – bibl. 1.2).

Kristeva’s ‘*sémeïon*’ defined as an indeterminate ‘mark,’ ‘trace,’ or ‘distinctive sign’ (RePL 25) aims to parallel Derrida’s ‘*gramme*’ in a manner that addresses more effectively in her view this contextual multidimensionality of meaning and its connection to both biology and history. As Kristeva puts it in “The System and the Speaking Subject” (1973):

The theory of meaning now stands at a crossroad: either it will remain an attempt at formalizing meaning-systems by increasing sophistication of the logico-mathematical tools which enable it to formulate models on the basis of a conception (already rather dated) of meaning as the act of a *transcendental ego*, cut off from its body, its unconscious and also its history; or else it will attune itself to the theory of the speaking subject as a divided subject (conscious/ unconscious) and go on to attempt to specify the types of operation characteristic of the two sides of this split, thereby exposing them to those forces extraneous to the logic of the systematic; exposing them, that is to say, on the one hand, to bio-physiological processes (themselves already inescapably part of signifying processes, what Freud labeled ‘drives’); and, on the other hand, to social constraints (family structures, modes of production, etc.). (KrR 28)

The text as the practice of subjectivity in the proper sense involves “the possibility – which is a *jouissance* – of a *subject who speaks his being put in process/on trial through action*. In other words and conversely, the text restores to ‘mute’ practice the *jouissance* that constitutes it but which can only become *jouissance* through language” (RePL 209). In Kristeva’s theory, the text thus names the *crossing* where “the subject breaks through his unifying enclosure and [...] passes into the

process of social change that moves through him. In other words, the moment of practice *objectifies* the signifying process (class struggle, for example) but *at the same time it introduces these material contradictions into the process of the subject*” (RePL 205). More precisely:

To view texts as signifying processes is to view their signifying operation in the light of their [...] subject’s always unsuccessful positing [*position manquée*]. To say that the text is a signifying practice implies that it has a subject, a meaning, and a logic, but the logic is one from which the subject is absent and it is through this very absence that the subject reveals himself. (RePL 214)

The subject as signifying practice never *is* in the strictly ontological sense of the term, just as the text cannot be said to exist without a certain experience of *being*. To experience subjectivity is to experience the absence of the subject – an absence that manifests itself “*within the position* out of which social, historical, and signifying activity unfolds.” (RePL 215)

1.4.3 Semanalysis

For Kristeva, semiotics or *semanalysis* (see Seme 19, 21-2, 180, 279-80; KrR 28, 31) constitutes the ‘science of the text’ or ‘theory of signification’ (Seme 279) that takes these conditions into consideration, combining a certain deconstructive vigilance and self-criticism with the Marxist understanding of text as revolutionary social practice on the one hand, and the psychoanalytic understanding of the text as the experience of the subject-in-process/on trial on the other. In Kristeva’s early definition, this science is above all “a *condensation*, in the analytical sense of the term, of historical practice – the science of historical

figuratibility [...]”¹⁹ beyond the static formalisms of structural and positivist linguistics (Seme 174), and yet within the limits or constraints of signification (Seme 180). In the words of Toril Moi, “Semiotic theory is therefore always already caught up in a paradox, an aporia which is the same as that of the speaking subject: both find themselves in a position which is at once subversive of and dependent on the law” (KrR 13), suspended between the metaphysical quest for a single, absolute meaning and the deconstructive dissolution of the boundaries of meaning (KrR 15). The text thus maintains a certain unity of meaning while pulverizing it; precisely through the *partial* character of its subversion, which is also the *partial* acceptance of the necessity of ‘repression’, the text is capable of transforming both subject and society and of renewing the meaningfulness of the bond that unites them (RePL 208). In Kristeva’s critique, the concept of *play*, central to Derrida’s work, remains meaningless unless it can be linked to socio-historical transformation on the one hand, and subjective desire and suffering on the other. In other words, *revolutionary practice* remains impossible in the context of a critical practice characterized, as Kristeva believes deconstruction is, by “a rejection of the symbolic and/or social *thesis* (in Husserl’s sense of the word) indispensable to every practice” (KrR 27). *Différance* remains somewhat indifferent to the particular positions (KrR 32) which endow a given text with its significance, such as class, gender, or ethnicity; it can deconstruct their meaning as ideological concepts, but it cannot affirm their revolutionary potential as subjective experiences that emerge in the process of textual practice.

¹⁹ “[...] une *condensation*, au sens analytique du terme, de la pratique historique – la science de la figuratibilité de l’histoire [...]” (Seme 25).

Kristeva regards the deferral that characterizes Derrida's non-concept as neutralizing the possibility of meaningful transformation insofar as it avoids the necessity of positioning oneself in relation to any particular meaning. A key purpose of the text, as Kristeva points out, is "to avoid becoming a free-flow 'escape' [*fuite*] of the signifier" (RePL 209). Rather than attempting to insert the element of chance within the text, Kristeva's practice thus insists on bringing out the social and political implications of that chance.

Semanalysis, by the same token, constitutes a critical discourse that aims to *renew* signifying processes by preserving the logic of 'neither/nor' and of 'both/and' in a manner that remains socially and subjectively productive. 'Ambiguity' becomes the name for this attempt and implies "the insertion of history (society) into a text and this text into history [...]" (DL 69). Therefore, "*semanalysis* can be thought of as the direct successor of the dialectical method; but the dialectic it continues will be one which will at last be genuinely materialist since it recognizes the *materiality* – the *heterogeneity* – of that negativity whose concrete base Hegel was unable to see and which mechanistic Marxists have reduced to a merely economic externality" (KrR 31). To be more precise, dialectics is too metaphysical and Marxism too materialist (oriented toward the exchange-value of products [KrR 81]) in orientation; as a result, both fail to consider the more complex and more fundamental question of 'meaning', along with the crisis that characterizes its continual emergence as a process that is both subjective and social (KrR 31). The purpose of semanalysis is to construct a discourse on the text that avoids the pitfalls of positive science by bringing alterity

to every discourse while simultaneously maintaining a critique of its own logic and language (KrR 78). By allowing itself to be thus affected by alterity (KrR 80) and “without forgetting that the text presents a system of signs, semanalysis opens an other scene within the interiority of this system.”²⁰ This ‘other scene’ is the heterogeneous scene brought into focus in Freud’s analysis of the uncanny but meaningful logic (KrR 29) of unconscious processes in their fundamental relation to bodily processes, a scene involving “the production of meaning prior to meaning” (KrR 84). Deconstruction is unable to fully engage with this ‘scene’, in Kristeva’s view, because its notion of *différance* – like Lacan’s ‘real’ – constitutes a non-entity, which nonetheless remains situated exclusively within the realm of signs (KrR 16). In contradistinction to this, semanalysis is an inherently translinguistic science insofar as it “conceives of meaning not as a sign-system but as a *signifying process*” (KrR 28) involving various kinds of language (KrR 75) as well as a multiplicity of experiences that simultaneously precede, traverse and escape language (KrR 29) without entirely severing their relationship with it. The essence of meaning understood in this sense is *translation* rather than *conceptualization*.

1.4.4 Intertextuality

The notion of ‘translation’ constitutes the very heart of Kristeva’s notion of *intertextuality* and informs all of her work, regardless of the particular discourse

²⁰ “[...] sans oublier que le texte présente un système de signes, la sémanalyse ouvre à l’intérieur de ce système une autre scène” (Seme 279).

she employs to express it.²¹ Hence, too, Kristeva speaks of intertextuality in terms of a *transposition*, and of repetition as transformation or the assumption of position as subversion of fixed/closed positionality:

The term *inter-textuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of ‘study of sources,’ we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic – of enunciative and denotative positionality.
(RePL 59-60)

Precisely as a transposition or translation of different signifying practices, texts are never merely ‘objects’ that would be “single, complete, and identical to themselves”; they remain inherently “plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated.” (RePL 60)

Only in this intimate connection to the experience of translation can the full significance of *intertextuality* in Kristeva’s theory be fully appreciated. Although Kristeva herself fails to appreciate the centrality of translation in the work of both Blanchot and Derrida, her notion of intertextuality emphasizes the necessity of textual and discursive relationality (DL 66, 69, 87-9) in all thought on difference in a manner that, arguably, is more determined and more elaborate than in either of the two other authors’ writings. Contrary to Blanchot’s explorations of the *essential solitude* of the literary work (see #1.2.2), Kristeva aims to radicalize the notion of ‘conversation’ that emerges in his writings of the late 1950s and 60s. Partly in response to Blanchot she asserts, in her discussion of Barthes’s contributions, that “there is no ‘absolute’ anonymity of the text” (DL 105), and

²¹ Kristeva makes this point more explicit in relation to language in *Black Sun* (1989): “To transpose corresponds to the Greek *metaphéreîn*, to transport; language is, from the start, a translation [...]” (BIS 41) – More on this in #3.

she brings to poststructuralist critique Bakhtin's idea of the text as an intersection of dialogical engagements. In distinction to the focus on 'rupture' (WD 249), on the irreducibility of the freeplay of differences (WD 247 & 265), and on the irreconcilability between certain textual practices (WD 265) in Derrida's work, Kristeva's approach treats language as "a correlation of texts" implying *both* rupture and correspondence as a "modality of transformation" (DL 88-9), and addresses the manner in which textual practices embody, first and foremost, "our individual and collective being-in-the-world" (RPL 7). In a sense, Kristeva's *intertextuality* can be seen as constituting a particular translation of Derrida's assertion that there is nothing outside of context. While Derrida tends to bring attention to every text's attempt to slip away from its own context in search of stable, consistent meaning, Kristeva points to the manner in which the very emergence of every text is made possible through its conversation with other texts. For her, this conversation is *an essential aspect of the context* of a given text, just as the experience of the subjective body and the universal, intersubjective dramas in which it is caught up – death, desire, suffering, pleasure, love, loss – is its pretext.

Kristeva's notion of intertextuality moves beyond the formalist constraints of Bakhtin's dialogism, but follows his observation that "dialogue is the only sphere possible for the life of language" (DL 68), and that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (DL 66). Intertextuality, in this respect, is not merely a matter of citation and influence, but a process of infinite and mutual engagement between texts. A

text does not simply intersect with other texts; it constitutes an active dialogue with other texts; indeed, no text would be possible without such dialogue. To read in an intertextual manner involves “a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations” (Allen, 2000, 1 – bibl. 1.2). Consequently, within Kristeva’s schema, intertextuality becomes the name for the text as the other: every text is, first and foremost, “a *writing* where one reads the *other*” (DL 68) and where, to paraphrase Lacan, the subject (author *and* reader) finds oneself addressed from the place of the other. Intertextuality “sees in every word a word about the word, addressed to the word; and it is only on condition that it belongs to this polyphony – to this ‘intertextual’ space – that the word is a ‘full’ word. The dialogue of words/discourse is infinite [...]” (Ruin 109). In the midst of this dialogical situation, the subject constitutes a fragmentary unity which “resists definition, for ‘Man never coincides with himself’” (Ruin 110). Since every culture and every community constitutes a perpetual weaving of texts, intertextuality points to a process that is “not only literary but also social, political, and philosophical in nature” (DL 71). Through a certain self-loss each text encounters its ethical obligation (RePL 274) – its assumption of the process of signification via the responsibility to other textual and subjective experiences:

[...] a practice is ethical when it dissolves those narcissistic fixations [...] to which the signifying process succumbs in its socio-symbolic realization. Practice, such as we have defined it, positing and dissolving meaning and the unity of the subject, therefore encompasses the ethical. The text, in its signifying disposition and its signification, is a practice assuming all positivity in order to negativize it and thereby make visible

the *process* underlying it. It can thus be considered, precisely, as that which carries out the ethical imperative. (RePL 233)

At a point of almost absolute proximity, Kristeva's intertextual theory splits off from Blanchot's and Derrida's work not so much because of essential, irreconcilable differences in their respective understandings of language and textuality, as due to differences in emphasis and in the choice of texts they read, both of which, in turn, being the result of the somewhat different character of their concerns and sensibilities. All three authors regard the text as marked by an essential incompleteness and inhabited by a radical 'plurivocality' and multiplicity of meaning. Kristeva's approach nonetheless indicates that she is not entirely satisfied with the manner in which Blanchot and Derrida limit their focus to the manner in which the text deconstructs itself and escapes both the author's and the reader's desire for conceptual and interpretive closure: Blanchot by remaining within the text's incompleteness and by multiplying its effects within works that seem to slip away from language, and Derrida by bringing perpetual rupture to texts constructed around a certain monological tendency to fix language and make it work in a particular way. Kristeva tends to read texts that neither escape nor fix language, but rather instigate a kind of crisis at the heart of words in order to bring about a certain transformation of meaning. Her theory of intertextuality emerges as an attempt to mediate between these two approaches by asserting that the text is neither a refusal of meaning nor a search for fixed meaning, but rather the embodiment of a desire for meaning understood, on the one hand, as a productive relationship between semiotic and symbolic aspects of

subjective experience and, on the other hand, as a productive engagement between different subjective experiences.

The notion of intertextuality is inherently multi-dimensional in character, pointing to Kristeva's attempt to mediate between symbolic/linguistic aspects of the text, socio-historical processes and biological levels of signification. This mediation is a response to Blanchot's preoccupation with the uncanny, inhuman character of language that withdraws from the world and descends into a silent, solitary, bottomless void, and to Derrida's deconstructive focus on the redistribution of signs along the seemingly groundless text and its infinite play of differences which dissolves the 'ontological difference' between signifier and signified, leaving in its wake something like a hollow abyss, "a blank within a blank" (Dis 265). Kristeva states: "Thus, without being at the 'origin' of language and eliminating the very question of origin, the 'text' (poetic, literary or otherwise) opens up in the surface of speech a verticality where the models of this *signifiance* that representational and communicative language does not recite, even if it registers them, situate themselves."²² By the same token, the text explodes the *surface* of language (*Sem* 13) and descends beneath it (DL 179). Around 1969, this initial insight comes to be solidified in the context of Kristeva 'science' of semanalysis and its fundamental distinction between the symbolic horizontality of the *phenotext* and the vertical, semiotic activity of the *genotext*:

The text is not a linguistic *phenomenon*. In other words it is not the structured signification found in the linguistic work seen as a flat

²² "Ainsi, sans être à l' 'origine' du langage et en éliminant la question même d'origine, le 'texte' (poétique, littéraire ou autre) creuse dans la surface de la parole une verticale où se cherchent les modèles de cette *signifiance* que le langage représentatif et communicatif *ne récite pas*, même s'il les marque" (Seme 8-9).

structure. Rather, the text is the *engendering* of signification, an engendering that is inscribed within the linguistic ‘phenomenon’ of the *pheno-text*. The *pheno-text* is the printed text, but may only be read when we pass *vertically* across the genesis of: 1) its linguistic categories and, 2) the topology of the signifying act. [...] And so meaning [*signifiante*] becomes an engendering which may be understood doubly: 1) as the engendering of the fabric of language and 2) as the engendering of the “I” which puts itself in the position of introducing meaning. This is what opens up the *pheno-text*. We will call this operation a *geno-text*, in this way dividing the notion of text into the categories of *pheno-* and *geno-text* (surface and depth/root, signified structure and signifying productivity).²³

Simply put, *phenotext* can be associated with the social, symbolic, communicative surface structure of language, while *genotext* pertains to the drive energy and unconscious affects underlying the text and manifesting itself through rhythm and intonation as well as numerous other stylistic devices and narrative figures (RePL 86-7). Precisely due to this distinction a proper theory of the text in Kristeva’s view must be constituted as ‘double’ (Seme 287) at the intersection of a semiotic analysis of the symbolic dimension of the text and a psychoanalytic analysis of the ‘other scene’ (Seme 283) that propels its productivity. This distinction necessarily always coincides with the intertextual/intersubjective distinction, whereby “The word’s status is [...] defined *horizontally* (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as *vertically* (the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus.” (DL 66)

²³ “Le texte n’est pas un *phénomène* linguistique, autrement dit il n’est pas la signification structurée qui se présente dans un corpus linguistique vu comme une structure plate. Il est son *engendrement*: un engendrement inscrit dans ce ‘phénomène’ linguistique, ce *phéno-texte* qu’est le texte imprimé, mais qui n’est lisible que lorsque’on remonte *verticalement* à travers la genèse: 1) de ses catégories linguistiques, et 2) de la topologie de l’acte signifiant. [...] La signifiante sera donc cet engendrement qu’on peut saisir doublement: 1) engendrement du tissu de la langue; 2) engendrement de ce ‘je’ qui se met en position de présenter la signifiante. Ce qui s’ouvre phéno-texte. Nous appellerons cette opération un *géno-texte* en dédoublant ainsi la notion de texte en phéno-texte et géno-texte (surface et fond, structure signifiée et productivité signifiante)” (Seme 280).

Within this context, Blanchot's unnamable neuter and Derrida's unnamable *différance* are re-contextualized in a manner Kristeva considers more productive: on the one hand, haunting different kinds of language (literary, philosophical, religious, or political) and demanding different interpretations; and, on the other hand, connecting both non-concepts to biological and social processes in a transformative way, thus bringing the estranged body and the estranged society into dialogue. Meaning, in Kristeva's reading, can only remain productive within the experience of a certain tension that – beyond the passivity of mere worklessness and the subversiveness of deconstructive undecidability – requires the constant assumption of (ethical/political) *positions* within every logic and every discourse. Kristeva refers to this as the “thetic phase”:

The thetic – that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social – is the very place textual experience aims toward. In this sense, textual experience represents one of the most daring explorations the subject can allow himself, one that delves into his constitutive process. But at the same time and as a result, textual experience reaches the very foundation of the social – that which is exploited by sociality but which elaborates and can go beyond it, either destroying or transforming it. (RePL 67)

Kristeva's criticisms, again, respond to certain *tendencies* within French critical theory. These tendencies have become monopolized by some contemporary versions of that theory in a manner that is somewhat split off from the original context in which they emerged (Interviews 148-150). Nowhere is Blanchot's text seemingly deprived of world and materiality more apparent than in passages in which he speaks of Orpheus's descent into the underworld.²⁴ Speaking of Kafka's *The Castle*, Blanchot asserts: “[...] the work contains within

²⁴ For a brief discussion of Kristeva's own interpretation of this mythical narrative see Lechte & Margaroni, 2004, p. 49 – bibl. 1.2.

itself, precisely in the part of it that is silent, the unknown side that underlies the speech of commentary, this speaking about speaking, vertiginous pyramid constructed on a void – a tomb – covered over and perhaps long ago forgotten” (InC 394). Blanchot’s language discloses a world always already deprived of itself and vanishing in the very words we speak. In Kevin Hart’s words, one is often overcome with the feeling that for Blanchot “language no longer has anything to do with the subject, [that] it is an object that leads us and can lose us [...]” (DG 139). Derrida, on the other hand, explores the multiplicity of ways each text disseminates itself, albeit “without adding to its thickness [...]. What is said to be hidden behind or beneath the text also functions textually, that is to say, as a surface” (de Nooy 206). In Derrida’s own words, “The labyrinth here is an abyss: we plunge into the horizontality of a pure surface” (WD 298). Neither the text nor the subject can be said to contain a depth – regardless of whether we call that depth ‘the unconscious’, the ‘world’, or ‘biology’. Robert Young is correct in his observation that, “Deconstruction does not remove ‘the world’, but rather demands that we rethink the terms in which we formulate it” (UT 19). The quotation from Montaigne, which Derrida includes at the beginning of his “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966), is quite indicative of his early concerns – as well as of the difference between his and Kristeva’s concerns: “We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things” (WD 278). As far as Derrida’s practice goes, one must remain with the text, with its logic, its claims to truth, its particular assumptions. Kristeva incorporates this approach in her early work, often emphasizing the fact

that semiotics is a practice that perpetually places its own claims and assumptions in question, because “A text always calls for a reading that emphasizes the instinctual and unconscious elements of the semiotician’s interpretation” (Interviews 182). For her, the task of interpreting interpretations is crucial (Interviews 181); but we must also interpret the experiences that precede, accompany, and follow those interpretations and the extent to which these interpretations *correspond* to these experiences.

1.4.5 The Crisis of Meaning

Kristeva’s theoretical development cannot be understood aside from her concern with the problem of meaning as something that transcends the deconstruction of metaphysical language and logic. Kristeva’s theory certainly echoes the concerns of many contemporary poststructuralist critics insofar as it posits the text as the site of challenge to the stable foundations of meaning and communication, to the privileging of meaning/truth as a fixed and readily accessible product of consumption. Her theory of the text, furthermore, offers a crucial elaboration of the idea, present in much French critical thought of the 1960s and 70s, that a proper critique of language and its logic coincides in an essential manner with the critique of social, political, philosophical, theological, and economic arrangements. Nevertheless, in distinction to certain critical attempts “to say no longer *from where* the text comes (historical criticism), nor even *how* it is made (structural analysis), but how it is unmade, how it explodes, disseminates – by what coded paths it *goes off*” (Barthes 1977, 126-27), Kristeva’s intertextual approach indicates that she was determined to respond to

the crisis of signification entailed in, but also preceded by, the poststructuralist critique.²⁵ Blanchot and Derrida were both certainly sensitive to this problem and it is precisely for this reason that Kristeva's early thought moves along a line that is parallel to theirs, occasionally crossing their work. And yet, only in Kristeva's work does the notion of 'crisis' constitute an essential and recurring motif. If, therefore, she invents a unique language that does not quite fit into their schemas, it is not so much in order to displace their ideas as to address the crisis of meaning in a more effective manner: 'semiotics', 'literature', and 'psychoanalysis' become, in a sense, different designations for the attempt to address the crisis of meaning from different yet converging positions, emphasizing – at a point of absolute loss – the absolute significance of the symbolic link for both psychological and social transformation, and the role of its disintegration in individual and collective neuroses and psychoses.

All three authors' readings point to the impossibility of leaving metaphysics behind, while simultaneously bearing witness to the impossibility of a fully self-enclosed, all-encompassing metaphysical logic or structure. This double impossibility constitutes the heart of the contemporary crisis of meaning and demands an ongoing and rigorous dismantling of metaphysical language and categories and also an ongoing and rigorous *reconstruction* – this time more careful and more humble in character – of this language and its categories. What distinguishes Kristeva's theory of the text in this regard is the explicit manner –

²⁵ In a 1985 interview, Kristeva reaffirmed her dissatisfaction with the misappropriations of certain 'deconstructionist' tendencies in French thought by referring to them as "a completely abstract deconstructionism, detached from any psychic or political concerns, from any speakers or spheres of study [...]," and containing no concern for a "concrete societal malaise" (*Interviews* 24).

more pronounced than in either Blanchot or Derrida – in which it embodies a profound and consistent awareness of the inherent fragility of language. This fragility has to do with the fact that language inevitably constitutes “an infinitesimal yet minimal part of the totality of symbolic experience” (Post 137). Thus Kristeva asserts “that the human condition, insofar as it involves the use of speech, is very fragile, and that writing explores that fragility. I try to find examples of literary texts where this fragility appears to have maximum visibility” (Interviews 203).

This awareness is further accompanied by Kristeva’s conviction that her discourse, like any poststructuralist discourse, is already situated within a certain general collapse of meaning in Western culture. In the midst of this situation, it is necessary to establish a new poetics in order to bring about a *meaningful* cultural transformation. The mere dissolution of boundaries, rational categories, and concepts will not suffice in ‘liberating’ reason, language, or the subject. This is one of the key reasons why Kristeva’s theoretical discourse attempts – not always successfully – to position itself against the abstraction of critical theory, which, in her estimation, “presupposes a split from practice that is a sort of ‘malaise’ in our culture” (Interviews 150). Kristeva emphasizes the fact that what is at stake here is not a particular conception of truth or interpretation, or the saving of thinking from metaphysical, rationalist, and ideological bonds, but the very question of *crisis* in all its manifestations, along with “the possibility of a *theory* in the sense of an *analytical discourse* on signifying systems, which would take into account these crises of meaning, subject, and structure” (DL 125). Here truth and ethics

are necessarily coextensive, and the text is the place of this coincidence.

Kristeva's notion of intertextuality stands in an intimate relation to Heidegger's notion of 'care' (RePL 132): the textual space is primarily a space of *concern* with those fundamental experiences that can be regarded as 'objective' and 'natural' (RePL 178) as much as social or symbolic – death, desire, suffering, or love – rather than simply as a structure to be ruptured or preserved for the sake of an idea or a plurality of ideas. "I shall therefore [...] argue in favor of an analytical theory of signifying systems and practices that would search within the signifying phenomenon for this *crisis* or the *unsettling process* of meaning and subject rather than for the coherence or identity of either *one* or a *multiplicity* of structures." (DL 125)

The complex understanding of the 'crisis of meaning' that emerges out of Kristeva's theory of the text follows a triple trajectory.

1. The crisis is inherently intertextual in character, affecting every discourse *at once* (Interviews 150) – from philosophy, to literary theory, to science, politics, ethics, or religion. In other words, one cannot speak of a 'crisis of religion' without simultaneously considering the 'crisis of science' or the 'crisis of secularism', and one cannot announce a 'crisis of logocentrism' without immediately bringing into discussion the crisis inscribed into the notion of 'pluralism'. Kristeva's work thus brings together diverse concerns in order to position itself directly towards the experience of a crisis whose meanings and consequences spread out in numerous directions at once.

2. Insofar as there can be no theory of meaning without some notion of what is entailed in the experience of subjectivity (KrR 27), the question of the *speaking subject* – subjectivity *and* language in their essential coincidence – is fundamental to any critique of language, monological or otherwise. Any theory that focuses only on language remains insufficient (Interviews 205) in its attempt to address the problem of meaning in the full sense of the term, namely as the perpetual movement *between* form and content (Interviews 191), logic and experience, symbol and affect, or culture and body. Kristeva is careful, in this respect, to make sure that the ‘death of Man’ does not extend to the death of men and women as speaking, embodied, desiring, and suffering beings.
3. The crises that afflict meaning, “far from being accidents, are inherent in the signifying function and, consequently, in sociality” (DL 125); as such, they demand endless *translation* rather than *resolution* – whether conceptual, linguistic, political, or theological in nature.

The task is not to make an interpretive summa in the name of a system of truths – for that attitude has always made interpretation a rather poor cousin of theology. The task is, instead, to record the *crisis* of modern interpretive systems without smoothing it over, to affirm that this crisis is inherent in the symbolic function itself and to perceive as symptoms all constructions, including totalizing interpretation, which try to deny this crisis: to dissolve, to displace indefinitely, in Kafka’s words, ‘temporarily and for a lifetime’.
(KrR 319)

Yet, although textual practice is of “another order than that of verisimilitude” (TeR 76), it makes the question of truth – whether in the philosophical, social, ethical, political or, indeed, religious sense – more urgent than ever before.

In this respect, Kristeva follows the ‘negative’ tradition of thought – including Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Hegel, Heidegger, Blanchot, and Derrida – which affirms that the experience of estrangement constitutes a necessary component of the very experience of meaning and truth. Indeed, her earliest collection of essays opens with words that resonate throughout her entire work: “*To treat language as work – poiein – to work in the materiality of what, for society, is a means of contact and understanding – is this not to become immediately foreign to language?*”²⁶ While in Blanchot the experience of estrangement from Being and from ourselves is inscribed into the very experience of language at its fullest, and while in Derrida’s early thought the emphasis on estrangement tends to be displaced in favor of an affirmation of *play*, for Kristeva, the significance of estrangement emerges from the beginning in connection to her belief that the crisis of meaning in its contemporary manifestation speaks to our inability to assume the task of translation, which she regards as coextensive with the life of every speaking being. This inability is simultaneously ‘metaphysical’ (the limits of Western Logos) and socio-political (we are alienated from one another due to both discursive and social arrangements) in character. In Kristeva’s early thought, modern literature as a particular kind of signifying practice assumes this task more effectively and more rigorously than any other discourse, first and foremost due to the fact that it “attests to a ‘crisis’ of social structures and their ideological, coercive, and necrophilic manifestations” (RePL

²⁶ “*Faire de la langue un travail – ποιεῖν – , oeuvrer dans la matérialité de ce qui, pour la société, est un moyen de contact et de compréhension, n’est-ce pas se faire, d’emblée, étranger à la langue?*” (Seme 7)

15; see also Seme 181). In the context of Kristeva's literary theory questions of religion and atheism first emerge in an explicit manner.

Chapter Two

Literature and the ‘Death of God’

[H]ow does one constitute a new heterogeneous signifying body, for which literature, and even more so, this new ‘literature’ that has us read in a new and different manner, can no longer be merely an ‘object’?

Julia Kristeva, “How Does One Speak to Literature?”, in DL 1980, p. 114

I sometimes have the feeling that the human condition, insofar as it involves the use of speech, is very fragile, and that writing explores that fragility. I try to find examples of literary texts where this fragility appears to have maximum visibility.

Julia Kristeva, *Interviews* 1996, p. 203

According to Michel Foucault’s well-known pronouncement, it was Maurice Blanchot’s critical reflections of the 1940s, 50s and 60s that made the discourse on ‘literature’ possible in France (AfB 5). Kristeva herself admits to having arrived in Paris carrying two “modern authors, Maurice Blanchot and Ferdinand Céline” in her suitcase (PK 8). Nevertheless, Kristeva’s scattered and brief evocations of Blanchot, along with the more explicit appreciation of Barthes in her early work (DL 100), suggest that she considers Blanchot’s understanding of literary writing as not sufficiently concerned with either the bodily and unconscious dimensions of the subject or with social practice. Be that as it may, bringing together two parallel readings of Blanchot’s and Kristeva’s engagement with literary language in this chapter has to do with much more than questions of influence. What is of crucial significance in the context of the present study is the manner in which the two authors, more than any of their contemporaries, establish

an essential link between literary and religious questions; or, more precisely, the manner in which they posit the question of (avant-garde) writing as inseparable from the question of the ‘death of God’. In this respect, despite their shared concerns, Blanchot and Kristeva define the relationship between literary and religious language in a highly different manner: Blanchot explores the corresponding ways in which the two kinds of language engage a certain silence at the heart of meaning, whereas Kristeva focuses on the way literature enters the void left by the alleged dissolution of religion in contemporary Western societies.

The argument in this chapter is that Kristeva’s discourse on religion and literature fails – almost in spite of itself – where Blanchot’s discourse succeeds: namely, in remaining within a certain ambiguity that is as productive as it is intertextual in orientation. In other words, Blanchot’s approach indicates a path Kristeva’s literary theory itself *necessitates*, and indeed, crosses on a number of occasions, before finally succumbing to a resistance, or at least a hesitation. Kristeva’s failure in this respect is eventually compensated through an encounter between literature and psychoanalysis, which endows her thought on religion with a new, more productive orientation.

2.1 The Silence of Literature and the Death of God: Blanchot’s ‘Atheism without Atheism’

The unknown to which poetry alerts us is much more unforeseeable than the future can be [...] for, like death, it escapes every hold. [...] Here is the essential. To speak the unknown, to receive it through speech while leaving it unknown, is precisely not to take hold of it [...]. To live with the unknown before one (which also means: to live before the unknown, and before oneself as

unknown) is to enter into the responsibility of a speech that speaks without exercising any form of power [...]. It is in this sense that we are permitted to say: to speak is to bind oneself, without ties, to the unknown.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*
1993, p. 302

We must, therefore, wager: engage our certain action for something that is certainly uncertain. But for which uncertainty? God, nothingness, the fulfillment of human destiny, the classless society?

Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*
1993, p. 102

It is difficult to find another author in contemporary critical thought as committed to the question of literature as Maurice Blanchot is. It is even more difficult to find another author determined to *avoid* the traditional question – What is literature? – with as much rigor and dedication as Blanchot. Literature, in Blanchot’s understanding, constitutes something like an *event* rather than a *phenomenon*. As such, it is characterized by a certain absence as much as by a certain presence. By the same token Blanchot’s writings consistently bear witness to literary language’s refusal of metaphysical logic, and its demand for an object properly circumscribed, held before it, subjected to formal analysis and, finally, conceptualized by means of a comprehensive definition, even when such definition remains dialectically open to correction. It is not entirely inappropriate in this respect to suggest that Blanchot’s concern situates itself closer to the plural question: ‘Where/When/How is literature?’ And yet, such a question neither demands nor expects an answer. Thus, it is more accurate to say that this question speaks *toward* literature or, more precisely, toward that very *refusal* inscribed within every literary endeavor. “One sometimes finds oneself asking strange

questions such as [...] ‘Where is literature going?’ [...] [I]f there is an answer, it is an easy one: literature is going towards itself, towards its essence which is disappearance” (BIR 136). The disappearance constituting every literary text is synonymous with what Blanchot refers to as *the silence peculiar to literature*. What is at stake does not concern only *literary* language. If, despite his unapologetic atheism, the question of the ‘death of God’ persists in Blanchot’s thought, it is due to the suspicion, implicit in his work, that the silence peculiar to literary language is never far from the silence peculiar to certain kinds of religious discourse. Although Blanchot is never *entirely* certain as to the precise nature of this strange relation without relation between literary and religious language, he nonetheless does not simply avoid this incertitude; on the contrary, he preserves a place for it in his treatment of literature.

Blanchot’s understanding of literary and poetic language cannot be divorced from his thinking concerning the nature of language as such. This has to do as much with a certain ‘inadequacy’ or ‘impoverishment’ as it does with a certain ‘excess’ or ‘plenitude’. While language always remains insufficient with respect to the ‘fullness’ of ‘subjective experience’, it is also always capable of overflowing this experience and every discourse constructed to bring that experience under control. As far as Blanchot is concerned, the ‘sickness’¹ characteristic of language must be affirmed, not cured; this necessity is co-extensive with every literary event, and points to the fact that all speech is

¹ According to Jean-Paul Sartre’s well-known assertion, “If words are sick, it is up to us to cure them. Instead of that, many writers live off this sickness. In many cases, modern literature is a cancer of words [...] made up of vague meanings which are in contradiction with the clear meaning” (Sartre 1967, p. 210 – bibl. 4).

inherently *without the last word* and is only insofar as it is inhabited by an ‘other’ to which it responds. In this sense, literature is also a crucial reminder that silence is never simply synonymous with the absence of speech, but always figures as the innermost feature of speech. As such, silence must be continually put into play rather than filled in by words or turned into an aim in itself. (InC 337)

2.1.1 A Relation without Relation

Blanchot’s formulations concerning literary writing – ‘absence of work’ or ‘absence of the book’ (InC 259, 417-19 & 423-31) – speak to this curious relation that literature maintains with *both* language and silence. Along with other related formulations, such as ‘literature of the outside’, ‘neutral writing’ or ‘fragmentary writing’, they do not designate a concept (InC 429); rather, they emphasize literature’s rejection of the cultural demand for an identifiable product and attune the reader to the multiplicity of ways in which the literary work overflows and disrupts social expectations, philosophical imperatives, or conceptual schemes, defying any attempt at a single interpretation and slipping away from subjective mastery, whether that of the reader or that of its own author. A ‘worklessness’ inevitably haunts every work (# 1.2.1), and opens in its midst the abyss of an interminable *murmur*, which does not allow for an easy distinction between silence and speech, and which deprives the work of the possibility of a proper closure, a fixed center, or a final resting place.

Neither belonging to this world nor to some transcendent, metaphysical realm, the ‘space of literature’ is *outside* any clear designation and, indeed, outside any clear dichotomy between absence and presence, here and there, inside

and outside. It is a neutral place *without* place akin to the silent interval that constitutes a conversation, where every speech encounters the speech of the other.

“To write: the relation to the *other* of every book, to what in the book would be [...] a scriptuary exigency outside discourse, outside language” (InC 427). In Leslie Hill’s words, literary or poetic language constitutes, for Blanchot, a “Saying that never coincides with a Said” (AfB 120); or, what amounts to the same, it is a speech that defies the laws of discourse, a writing that cannot be contained within the bounds of a book. And yet, it would be erroneous to position the silence of literary language in direct opposition to philosophical language, as though Blanchot were seeking to construct an impenetrable wall between their respective ‘neighbourhoods’. Literature entails, in Blanchot’s understanding, a kind of radical emptiness or incapacity of thought; as such, it resists philosophical appropriation. At the same time, literature “is a summons to a more profound thought” (BoC 39). In this sense, Blanchot attempts to radicalize Heidegger’s notion of thinking as piety, whereby philosophy’s proper task involves taking a step back and renouncing thought as mastery. In Blanchot’s words, “thinking is always learning to think less than we think, to think about the lack that thought also is – and, speaking, how to preserve this lack by bringing it to speech [...]” (BoC 249). In this respect, philosophy has something essential to learn from poetic speech (InC 354) as an experience with language that marks a certain *impossibility* of experience: a kind of self-effacement whereby nothing is gained or grasped and yet everything is at stake – beginning with the central no-place occupied by the ‘I’ and the perpetual crisis that characterizes this no-place.

Subject to the peculiar relation without relation that defines literary or poetic language, the writer's own position is also characterized by radical frailty or powerlessness (BoC 199). Blanchot characterizes the writer's experience as an impossible 'ordeal' or 'trial' that, properly speaking, is not *experienced*, but rather *undergone* in the sense of an affliction (BoC 34-35). The innermost exigency of the poet's speech is to relinquish the power to say 'I' for the sake of the work, to "become no one, the empty and animated space where the call of the work resounds" (BoC 215-16). Exposed to the inexplicable strangeness of this space, the poet communicates nothing that can be defined simply as a 'self', an 'idea', or a 'truth', and the work gives no communicable answer and accomplishes nothing final. Here, "language does not speak, it is" or, rather, it "speaks without speaking" (InC 196, 216 & 258). Even the word 'literature' is too much of a conceptual imposition expressing the demand for a culturally recognizable and fully accessible product (InC 348-49). According to Blanchot, what goes by the name of 'literature' continually strives toward its disappearance and demands its own shattering. (BoC 195, 201, 204 & 359; InC 258-59)

Literary language embodies an exigency beyond the traditional oppositions between 'choice' and 'necessity', 'author' and 'work', or 'literary' and 'everyday' language. And yet, if the writer's speech is a wandering speech deprived of fixed meaning, it also entails the fundamental imperative that *I speak*; this imperative constitutes me as a subject in the proper sense, i.e., *by way of another speech*. "I have to speak, having nothing to say, nothing but the words of others. Not knowing how to speak, not wanting to speak, I have to speak" (BoC 214). The

literary or poetic event constitutes the movement of a *ghostly* speech that, in its very *affirmation* of language, belongs to no one and is foreign to every name (BoC 108, 162, 227 & 249; InC 429). At once “nowhere, everywhere [...] this secret speech without a secret” (BoC 218-19) carries the reader and author alike to a neutral place “where the work is silent” (InC 385-86; see also BoC 220). As always, Blanchot’s words do not correspond to the simple, habitual meanings we assign to them. Aware of their own frailty, they attempt to indicate the peculiar manner in which the literary or poetic event refers to an absence *without* absence, or a silence *without* silence.

“[T]o speak in order to say nothing” (WoF 324): this Rilke-inspired conviction concerning literature’s final aim is expressed by Blanchot already in the late 1940s and affirmed in a variety of ways throughout his work. It can easily leave the reader with the impression that, as far as Blanchot is concerned, literary language entails a solitude (# 1.2.2) so essential, an enigma so radically removed from any meaningful experience that the only genuine response it can trigger is silent bafflement. Blanchot’s thought does, indeed, suggest this on more than one occasion; but it also does not allow us to remain conveniently entrenched in this suggestion. If literature speaks *nothing*, it is due to the fact that its speech resonates with a constant ‘not yet’, with what is always ‘still to come’ (WoF 112; BoC 239; InC 259). If it contains a silent void in its midst, which can never be mediated or communicated and which must be preserved precisely as unknown (InC 342 & 385), this void nonetheless bears within itself a silent *call* which demands perpetual response.

It is poetry's existence, each time it is poetry, that in itself forms a response and, in this response, attends to what is addressed to us in impossibility (by turning itself away). Poetry does not express this, does not say it, does not draw it under the attraction of language. But it responds. Every beginning speech begins by responding; a response to what is not yet heard, an attentive response in which the impatient waiting for the unknown and the desiring hope for presence are affirmed. (InC 48)

2.1.2 The Impossibility of Possibility

This ongoing tension in his thought places Blanchot closer to Heidegger than he himself is able or willing to acknowledge. Both undertake the difficult task of avoiding any convenient dualism between the 'orphyic' and the 'hermetic' dimensions of poetic language; they maintain an irresolvable dialogue between revelation and concealment, presence and absence, being and non-being – a relation without relation in Blanchot's terms: "[...] there is a speech in which things, not showing themselves, do not hide. Neither veiled nor unveiled: this is their non-truth [...]. Nothing is explained, nothing laid out, rather, the enigma is again bound up in a word [...]. Speaking without either saying or being silent." (InC 30-31)

Blanchot seeks to move beyond Heidegger's highly problematic attempt to link poetic language with the task of historical mediation, which, in Heidegger's postwar writings, is refocused around the issues of 'dwelling', of 'listening to the call' (which apparently can be heard by the chosen poet), and of 'naming'. In this respect, Blanchot responds to Heidegger's privileging of the works of Hölderlin, Trakl, and Rilke by reading authors whose sensibilities are, in his view, more quintessentially modernist – René Char, Mallarmé, Rilke, Kafka, or Bataille –

insofar as their writing carries within itself dispersal rather than gathering, chance rather than destiny, bafflement rather than comprehension, renunciation rather than appropriation, and worklessness rather than work (# 1.2.1). In Blanchot's reinscription of Heidegger the poet communicates nothing but the very incommunicability of Being. If, according to Heidegger, the role of the poet is to maintain the possibility of naming beings and gods by means of an essential speech, for Blanchot the poet affirms nothing more and nothing less than the very impossibility of naming. Blanchot's poet speaks the language of the desert, a language that disrupts authentic dwelling, deprives the world of its habitual semblance of familiarity, and turns us into foreigners in our own land: "The poem is exile, and the poet who belongs to it belongs to the dissatisfaction of exile. He is always lost to himself, outside, far from home [...]" (SpL 237). This motif is repeated in Blanchot's later work, albeit in a more affirmative tone:

Being out of one's element does not mean simply a loss of country but also a more authentic manner of residing, a habitless inhabiting; exile is an affirmation of a new relation with the Outside. The fragmented poem, therefore, is not a poem that remains unaccomplished, but it opens another manner of accomplishment [...] irreducible to unity. (InC 308)

The eccentric intimacy between Blanchot and Heidegger is most explicit in their respective readings of Hölderlin. In Heidegger's work, Hölderlin's poetry affirms the possibility of the impossible (Being, God); Blanchot's concern remains with the impossibility of possibility – an impossibility to which poetic language can only respond in an appropriate manner if it acknowledges that its response can never be entirely sufficient: "It is necessary to speak, that is the only thing that is appropriate. And yet it is impossible to speak [...]" (WoF 127). The

very recognition of the unspeakability constitutes for Blanchot the sacredness of Hölderlin's speech (WoF 126); indeed, "there would be no poet if he did not live out this very impossibility." (WoF 117)

This experience of impossibility has been partially missed in Heidegger's attempt to answer the question – "What are poets for in a destitute time?"² – by linking poetry to the task of naming the 'holy'. If, in Blanchot's account, Hölderlin's poetry does not name the Sacred, it is because it aims to inaugurate again and again the movement of a response toward an inexplicable namelessness at the heart of all speech (WoF 131; SpL 274; BoC 7 & 9; InC 39-40). Such namelessness does not take place and is not experienced by the poet, for it is always yet to come (DG 94-95). Blanchot alludes to this movement that neither names nor refrains from the task of naming as the only task proper to poetry when he draws a comparison between poetic speech and the oracle at Delphi, which, as Kevin Hart puts it in his study, "neither speaks nor remains silent but indicates" (DG 95). In Blanchot's words, the poet's task is, in a crucial sense, to recognize him or herself as presenting an enigma without enigma: "Sphinx without a secret." (BoC 95)

Blanchot's critique is not always fully attuned to the nuances contained in Heidegger's ongoing attempt to engage poetic language beyond dialectics, as well as to his increasing emphasis on the poet's lack of direct access to the holy that s/he speaks or names. Whereas Heidegger's thinking around poetic language continues to be permeated with the longing for the 'lost gods' together with the hope of preparing a new opening for the God to come via poetic speech, Blanchot,

² See "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* 2001, pp. 87-139 – bibl. 4.

echoing Mallarmé, regards this loss as crucial to the emergence of modern poetry above and beyond any kind of ‘spiritualism’, poetic or otherwise.

2.1.3 Poetic and Religious Speech: An Eccentric Intimacy

Writing as the experience of the ‘absence of work’ and religion as the experience of the ‘absence of God’ are synonymous for Blanchot (DG 64 & 146-47), as though poetic speech carried within the very abyss of its fragmented language the irreducible, disorienting abyss created by the ‘death of God’ and thus would maintain continuity with certain aspects of religious language. Blanchot affirms, almost in spite of himself, a kind of eccentric intimacy between poetic and religious discourse. This intimacy manifests itself, for instance, in the way poetic and prophetic speech mimic one another: in both cases the speech “announces an impossible future” over which it assures no grasp (BoC 79), a nomadic, desert-like speech that sounds like a cry of affliction (BoC 82-85), a powerless speech whose only real possibility is to indicate that which does not present itself. The poet is a messenger without a message, uncertain of who sent him. And yet, the poet’s affliction resembles the madness of the prophet lost in the midst of a Biblical desert (BoC 91) and the estrangement of the religious seeker deprived of the consolation of a divine presence organized around calculable, mass-marketable, ‘spiritual’ answers. This affliction shared by poetic and religious speech is simultaneously a double-task: “Poetry is not there in order to say impossibility: it simply answers to it, saying in responding. Such is the secret lot, the secret decision of every essential speech in us: naming the possible, responding to the impossible” (InC 48). In this way poetic speech brings religious

speech into its own, and this prepares the way “for a new, for a first hearing” (InC 366-67), a hearing that has renounced its claim over divine revelation and for which even the word ‘Sacred’ presumes too much: “Das Heilige, the Sacred, an august word charged with lightning and as though forbidden, serving perhaps only to conceal with the force of a too-ancient reverence the fact that it can say nothing.” (InC 36)

Beyond the strange affinity between poetic and religious speech, Blanchot’s references to religion are dispersed and occasionally baffling in their abruptness as well as in the manner in which they hover on the brink of an unapologetic atheism: “The gods? Returning, having never come” (InC 310). At the same time, religious questions remain inseparable from Blanchot’s concern with language and its relation to the ‘unknown’. If Blanchot privileges poetic language because of its proper relation with the unknown – a relation in which the unknown remains an irreducible alterity (InC 77), “A strange relation that consists in there being no relation” (InC 51) – all of his writings bear witness to the fact that, insofar as such unknown is at stake, it is impossible to draw a simple, convenient distinction between literature and religion, and to treat them as though they were two entirely self-enclosed and mutually exclusive kinds of language, even if they must be granted their respective ‘place’. Literary or poetic language today carries within itself the question of the ‘unknown’ that has emerged in the wake of the ‘death of God’; religious language must therefore necessarily maintain an opening for the question of literature. Blanchot’s engagement with writing cannot be regarded as a refusal of religious thought, even when he asserts: “Let us leave

aside God – the name is too imposing” (InC 50). Properly speaking, Blanchot is interested in a certain radical reserve within language and thought (InC 119) – a reserve with respect to what has traditionally been taken to be the ‘object’ of that thought, for instance: God, Truth, the Book. In a sense, we can speak here of a certain reinscription of the Heideggerian notion of *Gelassenheit* beyond the possibility of appropriation – a reinscription marked by Blanchot’s emphasis upon a particular aspect of the mysticism of Simone Weil, expressed, at one point, in this strange affirmation (without affirmation): “(I am) a being who is without relation to God and incapable of doing anything to approach him on my own” (InC 111). In other words: a peculiar form of desire without desire, an impossible desire (InC 53) permeated with the passivity of a non-possessive longing whose aim is not so much to seek the ‘mystery’ that eludes its grasp as to commit itself fully to a vigilant waiting in which the experiences of passivity, patience, and passion are indistinguishable. If thought is related to desire, it must nevertheless remain so in the sense of a radical receptivity and a radical renunciation: “Attention is waiting: not the effort, the tension, or the mobilization of knowledge around something [...] [but the act of] leaving empty what is empty and keeping our haste, our impatient desire, and, even more, the horror of emptiness from prematurely filling it” (InC 121). Whether our concern lies with literature, religion or philosophy, for Blanchot as much as for Heidegger “Language is the place of attention” (InC 122), at least insofar as it does not become a relation of power (InC 303). As such, language is the embodiment of the necessary “reserve that is the first need of the other.” (InC 122)

2.1.4 The Name of God

Blanchot's discussions of the 'Other', while heavily indebted to Levinas, also attempt to radicalize the latter's insistence that "the other is what exceeds me absolutely" (InC 52), and leave little doubt as to Blanchot's rejection of the association between 'God' and 'Autrui' as another person (DG 214). Blanchot regards this association as 'too imposing' in its correspondence to metaphysical logic. The relation to the Other is, in his reinscription, beyond any simple division between subject/object, human/divine, or immanence/transcendence – hence a relation whereby neither 'I' nor the 'Other' correspond to any essential identity, unity or presence (InC 70-71). In the midst of this no-place of infinite separation and radical difference, "language is the transcendent relation itself" (InC 56). All proper speech, including religious speech, "recalls the separation by which it speaks" (InC 63) – that is, its own essence as response always attuned to that impossibility which must remain nameless and ungraspable, even if it can never be abandoned as a fundamental concern (InC 45 & 65). "Such then would be my task: to respond to this speech that surpasses my hearing, to respond to it without having really understood it, and to respond to it in repeating it, in making it speak." (InC 65)

In this manner, too, Blanchot's central imperative resonates with a certain undecidability with respect to the name of 'God' – a name which is never merely a possibility for us as speaking beings, but which also does not allow for a merely indifferent silence: "To name the possible, to respond to the impossible. I remember that we had designated in this way the two centers of gravity of all

language” (InC 65). Blanchot’s work preserves the opening for an intimate, if inexplicable, affinity between the name of ‘God’, which marks a profound absence, and that ‘impossibility’ whose innermost feature is precisely the impossibility of ever being done with anything (InC 203-4) – whether it be truth, reason, literature, silence, theism, or atheism: “[...] everything repeats itself, everything returns: the limit of thought. To think or to affirm this law is also to speak at the limit [...]” (InC 275). As Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, the name of ‘God’ in Blanchot’s *The Infinite Conversation* serves as a kind of constant, elusive hint or sign for a certain impossibility contained in all nomination, for the fundamental namelessness that marks the no-place around which all meaning revolves and which refuses both theistic idolatry and atheistic nihilism (Nancy, 2003, 67-68). God is not simply denied, but rather erased as an ‘object’ of speech or a ‘subject’ of analysis; God’s name is reconfigured as a kind of ‘limit-experience’, a word for that which otherwise must remain secret, set apart: “It is not a question of whether or not there is God. It is, quite differently, a question of whether there is a name of [for] God or, more specifically, whether this name may be pronounced. This name responds to the question, whether it be a question of being (what?), of origin (how?) or of meaning (why?).”³

Nancy suggests quite correctly that the very refusal of a proper meaning embodied in God’s name simultaneously signals the infinite abundance of meaning, together with the call to participate in this abundance. Hence, “Almost

³ “Ce n’est pas qu’il y a ou qu’il n’y a pas de Dieu. C’est, bien différemment, qu’il y a ou plutôt qu’il se prononce le nom de Dieu. Ce nom répond à une déposition de la question, qu’elle soit question de l’être (quoi?), question de l’origine (par quoi?) ou question du sens (pour quoi?)” (Nancy 2003, 67 – bibl. 2.2).

in spite himself and as though at the extreme limit of his text, Blanchot has not given up the name of God – the unacceptable name of God – because he knew that it is still necessary to name the unnamable call, the interminable call to unnamability.”⁴ On intimate terms with his notion of the neuter, the name of God in Blanchot’s thought marks precisely that which is at once intrinsic to the religious discourse of monotheism and always already outside it: God as *Personne* or *No One*, deprived of proper identity, neither an entity nor a non-entity, not one and not not-one (Bruns, 1997, 163 & 168-71). As the interlocutor in one of Blanchot’s conversations states: “*God: sovereignty of the neutral, in relation to Being always in excess, empty of meaning, and through this emptiness absolutely separate from all meaning and nonmeaning*” (InC 303-4). In this manner, ‘God’ stands for the name that, bearing within itself an infinite void that cannot be filled by means of any designation, testifies to the incurability of the ‘crisis’ that afflicts all language and demands the patience of an infinite vigil. “God: language speaks only as the sickness of language in as much as it is fissured, burst open, separated, failure that language recuperates immediately as its validity, its power and its health; recuperation that is its most intimate malady, of which god, name always irrecuperable, who is always to be named and never names anything, seeks to cure us, a cure in itself incurable.” (SNB 48)

⁴ “Presque malgré lui et comme sur la limite extrême de son texte, Blanchot n’a pas cédé sur le nom de Dieu – sur l’inacceptable nom de Dieu – car il a su qu’il fallait encore nommer l’appel innommable, l’appel interminable à l’innomination” (Nancy 2003, 68).

2.1.5 Writing and Atheism

Blanchot's critique constitutes a crucial reminder that religious language cannot speak *about*, only *toward*, an enigma that, as far as Blanchot is concerned, presents no oracle that can be explicated once and for all (BoC 28-30). This 'no-place' or 'non-experience' constitutes for Blanchot the only truly proper 'place' or 'experience' of religion today, i.e. religion constituted around an impossibility that allows for no simple distinction between negation and affirmation, and that involves a double task whereby language is at stake. On the one hand, religion becomes the movement of a constant, interminable (re-)reading: a movement that, beyond the theological-cultural concept of the 'Book' (or 'Bible') with its demand for presence and unity remains linked to God as a metaphysical concept and yet affirms the essential discontinuity or fragmentariness of writing (InC 427-28) and recognizes in the Bible an invitation to the plenitude of a radical dispersal. Reading can no longer be simply an attempt to grasp God's 'message'; rather, it is a response to the radical plurivocality and ungraspability of that 'message', to the way in which it constantly unworks all human attempts at making it work only for them. As such, *The Infinite Conversation* may indeed be seen as a text that "contests, reworks, displaces, and yet perpetuates the Bible" (DG 190). On the other hand, Blanchot's critique emphasizes the priority of the Jewish model insofar as it entails, in a fundamental sense, the movement of an interminable dialogue, which refuses conceptual mediation and which involves in essence a 'relation without relation' (DG 180) echoed in Blanchot's notion of infinite conversation. Blanchot's appreciation, in this regard, situates itself between

theism and atheism: “[...] what we owe to Jewish monotheism is not the revelation of the one God, but the revelation of speech as the place where men hold themselves in relation with what excludes all relation: the infinitely Distant, the absolutely Foreign. God speaks, and man speaks to him. This is the great feat of Israel” (InC 127). And again: “[...] if, in fact, there is infinite separation, it falls to speech to make it the place of understanding: and if there is an insurmountable abyss, speech crosses this abyss. Distance [...] is maintained, preserved in its purity by the rigor of the speech that upholds the absoluteness of difference” (InC 128). In this respect, religion does not constitute an experience of God as a human possibility, but rather a conversation with God as a human impossibility (see DG 179-80). Religion is plural speech, a strange, fragmented fellowship united only in its anonymous, dialogical relation without relation to the unknown as unknown – that is, neither subject nor object, neither one nor many, neither god nor non-god, neither present nor absent and, above all, never simply “the not *yet* known.” (InC 300-301; emphasis mine)

If Blanchot’s writing is permeated by atheism, if *writing itself*, writing as plural speech, constitutes atheism for him, it is nonetheless an atheism without glory (BoC 201), deprived of nostalgia for the dead God. Nevertheless, such writing is aware of the fact that its language continues to be haunted, and cannot cease being haunted, by God’s ghost. In Kevin Hart’s words, Blanchot’s atheism remains marked by a fundamental recognition that all of its attempts at thinking are forever bound to “something inaccessible from which we cannot extricate ourselves,” something that “cannot be found and therefore cannot be avoided”

(DG 150). Hart asserts correctly that Blanchot “indicates more fully and more rigorously than others of his generation what it means to experience the absence of God. And he attends more carefully than they do to the complexity of this experience” (DG 5). Indeed, it would be more appropriate to regard Blanchot’s peculiar experience as an ‘atheism *without* atheism’, “an atheism that cannot quite be affirmed” (DG 10), an impossible atheism that remains inseparable from the persistent impossibility of what goes by the name of ‘theology’ (InC 252-53). Moreover, and most essentially at stake in Blanchot’s thought, the ‘unknown’ is neither theistic nor atheistic; this is due first and foremost due to the fact that the ‘death of God’ announced most prominently by Nietzsche corresponds to a certain crisis of language (as *logos*) rather than to an actual event (InC 271), and to a certain crisis of thought rather than to the dissolution of monotheistic faith, whether in its Jewish, Christian, or Muslim manifestation.

In a crucial sense, the question of the ‘death of God’ is equally at stake in *both* theism and atheism. As such, too, the ‘default of God’ which concerned Heidegger signals, in Blanchot’s work, a necessary *suspension* of *both* theism and atheism as two distinct, self-sufficient kinds of discourse: “So that, seeking the true atheists among the believers (always necessarily idolatrous) and the true believers among those who are radically atheist, we will, perhaps, exchanging the one for the other, happily come to lose the two figures they perpetuate” (InC 253). At the heart of this intriguing assertion is the suggestion that the very opposition between theism and atheism is a residue of metaphysical thinking. This opposition has little to do with ‘God’: theism and atheism are, as it were,

inscribed within one another, and today we can avoid the exigency of *neither one*.⁵ Blanchot places atheism at the very heart of religious discourse – not merely as a denial of the validity of that discourse, but rather as religion’s own impossible possibility, which haunts all religious ‘affirmation’ in the same manner in which the impossible possibility of God haunts all atheistic ‘denials’. Atheism turns out to be religion’s own innermost *concern* and perhaps even its own innermost *experience*: that which, more than anything else, belongs to religion and must necessarily “cross [...] the most devout faith” (DG 230). In its most profound manifestation, theism appears to involve a certain mimicry of atheism; it renounces any *possible* grasp of the ‘God’ who constitutes, as it were, the infinite silence of its discourse. Conversely, atheism in the proper sense – i.e., atheism insofar as it refuses the temptation of nihilist indifference and remains profoundly *afraid* – is coextensive with a certain mimicry of theism: it preserves within itself, in the manner of an infinite conversation, a concern with the question that, in Blanchot’s schema, figures as the question of ‘God-Man’. Blanchot’s words echo in several directions at once:

I do not know whether atheism is possible, but I assume that insofar as we suspect [...] that we are in no way done with the ‘theological,’ it would be of great interest to seek whence this possibility of atheism that

⁵ According to Henri Duméry, “In our culture theism and atheism are hostile siblings. Their polemics are constant, feeding off one another. What one asserts, the other contradicts. Focused on their quarrel, as they are, they hardly consider renewing the issue. The quarrel continues based on old ideas and dated methods. It would last much longer if the issue didn’t change. And yet the issue does change and the problem is posed differently. This change is among the most significant in our waning. Let’s wager that atheism, too, will become less euphoric. In this second half of the twentieth century, it is not religion that mutters, and irreligion that speaks out clearly. It is Western man, either believer or unbeliever, who behaves and speaks differently, who despairs of correcting one ideology with a better one, and who would rather do away with all ideology. Is this possible? That’s the question, the only question. Perhaps it will soon be added to the already long list of *insoluble* questions” (Henri Duméry, Art. “Dieu-D: Par-delà théisme et athéisme”: *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, vol. 7. Paris: 2008, pp. 763-64, re-edition of vol. 5, Paris, 1978, 13th ed., pp. 586-87; quoted in Boutin 2005, p. 516 – see bibl. 4).

always eludes us might come to us, and from whom. Let us note that the contrary is also true; the Churches continue to fear that under the thought of Transcendence a foreign affirmation is introduced – a decisive heresy that makes an atheist of the very one who thinks he ‘believes in God’. And, in the church’s view, it is always closest to the thought of God that danger threatens [...]. (InC 253)

The infinite undecidability between the demands of theism and atheism manifests itself in Blanchot’s appropriation of Rilke’s expression: *Nirgends ohne Nicht*, or ‘Nowhere without No’ (DG 19 & 102). The question God poses to Adam in the Genesis story – “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9, cited in InC 128) – remains, for Blanchot, meaningful today insofar as it is a reminder of the spiritual no-place that humanity presently occupies: a no-place where, properly speaking, ‘God’ is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive, neither distant nor near, neither vanished nor to come, neither affirming nor denying anything; all these categories operate only in accordance with humanly calculable measures. In this way also the ‘default of God’ is inseparable from the ‘default of Man’, at least to the extent that the God of metaphysics and the Cartesian subject are intrinsically linked. This inseparability constitutes the heart of Blanchot’s paradoxical humanism. On the one hand, man enters the no-place of God as the irreducible Other of the ‘relation without relation’ (InC 59, 68 & 72); this is why Blanchot asserts, in response to Levinas, that “Perhaps [...] it is time to withdraw this term *autrui*, while retaining what it has to say to us: that the Other is always what calls upon ‘man’ [...]. [N]ot the other as god or the other as nature but, as ‘man’, more Other than all that is other” (InC 72). Humanity occupies the neutral abyss of what Blanchot regards as “*the most profound question*”, which assumes the role of the enigma: “[...] man as Sphinx; that dangerous, inhuman, and sacred

part [...]” (InC 17). On the other hand, the humanist ‘question of man’ is fundamentally coextensive with the question of man’s disappearance as a self-possessed subject: “Be there God or the atom, the point is precisely that everything does not depend on man. In God’s time this was very nearly clear [...]” (InC 270). It is as though the most pious stance entailed a certain humanism deprived of man as the Sovereign: no longer man as *possibility* but man as the *impossibility* of any self-assured ‘I am’ or ‘God is’. As Nancy notes, Blanchot’s intention is to affirm a humanist stance that refuses the temptation of both idolatry and “anthropotheology.” (Nancy 2003, 68)

Blanchot’s humanism thus appears virtually synonymous with a certain religiosity, at least insofar as religion can be said to constitute a profound meditation on the human experience of a self-estrangement that counters, in a significant manner, human desire for total domination, manifesting itself as much in theological or philosophical presumptuousness, as it does in techno-scientific efforts to master nature. It is in this sense that one should read Blanchot’s rather saturnine pronouncement, in which he paraphrases Levinas: “Enigma of Saying as of a god speaking in man, man who relies on no God, for whom there is no such thing as dwelling, who is exiled from all world without afterworld, and who finally does not even have language as his abode [...]” (OCC 47). This passage explicitly draws a link between the affliction of language and the affliction of atheism and declares this double-affliction as essential to the present age. Yet again, the Jewish experience of the exodus is also there as that which must be affirmed in contemporary discourse, whether literary, religious, philosophical, or

scientific. As Blanchot points out, the experience of exile, understood properly, signifies a new relation to ‘truth’, rather than its absolute negation (InC 127). If being religious necessarily entails being lost without refuge, humanism coincides with this experience in an intimate manner, for it too names a nameless community crying out in the desert (InC 262-63): *Where* am I? As far as Blanchot is concerned, this question is more appropriate than the metaphysically oriented *Who* am I?⁶

For Blanchot, the question ‘Where am I?’ speaks the language of the Outside which, like the echo, is the speech of *no one* – a speech dispossessed of its self-certainty, suspended in some neutral no-place between the mouth and the ear, no longer able to grasp its precise origin, dwelling place, or proper destination, even when it resonates with the speech of the other. Such incessant, nameless echo belongs neither to silence nor to language. Blanchot’s speech is erring, deprived of both ‘God’ and ‘Man’. Such, too, is the language of prayer, at least the prayer of the poet who, having experienced the ‘default of God’ does not cease to speak, even if this speech is punctured by a silent abyss:

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.
No one.

Praised be thy name, No One.
For your sake
we shall bloom
Towards
you.⁷

⁶ See also M. Boutin, *Relationalität als Verstehensprinzip bei Rudolf Bultmann* [Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie, 67]. Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1974, 626 p.; pp. 46-47.

⁷ Paul Celan, “Psalm.” In *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York & London: Norton, 2001), pp. 156-57. Some minor adjustments to the above translation have been made with the help of Dr. Thomas Lornsen.

Paul Celan's poem/prayer proclaims an absence and carries that absence in its very midst as though it constituted its only impossible possibility, like the 'absolute slip' Blanchot associates with the 'death of God' (SNB 60, 48 & 121). Literary or poetic writing as a certain experience of radical atheism thus positions itself within the emptiness of religious language, yet without simply replacing it. The sense of 'spiritual' dejection expressed in the above fragment of Celan's poem/prayer to an anonymous *Niemand* is simultaneously permeated with the awareness of a profound lack of completion: no convenient truth presents itself in the wake of God's absence – a truth that might, for instance, comfortably correspond to the names of either 'atheism' or 'humanism'. Echoing Blanchot's concern, the poem suggests that 'we' turn *toward* this lack of truth and the exigency it presents: to think at once more *and* less than we think. This exigency is coextensive with *speaking both more and less* than we speak. According to Blanchot, certain kinds of literary and religious language bear witness to this enigmatic event whereby language at once *speaks excessively* and *does not speak*, situated in the interval between what, according to the demands of metaphysical logic, must correspond to *either* 'speech' *or* 'silence'. Hovering over an abyss it continually affirms but to which it must not succumb, neither literature nor religion constitutes a simple refusal of language; rather, it indicates in a fundamental way that *silence speaks* and that the validity of speech can never be measured simply by its capacity to replace silence with words, concepts, or definitions. Blanchot's atheism without atheism embraces the experience evoked by Celan's poem in its own manner; it denies by way of affirmation and it affirms

by way of denial: “Nietzsche’s dictum ‘God is dead’ is not effective as knowledge that provides an answer, but as a refusal of an answer, the negation of salvation, a ‘no’ to the elevated agreement that humanity may rest and unburden itself of itself based on an eternal truth that God exists. ‘God is dead’ is a task, a task without end” (WoF 292). The silence of literature and the death of God are experienced today as two distinct events which, nonetheless, are not quite separate, for they share an intimate familiarity with a silence that is never merely the opposite of speech, and with an absence that is never merely contrary to presence.

2.2 Writing and Atheism in Kristeva’s Literary Theory

[I]f poetic economy has always borne witness to crises and impossibilities of transcendental symbolics, in our time it is coupled with crises of social institutions (state, family, religion), and, more profoundly, a turning point in the relationship of man to meaning.

Julia Kristeva, “From One Identity to an Other”,
in DL 1980, p. 140

An invisible sword of judgments weighs on Céline’s universe more heavily than God [...] did on medieval carnival and its altogether Christian sequels, Dostoyevsky included. It is the invisible sword of a non-existent God – neither transcendence nor Man, no capital letters, save the place, ‘Nothing shall have taken place but the place’ (Mallarmé).

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 1982, p. 138

If an atheist like Mayakovsky was able to believe in resurrection, it would seem that his faith had been inspired by the experience of writing.

Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*
1997, p. 137

2.2.1 Between ‘Writing’ and the Literary Text

Kristeva’s early explorations of intertextuality (# 1.4.4) are marked by a paradox. By positing the concept of the ‘text’ as the intersection of a multiplicity of practices, Kristeva radically puts into question the ease with which Western culture maintains separate categories of texts – philosophical, literary, scientific, or theological; by the same token her concept of the ‘text’ emerges as a replacement for the traditional concept of ‘literary work’ (Seme 16 & 278). She therefore approvingly cites Philippe Sollers’ assertion that the ‘literary text’ “is not assimilable to the historically determined concept of ‘literature’. [...] The practice must be defined on the level of the ‘text’ [...]” (KrR 86). On the other hand, Kristeva nonetheless insists on preserving the distinctness of literary practice and, indeed, grants it a privileged role within her theory of the text: “Strangely close and yet intimately foreign to the substance of our discourse and of our dreams, ‘literature’ seems today to be the very act which grasps how language is put to work and indicates that which, tomorrow, it has the power to transform.”⁸

This paradox is further complicated by the fact that, throughout her early work, Kristeva occasionally employs the terms ‘text’ and ‘literature’ (see for example Seme 73 & 90, Ruin 116, RePL 17 & 186) as though they were interchangeable or, indeed, synonymous: “Textual productivity is the inherent measure of literature (of the text), but it is not literature (the text), just as each

⁸ “Étrangement proche, intimement étrangère, à la matière de nos discours et de nos rêves, la ‘littérature’ nous paraît aujourd’hui être l’acte même qui saisit comment la langue travaille et indique ce qu’elle a le pouvoir, demain, de transformer” (Seme 7).

work is the inherent measure of a value without constituting that value as such.”⁹

Kristeva struggles to clarify these tensions as early as 1967:

Literature does not exist for semiotics. It does not exist as an utterance [*parole*] like others and even less as an aesthetic object. It is a *particular semiotic practice* which has the advantage of making more accessible than others the problematics of the production of meaning posed by a new semiotics, and consequently it is of interest only to the extent that it (‘literature’) is envisaged as irreducible to the level of an object for normative linguistics (which deals with the codified and denotative word [*parole*]). In this way we can adopt the term *writing* when it concerns a text seen as a production, in order to distinguish it from the concepts of ‘literature’ and ‘speech’. (KrR 86)

To some extent, these tensions have to do with the fact that, while she affirms the necessity of deconstructing ‘literature’ as a metaphysical and institutional concept, Kristeva is simultaneously weary of following Derrida’s example and displacing ‘literature’ in favor of the more general notion of ‘writing’. In this way, she asserts her resistance to the “strong post-Heideggerian temptation” (DL ix) to write theory as literature.

‘Writing’ nonetheless persists in Kristeva’s early thought and is coextensive with the notion of ‘textual productivity’ (DL 58-59 & 102; see # 1.4.1) or even with the text as such (Seme 181-82) insofar as it aims to deconstruct the ideological valorization of the ‘bounded text’ and brings critical, ideological, and epistemological concerns to every textual practice (DL 93-111). In 1980 she formulates this problem around the following double question: “[...] first, in what way can anything be written in the twentieth century, and second, in what way can we talk about this writing?” (Post 136) She adds:

⁹ “La PRODUCTIVITÉ TEXTUELLE EST LA MESURE INHÉRENTE DE LA LITTÉRATURE (DU TEXTE), MAIS ELLE N’EST PAS LA LITTÉRATURE (LE TEXTE), de même que chaque travail est la mesure inhérente d’une valeur sans être la valeur même” (TeR 73).

With this formulation any literary inquiry transforms itself first into an epistemological, and then into a sociohistorical investigation. [...] With this in mind, I should call this practice of writing an ‘experience of limits’, to use George Bataille’s formulation: limits of language as communicative system, limits of the subjective and naturally the sexual identity, limits of sociality.

Precisely on account of these concerns, Kristeva resists what she considers to be the danger of turning every text into a kind of literary writing – which she believes “is the case with certain French philosophers who try to write as if they were writers” (Interviews 182-83) – and thus of blurring the essential differences (including different capacities) embodied in various kinds of texts. If ‘writing’ as productivity is inscribed into every context, Kristeva emphasizes that not all writing is the same: some texts speak to that which cannot be named, others revolve around a truth they aim to fix and present; some texts are inherently monological, others inherently polylogical (DL 77-89); some are revolutionary, others merely entertaining. A restaurant menu, a doctoral thesis, a poem are equally inhabited by what Derrida calls *différance*; yet, according to her, this experience is and must be realized or repressed in each text in a very different manner and to a very different end. For Kristeva, much is at stake in this regard – socially, politically, epistemologically, ethically, historically, and psychologically speaking. More precisely, any subject unable to distinguish one type of ‘writing’ from another is incapable of leading a proper ethical, political or, indeed, psychological life. Kristeva’s work increasingly bears witness to her belief that this is the malady that has come to afflict contemporary subjectivity in the wake of certain excessive and highly abstract appropriations of deconstructive discourse. Therefore, she prefers to associate ‘writing’ with literary and poetic

explorations of the limits of language (Interviews 19) without severing its relationship with other kinds of practices. She remains critical of some poststructuralist attempts to blur the line between ‘writing’ and ‘knowledge’ and preserves within her thought certain aspects of Heidegger’s and Blanchot’s privileging of literature and poetry.

[T]he wager which consists of postulating the possibility of knowing, of giving back the trail of sense and of the subject of semiology, is one that has the impertinence of the Pascalian wager. It is perhaps not insignificant that it is a woman who is announcing this while philosophy in France is abandoning, in large part, *any* metalanguage and replacing it with a discourse which calls itself fictional, and which is considered to be the only possible way to witness, if not to render, an accounting of the trial of sense and signification. (SpS 216)

Modern literature becomes in Kristeva’s view the *exemplary* manifestation of the notion and practice of the ‘text’: a crucial resource for rethinking every textual practice insofar as literary questions correspond in a fundamental manner to philosophical, political, ethical, subjective, or religious questions – without collapsing the necessary distinction between different textual practices (Seme 279, Interviews 30-34).

If there exists a ‘discourse’ which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of a withdrawn body, and is, instead, the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction – productive violence, in short – it is ‘literature’, or more specifically, the *text*. [...] Hence, the questions we will ask about literary practice will be aimed at the political horizon from which this practice is inseparable, despite the efforts of aestheticizing esoterism and repressive sociologizing or formalist dogmatics to keep them apart. (RePL 17)

Literature presents the most radical attempt to bring intertextual logic into the heart of every discourse. This is why several of Kristeva’s early essays elaborate

Bakhtin's notion of dialogism in tracing the historical developments leading up to the emergence of contemporary avant-garde literature.¹⁰

A break occurred at the end of the 19th century: while dialogue in Rabelais, Swift, and Dostoievski remains at a representative, fictitious level, our century's polyphonic novel becomes 'unreadable' (Joyce) and interior to language (Proust, Kafka). Beginning with this break – not only literary but also social, political, and philosophical in nature – the problem of intertextuality (intertextual dialogue) appears as such. (DL 71)

Modern literature, more than any other kind of language, is fundamentally constituted around "A plurality of languages, a confrontation of types of discourse and ideologies, with no conclusion and no synthesis" (Ruin 110). As such, it is capable of exposing ideologies and transforming entire representational systems within its 'polyphonic' movement (Ruin 114). Literature neither withdraws into its own solitary space nor allows itself to be fully appropriated by philosophical or economic logic; rather, it brings a kind of 'plague' to every logic – a plague that is as much ethico-political in nature as it is linguistic. Modern literature occupies a unique position in textual practice due to its capacity to address crises of meaning and social transformation; most other types of text are either ill equipped to do so due to their own ideological limitations (empirical science or positivist philosophy, for instance) or due to their structural and logical incapacity to do so (job application, or instruction manual for a software program). In this sense, the literary text is fundamental to all contemporary questions concerning language, meaning, and truth – regardless of its 'disciplinary' or categorical location. "One of the major stakes of literature and art is henceforth located in that invisibility of the crisis affecting the identity of persons, morals, religion, or politics. Both

¹⁰ See especially "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" (1969, in DL 64-89).

religious and political, the crisis finds its radical rendering in the crisis of signification.” (BIS 222)

The early essay, “How to Speak to Literature?” (1971), shows Kristeva’s debt to fundamental concerns of Blanchot’s literary criticism (DL 100 & 104)). The question it poses resonates with another: ‘How *not* to speak *about* literature?’ In other words: How to situate one’s discourse with respect to the enigmatic logic of the literary text, the eccentric movement of its language, its rhythms, its silences, without simultaneously turning the literary text into a mere object of analysis? How to offer a ‘theory of literature’ beyond the static reductionisms of linguistic science and rational logic, while avoiding the trap of assigning the literary work the status of a merely ‘aesthetic’ phenomenon with no critical, ethical, or political significance? At the same time, the essay affirms Kristeva’s allegiance to Barthes’ project (DL 100) insofar as it elaborates the link between literary, social, and historical concerns (DL 93) in a more explicit and concise manner.

It follows that the literary avant-garde experience, by virtue of its very characteristics, is slated to become the laboratory of a new discourse (and of a new subject), thus bringing about a mutation, ‘perhaps as important, and involving the same problem, as the one marking the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance’ ([Barthes,] *Critique et vérité*, p. 48). It also rejects all discourse that is either stagnant or eclectically academic, preempts its knowledge where it does not impel it, and devises another original, mobile and transformative knowledge. In so doing, it stimulates and reveals deep ideological changes that are currently searching for their own accurate political formulation [...]. (DL 92)

According to Kristeva, Barthes’ approach provides an important transitional point on the way to a new textual practice in which literary considerations become

fundamentally linked to issues of the materiality of language, its historical developments, and its psychoanalytic implications (DL 100). Within this practice, literature plays a crucial role in the production of knowledge without reducing knowledge to the status of a fiction. In the process, literature bears witness to the experience of the contemporary subject on the margin between body and culture (DL 97) and addresses this subject's socio-historical and linguistic alienation.

“For subjects of a civilization who are alienated in their language and blocked by their history, the work of Barthes shows that literature is precisely the place where this alienation and this blockage are thwarted each time in a specific way” (DL 96). Kristeva's transposition of Blanchot's and Barthes' question – How to speak to literature? – is inseparable from the Hölderlinian-Heideggerian, but also psychoanalytic question: What is the purpose of literature in times of distress? (Interviews 163) Bringing together the time of history and the singularity of subjective experience (DL 121) as well as the demands of both law and desire within a movement of negativity, literature traverses sense and nonsense and preserves meaning, while simultaneously revealing its inherent plurality (DL 111). In a sense, literature *is* desire; to be more exact, literature constitutes, through language, the *translation* of desire for an *other* (DL 116). This is the heart of literature's ethical and political potential (DL 121); and the purpose of Kristeva's work is to affirm this logic in an increasingly more explicit manner without losing sight of the necessary coincidence between theory and practice.

2.2.2 The Ethics and Politics of Poetic Language

Kristeva's increasing emphasis on the political dimensions of literature finds its expression in "Politique de la littérature" (1973), before its most complete elaboration in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (French 1974). Kristeva makes it quite clear that her approach rejects the usual highly politicized distinction between 'engaged' literature and literature as an 'aesthetic' practice. Insofar as s/he speaks, the human being is a political animal (Pol 13); no language can avoid its own political implications. Since language has, according to Kristeva, become the quintessential 'non-object' of critical inquiry, and since contemporary literature constitutes the most radical practice of language at the *limits* of language, literature today not only *overlaps* with other concerns (epistemological, political, ethical, economic or theological), but helps *instigate* a *revolution* that, passing through the current shattering and exploitation of language (RePL 15), fundamentally affects those concerns. This revolution is as much conceptual as it is linguistic. Its purpose is first and foremost a fundamental transformation of the very notion of political discourse and political action: "The exercise of language as *practice* presupposes a transformation of the concept of politics."¹¹ Hence Kristeva's repeated evocation of names associated with this cultural transformation cannot be regarded merely as idealistic naiveté:

Joyce, Kafka, Artaud: a discourse, a sociality, a politics which has lasted two thousand years is in the process of breaking free by forming an immeasurable *jouissance*. Those politics which do not take account of this are destined to anachronism or to the many types of totalitarianism. To recognise this phenomenon is to begin to understand

¹¹ "L'exercice du langage comme *pratique* suppose un changement de la conception de la politique" (Pol 15).

that a subject in process requires a different sociality – a sociality which simultaneously rejects madness and divisive subordination to the law.¹²

The aim behind Kristeva's extensive treatment of poetic language in *Revolution in Poetic Language* can easily be misconceived if one fails to adequately understand the significance of the above remarks – as indeed many commentators have.¹³ These misconceptions may be divided into two closely related categories. The first one is characterized by the accusation – hinted at above – that Kristeva is quite naive in her overestimation of the social, ethical, and political importance of poetic language in contemporary Western culture. A notable example in this case is Michel Beaujour, according to whom Kristeva's venture can only appear politically Quixotic “in a world where poetry has ceased to be taken for a fundamental and common need [...]” This venture, he continues,

must have originated in a Slavic universe where precisely poetry, and Symbolist poetry in particular, continues to be indispensable as a substitute for political freedom, as a compensation, if not as the unique bearer of truth, confronted by the ‘language of the murder contract’ which represses it. But defending poetry in France today, albeit by resorting to the alibi of the ‘avant-garde text’ is, after all, to set the cat among the pigeons. (KCR 30-31)

This accusation fails to pay attention to the nuances of Kristeva's transposition of the traditional meaning of terms such as ‘the political’ or ‘the literary’, as well as to her complex understanding of ‘culture’ as a weave of various textual productions in which every signifying process carries consequences that

¹² “Joyce, Kafka, Artaud: un discours, une socialité, une politique qui durent depuis deux mille ans sont en train de se rompre par la formulation d’une jouissance incommensurable. La politique qui ne l’entend pas se voue à l’anachronisme ou aux diverses variantes du totalitarisme. L’entendre, c’est commencer à comprendre qu’une autre socialité est exigée par un sujet en procès qui écarte du même geste la folie et la subordination clivante à la loi” (Pol 20-21).

¹³ This situation, of course, resembles certain critical misunderstandings – including Kristeva's – with respect to Derrida's deconstruction.

reverberate across the entire cultural spectrum. One is tempted to retort that Beaujour's comment could have originated only in the mind of someone firmly convinced that a radical division between 'aesthetic', 'political', and 'spiritual' concerns is not only a fact in the Western world, but also a necessity. Having grown up in communist Eastern Europe, where an inappropriate title on a doctoral thesis could cost one a career or lead to imprisonment, Kristeva is certainly more sensitive than most of her Western contemporaries to the uncanny manner in which a seemingly irrelevant event – the words of an actor on stage, an ambiguous line in a poem, a communal prayer, or the gesture of an Olympic athlete – can explode beyond its own 'proper' context with unforeseeable social and political consequences. However, Kristeva's aim is not simply to point out that this state of affairs holds true in any cultural context, including France or the United States. More importantly, her argument is that a culture that condemns fundamental human concerns to separate, mutually-exclusive spheres remains dangerously close to psychosis and risks eventual collapse – imaginary, symbolic, and real – since "History and morality are written and read within the infrastructure of texts." (DL 65)

This is the darker dimension of the crisis that affects contemporary Western societies – and a significant reason behind Kristeva's attempt to indicate how the peculiarities of poetic language "eliminate the isolation of poetic discourse (considered, in our hierarchised society, as an 'ornament', 'superfluity', or

‘anomaly’) and accord it the status of a social practice [...].”¹⁴ If Kristeva argues that literature is a crucial resource for social transformation, she emphasizes the fact that no such transformation can take place without a fundamental reconceptualization of what we understand by the ‘literary’ process and its relation to other kinds of discourse. Western culture continues to repress this process by institutionalizing ‘literature’ as an object of consumption, i.e. a *product* rather than *productivity*, distinct from other cultural ‘spheres’.

Beaujour’s criticism underestimates the fundamental role that, in Kristeva’s scheme, language in general and poetic language in particular – as “the very place where social code is destroyed and renewed” (DL 132) – plays in every culture’s experience of meaning and truth, hence in the process of its self-realization. “In this context, the calling into question of language and of the individual, which represent a microrevolution, is something that affects the social fabric and can potentially challenge the entire social framework.” (Interviews 215)

This brings us to the second misconception, namely that ‘poetic language’ and ‘poetry’ in Kristeva’s theory stand for one and the same phenomenon. In order to address this question we need to take a more elaborate look at Kristeva’s complex ‘non-definition’ of ‘poetic language’.

The notion of ‘poetic language’ appears already in Kristeva’s earliest writings, notably in “Pour une sémiologie des paragrammes” (1966), in “Poésie et Négativité” (1968), and in “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” (1969). From the very beginning, this notion is marked by a similar confusion as the one encountered in

¹⁴ “[...] éliminent l’isolation du discours poétique (considéré, dans notre société hiérarchisée, comme ‘ornement’, ‘superflu’, ou ‘anomalie’) et lui attribuent un statut de pratique sociale [...]” (Seme 175; see also DL 64-65).

Kristeva's interchangeable employment of the terms 'text' and 'literary text'. Kristeva occasionally alternates between 'poetic language' and 'literary/poetic text' (see, for example, Seme 174-184; DL 64-65, 69, & 146-7; RePL 137) as though the difference were obvious to the reader. In a few instances, the distinction between 'poetry' and 'poetic language' remains ambiguous: "The poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse" (DL 65); "the ethics of a linguistic discourse may be gauged in proportion to the poetry that it presupposes" (DL 25). Beajour's skepticism in this regard echoes a more widespread response to Kristeva's early work: "We note as well that assertions concerning the 'text' (and, *a fortiori*, 'poetic language') change according to the context and circumstances, without for all that indicating progress towards a more precise definition. It is rather a game of forward and back, of successive but non cumulative alterations and, to be frank, of approximations and loose terminology" (KCR 27). The comment is not mistaken in one respect: Kristeva does, indeed, purposely avoid a simple progression towards fixed definitions; but this avoidance is necessary since her work attempts to address aspects of the subjective and social 'experience with language' (Heidegger) that are impossible to isolate and define once and for all.

A more careful reading, however, reveals that Kristeva has in fact something specific in mind when she adopts the concept of 'poetic language', for instance in this early formulation: "The description of the functioning of poetic language (here this term refers to a function which could belong to the language of 'poetry' as well as to the language of prose) is today an integral – and perhaps

the most worrisome – part of linguistics in its effort to explain the mechanism of language.”¹⁵ This statement makes it immediately apparent that ‘poetic language’ as a conceptual category of sorts cannot be reduced to any particular form of ‘literary’ or ‘poetic’ activity, even if it is intimately related to it. As an elaboration of the reflections of the Russian Formalists, the notion has something to do with the process of reorganization or ‘infinitezation’ (Seme 175 & 178) of the logic (and rules) of representational and communicative language that can take place in a variety of linguistic practices, opening the text to a certain “pluridetermination of meaning.”¹⁶ Kristeva will later declare in an interview that her early thought was also a transposition of Jakobson’s idea of the ‘poetic’ as a kind of “reordering of everyday communication” by bringing together poetry and prose (Interviews 212). As Juliana De Nooy observes, “Kristeva tirelessly insists on the particularity of poetic language (Seme 255, 257, 264, 265, 274, 276), its specificity (Seme 190, 246-48, 264, 273-74), and its radical difference (Seme 188) from all other semiotic practices” (De Nooy, 1998, 185), and also on its distinction from the text as such. (De Nooy 186)

Poetic language is further said to involve a kind of ‘doubling’ (Seme 182 & 202) that resembles ‘dialectical logic’, albeit without the possibility of proper resolution. In this sense, poetic language is associated with Kristeva’s other significant, early notions, such as *ambiguity* (Seme 252), *productivity* (Seme 274), or *negativity* (Seme 247, 254-57, & 271-72). This notion maintains not only a

¹⁵ “La description du fonctionnement du langage poétique (ici ce terme désignera un fonctionnement qui peut être propre au langage de la ‘poésie’ aussi bien qu’à celui de la prose) est aujourd’hui une partie intégrante – peut-être la plus inquiétante – de la linguistique dans sa visée d’expliquer le mécanisme du langage” (Seme 176).

¹⁶ “[...] pluridetermination du sens” (Seme 184).

kind of ‘relation without relation’ with Hegel’s negativity, but also emerges at a point of almost absolute proximity to Blanchot’s neuter and Derrida’s *différance*, marking at once a negative (neither/nor) and an affirmative gesture (both/and).

“This type of poetic signified simultaneously does and does not refer back to a referent. It exists and does not exist; it is at once a being and a non-being.”¹⁷

Finally, poetic language constitutes *the* intertextual experience *par excellence*: “It is the point of intersection for many codes (at least two) which find themselves in a relation of negativity with respect to one another.”¹⁸ Once again, Kristeva’s aim is to emphasize the fact that while the ‘logic without logic’ of this intertextual, negative *and* affirmative movement, escapes proper conceptualization, it is never merely incomprehensible: “Being at once a grammatical object (observable) and an *operation* of semes in intertextual space, poetic meaning is located between the affirmation and the negation of this law. It is neither its illustration nor its deviation. Its logic is *other*, but analyzable, after the fact and for the subject between *yes* and *no*.”¹⁹ “Poetic experience has, once again, grasped the constant passage from sign to non-sign, from subject to non-subject, which poetic language is.”²⁰ These remarks make it clear why Kristeva asserts a few years later that when she speaks of poetic language she means “something other than language – a practice *for which any particular language is the margin*” (DL 25) and which

¹⁷ “Un tel signifié poétique à la fois renvoie et ne renvoie pas à un référent; il existe et n’existe pas, il est en même temps un être et un non-être” (Seme 253).

¹⁸ “Il est le lieu de croisement de plusieurs codes (au moins deux) qui se trouvent en relation de négativité l’un par rapport à l’autre” (Seme 255).

¹⁹ “Étant à la fois un objet grammatical (observable) et une *opération* de sèmes dans l’espace intertextuel, le sens poétique se place entre l’affirmation et la négation de cette loi; il n’est ni son illustration, ni sa déviation; sa logique est *autre*, mais analysable, après coup et pour le sujet entre ces *oui* et *non*” (Seme 262).

²⁰ “L’expérience poétique a, une fois de plus, saisi ce passage constant du signe au non-sign, du sujet au non-sujet, qu’est le langage poétique” (Seme 275).

embodies within itself the process of the dissolution and reconstitution of language and of social bonds.

Poetic language, in Kristeva's understanding, makes manifest the 'truth' of language (DL 24) as such: "[...] there is within poetic language (and therefore, although in a less pronounced manner, within any language) a *heterogeneousness* to meaning and signification [...]" (DL 133). Here Kristeva's theory assumes a rather Heideggerian character²¹ with echoes of Blanchot: poetic language bears witness to the enigmatic manner in which language at once constitutes the most uncanny dimension of subjective experience *and* the sole guarantee of the speaking being's fragile existence in the realm of meaning. The signifying subject and the signified 'object' alike turn out to be merely one of the limits of the poetic dimension of language, "certainly constitutive, but not all-encompassing" (DL 132). If Kristeva can assert that "poetry is a practice of the speaking subject" (DL 25) it is not in order to suggest that one can only become a subject if one becomes a poet. *Poiesis* as Kristeva understands it (BIS 206-7) is released from its merely aesthetic entrapment; it marks the innermost essence of what is called 'meaning', 'knowledge', 'truth', and, indeed, subjectivity itself insofar as it participates in language. It is always already the *scene of the other* (DL 80) constructed and preserved through a painstaking but necessary movement between sense and nonsense, body and culture, materiality and metaphysics, speech and silence, myself and another.

²¹ Kristeva herself admits at least once that in her theory of poetic language Heidegger "retains currency, *in spite of everything*, because of his attentiveness to language and 'poetic language' as an opening of beings; as an openness that is checked but nonetheless occurs [...]" (DL 25).

In Kristeva's view, opening language and meaning to its poetic dimension necessarily entails a profound transformation in the way in which one conceives of subjective, social, political, ethical or, indeed, religious experience. Conversely, the modern devaluation of this dimension through the instrumentalization, objectification, and commodification of language and meaning, with rationalism, techno-science, and capitalism assuming the role of the sole guardians of enlightened humanism, has played a significant role in bringing about the contemporary crisis of meaning, which is as much 'conceptual' as it is 'cultural' or 'subjective' in character. Hence Kristeva writes:

If it is true that the sciences of Man have used language as a level to breach the protective shield and the neuralgic locus of rationality, it is also true that this epistemological reinvestigation, the hallmark of our century, is accompanied by one of the most formidable attempts to *expand the limits of the signifiable*, that is, to expand the boundaries of human experience through the realignment of its most characteristic element, language. (Post 137)

This expansion of the limits of signification, however, also entails the realization of language itself as a limit that cannot be mastered, whether by science, rhetoric, or writing. In this regard the poetic word, "facing philosophy, knowledge, and the transcendental ego of all signification," bears witness to a new "venture" whose purpose is to challenge "all attempts to master the human situation, to master language by language [...]" (DL 145). Kristeva's concern here is not so much with the very attempt to stabilize meaning as with epistemological and political attempts to provide *one* meaning. In fact, Kristeva reserves a rather severe judgment for those contemporaries who, in her view, choose to immerse themselves in the kind of writing that results neither in 'literature' nor in

‘knowledge’. “Faced with this poetic language that defies knowledge, many of us are rather tempted to leave our shelter to deal literature only by miming its meanderings, rather than by positing it as an object of knowledge. We let ourselves be taken in by this mimeticism: fictional, para-philosophical, para-scientific writings” (DL 145). Kristeva’s critical discourse on intertextuality and poetic language is guided by her commitment to a mutually transformative translation *between* different signifying practices, rather than an erasure of their boundaries, in order to explore the possibilities inherent in language.

(RePL 2)

Beaujour’s criticism, legitimate in its concern, is erroneous in its assumptions: “It seems to me that ‘language in the sense of a static, dead letter, barren system of the veil’ is only Julia Kristeva’s bad dream: it suffices for her to wake from it in order to observe that the costermonger and the local fisherman are very voluble: they lisp, belch, make slips of the tongue, talk to themselves, make a dazzling use of shifters, talk twaddle [...]. As to the claim that the poetic text is the *only* form of language (*langage*), this is a belief thought to be superseded since the time of the Romantic myths about language” (KCR 26). Simply put, since Kristeva makes it very clear that poetic language inhabits every kind of language, her theory makes no simple distinction between ‘everyday speech’ and poetic language, and certainly never assumes that *all* language outside ‘poetry’ is static and barren. Be that as it may, the fact remains that lisping, belching, and tongue-slipping – like techno-scientific instrumentalizations of language – carry little ethical and political import unless they succeed in making a fundamental

link between the subjective questions of desire, suffering, ‘speaking body’, and the social questions of truth, meaning, or the law (DL 134). Beaujour’s comment neglects the fact that Kristeva’s thought concerns herself precisely with those practices that manage to accomplish this connection within an ongoing movement of language. “What is at stake is not just the survival of the social function of ‘art’, but also, beyond this cultural preoccupation, modern society’s preservation of signifying practices that [...] open up the closure of the *representamen* and the unary subject.” (RePL 190)

This concern remains at the heart of *Revolution of Poetic Language* and its politico-ethical explorations. In this regard the alternation between the terms ‘poetry’, ‘literature’, and ‘poetic language’ is fully justified, since Kristeva is discussing on the one hand ‘poetic language’ as a dimension of language and, on the other hand, avant-garde practices – ‘poetic’ as much as ‘literary’ – insofar as they embody the capacities of poetic language. But Kristeva’s complex study, often exhausting in its density and confusing in the correspondences it seeks to chart out between terms, concepts, or even entire theoretical models (Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Bakhtin, to name only the key ones), is also an ambitious, even impossible, attempt to bring together all of her previous theoretical developments in a more or less comprehensive manner. In the course of this extensive exercise, poetic language marks nothing less than Kristeva’s effort to subsume her concepts of productivity, ambivalence, negativity, and *chora* within a single movement that, operating at the core of language, parallels the logic of intertextuality on the level of the text, and at the same time defies proper conceptual reduction while

simultaneously enabling the conceptualization of the ‘linguistic’ processes that accompany both subjective and social development. In this sense, the notion of ‘poetic language’ may also be regarded as Kristeva’s final, theoretical *and* ethico-political attempt to move beyond Blanchot’s logic of the neuter and Derrida’s play of *différance* without rejecting the validity of their central insights, particularly the unavoidability of the experience of undecidability in language and of the irreducible heterogeneity of meaning. (DL 135)

2.2.3 Semiotic and Symbolic Modalities of Meaning

These considerations inform Kristeva’s emphasis on the interaction that plays itself out in poetic language between *semiotic* and *symbolic* modalities of meaning (RePL 23-24) in the extended sense of *signifiance*, described as the “unlimited and unbounded generating process, this unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language, toward, in and through the exchange system and its protagonists – the subject and his institutions” (RPL 17; see also Interviews 21). Kristeva defines ‘the semiotic’ (*le sémiotique*, in distinction to *la sémiotique*) in connection to its Greek origin as a “distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace, figuration” (RePL 25). As such, it is related to Derrida’s trace or the *gramme* (RePL 40), but it is also associated with instinctive drives understood as energy imprints, intonations, rhythms, or fissures *within* body and language – and hence with *chora* (# 1.4.2). ‘The symbolic’ (*le symbolique*), on the other hand, refers to meaning or signification (RePL 40) in their linguistic, discursive and social structuring, insofar as it emerges from the semiotic via the *thetic* phase (RePL 43), which

brings together the two edges of that fissure” (RePL 49). Kristeva’s aim is to consider the semiotic as “inseparable from a theory of the subject that takes into account the Freudian positing of the unconscious” (RePL 29) but that also inscribes its effects within the symbolic as social positioning or the socio-historical context (Interviews 185).

The problem is thus one of introducing the struggle of *signifiante* – its process – no longer just into ‘individual experience’ – where, in any case, it already is, since it is always destroying that experience – but also into the objective process of contemporary science, technology, and social relations. This is the stake that was first proposed by the [literary] texts of the late nineteenth century. (RePL 213)

In this scheme, the semiotic and the symbolic correspond to Kristeva’s earlier distinction between *genotext* and *phenotext* (# 1.4.4), and they can never be experienced in isolation; they are only limited conceptual designations for two *heterogeneous* aspects – not merely signified and signifier, but also, as it were, instinct and sign, or *sense* and *nonsense* – of a single process and, therefore, necessarily presuppose one another (RePL 65-66). “A complex array of nonlinguistic representations fosters the very practice of language: drive, sensation, prelanguage, rhythm, melody, and so on” (Interviews 268). “Thus perhaps the notion of the semiotic allows us to speak of the real without simply saying that it’s an emptiness or a blank” (Interviews 23). Neither the subject nor any signifying or social system can maintain itself as a practice and process without *both* modalities being constantly implied and put into play (RePL 24).

There is no practice that does not presuppose *symbolic* limits: the position of meaning, the signifying border of the process, *doxa*, the *thesis* of ‘being’, of ‘subject’ and of ‘object’. The symbolic (and language) is *thetic*: language is thesis par excellence. And yet, far from

being a point of origin (idealistic conception), this symbolic thesis is a rupture and a displacement of the semiotic process.²²

On the other hand, and at the same time, if there is no practice without *doxa* and without thesis, the latter would constitute simple repetitive systems without the heterogeneous contradiction of the semiotic which, through the cycle of its eruptions, displaces infinitely and indefinitely the thesis, the signifying and signifiable being; which means that it is the mechanism of renewal. The semiotic is the revolutionary factor of a practice that exists only on the condition of confronting its symbolic thesis (its meaning, its structure).²³

A serious consideration of these modalities constitutes nothing less than a fundamental reconsideration of 'the political'. (Pol 14)

In a sense, 'poetic language' is nothing more and nothing less than Kristeva's name for the mutual (dialogical) *translation* between the semiotic and the symbolic dimensions of language (KCR 5; see Interviews 212). By the same token, poetic language constitutes a perpetual translation between materiality and imagination, body and culture, the nameable and the unnamable, desire and knowledge – in a manner that both shatters and preserves *meaning* as a heterogeneous process (RePL 56 & 67). In some cases, again, this translation becomes severed or repressed (job application, instruction manual, rationalist or scientific discourse), while in others it is radically affirmed through transgression (RePL 67-69) and thus *revolutionary* (avant-garde literature and poetry, but also

²² "Il n'y a pas de pratique qui ne suppose la limite *symbolique*: la position du sens, le bord significatif du procès, la *doxa*, la *thèse* de l' 'être', du 'sujet' et de l' 'objet'. Le symbolique (et le langage) est théorique: le langage est la thèse par excellence. Pourtant, loin d'être une origine (conception idéaliste), cette thèse symbolique est une coupure et un déplacement du procès sémiotique" (Pol 14).

²³ "En revanche, et en même temps, si'il n'y a pas de pratique sans *doxa* et sans thèse, celles-ci seraient de simples systèmes répétitifs sans la contradiction hétérogène du sémiotique qui, par le cycle de ses irrptions, déplace infiniment et indéfiniment la thèse, l'être signifiable et significatif; ce qui veut dire qu'il est le mécanisme du renouvellement. Le sémiotique n'est le facteur révolutionnaire d'une pratique qu'à condition de s'affronter à sa thèse symbolique (au sens, à la structure)" (Pol 14-15).

art, music, and film). The entire logical problematic of the connection between the semiotic and the symbolic depends fundamentally on the mediation of both through poetic language, which gives meaning to both categories, while constituting neither the one nor the other. Without poetic language, the semiotic remains a meaningless, unmediated *physis*, while the symbolic entails nothing more than an abstract, logical formalism. At the same time poetic language enables Kristeva to emphasize her move beyond Blanchot's neuter and Derrida's *différance*, insofar as it does not constitute merely a linguistic category (DL 137) that resists metaphysical or logical appropriation. Rather, poetic language marks a dynamic, dialogical *process/trial* – rather than slippage and deferral, as in Derrida (De Nooy, 1998, 165) – between meaning and nonmeaning that explicitly emphasizes its simultaneously linguistic, literary, psychoanalytic, historical, ethical, and political dimensions. This movement remains on intimate terms with the body, instincts, and drives – with “a new reality [*un nouveau réel*]²⁴ corresponding to a new heterogeneous object” (RePL 181), distinct from the metaphysical but also poststructuralist understanding of heterogeneity as “that part of the objective, material outer world which could not be grasped by the various symbolizing structures the subject already has at his disposal [...]” (RePL 180). As such, poetic language as a notion remains practically meaningless without its fundamental connection to subjective development and the acquisition of language, and to questions concerning the preservation and transformation of both individual and social meaning and identity. In Kelly Oliver's words, “The

²⁴ Kristeva is here playing with Lacan's notion of the ‘real’ as that which is impossible to symbolize and which, she believes, also constitutes the core of Derrida's and Blanchot's understanding of meaning.

interdependence of the symbolic and semiotic elements of signification guarantees a relationship between language and life, signification and experience [...], body (*soma*) and soul (*psyche*)” (PK xv). By the same token, Blanchot’s neuter and Derrida’s *différance* become not so much displaced as subsumed within a more explicit emphasis on *mediation*, *translation*, and *dialogue*.

Above all, the notion of poetic language represents Kristeva’s most radical effort to address the crisis of meaning (Interviews 212) as *both* subjective *and* cultural. As the movement between the semiotic and the symbolic indicates, this crisis has to do as much with the body as with language, and with desire as much as with knowledge. “Sense as a trial and the speaking subject on trial articulate themselves precisely on the impetus of the interaction between these two modalities” (SpS 217) and, as the signifying practice that represents the most radical attempt to enables these modalities to cross each other, avant-garde literature brings “into play the speaking body’s complex relationship with society” (Interviews 97), marking a process of social transformation that entails both rupture and stability (Interviews 97). For Kristeva, all metalanguages or ideological discourses are, on the contrary, inherently preoccupied with ‘sense’ or meaning as identity, presence, closure (SpS 218); contrary to modern literature, they seek to accomplish within language a fullness without a void (Pol 215). This logic finds its most dangerous expression in certain kinds of political institutions and discourses: having replaced religious institutions and discourses, they attempt to establish the final Word by setting up a ‘sacred’ state in which “the One stands for the Many” (Lechte, 1990, 150). Parallel to this ‘sacred’ function of the state,

Kristeva regards the purpose of modern literature as always more than ‘literary’, ‘linguistic’, ‘conceptual’ or even ‘political’ in nature; in a sense, literary practice today assumes within itself the ‘religious’ concern with individual and socio-historical ‘salvation’ – a role religion, in Kristeva’s view, is no longer able to fulfill adequately – beyond religious and political reliance on transcendental signifiers and theological dogmatisms. The issue that needs to be addressed at this point is: considering the centrality of the problem of interpretation and the question of the limits of language, to what extent does Kristeva’s literary theory succeed at addressing the nature of the relationship between literary and religious language in contemporary Western culture?

2.2.4 Modern Literature and the Crisis of Religion

To some extent, Kristeva’s early references to religion may be regarded as an attempt to continue Maurice Blanchot’s displacement of the theologically grounded notion of ‘the book’ as a structurally closed *product* in favor of a new practice of ‘writing’, regarded as an ongoing movement of *productivity* without fixed origin or destination (#1.4.1). Yet, a considerable difference of tone can be detected in the manner in which the two authors speak of this transition. For Blanchot, the essential connection between ‘theological’ and ‘literary’ developments in Western culture points to the immense complexity involved in any attempt to ‘displace’ metaphysics and theology through ‘literary’ writing:

It is no longer here simply a matter of raising our hand against Being or decreeing the death of God, but of breaking with what has always, in all laws and in all works, in this world and in every other, been our guarantee, our exigency, and our responsibility [...]. [W]e will [thus] try to come to a sense of another form of speech and another kind of relation

wherein the Other, the presence of the other, would return us neither to ourselves nor to the One. (InC 67)

While Kristeva would not disagree with Blanchot's statement, her literary theory is characterized by a more determined conviction that avant-garde literature in its explorations of the poetic dimensions of language marks the final dissolution of the monotheistic and theological worldview. This dissolution, according to Kristeva, has already begun when 'the sacred book' found its way into print and paved way for the development of the 'novel' (TeR 139), leading to a certain displacement of religious language by literary practice. Kristeva is as aware as Blanchot that, insofar as questions of language and its limits are concerned, a peculiar affinity exists between literary and religious discourse. But while Blanchot's thought on the neuter (# 1.2.4) explores that affinity without seeking a hasty resolution, Kristeva's critique leads her in the direction of a rather uneven effort to establish something like an essential antagonism between literary and religious practice. In this way, the 'atheological' logic of Blanchot's thought on religion becomes more explicitly 'atheistic' in Kristeva's theory of the text. The 'ruin' of classical poetics announces a kind of 'poetics of religious ruin'²⁵ grounded in the dissolution of religion's innermost 'object' (God), which results in a number of impasses Kristeva will struggle to address throughout her intellectual endeavors.

²⁵ In "The Ruin of a Poetics" (1973), Kristeva pays tribute to Bakhtin's contribution to the dissolution of classical poetics (Ruin 103 & 116), while simultaneously criticizing him for carrying on "the unrecognized influence of Christianity in a humanist terminology" (Ruin 106; see also 116). Consequently, she regards her work as a continuation of Bakhtin's project and, indeed, as an attempt to complete the displacement of Christianity's metaphysical and institutional domination in Western culture. "The remark of old Karamazov, 'God is dead, everything is allowed', seems to have been decoded as what it becomes if one goes just a step further towards what he refrains from saying, 'God is dead, everything is inter-diction'" (Ruin 115).

Although Kristeva's discussions of religion and theology remain somewhat scattered and fragmentary between the late 1960s and late 1970s, they nonetheless do not fail to underline the depth of her recognition that the question of 'religion' is inscribed at the very core of her concerns with poetic language, text, and literature. Early on in her work, she refers to the literary text as a signifying practice that has historically been, on the one hand, censored through its relegation to the 'sacred', 'beautiful', or 'irrational' and, on the other hand, ideologically recuperated via its subordination to religion, aesthetics, and psychiatry (Seme 7). Kristeva's work assumes, from the very beginning, a task that will inform much of her work: namely, to undermine the allegedly self-evident nature and dominance of these three conceptual and institutional categories in Western discourse. In this manner, religion – specifically Judeo-Christian monotheism and dogmatism – emerges in her thought not only in its intimate connection to ideology (Seme 23) but also insofar as it entails the most absolute embodiment of monological discourse, as the very manifestation of ideology as such: one God, one Logos, one Truth – all embodied in a single metaphysical system, eternally fixed around a transcendental Signifier and impervious to any otherness. Christian theology and its institutional organization thus reflects an extensive effort – at the very heart of Western discourse – to repress the productivity, negativity, and ambiguity inherent in its signifying practice (DL 55) and to transpose this repression onto every other signifying practice. The concept of the 'Sacred Book' – descending from a single Author, perfectly self-enclosed, eternally complete in its 'content' or 'message', and

subject neither to interpretation nor to the uncertainties of language – represents for Kristeva this ideal in its attempt to fix writing and escape the multiplication of meaning entailed in it.

In “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” (1969) Kristeva draws on Bakhtin’s insights in order to establish an essential connection between religious language and ‘prohibition’ on the one hand, and poetic language and ‘transgression’ on the other. This distinction continues to reappear in Kristeva’s thought under a variety of guises: ‘God’, ‘Law’, ‘Definition’, thought merely as variations of the same principle or imperative (DL 70), embodied in a dogmatic discourse that assimilates everything into itself without remainder. All things correspond absolutely; theological dogmatism and representational or ‘realist’ narrative follow a very similar logic: “With Bakhtin, who assimilates narrative discourse into epic discourse, narrative is a prohibition, a *monologism*, a subordination of the code to 1, to God. Hence, the epic is religious and theological; all ‘realist’ narrative obeying 0-1 logic is dogmatic. The realist novel, which Bakhtin calls monological (Tolstoy), tends to evolve within this space” (DL 70). Kristeva is convinced that “The only linguistic practice to ‘escape’ this prohibition is poetic discourse.” (DL 70)

It is crucial to emphasize that Kristeva is not settling for a simple opposition between religious irrationalism and enlightened rationalism; within her scheme ‘religion’ is coextensive with the kind of positivist scientism that “knows neither negativity as *poetry* nor objectivity as *movement*” (DL 106). Monologism operates as much at the heart of scientific discourse as it does at the heart of

theological dogma and representational narrative; in each case, “the subject both assumes and submits to the rule of 1 (God). The dialogue inherent in all discourse is smothered by a *prohibition*, a censorship, such that this discourse refuses to turn back upon itself, to enter into dialogue with itself” (DL 76-77). The ‘carnavalesque’ logic of dialogical discourse that Kristeva opposes to monological discourse does not constitute merely a rejection of ‘prohibition’, but rather its dynamic negativization. “Dialogism is not ‘freedom to say everything,’ it is a *dramatic* ‘banter’ (Lautrémont), an *other* imperative than that of 0” (DL 71). Dialogism does not oppose truth, morality, or the act of naming; it preserves and explores them within the movement of dialogue and prevents them from solidifying into ready-made ‘facts’, graspable once and for all. This concern is inscribed within Kristeva’s seemingly anti-religious assertion according to which the logic of the carnival inherent in the writings of Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, Sade, Balzac, Lautréamont, Dostoievski, Joyce, or Kafka, “challenges God, authority, and social law [...]. Its history is the history of the struggle against Christianity and its representation” through “a consecration of ambivalence and of ‘vice’” within language. (DL 79-80)

Kristeva’s early attempts to make sense of the way in which the complex development of the notion of ‘the book’ mirrors an intimate relation between religion and literature are not merely antagonistic toward Christianity; they rather remain within the tensions that marks Christian thought and writing. Her awareness of this tension becomes apparent, for instance, in the following discussion:

It is Christianity that will reign over the cult of the book [...] [and] Christ seems to be the only God represented with a volume. As a religion of sacred books, Christianity has battled Neo-Platonism and, in general, the idealism of antiquity upon the field of writing as a sign expressive of truth, Faith, and the Divine Word. [...] God, Speech and Writing are joined at the heart of Christianity: for the entire Christian culture the book will be the site of authoritative discourse, the Word of the Father. This is the origin of the two metaphors of the book which would prevail at the beginning of the Middle Ages: writing as WOUND (death), writing as WORK (a creative, generative act).²⁶

Kristeva's 'historical' concern in this context anticipates her later psychoanalytic studies, insofar as its aim is to understand the multidimensionality of the Christian tradition's engagement with the text; the ambiguous, complex consequences of that engagement, perhaps even the manner in which its sacralization of writing laid ground for its own desacralization (TeR 145) as well as for the eventual development of modern literary, poetic, and critical practice. Similarly, in "From Symbol to Sign" (1967), Kristeva comments on the replacement of "The serenity of the symbol [...] by the strained ambivalence of the *sign's* connection" (KrR 66) in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which established the theme of *dialogue* – particularly the dialogue between God and the human soul – as anticipation of the dialogical dimensions of the modern novel. In "Word, Dialogue, and Novel", her explorations of the carnivalesque structure of ancient Menippean discourse allude to its great influence on Christian and Byzantine literature (DL 82), only subsequently repressed by the theological monologism of the Christian text on the

²⁶ "[...] c'est le christianisme qui fera régner le culte du livre [...] [et] le Christ semble être le seul Dieu représenté avec un volume. Religion des livres sacrés, le christianisme a rencontré le néo-platonisme et en général l'idéalisme de l'antiquité sur le terrain de l'écriture comme signe expressif de la vérité, de la Foi, de la Parole Divine. [...] Dieu, Parole et Écriture se joignent au sein du christianisme: pour toute la culture chrétienne le livre sera le lieu du discours autoritaire, du Dire du Père. De là les deux métaphores du livre que le début du moyen âge connaîtra: l'écriture comme BLESSURE (mort), l'écriture comme LABEUR (acte fécondateur, générateur)" (TeR 142-43).

one hand, and the bourgeois text on the other (DL 85). If, within this scheme, modern literature becomes possible only insofar as it coincides with the displacement of 'God' (DL 85), much more is at stake in this displacement than a 'liberation' from Judeo-Christian 'illusions' and 'superstitions', because it also involves a fundamental reconsideration of the very 'nature' and limits of language, thought, meaning and subjectivity. Kristeva's powerful early pronouncement is as theological as it is linguistic in its implications: "When the most solid guarantee of our identity – syntax – is revealed as a limit, the entire history of the Western subject and his relationship to his enunciation has come to an end." (DL 178)

2.2.4.1 Writing and the Limit

The motif of 'limit' makes an appearance in two important essays from the early 1970s, in a manner that brings the increasing tension between literary and religious language in Kristeva's theory into its potentially most intimate proximity to aspects of Blanchot's atheology. In "How Does One Speak to Literature" (1971), Kristeva approvingly cites Barthes's observation, in his *Critical Essays*, concerning literary writing's recognition that meaning marks, at once, a fundamental limit and a fundamental inexhaustibility. Hence, exploring the *process* of meaning in its *finality* rather than in its *finalization*, literary practice "speaks the place [or locus] of meaning but does not name it" (DL 97). Constituting an *impossible* object of knowledge (DL 98), literature is capable of remaining *within* the impossibility of meaning – of preserving the impossible as impossible without giving up on the infinite task of naming and inscribing that

impossibility (DL 113; # 2.1.2). In opposition to this, theological language, as Kristeva occasionally suggests, seeks to make the impossible *possible* as One Meaning (DL 112), to grasp it as possible *for it*, even when it declares ‘God’ to be radically transcendent, *ungraspable in Himself*. In this sense, modern literature succeeds where religion fails: face to face with a certain ‘nothing’ which is nonetheless ‘real’, it explores that “‘unnamable’ interplay of meaning and jouissance [...] that comes across less as ‘aesthetic effect’ than as something one used to situate close to the ‘sacred’” (DL 148) without, for that matter, allowing itself to become a form of ‘aesthetic religion’. (DL 111; see # 2.2.2)

2.2.4.2 ‘Polylogical’ Writing

In “The Novel as Polylogue” (1974) Kristeva discusses, in connection to Philippe Sollers’s *H* (1973), a “language, a subject within language, [that] seeks itself” (DL 160) at a point of absolute proximity to a truth that nonetheless remains impossible. Such a search takes up a certain religious, Augustinian imperative, while avoiding a theological or even mystical sense of accomplishment: “This is not mysticism saying, ‘I am the truth’. [...] For this polylogical ‘I’ *speaks* of a *before*: before logic, before language, before being. A *before* that isn’t even unconscious; a ‘before’ all ‘before-unconsciousness’ [...]” (DL 188). Kristeva elaborates:

A floating signifier? A senseless flow that produces its own significance [...]. Thus impersonal, in short, speaking (in) the name of no one – not even in its (own) ‘proper name’, but *saying what is heard*: ‘he shall not speak on his own but everything he hears he shall say’ (p. 181 [Sollers’s *H*]). This is the Augustinian formula referring to the ‘holy spirit’ in *De Trinitate*. But, within this register, to what can ‘in the name of’ refer?

An excess in the function of the Father or of the Son; the ideal proceedings against the One and against Naming itself? (DL 190)

Soller's *H* thus presents a "heterogeneous infinity" that "returns and threatens all nominal existence" (DL 190), particularly the linguistic finitude of the 'proper Name' to which religious language remains so attached. Beyond theological transcendence, it finds another support by inscribing its rhythms, intonations, and sensations "into the place of a pure signifier" (DL 195), into the non-sanctified fullness and emptiness of meaning. "Otherwise, we revert back to notions of God, the *exiled* negative and mythical fusion." (DL 197)

The 'death of God' turns out to be a premature proposition because "the *paternal function* – insasmuch as it is a symbolic function, a guarantee of nomination, symbolization, and superegoistic (even pulverizable) resurgences – persists eternally" (DL 200). At the intersection of a subjective displacement and a political, historical process, the task of 'polylogical' writing is to avoid the seemingly contrary, but in fact always "solidary", temptations of insanity and dogmatism (DL 204). Kristeva's analysis recognizes at this point the historical link between religion and revolution, though only to reject its currency: "We are now faced with a monumental requirement. We must transform the subject in his relationship to language, to the symbolic, to unity, and to history. Until recently, this kind of revolution took the form of religion [...]" (DL 204). Be that as it may, the tone of Kristeva's closing remarks points in the direction of her later psychoanalytic attempts to traverse religious discourse without abandoning its 'truth':

H also listens to *the time of Christianity*, perhaps more closely than anyone today, in order to grasp the truth of monotheism that it sets forth: namely, that neither subject nor history can exist without a confrontation between challenging process (semiotics, production, class struggle) and unity (symbolic, thetic, phallic, paternal, of the state). *H* does this with the aim of leading us through and beyond Christianity [...]. (DL 204)

Transcendence – “[d]ivine, family oriented, humanitarian (the list could go on forever)” – is necessary after all. It constitutes perhaps another name for *transference*, it saves the subject by offering a “symbolic elsewhere” and establishing “a sheltered exile” (DL 206). Without such a subject, revolutions can only result in collective psychosis or, indeed, dogmatism.

2.2.5 (Religious) Prohibition and (Poetic) Revolution

Kristeva unfortunately fails to elaborate these motifs – and therefore to address the tensions between religion and literature present in her early critique – in a more *productive* manner in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (French 1974), despite the fact that her theory of poetic language offers a substantial opportunity to do so. This opportunity occurs already in Kristeva’s “Prolegomenon”, in which she refers to the religious dimension of the crisis of signifying structures that has emerged in Western societies: modern literature, as a ‘shattering’ that attests to this crisis, “can display the productive basis of subjective and ideological signifying formations – a foundation that primitive societies call ‘sacred’ and modernity has rejected as ‘schizophrenia’” (RePL 16). Thus, “Magic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and the ‘incomprehensible’ poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourses and attest to what it represses: the *process* that exceeds the subject and his communicative structures” (RePL

16). Kristeva's observation reveals that far from being antagonistic to religion, her study of poetic language places certain kinds of religious practices and discourses on the side of 'dialogism', the 'carnival', 'avant-garde writing', 'negativity', or 'ambiguity'. In this sense, her study demands an extensive exploration of these practices and discourses, particularly in their capacity to both displace and emphasize the linguistic and conceptual boundaries of Western discourse; hence in their critical or 'revolutionary' potential.

Kristeva's discussion reinforces the fact that her critique of religion is aimed predominantly against the metaphysical, transcendental, and dogmatic presumptions of monotheism. This critique is inseparable from her critique of the metaphysical, rationalist, and dogmatic presumptions of science (RePL 58). In both instances, the necessity of the 'thetic phase', which preserves the possibility of knowledge and truth, is incorporated into an absolute, tautological, self-sufficient synthesis denying the necessity of the movement that underlies it. "We maintain therefore that science and theological dogma are doxic. By repressing the *production* of doxy, they make the thetic a belief from which the question of truth departs; but the path thus programmed is circular and merely returns to is thetic point of departure" (RePL 59). Poetic language, on the other hand, releases the productive movement repressed within the ideological 'posturing' of theological and scientific dogma. As such, poetic language

question[s] the very principle of the ideological because [it] unfold[s] the *unicity* (the precondition for meaning and signification) and prevent[s] its theologization. As the place of production for a subject who transgresses the thetic by using it as a necessary boundary – but not as an absolute or as an origin – poetic language and the mimesis from which it is inseparable, are profoundly a-theological. They are not critics of

theology but rather the enemy within and without, recognizing both its necessity and its pretensions. (RePL 61)

Following these preliminary remarks Kristeva's text proceeds to set up two closely intertwined and highly problematic propositions that will guide the remaining part of her study: in the first place, the association between religion and prohibition becomes radicalized through the positing of religious logic as constituting, at bottom, a logic of 'sacrifice' for which it is unable to compensate the subject; in the second place, and by the same token, religion and literature emerge on two opposite sides of poetic language, and modern literature becomes fundamentally coextensive with the 'death of God' Kristeva associates with the dissolution of formal religious discourses and institutions.

Kristeva's double proposition is heavily indebted to Freud – especially *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) – and similarly ridden with questionable assumptions. Religion sets up the thetic position, and with it the social contract, in an attempt to curb the violence of the presymbolic, semiotic *chora*, associated with the death drive and 'murder'.²⁷ In the context of this logic, religious sacrifice is coextensive with the establishment of the necessary symbolic structure as well as with the limit of this structure; as such, "it reproduces both the foundation of that code and what it represses" (RePL 78).

"The sacred – sacrifice – which is found in every society, is, then, a theologization

²⁷ RePL 70. – Kristeva's logic here alludes to Freud's pseudo-fictional account of the act of primordial parricide by a band of brothers, which led to the establishment of social order. Variations of this account appear throughout Kristeva's analyses of religion, especially in the 1970s: "We are all familiar with that Freudian thesis as to the murder of the father and, more specifically, with the one he develops in *Moses and Monotheism*: in connection with Judaic religion the archaic father and master of the primeval horde is killed by the conspiring sons who, later seized with a sense of guilt for an act that was up restoring paternal authority, no longer as an arbitrary power but as a right; thus renouncing the possession of all women in their turn, they establish at one stroke the sacred, exogamy, and society" (PoH 56).

of the thetic, itself structurally indispensable to the positing of language. This theologization takes on different forms depending on the degree of development of the society's productive forces" (RePL 78). The problem, as far as Kristeva is concerned, has to do with the fact that sacrifice sets up a partially effective, but inevitably oppressive combination, because it brings together a certain symbolic exclusion with a certain theological fetishization of the thetic. Art and literature accompany this religious logic. Yet, through their "semiotization of the symbolic" (RePL 79) they also enable the excluded violence of drives and desire to move *across* the thetic boundary (RePL 70) without denying it, thus bringing about its ongoing reconfiguration, which is also a reconfiguration of social and subjective experience. Putting into play their poetic resources, modern art, literature, poetry, and music in particular are capable of providing a socially and subjectively beneficial and revolutionary alternative to the logic of theological sacrifice.

We thus find sacrifice and art, face to face, representing the two aspects of the thetic function: the prohibition of *jouissance* by language and the introduction of *jouissance* into and through language. Religion seizes this first aspect, necessary to the institution of the symbolic order. First myth and then science seek to justify it by elaborating a complex system of relations and mediations, even though the very fact that the later are produced, vary, and change, refutes their claim that language prohibits *jouissance*. On the other hand, poetry, music, dance, theatre – 'art' – point *at once* to a pole opposite that of religious prohibition. One may say, in this sense, that they know more about it than it does. (RePL 80)

In this scheme, Kristeva's critique tends to subsume all forms of religious practice under the category of a certain symbolic failure, due either to its rationalist/absolutist (Christianity) or irrationalist and psychotic (pagan rites) tendencies. In the former case, Kristeva finds the very embodiment of idealism as

ideology, whether theological (Church as the Ideal) or secular (State as the Ideal): “[...] it posits division, movement, and process, but in the same move dismisses them in the name of a higher metaphysical and repressive truth, one that is differentiated but solely within the confines of its unity [...]” (RePL 135). In the latter case, the symbolic process is rejected in favor of arbitrary rituals and cults. In either case, paranoia and violence correspond quite precisely to the intensity of symbolic repression *or* rejection. All things considered, religion turns out in this context to be not only repressive but quite unnecessary. Kristeva believes that its beneficial dimension is be inscribed at the very heart of those types of avant-garde artistic and literary practice which neither theologize nor reject the thetic event, but rather thread the fine line between repressive fetishism and the irruption of delirious violence, thus constituting “neither intransgressable and guilt-producing divine fiat nor ‘romantic’ folly, pure madness, surrealist automatism, or pagan pluralism. Instead we see the condition of the subject of significance as a heterogeneous contradiction between two irreconcilable elements – separate but inseparable from the *process* in which they assume asymmetrical functions” (RePL 82). Kristeva associates the emergence of this practice with such literary names as Nerval, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Joyce, Bataille, Kafka, or Artaud. Their writings embody a practice of the text that revolves around a void in meaning that cannot be theologized in any manner, positive or negative. Such a void resembles the no-place of *chora*, appropriated, in one way or another, by many religious discourses. “As the text constructed itself with respect to an empty place (‘Nothing shall have taken place except the place,’ writes Mallarmé in A

Throw of the Dice), it in turn comes to be the empty site of a process in which its readers become involved.” (RePL 210)

At this point in Kristeva’s analysis it becomes apparent why she is reluctant, for better or worse, to assume the ‘atheological’ ambivalence that characterizes many of Blanchot’s – and later, Derrida’s – writings. While her argument is explicit in its assertion that any literary writing which does not *pass through* ‘religious’ concerns remains partially ineffective in its aims and lacking in substance, she remains weary of the possibility of a ‘new religion’ (RePL 186) under a different, pseudo-theological or spiritualist guise, provided this new guise maintains an allegiance to a ‘poetic truth’ that purports to defy traditional, onto-theological logic and the religious institutions constructed around it. This weariness is at work in the following observation:

Having objectively rejected Christianity (whose rites, for centuries, had absorbed the Western – unitary – subject’s nostalgia for contradiction), the Western petty bourgeoisie, in barely secret societies, gave itself over to a reborn occultism that was to shelter poetic ‘experiences’ as well. The Symbolists, Wagnerians, Parnassians, and Mallarméans, up through the Surrealists and their current survivors, were to become the hesitant and stray defenders of a certain ‘truth’ about the subject that the dominant ideologies could no longer master and that religions [...] had sealed up. (RePL 211)

The new ‘occultism’, poetic as well as intellectual and scientific, tends to withdraw, according to Kristeva, into the kind of celebration of ‘subjective’ or ‘humanitarian’ experience that in fact feeds the dominant ideology as its subversive and negative but ultimately obliged companion. Whether ‘atheological’ or ‘negative theological’, the unrepresentability evoked by these discourses remain detached from the essential task of a transformation of meaning

that assumes a fundamentally political and ethical character. The avant-garde text fulfills this ‘revolutionary’ role insofar as it moves beyond ideological discourses grounded in ever-new and ever-unrepresentable, transcendental ideals and – at the limits of language, but in the name of language (Pol 20) – commits itself to ethical *practice* through conceptual, material, and social realignment. As Kristeva puts it in her closing statement, “The ethical cannot be stated, instead it is practiced to the point of loss, and the text is one of the most accomplished examples of such a practice.” (RePL 234)

2.2.6 The ‘Poetics of Religious Ruin’

The conclusion of *Revolution in Poetic Language* leaves a number of issues unresolved and, indeed, rather unclear. In particular, Kristeva fails to adequately elaborate why certain kinds of religious language – for instance those that participate in the destabilization of the metaphysics of presence and its epistemological and theological presumptions – cannot embody ‘revolutionary potential’ on a social, ethical, and political level. Kristeva’s scattered references to religion and literature in several short texts that followed *Revolution in Poetics Language* (French 1974) continue, similarly, to affirm a clear distinction between religious and poetic language. In rare instances, Kristeva refers to poetic language in a manner that closely resembles Blanchot’s discussions of literary and prophetic speech and Derrida’s later allusions to the ‘messianic’ dimensions of deconstruction. “Poetic discourse measures rhythm against the meaning of language structure and is thus always eluded by meaning in the present while continually postponing it to an impossible time-to-come” (DL 33). Be that as it

may, Kristeva remains determined to leave no doubt that her theory of poetic language in which modern literature is “the ‘other’ of theological discourse” (Ruin 115) constitutes a kind of ‘poetics of religious ruin’. Two passages found in “From One Identity to an Other” (1975) explicitly follow the path of this determination in a manner that retains most of the central inconsistencies of Kristeva’s argument in *Revolution in Poetic Language*:

Meaning, identified either within the unity or the multiplicity of subject, structure, or theory, necessarily guarantees a certain transcendence, if not a theology; this is precisely why all human knowledge, whether it be that of an individual subject or of a meaning structure, retains religion as its blind boundaries, or at least, as an internal limit, and at best, can just barely ‘explain and validate religious sentiment’ [Lévi-Strauss] [...]. (DL 124)

‘[P]oetic language’ [...], through the particularity of its signifying operations, is an unsettling process – when not an outright destruction – of the identity of meaning and speaking subject,²⁸ and consequently, of transcendence or, by derivation, of ‘religious sensibility’. On that account, it accompanies crises within social structures and institutions – the moment of their mutation, evolution, revolution, or disarray. For if mutation within language and institutions finds its code through this signifying practice and its questionable subject in process that constitutes poetic language, then that practice and subject are walking a precarious tightrope. (DL 124-25)

The question of the role of religion in contemporary Western culture remains all the more urgent in light of Kristeva’s concern with the nihilistic replacement of religious institutions with technocratic and totalitarian politics and with the inability of liberal discourses and institutions to address this replacement and the ‘repression’ that underlies it. Such concern is detectable already in “Politique de la littérature” (1973): “Fascism is the return of the repressed in

²⁸ According to the translators’ explanation, “Kristeva’s French phrase is *mise en procès*, which, like *le sujet en procès*, refers to an important, recurring concept – that of a constantly changing subject whose identity is open to question” (DL 147).

religious or political monologism. This return cannot be stopped, as bourgeois liberalism naively intends, or as ‘communist’ dogmatism forces itself to do, even as it allows itself to be contaminated by it. The problem is to make this ‘repressed’ of monologism speak [...].”²⁹ This nihilistic development is additionally reinforced by what Kristeva sees as the erosion of traditional, religious moral discourses, which leaves a gap that reveals “the lack of languages with which to speak of the impossibility of the risk involved” (Post 138) in the kind of revolution *and* crisis of meaning that Kristeva envisions. Her awareness of the “risk” involved in this enterprise remains unapologetically on the side of atheism; avant-garde literary practice – the *other* language emerging from the ashes of religious ruins – serves as the most determined, and perhaps the *only* truly determined, opponent of political nihilism (SpS 220): “Never before in the history of humanity has this exploration of the limits of meaning taken place in such an unprotected manner, and by this I mean without religious, mystical, or any other justification” (Post 141). By the end of the 1970s, Kristeva becomes more conscious of the fact that she may have underestimated the social and subjective complexity of the ‘religious dimension’ of the crisis of representation, and she acknowledges that, to some extent, this crisis has always been inscribed at the very heart of religious language, which often echoes the “impossibilities of transcendental symbolics” in “the relationship of man to meaning” (DL 140). Nevertheless, Kristeva continues to seek an experience of ‘non-meaning’ above

²⁹ “Le fascisme est le retour du refoulé dans le monologisme religieux ou politique. On ne peut pas empêcher ce retour, comme le veut naïvement le libéralisme bourgeois, ou comme s’efforce de le faire, en se laissant contaminer, le dogmatisme ‘communiste’. Le problème est de faire parler ce refoulé du monologisme [...].” (Pol 17).

and beyond any form of religious ‘transcendence’, ‘negative’ or otherwise: “What is unrepresentability? That which, through language, is part of no particular language: the horrible, the abject. [...] This is the modern, and I mean nontranscendent, variation of the truth.” (Post 141)

Kristeva develops this theme in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (French 1980), a work that is of particular significance insofar as it marks a noticeable transition in Kristeva’s thought, with psychoanalysis assuming, for the first time, precedence over semiotic, literary, and political questions.

2.2.7 Religion and the Literature of Abjection

Powers of Horror defines the ‘abject’ in terms that are simultaneously linguistic, psychological, and empirical and that, at every turn, appear insufficient and call for yet another formulation: “The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it [...] an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire” (PoH 1). If it resembles an ‘object’, the abject does so only to the extent that it manifests itself in a fundamental opposition to one’s subjectivity; unlike an object that operates within the context of desire and meaning, the abject constitutes that which “is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (PoH 2). In a sense, the abject may be regarded as the impossible of thought, the unthinkable as such. Yet this formulation must be immediately qualified: in spite of its unthinkability, the abject can manifest itself as an undeniable, disturbing, corporeal ‘thing’ – one that nevertheless cannot be fully assimilated or incorporated into any symbolic structure, because it is the very limit of that structure, and results in the experience

of abjection on the part of the subject and his/her community, since their identity can only be constructed around its exclusion, “what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.” (PH 3)

The most basic forms of the abject include bodily waste, excretions, expulsions: “There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border” (PoH 3), which announces “the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (PoH 10). In Kristeva’s scheme, the decomposing cadaver represents the abject in its absolute purity, beyond reason and faith alike: “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (PoH 4). Even so, Kristeva’s logic repeats the logic encountered in her earlier discussion, in which a primal exclusion/repression is as necessary to the subject and to the symbolic order as it can be problematic: “The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (PoH 5). The abject as such is the most immediate reminder of the inherent fragility of the ‘symbolic function’ and of the immense struggle involved in maintaining it as a defense against psychological and social collapse.

Simply put, *Powers of Horror* constitutes a psychoanalytic and anthropological study of the manner in which Western religious discourses

(Judaism and Christianity, to be precise) and modern literature – two kinds of signifying practices that, in Kristeva's view, remain closest to the unsignifiable core of subjectivity and sociality – have been able (or unable) to respond to or *sublimate* abjection as the radical, ambiguous, and unstable otherness haunting civilization: as the *crisis* that can be neither dismissed nor resolved fully, but that must be assumed within symbolic production. Kristeva, once again, is looking for a language capable of mediating between two extremes: an oppressive and somewhat arbitrary manifestation of the logic of the One in "Religion, Morality, Law" (PoH 16) on the one hand, and the collapse of the symbolic order on the other. Such a task is all the more urgent since Western culture finds itself at a particularly fragile, transitional phase of its historical development. Kristeva's account here echoes the already familiar logic of sacrifice (PoH 56), developed along a slightly different path and with the help of new terminology. All religions, according to this account, emerge in response to abjection and are accompanied by it; as such, they provide the original attempt at a symbolic organization of the subject and the social and natural environment. This attempt is first encountered in pagan rites of defilement and pollution, and in the respective exclusions of substances involved in the positing of the 'sacred':

Abjection persists as *exclusion* or taboo (dietary or other) in monotheistic religions, Judaism in particular, but drifts over to more 'secondary' forms such as *transgression* (of the Law) within the same monotheistic economy. It finally encounters, with Christian sin, a dialectic elaboration, as it becomes integrated in the Christian Word as a threatening otherness – but always nameable, always totalizable. (PoH 17)

At this point, the intimacy between religion and literature appears more explicit and more problematic than ever before in Kristeva's thought. If the history of religions is essentially the history of religious attempts to 'purify the abject', this history, in Kristeva's account, has encountered the final limit of its capacities in the contemporary West. Modern literature emerges in order to both affirm and surpass this limit, "on the far and near side of religion. [...] Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions" (PoH 17). Passing through religion and its no longer effective language, modern literature "amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn" (PoH 18); by rupturing and simultaneously and reconstituting language, it brings the experience of abjection within the scope of the 'speakable' and the 'thinkable'.

Rather than simply taking the place of religion, avant-garde writing bears witness to its impossibility (PoH 16): it lets religious language resonate within literary language only to bring into focus the emptiness and insufficiency of its words, its incapacity to address abjection's modern face, its ever new manifestations through death, horror, and destruction. Only in this sense can literature be considered "a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred, at the limits of social and subjective identity" (PoH 25). What makes *Powers of Horror* a peculiar text is the fact that, despite her continuing conviction concerning the dissolution of religious structures in the West, Kristeva's

engagement with religion becomes intensified here. The reason behind this paradox – also one of the main reasons behind Kristeva's turn to psychoanalysis in this text – can be found in her growing awareness that religious logic persists on the *psychological* level, individual as well as collective. Kristeva considers this persistence as structurally and historically inevitable, precisely due to her belief that despite its present ineffectiveness religious logic is inscribed into the very fabric of cultural formation: the 'original experience' which triggered the religious beginnings of this formation also constitutes the 'original experience' of every subject and is hence a universal phenomenon (PoH 68). Kristeva's understanding of this 'original experience' acquires a new dimension in this text: the Freudian account of the murder of the archaic father must be supplemented with a reflection on the desire for incest and its link to the archaic experience of a loving but threatening maternal bond.

Could the sacred be, whatever its variants, a two-sided formation? One aspect founded by murder and the social bond made up of murder's guilt-ridden atonement, with all the projective mechanisms and obsessive rituals that accompany it, and another aspect, like a lining, more secret still and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward fragility – both threatening and fusional – of the archaic dyad, toward the non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion? (PoH 57-58)

Kristeva suggests that death and incest, guilt and dread, socialization and lack of proper differentiation constitute the double logic (masculine and feminine) of religious taboos, and by extension of social structures. Henceforth, religious purity rites constructed around defilement, bodily pollution, food taboos, sexual

impurity, and sin³⁰ and the experience of abjection that accompanies them are regarded as the most basic response to this double threat of paternal castration or prohibition and of the dissolution of identity associated with the desire for, and fear of, the maternal bond. “Poetic language would then be, contrary to murder and the univocity of verbal message, a reconciliation with what murder as well as names were separated from. It would be an attempt to symbolize the ‘beginning’, an attempt to name the other facet of taboo: pleasure, pain.” (PoH 60)

Beyond Freudian reductionism, Kristeva’s account plays an important role in her growing sensitivity to the frailty of language and meaning. This can be seen in the quite explicit manner in which the analysis in *Powers of Horror* shifts away from the prior texts’ focus on the disruptive potential of literature and becomes attentive to the manner in which literary and poetic productions reveal that language is, as it were, always already broken and that – especially in contemporary Western culture, deprived of its religious assurances – meaning is perpetually on the brink of collapse. Modern literature bears witness to the void at the core of subjective experience: abjection as the impossibility of subjective sovereignty, consciousness, knowledge, or desire (PoH 87). Inserting itself into the cracks in meaning, literature thus allows for the ongoing reconfiguration of the experience of abjection without the illusion of oneness and unity that characterizes religious monotheism/monologism. Hence Kristeva’s assertion that

³⁰ PoH 68-79. – Although Kristeva’s analysis is focused on Jewish and Christian logic in this text, she suggests that it is the caste system in India “that provides the most complex and striking instance of a social, moral, and religious system based on pollution and purification, on the pure and the impure” (PoH 79). Be that as it may, Kristeva also suggests approvingly that, contrary to monotheism’s obsession with the logic of the One, some eastern traditions reflect the possibility of a non-totalizing religious thought, allowing for a remainder which bears witness to the belief that “nothing is exhaustive, [and] that there is a residue in every system” (PoH 76-77).

“writing causes the subject who ventures into it to confront an archaic authority, on the nether side of the proper Name” (PoH 75). Literary language, much like religious language, occupies the dangerous but necessary “border between abjection and the sacred, between desire and knowledge, between death and society,” and reminds of the subject’s “particularity as *mortal and speaking*” (PoH 88), marked from the very beginning by “the basic incompleteness that conditions the indefinite quest of signifying concatenations” (PoH 88-89). In playing this role, literature supports the subject without granting the illusion of a stable, proper Word in the religious sense.

Kristeva’s careful readings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s (1894-1961) ‘abject writing’ follow the multiplicity of ways in which his language affirms the irreversibility and inevitability of the destruction of religious discourse in contemporary culture:

The world of illusion – the world of religions – brings to light or embodies the prohibition that has us speak. Thus, it gives *legitimacy* to hatred if it does not *invert* it into love. Embodying, legitimizing – today we are too aware of their techniques to yield to them. The world of illusions, now dead and buried, have given way to our dreams and deliriums if not to politics or science – the religions of modern times. (PoH 133)

More than a mere confirmation of the ‘death of God’, Céline’s literature in Kristeva’s interpretation assumes the more radical task of exploring everything that has been concealed or excluded by the name of ‘God’, including the irreducible wound around which subjectivity constructs itself, together with the anxieties, desires, neuroses and uncertainties that afflict its vulnerable existence. According to Kristeva, there is nothing doubtful or even tragic about the atheism

manifest in this kind of writing: it affirms neither divinity nor morality, and it carries no obvious revolutionary political or humanist convictions (PoH 136). Its effort is entirely focused on reconfiguring language in order to enable it to absorb within itself the horror and jouissance that underlie subjective experience:

“Without God, without any One other than that which lies under the polylogue of the Célinian symphony – a music, a web, a lacework” (PoH 136). Deprived of any transcendence, weighed down with “a non-existent God – neither transcendence nor Man, no capital letters, save the place” (PoH 138) – Céline’s writing is dangerously close to nihilism and madness: yet, in Kristeva’s view, precisely such proximity places this writing at the very heart of the current situation of the Western subject deprived of the assurances of both faith and reason, while simultaneously granting access to meaning as a fragile, risky, and in a sense impossible task.

No longer able to fall back on a clearly ethical or political agenda, Kristeva’s analysis becomes highly vulnerable to the charge of nihilism, even when she struggles to provide a convincing reason for her defense of the psychological and ethical potential of Céline’s ‘apocalyptic’ staging of abjection.

Kristeva is conscious of the problematic character of her venture:

It is as if Céline’s scription could only be justified to the extent that it confronted the ‘entirely other’ of significance; as if it could only be by having this ‘entirely other’ exist as such, in order to draw back from it but also in order to go to it as to a fountainhead; as if it could be born only through such a conformation recalling the religions of *defilement*, *abomination*, and *sin*. (PoH 149)

Like Blanchot’s poet, the author speaks in the manner of a prophet in the desert, albeit an apocalyptic one, inspired by the Book of Revelation he reads (PoH 205),

while inescapably bound to a “place left vacant by the disappearance of God, Prophets, and Faith” (PoH 186):

Céline alludes to biblical texts, mentions the prophets, vituperates against them. Nevertheless, his text follows their trajectory, jealously and yet differently. For he lacks the Law that belongs to prophetic stance; the abjection that he stages, contrary to that of the prophets, will not be relieved, not through any Name; it will merely be inscribed in enchantment, not for some other time, but here and now, in the text. (PoH 186)

Céline’s writing rejects religious, moral, and political aims; it declares a “laughing [...] apocalypse without god,” and “transcendental collapse [...] without morality, without judgment, without hope” (PoH 206). And yet, Kristeva regards Céline’s work as an exemplary attempt to encounter the “truth of the human species” at the zero-degree of meaning (PoH 154). Insofar as this encounter takes place through language, it offers a limited but important resource for exorcising the dangerous powers that lurk beneath social and subjective structures. The polylogical explosions of Céline’s language, brushing against abjection, horror, madness, and evil, thus mirror Western civilization in the wake of its two world wars, displaying its violence, its presumptuousness, its anxieties and its fragility in a manner that spares neither the secularists nor the faithful. Without such literary engagement Western civilization is incapable of engaging the crisis of meaning it is undergoing; instead, it remains adrift without God, Law, and Logic, knowing neither the limits nor the dangerous and redemptive possibilities inherent in its signifying structures. “By suggesting that language is its privileged signifier, I wish to point out that, far from being a minor, marginal activity in our culture, as a general consensus seems to have it, this kind of literature, or even literature as

such, represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses” (PoH 207). Kristeva makes this point even more explicit in an interview: “Céline’s writings and experience are the only ones that portray a true *crisis* – an identity crisis, a structural crisis, and an institutional crisis – and that is what makes them modern.” (Interviews 229)

Kristeva acknowledges that the explosiveness of Céline’s and other avant-garde writers’ language comes close to nihilism and indeed psychosis, because it partly fails “to appreciate the essential and indispensable features of the symbolic function” (Interviews 232), including those offered by Jewish monotheism (Interviews 233). Kristeva’s evocation of psychoanalysis in the closing remarks of *Powers of Horror* is not accidental in this respect; it emphasizes a conviction that implicitly guides her entire argument: psychoanalysis cannot exist without textual/literary practice, just as this practice can easily lead to the collapse of meaning without the accompaniment of psychoanalytic practice. Situated within a discursive realm that closely resembles the situation of the abject writer/poet, the psychoanalyst as the subject of an *abject* knowledge rather than an absolute one, accompanies literary productions and is prepared

to go through the first great demystification of Power (religious, moral, political, and verbal) that mankind has ever witnessed; and it is necessarily taking place within that fulfillment of religion as sacred horror, which is Judeo-Christian monotheism. In the meantime, let others continue their long march toward idols and truths of all kinds, buttressed with the necessarily righteous faith for wars to come, wars that will necessarily be holy. (PoH 210)

Kristeva’s conclusion announces explicitly a new direction in her thought.

Literature alone does not suffice; its difficult revolutionary task demands the

assistance of psychoanalytic discourse. This task can no longer be reduced to a simple affirmation of the ‘death of God’. “For abjection, when all is said and done, is the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies [...] and this is why we cannot escape the dramatic convulsions of religious crises” (PoH 209). If this thought attests to a certain ‘failure’ of ‘religion’, it also makes apparent that this failure belongs to a more extensive crisis, which does not allow for a hasty *dismissal* of religion from contemporary cultural, political, or psychological concerns.

The elaborate engagement with religion in *Powers of Horror* fails to justify the somewhat two-dimensional opposition between literary dialogism/polylogism and religious monologism/dogmatism that informs Kristeva’s early work. The text mostly maintains Kristeva’s tendency to reduce Judeo-Christian monotheism to a single, unified, dogmatic logic and metaphysics of presence, and it neglects to consider the extent to which this tradition contains different kinds of thought/practice, carrying different capacities to keep meaning in play and to bring about subjective, social, and political transformations, rather than merely maintaining the law of the ‘symbolic link’. Indeed, Kristeva does not take into account the possibility that much of what goes under the name of ‘religion’ today, like much of what goes under the name of ‘literature’, constitutes merely an object of metaphysical, rationalist, economic, and political consumption (RePL 7 & TeR 50) – a *product* rather than a *productivity*. Such a fact does not eliminate the ongoing possibility of a new religious as much as literary discourse emerging

from the ‘ruins’ of the old one. In spite of its problematic reductionisms, *Powers of Horror* indicates a transformation that brings Kristeva intriguingly close to Blanchot’s thought of affliction as “precisely the thought of that which cannot let itself be thought;” a thought that “religion, in inverting it, projected up into the heavens” (InC 120), thereby forgetting the necessity of language as the ‘place of attention’, “leaving empty what is empty and keeping our haste, our impatient desire, and, even more, our horror of emptiness from prematurely filling it” (InC 121). In this sense, Kristeva’s work parallels Blanchot’s attempt to explore the manner in which the ‘crisis of religion’ and the ‘crisis of secularism’ continue to remain essentially coextensive. As her discussion of Georges Bataille in *Polylogue* (1977) indicates, Kristeva has become increasingly aware that the complexity of the ‘death of God’ corresponds fundamentally to the complexity of the ‘death of Man’ as a Transcendental Ego or Sovereign Subject. “Rather than being ignorant of it, or avoiding it, Bataille’s approach takes the conclusion of Christian idealism as its point of departure” (cited in Lechte, 1990, 17). In John Lechte’s words, Kristeva recognizes that, as far as Bataille’s work is concerned, “the death of God is not the end of the story – either philosophical or historical. In its continuation, this story – especially as it is taken up by the writer – refuses to bypass the horror and death (man’s own death) which Christianity masked, and which humanity must now confront alone, if it can confront it at all” (Lechte 17). Her increasing engagement with psychoanalytic discourse will enable Kristeva to respond to this problem in a more effective manner.

Chapter Three

Religion and Psychoanalysis at the Limits of Language

The true formula of atheism is not *God is dead* – even by basing the origin of the function of the father upon his murder, Freud protects the father – the true formula of atheism is *God is unconscious*.

Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* 1998, p. 59

Analytic discourse [...] is perhaps the only one capable of addressing this untenable place where our species resides, threatened by madness beneath the emptiness of heaven.

Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 1980, p. xi

Desire and God have always been there, our task is now to put them under scrutiny, as such, together, in the folds of individual psychic experience.

Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 1989, p. 86

Powers of Horror is the text that marks a ‘psychoanalytic turn’ in Kristeva’s thought; this turn must be appreciated in its complexity. On numerous occasions in her later work and interviews Kristeva insists that her psychoanalytic practice is a direct transposition of her textual and literary theory (Interviews 19-20 & 222), its application in the context of a discursive, intersubjective situation beyond theoretical abstractions (Interviews 148) and a continuation of its political and ethical concerns.

Already in “The Ethics of Linguistics” (1974) Kristeva regards Freud’s practice as a kind of succession to the practice of writing (DL 26), and in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (French 1974) she insists that “The theory of the unconscious seeks the very thing that poetic language practices within and against

the social order: the ultimate means of its transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution” (RePL 81). In a 1985 interview with Margaret Waller, Kristeva asserts that “psychoanalysis has the advantage [...] of linking theoretical work with action” (Interviews 198) and that “The practices of the teaching of literature and literary criticism can be nourished and enlightened, finding both resources and greater lucidity, only through contact with psychoanalysis” (Interviews 199). In Kristeva’s view, psychoanalytic practice is inseparable from questions of language and its relation to subjective experience (Interviews 9); literary and poetic texts provide a foundation that enables this practice to reflect on its own character as a type of discourse: “The discovery of the unconscious was preceeded and accompanied by one of the most spectacular explosions of occidental discourse, signaled by the names of the ‘avant-garde’ literature: Mallarmé, Lautréamont, Joyce, Kafka, Artaud.”¹ Literary and psychoanalytic discourses must be seen not only as mutually enriching but also as fundamentally coextensive, even though psychoanalysis holds the advantage of producing a more substantial ‘knowledge effect’ (TaL 276). Their coincidence becomes crucial to Kristeva’s attempt to move away from what she perceives as the entrapments of theoretical contemplation and to engage in a more directly dialogical/intertextual manner with the speaking subject at the *crossroads* between all varieties of discourse, as the primary no-place where the crisis of meaning understood as the crisis of social, political, and religious structures plays itself out (Interviews 20). Psychoanalytic practice enables Kristeva to emphasize

¹ “La découverte de l’inconscient est précédée et s’accompagne d’un des éclatements les plus spectaculaires du discours occidental, que signent les noms de l’‘avant-garde’ littéraire: Mallarmé, Lautréamont, Joyce, Kafka, Artaud” (Pol 15).

the emergence of the speaking subject within a *discursive* situation that remains attentive to the body and affects.

Kristeva's psychoanalytic turn is paralleled by her increasing appreciation of the continuing significance of religious ideas, symbols, images, and narratives for the constitution of the modern subject and for the particular manner in which identity, desire, suffering, love relationships, sexuality, loss, language, ideals, social bonds, or psychic disintegration and transformation are experienced by the modern subject. In this respect, religious texts become as central to Kristeva's psychoanalytic readings as literary texts. Her psychoanalytic discourse deliberately situates itself on the ambiguous borderline between literary and religious concerns.

This chapter attempts to explicate the nature of this reorientation in Kristeva's thought by way of two interrelated readings. The first reading follows the development of Kristeva's psychoanalytic discourse and pays special attention to the changing character of its analyses, its emphases, its nuances, and its positionings with respect to religious discourse. While Kristeva strives for a comprehensive psychoanalytic model, her approach changes in response to her psychoanalytic experience and to the particular texts she considers. Her psychoanalytic readings of religion contain three unique 'reorientations', although it may be preferable to think of them as three strands between which Kristeva's thought moves. The second reading addresses the extent to which Kristeva's thought on the limits of speech – the 'unnamable' or the 'unspeakable' – brings together linguistic, psychological, and religious concerns, and thus the extent to

which she considers psychoanalytic practice as a kind of ‘replacement’ for religion. Kristeva’s understanding of psychoanalysis in this regard situates itself on a parallel line with Derrida’s deconstruction. Both authors’ language acquires its closest resemblance to the language of negative theology at approximately the same period in the 1980s. Kristeva’s explorations of the question of silence in language constitute an important dimension of her thought and also a significant contribution to the critical debate concerning the limits of language, meaning, and reason. This contribution has been overshadowed by the strong response Derrida’s direct engagement with negative theology has triggered among critical theorists and religious scholars alike. In order to contextualize and assess Kristeva’s contribution more effectively, her thought on the ‘unnamable’ is accompanied by a discussion of a number of texts by Derrida. (# 3.2)

It has become common habit among Kristeva scholars to consider *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (French 1980), *Tales of Love* (French 1983), and *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (French 1987) as her ‘psychoanalytic trilogy’. Therefore, this chapter focuses predominantly on these texts – especially the latter two, although the analysis includes also a brief discussions of several shorter works which are closely related to the line of inquiry Kristeva pursues in the ‘trilogy’.

3.1 The ‘Scene of the Other’, or The Sense and Nonsense of Religious Discourse

Psychoanalysis – as the locus of extreme abjection, the refuge of private horror that can be lifted only by an infinite-indefinite

displacement in speech and its effects – represents for me today the logical consequence of my initial questioning, which it still allows me to pursue. Leaving aside the uncertainties or the perversities of analytic institutions, I see psychoanalysis as the lay version, the only one, of the speaking being's quest for truth that religion symbolizes for certain of my contemporaries and friends. My own prejudice would lead me to think that God is analyzable, infinitely...

Julia Kristeva, "My Memory's Hyperbole", in
The Portable Kristeva 2002, p. 10

In several instances during the 1970s Kristeva attempted something like a rehearsal for the kind of approach that characterizes her psychoanalytic trilogy of the 1980s; this rehearsal was motivated by the fact that, during this period, she became increasingly interested in becoming a practicing analyst, which she eventually did in 1979. One can detect the dominance of the psychoanalytic orientation already in Kristeva's examination of the revolutionary potential of art in "Giotto's Joy" (1972) and "Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini" (1977), as well as in her analyses of Beckett's writing in "The Father, Love, and Banishment" (1976), of infantile 'meaning' in "Place Names" (1976), and of the significance of the figure of the Virgin Mary in "Stabat Mater" (1976). What is peculiar about these texts is that every single one (excepted "Place Names") is preoccupied with religious themes, images, or ideas. One is justified in suspecting that from the very beginning Kristeva finds it especially difficult to conceive of a psychoanalytic investigation that does not just *traverse* religious experience as literary language does, but that *remains within* its dynamics. More importantly, even though these short texts run parallel to Kristeva's semiotic and literary aim at 'disrupting' the theological monologism of Western discourse, they

are for the most part characterized by a different approach to the ‘religious problematic’.

3.1.1 Early Analyses of Religious Motifs

Kristeva’s discussion of Giotto evokes “the emergence of the great Christian paintings of the Renaissance” that, subverting the fixed center of perspective, marks “a process of liberation *through and against norm*” (DL 215) and refers favorably to Bonaventura’s disruption of the “rigid Christian canon” (DL 212) through the notion of the *itinerary*² and the “liberating scope” of reflections on the link between body and light, which, as Kristeva notes with regret, is “difficult for us to appreciate today” (DL 223). “Giotto’s joy,” in turn, “is the sublimated jouissance of a subject liberating himself from the transcendental dominion of One Meaning [...]. This chromatic joy [...] discreetly enters the theological signified, distorting and doing violence to it without relinquishing it” (DL 224). The two essays on motherhood and femininity – “Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini” and “Stabat Mater” – remain fully within the *ambiguities* of Christian discourse and representation: its simultaneous commitment to reason and desire, identity and difference, language and the body, symbol and the unsymbolizable, or feminine and masculine experience (DL 243, 250-51, 266, 268). At one point Kristeva bemoans the loss of some of these ambiguities in the Age of Reason: “In general, Bellini’s paintings have a common denominator in *sacra conversazione*. It is there that the ‘sacred’ scene of the Western World has been knotted and arrested. It was soon to be replaced by

² Particularly in Bonaventura’s *Mind’s Road to God*.

humanism and rational knowledge, achieving the progress with which we are all familiar. But with what loss of *jouissance*!” (DL 250) Similarly, “*Stabat Mater*” notes the impoverishment of motherly and feminine experience in rational, humanist, secular, and feminist discourse (TaL 234 & 262), following its complex elaborations in Catholic and Orthodox theologies and rites. “Christianity,” as she puts it, “is doubtless the most refined symbolic construct in which femininity, to the extent that it transpires through it – and it does so incessantly – is focused on *Maternity*” (TaL 325). Despite her explicitly psychological concerns (TaL 236), Kristeva’s careful exploration of the figure of the Virgin Mary patiently follows for the first time in her work the complex movements of theological language in both its rationalisms and in its attempts to trespass the limits of rational thought. Finally, Kristeva’s analysis of Beckett speaks to the complexity of the ‘death of God’ through the lens of the ‘Oedipal triangle’ (Father/Mother/Child), and concludes with a question that does not allow for hasty decisions:

So beyond the debris of the desacralized sacred that Beckett calls upon us to experience, if only as lucid and enlightened observers, does there not persist an *other* – untouched and fully seductive? The true guarantee of the last myth of modern times, the myth of the feminine – hardly the third person any longer, but, both beyond and within, more and less than meaning: rhythm, tone, color, and joy, within, through, and across the Word? (DL 158)

If Kristeva’s literary theory remains almost entirely committed to the displacement of religious monologism through the poetic and literary polylogue, the relationship between her early psychoanalytic discourse and religious discourse is characterized by a certain undecidability: it shifts between instances

of psychological reductionism and a more careful, critical appreciation for the multilayered logic of religious symbolism and narrative. Composing this early tension, then, are *two* of the three strands or orientations that give shape to Kristeva's psychoanalytic engagement with religion. On the one hand, Kristeva the psychoanalyst assumes the role of the *knowing* subject (PoH 92) – Oedipus before the Sphinx, as it were – who speaks *about* religion and brings into focus the process of its 'productivity' by 'deconstructing' its monological truths and revealing them as illusions that were once necessary, but are no longer possible to maintain. In this sense, psychoanalysis and literature combine their resources to step into the symbolic gap left in the wake of the 'death of God': not in a celebratory gesture, to be sure, but one determined to assume the burden of the task at hand. On the other hand, Kristeva attempts to *listen to* religious language in order to hear within its polylogical depth echoes of subjective desire and affliction. Here, religious discourse manifests the complex truth of subjective experience and contains within itself a multiplicity of resources enabling not only the constitution and preservation of meaning, but also its transformation or renewal. These truths and resources require the assistance of psychoanalytic discourse, since the Western subject is no longer capable of experiencing them on a *religious* level. In Kristeva's first 'orientation', religion *acts out* symbolically that which psychoanalysis *understands*; in the second 'orientation', religion *anticipates* in its insights and in its discourse that which psychoanalysis plays out within a discursive practice no longer bound to divine laws or metaphysical principles. Psychoanalysis, in this sense, assumes the task of *translation*: it

transposes concerns to which religion and literature bear witness into the context of humanist secularism entrenched in its instrumental, calculative logic.

Following in the footsteps of these early ‘rehearsals’, the task of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic trilogy in the 1980s is double in character. In the first place, the trilogy offers a critical explication of some key texts – ideas, narratives, images, or practices – that have contributed to the development of the Western subject and that continue to inform contemporary subjective experience; in this sense, each work in the trilogy approaches the dynamics of subjectivity through a particular kind of ‘limit-experience’: abjection and horror in *Powers of Horror*, love and desire in *Tales of Love*, suffering and melancholia in *Black Sun*. In the second place, the trilogy constitutes an extensive attempt to reflect on the nature of psychoanalytic theory and practice by way of a fundamental engagement with religious and literary language, which would enable Kristeva to clarify the relationship between the three kinds of signifying practice. Each of the three steps marks a progression in Kristeva’s thought, but this progression must be understood as a dynamic back and forth movement between different orientations and emphases, with aspects of prior readings becoming preserved, revised, or abandoned in the ones that follow. In this respect, Kristeva’s style follows that of Freud, one of the great masters of thinking as a movement of trial-and-error; it would be a mistake to simply isolate and fix any specific assertion within the process it unfolds.

3.1.2 Religious Logic in *Powers of Horror*

Powers of Horror is exemplary here, for although nothing prevents one from accusing the text of constituting the most overt example of Kristeva's psychological reductionism, its logic must also be seen as marking a kind of necessary – if partial – failure in the development of Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory. The reductionism that characterizes Kristeva's readings of Jewish and Christian purity rites in this work is not entirely surprising; its aim, after all, is to reinforce the critique of religion found in her literary theory through a psychological explanation of the 'failure' of religious symbolic structures. As Kristeva declares, the primary purpose of her inquiry is at once critical and instrumental: "to bring to light the variants of the subject/object relation that religions implied, avoiding the non-existence of separation just as much as the rigidity of the splitting. In other words, I shall need to look into the solutions given for phobia and psychosis by religious codes" (PoH 48). Kristeva hopes to radicalize her critique of the monotheistic privileging of unity and identity by indicating, through a more or less detached psychological analysis, that its logic is not only fundamentally repressive but, indeed, ineffectual in its aim.

What does, however, make the reductionism of *Powers of Horror* peculiar is the fact that Kristeva's psychoanalytic readings of religion in the 1970s had been quite capable of a substantially different orientation (# 3.1.1) and, in fact, of substantially different conclusions concerning the 'liberatory' potential embodied in Western religious symbolism. Kristeva allows for echoes of this other orientation to resonate within her analysis in *Powers of Horror*, albeit in a

somewhat muted fashion. Her discussion of Judaic purity laws is permeated with an appreciation for the difficult struggle the tradition had to undergo in order to construct a sense of social and subjective cohesion through a series of important prohibitions revolving around food consumption, sexual differentiation, and division between nature and man as well as man and God. Above all, and seemingly contrary to her argument in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (French 1974), Kristeva credits Judaism for its role in the dissolution/sublimation of the (pagan) logic of sacrifice/murder:

Through sustained abomination, Judaism parts ways with sacrificial religions. And to the extent that religion and sacrifice overlap, biblical abominations perhaps constitute the logical explication of the religious (without proceeding to murderous acts – which become unnecessary when the rules of taboo are disclosed and observed). With biblical abomination religion is probably wending its way toward fulfillment. (PoH 95)

Despite the repressive character of their logic constituted around “the One that separates and unifies” (PoH 111) and without whom everything is abominable, the texts that compose the Hebrew Bible can be understood as an extensive, and in many ways, significant effort to displace the violence of the death drive with moral judgment, and to diffuse the threat of horror and abjection through a meticulously constructed system of strict rites and beliefs (PoH 111-12), which serve as a sensible, though limited, safety net for the speaking subject and his or her community.

Christianity, in turn, translates the logic of early Judaism into a new set of differences and meanings. The essential trait of this transformation “is that abjection is no longer exterior. It is permanent and comes from within.

Threatening, it is not cut off but is reabsorbed into speech” (PoH 112). The consequence of this symbolic and psychological turn is paradoxical: the Christian subject becomes fundamentally divided (PoH 112, 116, 118), inhabited, as it were, by sin and evil (by the abject) and hence dangerously close to the threat of psychosis. At the same time, the Christian subject is liberated from the traditional dichotomies and the threat of a world saturated with impure objects and substances. Christianity resolves the tension of this paradox in favour of the subject through the redemption offered by the crucifixion and the Eucharist that preceded it. The Christian subject is purified from sin and compensated for incompleteness through the introjection of the body of Christ, through an essential *identification* (rather than merely a social or familial bond) with the other (PoH 118-19). “An acknowledgment, a covenant with the one who absolves, thanks to the words of an other in the name of the Other – and lust, erroneous judgment, fundamental abjection are remitted – not suppressed, but subsumed into a speech that gathers and restrains” (PoH 131). Thus, Christianity transcends the division between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ in a spectacular manner: “[...] all corporeality is elevated, spiritualized, and sublimated” (PoH 120), at least insofar as one identifies with Christ while acknowledging separation through sin: “[...] body and spirit, body jettisoned from the spirit; as a condition that is impossible, irreconcilable, and, by that very token, real” (PoH 120). Kristeva’s tone in this discussion is filled as much with fascination as it is with appreciation for the complex and difficult manoeuvres involved in this psychological and symbolic development, which culminates in an understanding of body and desire that, in

her view, exceeds the rather superficial divisions found in ancient Greek or Hebrew thought: “One of the insights of Christianity, and not the least one, is to have gathered in a single move perversion and beauty as the lining and the cloth of one and the same economy.” (PoH 124-25)

Regrettably, Kristeva’s closing remarks undermine these moments of fascination and move beyond the tension in her logic in favour of a coherent conclusion that sounds rather classical in its formal reductionism. Her appreciation for the ‘truths’ of the Judeo-Christian tradition is still there, but somehow unconvinced as to their status, as though all of the social and psychological advantages and the impressive symbolic feats entailed in the Judaic and Christian experience were no longer fully capable of supporting and renewing the modern subject:

If defilement was what is impossible within a system, if Levitical taboo was what is excluded from a Law, sin, on the other hand, is a defect in judgment. The biblical conception remained closer to the concrete truth of the sexed and social being. The conception stemming from the New Testament resorbs the guilt of the previous one and, at the risk of cutting itself off from the coarse and intolerable truth of man that Judaism discloses, offers displacements of it that are perhaps elaborations – communitary, logical, esthetic ones. On the one hand, we find the truth of the intolerable; on the other, displacement through denial for some, through sublimation for others. (PoH 129)

The purpose of Kristeva’s analysis here is to prepare ground for yet another literary displacement of religion – in this case, Céline’s (# 2.2.7). Be that as it may, the psychoanalytic logic of Kristeva’s discourse on religion reaches its own limit at this point. The transformation her language undergoes in *Tales of Love* may well indicate that Kristeva herself was not unaware of this possibility.

3.1.3 Religion and the Lover's Discourse in *Tales of Love*

This transformation is twofold: first, Kristeva's language moves away from her previously heavy reliance on the Freudian ventures into 'primitive' religion and the development of monotheism; second, in distinction to her earlier studies, which employed psychoanalytic language more or less uncritically, Kristeva now begins to consider psychoanalysis as a kind of discourse. Both *Tales of Love* and *Black Sun* include an early discussion of psychoanalysis, language, and the discursive character of the relationship between the analyst and the analysand. Psychoanalysis is no longer regarded as a critical tool for taking apart texts and revealing their psychological and usually repressive underpinnings; its task, rather, is centered around understanding subjective and social afflictions in order to contribute to the renewal and transformation of psychic/bodily and social experience (TaL 1). Most importantly, since psychoanalytic practice situates itself at the limits of signification and constitutes, by definition, a limit-discourse – a discourse of the limit – its language necessarily parallels certain kinds of literary *and* religious language. In other words, in the context of Kristeva's current approach, psychoanalysis as a discourse that opens up onto the 'scene of the other' finds that this 'scene' is always already occupied by religious 'formations' that are not only defensive and monological but that – along with poetic and literary productions – anticipate psychoanalytic insights and put them into practice. If, as Kristeva puts it, "The analyst is within love from the start, and if he forgets it he dooms himself not to perform an analysis" (TaL 13), her approach now recognizes that the analyst is also, from the start, within *poiesis* and

within *faith* and will not accomplish anything unless s/he remains there and follows *both* religious and poetic language in its encounter with the Other in its heterogeneous manifestations.

Kristeva's approach in *Tales of Love* is a more careful and more open-ended elaboration of the approach found in her early analyses of Giotto, Bellini, or the Virgin Mary. It breaks with the limiting reductionisms of the logic that guided *Powers of Horror* but does not entirely abandon Kristeva's conviction that, in the final account, "Psychoanalysis skirts religious faith in order to expend it in the form of literary discourse" (TaL 38). More precisely, psychoanalytic discourse constitutes the necessary medium through which religious and literary explorations of subjective experience are translated into a more conscious, critical framework, and as such granted their fullest potential. Religion and literature give name to subjective experiences and put these experiences into play through such naming, thus embodying a crucial capacity for transformation and renewal. But without the assistance of psychoanalytic interpretation this capacity remains somewhat fragmented and too close to the point of 'origin'. This logic is apparent in Kristeva's assertion that, in order for the analytic process to unfold, the analyst must occupy the (empty) place of the Other, if only somewhat arbitrarily and for a limited time:

The Other, to the extent that the analyst takes his place, is, within the cure, a loved Other. That is why he can, in a particular, more or less perverse handling of the cure, become a tool of domination, or slavery, for the patient, when he isn't a tool of religious power and faith. But on the other hand, and if one grants that this Great Other is nothing but the Meaning of discourse, to transform it into an object of love during analysis suggests that the Province of Meaning is no longer held within a strictly referential univocity. To the contrary, it ushers in that passion of

signs exemplified by free association, displacement, condensation, and so forth [...]. There is no analysis if the Other is not an Other whom I love (with the corollary, whom I hate), through the good offices of 'that man/that woman without qualities' [Robert Musil] who is my analyst. (TaL 13-14)

The analyst's position, then, is the no-place of meaning as the place of crisis. Like the poet, the prophet, or the mystic, the analyst gives a temporary name to this no-place. Without this name the subject is unable to establish his or her psychic and social identity. At the same time, the analyst remains within a *knowledge* that seems partly inaccessible to the literary or religious subject. In a sense, Kristeva's analyst assumes the role of Heidegger's philosopher with respect to the poet/mystic, one who is aware of the fact that the 'gods' and the 'objects of love' sought and named by the poet/mystic are nothing more and nothing less than identifications with an Ideal/Being/Meaning that cannot be properly accessed or made present. Thus, "the analyst situates himself on a ridge where, on the one hand, the 'maternal' position – gratifying needs, 'holding' (Winnicott) – and on the other the 'paternal' position – the differentiation, distance, and prohibition that produces both meaning and absurdity – are intermingled and severed, infinitely and without end," in order "to accompany the patient as far as the limits and accidents of his object relations" (TaL 29). "It is in knowing this and doing it that he [the analyst] creates the space of transference love" (TaL 31). In Kristeva's scheme, the analyst knows that insofar as the human being is subject to language, s/he has no possibility of meaning as a fixed presence, of unmediated access to the Other. But the analyst also knows that there *is* meaning insofar as the subject is a loving subject and accepts the necessity of the other (first and foremost,

mother/father) who preserves the relation to an otherwise inaccessible Other. Meaning is hence “always that of dialogue” (TaL 68). In distinction to Lacan who emphasizes the inherent *lack* in the speaking being, Kristeva insists on the love bond occurring within language as well as beyond it, which prevents this lack from consuming the subject.

The necessity of love constitutes the limit of the analyst’s rationalism. Kristeva’s logic strives to maintain a productive balance between knowledge and desire. This is one of the key reasons why, unlike *Powers of Horror, Tales of Love* manages with remarkable ease to maintain an *undecidable* tension between Kristeva’s tendency to psychologize religious texts on the one hand, and her tendency to appreciate the complexity of their language and the diversity of experiences it embodies on the other. As Kristeva explicitly asserts, one of the central aims of her study is to emphasize a history of the Western subject that runs parallel to the account which prefers to see this history in terms of the “supremacy of thought and knowledge over passions” (TaL 297), or as the emergence of the Transcendental Ego out of its ‘enslavement’ in superstition and irrationalism into the light of rational, humanistic, and secular certitude.

This survey [...] has no other aim than to point out, on the near side of the grandiose Cartesian project, a few waverings of philosophical and theological discourse in the shadow of monotheism, which set forth a dynamics of appetency ahead of – or as much as – a systematics of knowledge. One might have followed, with Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, the surviving manifestations of that amatory appetite that, as a feverish pull toward the One and appropriation of the good, becomes distorted into esthetics or morality, into sublimity or *jouissance* [...]. (TaL 186)

Neither ‘side’ of the history of Western subjectivity – which is also the history of the Western *soul* (TaL 59) – can be dismissed once and for all, according to Kristeva’s logic; both accompany the venture into modern subjectivity from the very beginning and can be found already in the conflicted nature of Platonic thought, negotiating between Psyche and Eros, knowledge and desire, masculine and feminine being:

Far from any deceit, Plato speaks to us [...] in harmony with the anxieties that fill modern cities. He is situated, in the fourth century B.C., as on a rooftop with slopes descending on either side. One opens out on manic, painful, exorbitant possession, on black masses of shameful nights and bodies deriving pleasure from being ridiculed. The other leads to superhuman effort (he called it supercelestial) on the part of the soul, which, within the same phallic dynamics, tears itself away from the allurements of *having* to accede to the dignity of *knowing* and *being*. [...] Phaedrus and Socrates are among us...Just as addicted to their mania, just as eager for political or religious ideal... (TaL 68)

The history of love in the West constitutes a crucial embodiment of these conflicts, insofar as it inscribes its experiences within discourse or, more precisely, insofar as it inscribes itself within the polyvalence of a language that seeks to *bring together*, within a single logic, the diversity and the identity of Judaic, Greek, Christian (Roman/Byzantine), ‘humanist’, or even ‘atheist’ experiences. The experience of the neo-Platonic subject as “a reflection of the unapproachable Other whom I love and who causes me to be” (TaL 59) remains, in some sense, inseparable from the experience of the “quivering passion of the Song of Songs” (TaL 60) in the Hebrew Bible, which in turn finds its diverse elaborations in both the unconditionality and impossibility of the Christian *Agape* in both its paternal and its maternal aspects (TaL 60), as well as in philosophical discourse’s inability to separate once and for all knowledge and desire, truth and

love, or faith and reason (TaL 63). Psychoanalysis, in Kristeva's practice, embraces their inseparability – along with the inseparability of masculinity and femininity – as a fundamental fact of the experience of every speaking being.

Kristeva charts these connections and the ruptures they embody in her readings. Even though she remains comfortably positioned in her role as critical thinker and analyst, for the first time in her writings her language alternates between psychological, religious, literary, and philosophical 'experiences' or 'scenes' in a manner that prevents the reader from assuming any simple distinction between them. The discussion of Biblical love which follows the discussion of Platonic Eros presents the reader with a language not encountered in *Powers of Horror* even where that text is most appreciative of Jewish and Christian narratives. Here the religious text speaks and Kristeva the analyst listens carefully: she inserts an occasional, psychological remark – suggestion or conviction, but she remains ultimately concerned with keeping meaning in play rather than fixing it prematurely. The Biblical text is not merely a defensive illusion; its truth is psychologically undeniable, and must be appreciated by the modern analyst and subject in its profound complexity. "The immediate love of God for his people [...] directly establishes the loved one (who is also loving) as a subject in the strong sense of the term," even if "Its correlative is non-representability [...]" (TaL 84). Kristeva follows with fascination the manner in which the text of the Song of Songs negotiates between the immediacy of sensual, corporeal passion and the ideal, transcendental inaccessibility of God, thus marking the simultaneous, albeit uncertain unity and separation that gives birth to

the speaking subject as both loved and mortal. “The sensitive and the significant, the body and the name, are thus not only placed on the same level but fused in the same logic of the undecidable infinitization, semantic polyvalence brewed by the state of love – seat of imagination, source of allegory.” (TaL 90)

The eruptions and transformations of language in this text are, according to Kristeva, no less powerful and no more delusional than those found in the lyrical stagings of Baudelaire or Mallarmé (TaL 91), which carry the Western subject toward experiences as joyful as full of uncertainty and affliction. Religious and literary experiences are so intimately intertwined in Kristeva’s readings in *Tales of Love* that, in some instances, they appear virtually synonymous: “Is not symbolic exegesis,” she ask in reference to the incorporation of the Songs of Songs into the Biblical canon by the rabbis, “a simple recognition of the rhetorical infinity – of the metaphorical proliferation – present at the foundations of amorous discourse?” (TaL 99) Kristeva recognizes, if only in rare instances, that the encounter between religious and literary texts follows a logic that cannot be fully reduced to a psychological interpretation. Although, as in her other studies, she seeks the ‘unconscious logic’ of the Song of Songs (TaL 94), she suggests that this logic cannot be fully explained in psychological terms because Biblical characters and events also constitute “the agents and functions of a *narrative*” (TaL 93), which in turn unfolds the experience of “the divine word addressed to the chosen people” (TaL 92). Kristeva remains committed to the *psychoanalytic* task of placing ‘desire’ and ‘God’ under scrutiny “in the folds of individual psychic experience” (TaL 96); but her language points to a certain awareness that

this task, despite its preferred status in her thought, has its own logical and discursive limitations. In any case, the purpose of the task as she now conceives it is to acknowledge – *beyond* but *not without* the necessity of analytic interpretation – the debt psychoanalysis owes to the exploratory achievements of religious traditions. Speaking of the ancient rabbis, Kristeva declares: “[...] one cannot help rendering fascinated homage to those men who, beyond what we think were their prejudices, took it [the erotic text of the Song of Songs] into the sacred scriptures, thus realizing one of those exceptional syntheses of the ancient world which does not cease to fill us with wonder” (TaL 98). Kristeva goes as far as stating that in embracing this textual hymn to love in all of its multidimensional ambiguity, “Judaism asserts itself as a first liberation of women. By virtue of being subjects: loving and speaking. The Shulamite, by her lyrical, dancing, theatrical language, by an adventure that conjugates a submission to legality and the violence of passion, is the prototype of the modern individual.” (TaL 99)

Kristeva’s discussion of the notion of ‘self-love’ in Plotinus’s thought attempts, on the one hand, to follow its “psychological [...] unfolding of the soul’s activities” (TaL 107). In this sense, her analysis is appreciative of what she considers as the Plotinian “hypostasis of narcissistic love,” which “was to constitute the decisive step in the assumption of inner space, the introspective space of the western psyche” (TaL 111). Plotinus accomplishes this significant step, in Kristeva’s view, through the particular association he posits between divinity and love: “The One ‘is simultaneously the *loved one* and *love*; He is *love of himself*; for He is beautiful only by and in Himself” (TaL 111). This

association embodies, through a theological and psychological projection, the recognition of the necessity of a narcissistic ideal for the constitution of the subject. On the other hand, Kristeva is concerned with the manner in which this scheme excludes the possibility of the Other, pointing to the “untranslatable Plotinian phrase MONOS PROS MONON,” which, she suggests, can be rendered as “alone with him who is alone” (TaL 113). Kristeva is in fact convinced that some of the key ‘doctrines’ that developed in that era – she mentions Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and Christianity – can be regarded as “an impossible, tragic, painful attempt to tackle a problem that the ancient world had not solved – otherness, *to eterotes*” (TaL 119). For Kristeva this problem is important insofar as it persists, in an especially acute manner, within the psychological structure of the modern subject for whom Narcissus is a figure at once ancient and intimately contemporary:

Deprived of the One, he has no salvation; otherness has opened up within himself. He no longer has the thinking *nous* of the ancient world that could have enabled him to approach the other as plurality, as a multiplicity of objects or parts. He no longer has the Plotinian loving *nous* that could have led him to escape his otherness through a merging with the One. If he is alone with him who is alone, his otherness is not completed within totality, it does not become internality. It remains open, gaping, mortal, because deprived of a One. (TaL 121)

Kristeva’s atheism is quite explicit here, although her statement associates the ‘religious crisis’ with the dissolution of the unified system of ‘onto-theology’ rather than with the collapse of religion as such: “Is it then by chance that the images of psychological or esthetic Narcissi accompany the crises of salvation religions, and are a compelling presence in our contemporary world, shaken by the death of the One God?” (TaL 121)

Kristeva appreciates the paradox of the Christian resolution of the relation between the 'Self' and the 'Other': "'You must love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:31) is what the Bible had already said. [...] Henceforth, love of self is an error to the extent that one forgets one is the reflection of the Other (the Lord)'" (TaL 122). At this point her argument becomes rather problematic; she suggests, following a discussion of narcissism in several poetic texts, that 'psychic space' today can only be experienced along two paths: the decentered path of artistic *poiesis* committed to playing with undecidable meanings, or a lay religiosity constituted around a certain divinization of the Self (TaL 135-36) as a process that, she believes, had been triggered by the Christian logic of 'self-love'. "If we still have a religion today," Kristeva concludes somewhat hastily, "it is an esthetic one, for Narcissism shields itself most intensely in the fleeing displays of fictional meaning" (TaL 136). The assertion makes sense only if one accepts its implicit premise, namely the dissolution of Christian logic and institutions in contemporary Western culture. The religion of the Self becomes possible, within Kristeva's present scheme, only with the displacement of both the neoplatonic One and the Judeo-Christian Other. What seems equally implicit in Kristeva's argument is her own ambivalence with respect to this development: on the one hand, the emergence of the narcissistic modern subject must be welcomed by the analyst, for narcissism is the inevitable consequence of waking up in a world of crumbled ideas, projections, and illusions; on the other hand, the inability of this subject to recognize him or herself as the other results in a sense of alienation

from others, in new psychic sufferings, and perhaps also in new, ever more dangerous projections and illusions.

At least partly due to this concern *Tales of Love* offers a careful analysis of questions of love and desire in Christian discourse – by far Kristeva’s most extensive engagement with this tradition to date. Of particular importance is the substantial reversal Kristeva’s logic undergoes in relation to her previous treatment of Christianity. While in *Powers of Horror* Christianity was presented as offering significant, but ultimately insufficient means of defense against abjection, in *Tales of Love* it is the forgetfulness around the complex dynamics of subjective desire in Christian discourse that leaves the modern, secular subject in a position that is fundamentally impoverished and fragile, if not entirely abject. In “God is Love”, Kristeva traces the development of the Greek concept of Eros in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* and the Biblical concept of *Ahav* (Deut. 6:5 & Lev. 19:18) into the Christian/Paulinian understanding of *Agape* as a ‘theocentric’, ‘disinterested gift’ of love revealed to humanity through the death of Christ on the Cross (TaL 139-40). Kristeva’s psychological concerns with respect to this development follow theological considerations – albeit not only in order to explain their initial, psychological validity or even radicality, but in order to inquire how the dynamics of Paulinian thought on love continue to constitute a ‘scandal’ for modern culture, and to pose the difficult question: “Is there a post-Christian actuality?” (TaL 140)

Within Kristeva’s analytic scheme, the scandal has to do with the manner in which Christian logic moves beyond the Freudian and Lacanian privileging of the

stern, prohibiting Father figure; the logic of love, according to Kristeva, both subsumes and transcends the logic of sacrifice within the dynamics of subjective development (TaL 143). The subject exists because meaning is granted through the other as an already prior gift, rather than due merely to his entry into symbolic law through the violence of castration:

The killing of the body is the path through which the body-Self has access to the Name of the Other who loves me and makes of me a Subject who is immersed (baptized) in the Name of the other. A triumph of idealization through a sublimatory elaboration of suffering and of the destruction of the body proper, agape marks...the end of sacrifice. Or rather, it neutralized it by means of subjective internalization: by a working through in the Gospel's narrative. (TaL 146)

Christian logic reminds of the modern subject's constitution as a social and political relation with an Other and simultaneously with an other who subverts the individual's illusory self-entrenchment and places it within the open movement of "construction-deconstruction, life-death" (TaL 147) as a movement of love that necessarily includes strangers, foreigners, and sinners. Christianity thus not only provides a language that anticipates psychoanalytic practice and the formation of modern subjectivity; it continues to speak to us from the midst of the contemporary crisis of meaning and its allegedly post-Christian character.

3.1.4 Figures of Christian Desire: Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, Stabat Mater

Kristeva's studies of Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas in the next two chapters constitute an attempt to grasp the complex manner in which the dynamics of early Christian love become translated into a theological discourse on desire, affect, and love – on a parallel line with the secular development of

‘courtly love’. Kristeva admires Bernard’s effort to bring together the earthly demands of corporeal nature and the nature of the spiritual love that reaches toward God (TaL 153). Bernard’s thought, Kristeva asserts, contributes to the development of a discourse that offers an alternative to both the Platonic/Neoplatonic renunciation of flesh and to the Cartesian renunciation of the irrational; it testifies to the fact that – beyond *Ego cogito – Ego affectus est*, as Kristeva formulates it (TaL 154).

One notes the very right bond between flesh and spirit that is instituted, for Bernard, by the notion of affect, thereby translating the exquisite dialectics of the Trinity [...]. The point is to avoid removing the flesh from a spirituality that would thus become too ethereal, without forgetting the presence of the spirit in a flesh that composes an area of fundamental dissimilarity between man and God. (TaL 157)

Kristeva’s analysis of Bernard’s religious terminology and the nature of the relation between certain terms is quite detailed here, and determined to move within theological language while at the same time seeking after both the uniqueness and the ongoing validity of its psychological insights. Kristeva is intrigued by Bernard’s elaborations on the Augustinian logic of desire as complementary to the affect, with God posited as the desirable yet lacking ‘object’ that propels the movement of the soul, which thus becomes constituted at once by a certain absence and by a certain drive toward a fulfilling union with the other. For Kristeva, this logic reflects the “specularity of Christian love” (TaL 160) in conjunction with the dynamics of ‘primary narcissism’ in the constitution of the Western subject:

We meet again with a kind of ‘primary narcissism’, surmountable only through the positing of an Other who is supposed to have existed before us and who is not unaware, on his part, of that longing for self-

gratification and total gratification. Thanks to the originary specular affection for that Other, only thus may desire for an absent being – an avid, total, impossible desire – be guided by will and wisdom and become a desire that is *pure*. *Pure*, with Bernard, means fulfilled by merging with the Loved One – God. (TaL 160-61)

Bringing together *natural* and *sublime* love, God as an infinite Object allows for the infinite “drifting together of the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary” (TaL 162), the three ‘registers’ that define the subjective structure for Kristeva as much as for Lacan.

Kristeva is particularly appreciative of Bernard’s effort to defend the natural primacy of carnal love, even if this love always ascends toward God through four consecutive stages or transitions (TaL 163-65). Rather than simply suggesting the need to overcome each phase in the quest for a loving union with God, “Bernard emphasizes that in love as in religious experience in general, an *ascent* is as necessary as a *descent*” (TaL 165). Here, identity and heterogeneity, ideal and affect, nature and meaning, sin and grace, or symbolic and semiotic dimensions of subjective experience are united within a dynamic harmony capable of idealization as well as of subversion. According to Kristeva, this complex process, “this passion of the body wrenching itself” (TaL 166) embodied in Bernard’s powerful attempt to “define man’s *being as a lover*” (TaL 167), prevents Christian discourse from turning into mere rationalism. As such, Christian theology compares favorably with philosophy, both in its psychological and its social validity: “No philosophy has equaled the philosophical success that could give satisfaction to drive-impelled narcissism while raising it above its own realm to give it an extension that could reach the other, the others – a divine

extension, to be sure, and a social one in passing” (TaL 167). Indeed, Bernard’s recognition of “the immanence of God’s love in our nature, carnal and greedy as it may be [...] is lacking with Kant and causes the loss of what one readily calls the ‘unconscious’ part of love, at the same time as the loss of amorous happiness as the essential definition of the human event” (TaL 167). As Kristeva explicitly asserts, the dynamics of idealization and sublimation, which operate at the heart of the psychoanalytic experience, are already identifiable in Bernard’s theological and mystical scheme, pointing through its language “toward the region that today we are quite ready to call the unconscious.” (TaL 168)

Kristeva believes that Thomas Aquinas’s texts, beyond their systematic rationalism, offer a productive elaboration of the dynamics of the speaking subject as a loving subject found in Bernard of Clairvaux, weaving together “a complex dialectic of passivity and activity, effect and cause, subjection and freedom, fall and grace,” but “also an exquisite blend of affect, desire, and meaning” (TaL 171). These texts thus chart a kind of ontology of ‘secondary narcissism’ Kristeva intends to consider in a manner that, as she suggests, may seem equally unsettling to the religious believer *and* to the secular analyst (TaL 171), because it seeks a “post-theological, secular means of sublimating our sickness of being, which is a sickness of love” (TaL 171), while nonetheless appreciating the dialectical understanding of self-love contained in Aquinas’s theological model within a reading that remains faithful to its logic and does not attempt to distort it in order to fully encompass it within the logic of psychoanalysis (TaL 176). According to Kristeva’s interpretation, this model posits that “the greatest good is

God, but the first access to him comes from our immediate relation to ourselves; moreover, the similarity between others and ourselves permits us to have access to them” (TaL 172). Here, “Love of self is what establishes *one’s own* as a unity as well as *one’s own good* – a lovable unity” (TaL 174). Kristeva takes Aquinas’ ontology as holding that “Any being is desirable before being knowable or while it is knowable. Better: it is being itself that the feature of desirability suits best – *appetabilis*” (TaL 174). In this scheme, Kristeva admiringly observes, one can no more hope to reach God entirely beyond oneself, than hope to find God beyond the necessity of engaging with others or to do away with ‘nature’: “[...] without access to *one’s own good* there can be no access to God. Without self-love, no love for God can be perceived or thought, and consequently no gift of love to others.” (TaL 176)

Kristeva is fascinated by the nuances of Aquinas’ understanding of ‘natural love’, which, although distinct from ‘theological love’ (charity) is at the same time not reducible to mere ‘carnality’, for it is always already “defined by its object (the good), and its end, bliss” and is, in a sense, coextensive with the act of will (TaL 177). Kristeva the analyst feels some ambivalence with respect to this essential and rational juxtaposition of love and knowledge: “The heterogeneity of carnal desire as opposed to the will for Meaning, and of course knowledge (a heterogeneity that is in evidence in Bernard’s work), becomes obliterated here. With Aquinas, amatory desire is always already willful, because it is appropriated by *one’s own good*, of which God constitutes the absolute presence” (TaL 177). Kristeva’s reading nevertheless remains attentive enough to appreciate the

complex maneuvers of Aquinas' logic and its psychological insightfulness: "[...] the dynamics of Thomistic thought completes the *sublimation* of narcissism within an ontology of the *good*" that does not repressively relegate "the latter to the sole realm of morality" (TaL 181). The sublimatory aspects of the theology of the good become repressive in the philosophy of the true relying fully on will, judgment, and reason, Kristeva asserts; but she is aware of the dialogical tensions of Aquinas's text, and she follows their undecidability. "Altering the same as well as the other in light of their union tempers the unity of each and disrupts everyone's own identity, even though it had initially and jealously been posited" (TaL 181).

If we reread Aquinas we shall again discover that the thinking subject is a subject thinking the other, and as such it is analogous to the subject loving the other. *Ratio diligendi* and *Ego cogito*: both bear the scar of a narcissism that aspires to tear itself away from – or unite itself with – the other, as from or with its own good. Aquinas, however, reveals the delight of alienation at the very moment that he posits its impossibility in the citadel of *one's own*: of the *good*. The splitting between lovers, as the one within each lover, is immediately erased by the machinery of judgment pertaining to meaning and to one's own good. (TaL 182)

Kristeva points to a profound affinity between Aquinas' and Lacan's approach (TaL 183). Although she affirms that psychoanalysis necessarily represents a practice without 'God', Aquinas' theological scheme forces it to reflect on its own pursuit of a modern 'good' that is not simply individualistic, capricious, or absurd:

At this point one will appreciate the epistemological and psychological importance of Aquinas' valorization of *amor sui*. For nature to have been 'created,' or as some might say today, more modestly, for it to be 'signifying,' was not sufficient for one to propose an ontology based on *positive values* such as the good and the true. Without necessarily

building, without yet building subjectivity, it was necessary to provide human experience with an access to that ontology. (TaL 183)

Located between Bernard's passion and Aquinas' reason, Christian discourse in Kristeva's interpretation avoids the idealistic illusions of courtly love as much as the rationalist illusions of Cartesian logic. It sets up, beyond morality, a language permeated with psychoanalytic concerns and insights.

The inclusion of "Stabat Mater" – an essay first published in French in 1976 – in *Tales of Love* testifies to the fact that Kristeva's approach elaborates a strand in her thought developed already during the 1970s. However its function is also to disrupt what she considers to be the comfortable harmony of Bernard and Aquinas's thought by injecting it with a certain unsettling aspect of feminine experience: motherhood. Kristeva's aim is to clarify, with the help of psychoanalysis, the ambiguous manner in which Christianity privileges and idealizes feminine experience (TaL 242-44 & 254), while simultaneously appropriating it and reducing its 'revolutionary' potential through an essentially masculine logic (TaL 236, 250 & 253). The text assumes the risk of threading a fine line between a psychological apology for Catholic thought, which disrupts secular and feminist discourses and a somewhat reductionist, psychological subversion of Christian theology that parallels Kristeva's thought on the dynamics of abjection. The centrality of the figure of the Virgin Mary in Catholic and Orthodox discourse thus bears witness at once to the symbolic capacity of Christian logic to subsume the heterogeneity of human experience *and* to the impossibility of its closure. "Starting with the high Christly sublimation for which it yearns and occasionally exceeds, and extending to the extralinguistic

regions of the unnamable, the Virgin Mother occupied the tremendous territory on this and that side of the parenthesis of language. She adds to the Christian trinity and to the Word that delineates their coherence the heterogeneity they salvage” (TaL 250). According to Kristeva, without this feminine dimension, Christian discourse would become deprived of much of its revolutionary capacity, its descent into ‘nonspeech’, the semiotic, or *chora* (TaL 248) and its continuing significance in contemporary Western culture. “Christianity, it is true, finds its calling in the displacement of that bio-maternal determinism through the postulate that immortality is mainly that of the name of the Father. But it does not succeed in imposing *its* symbolic revolution without relying on the feminine representation of an immortal biology.” (TaL 251)

Kristeva’s most subversive gesture revolves around her attempt at a certain displacement – although certainly not removal – of the paternal function. She does this by postulating that the figure of the Virgin Mary – a juxtaposition of the image of the powerful Queen with that of the sad but consoling Mother and the Beloved Lady – offers an effective precedent to the figure of the loving Father, along with a potent defense against death.

Man overcomes the unthinkable of death by postulating maternal love in its place – in the place and stead of death and thought. This love, of which divine love is merely a not always convincing derivation, psychologically is perhaps a recall, on the near side of early identifications, of the primal shelter that insured the survival of the newborn. (TaL 253)

As Kristeva is quick to point out, even Freud underestimated – or perhaps purposely repressed – the symbolic capacity of such a mother-figure: “One might be led to think that motherhood was a solution to neurosis and, by its very nature,

ruled out psychoanalysis as a possible other solution. Or might psychoanalysis, at this point, make way for religion?" (TaL 254) Kristeva, nevertheless, curbs the subversive character of her argument and strives for a balanced 'diagnosis' of the 'secular malaise': having mostly disposed of its Christian tradition, she asserts, Western culture remains suspended between two 'absences' – the absence of the Holy Mother and the absence of the loving Father – which leave its discourse orphaned, empty of meaning (TaL 374-75 & 378). The analyst is 'revolutionary explorer' (TaL 375) who steps into this void in an attempt to construct a new discourse from the shattered fragments of religious language – and with the help of poetic language. The analyst therefore becomes the bearer of discourses that we are no longer able to speak and that we hear occasionally only in the midst of modern literary and artistic explorations.

In the last section of *Tales of Love* Kristeva turns her attention to literary writing, as though in imitation of the critical maneuver she had performed in *Powers of Horror*. Here, again, "literature appears [...] as the privileged place where meaning is elaborated and destroyed, where it slips away when one might think that it is being renewed" (TaL 279). Constituting "an essentially amorous experience, unstabilizing the same through its identification with the other," literature thus at once emulates and subverts theological faith: "[...] today literature is both the source of 'mystical' renewal (to the extent that it provides new amatory spaces) and intrinsic negation of theology to the extent that the only faith literature conveys is the assurance, painful just the same, of its own performance as supreme authority" (TaL 279). This development no longer

suggests a mere replacement of ‘religious’ logic with ‘poetic’ logic, but rather a kind of ambiguous coincidence of the two: “In love with our own productions, under empty skies, [...] we are the faithful of the last religion, the esthetic one” (TaL 279 – despite # 2.2.2). Kristeva’s turn toward literature in *Tales of Love* in fact marks a profound difference from the ‘laughing apocalypse’ of Céline in *Powers of Horror* (# 2.2.7): the texts she reads – notably Baudelaire and Bataille – appear ‘atheological’ or ‘posttheological’ (TaL 368), perhaps even negative theological rather than ‘atheist’ in essence. They feature a language that refuses both theological ‘fetishism’ and psychological ‘realism’, and negotiates between the experience of ‘sublime divinity’ and ‘abject collapse’ (TaL 368). Kristeva’s allusion to the recent destruction of the ‘psychic space’ constituted by Christianity (TaL 376) is more cautious than celebratory in character. Having constructed Western subjectivity in its impossible ‘innerness’ – in its ceaseless movement between desire and reason, body and meaning, the ‘I’ and the ‘Other’ – out of Judeo-Greek foundations, Christian discourse cannot be avoided by contemporary subjects, stuck in the “unnamable solitude” of a mediated culture (TaL 376): “[...] the unbeliever’s world is established only through mystical delirium – thus always in a recourse to God, but a recourse that is henceforth devoid of meaning, insane. We have not escaped from the dilemma [...]” (TaL 378)

3.1.5 Suffering and Atheism in *Black Sun*

Although *Tales of Love* seeks to blur the comfortable boundaries between literary, religious, and psychoanalytic discourses, in the end it also maintains an implicit hierarchy: religious language (including the language of Christian

theology) remains a crucial resource in Western culture insofar as it is removed from the ruins of its dogmatic structure, taken up within literary and artistic practice, and translated socially and psychologically through psychoanalytic discourse. In *Black Sun*, this hierarchy mostly disappears and Kristeva assumes from the very start the necessity of a mutual contamination between the three kinds of discourse. She sums up her approach to melancholia understood as a subjective crisis that is at once a crisis of signification, by asserting that “aesthetic and particularly literary creation, and also religious discourse in its imaginary, fictional essence, set forth a device whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters, and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject’s battle with symbolic collapse” (BIS 24). While a certain psychological reductionism is still detectable in Kristeva’s language, her opening statement also indicates a significant reorientation in her logic, one that may be regarded as moving beyond the previous two strands in her thought without quite displacing them altogether:

[...] literary (and religious) representation possesses a real and imaginary effectiveness that comes closer to catharsis than elaboration; it is a therapeutic device used in all societies throughout the ages. If psychoanalysts think they are more efficacious, notably through strengthening the subject’s cognitive possibilities, they also owe it to themselves to enrich their practice by paying greater attention to these sublimatory solutions to our crises, in order to be lucid counterdepressants rather than neutralizing antidepressants. (BIS 24)

If psychoanalysis continues to play the role of a discourse that translates literary and religious discourses, Kristeva asserts that the possibilities of psychoanalytic discourse become seriously undermined if it fails to enable both ‘religious’ and ‘literary’ concerns to resonate within its practice. Psychoanalytic discourse is

able to persist in its efficacy only to the extent that it allows itself to be continually transformed in its encounter with religious and literary discourse.

At first glance *Black Sun* appears to lean heavily in the direction of literary ‘solutions’ to the collapse of meaning: out of the four analyses of texts that Kristeva offers here, three address literary figures (Nerval, Dostoyevsky, and Duras) and only one attempts an explication of a ‘religious’ work (Holbein’s ‘Dead Christ’ painting). In fact, Kristeva’s readings consistently present a radical blurring – or, better yet, a mutual translation – of ‘literary’ and ‘religious’ motifs within each text. The question of the essential difference between ‘religious’ and ‘literary’ production, which has informed much of her previous thought, becomes displaced in favor of what she considers a more fundamental concern with “a specific economy of *imaginary discourses* as they have been produced within Western tradition (heir to Greek and Roman antiquity, Judaism, and Christianity) [...] constituted very close to depression and at the same time show[ing] a necessary shift from depression to possible meaning” (BIS 100, emphasis added). In this reading, religion, literature, and art are fundamentally inseparable in the constitution of the entire symbolic tradition of the Western subject, reinforce one another in their sublimatory, allegorical capacity (BIS 99) as well as in their capacity to put in play the “musicalization of signifiers, polyphony of lexemes, dislocation of lexical, syntactic, and narrative units,” in order to enable “a psychic transformation of the speaking being between the two limits of nonmeaning and meaning, Satan and God, fall and Resurrection.” (BIS 101)

One might raise the objection that such blurring of boundaries between religion and literature inevitably results in the reduction of all religious claims to the status of mere allegory. Kristeva would likely not object to this; after all, she is careful to point out at the onset that she considers religion to be nothing more and nothing less than a necessary *fiction* (BIS 24). However, her opening argument makes it obvious that the term ‘fiction’ must be understood here outside the traditional dichotomy – as positivist and rationalist as it is metaphysical in character – according to which ‘fiction’ is opposed to ‘fact’. In Kristeva’s scheme, fiction – whether in its ‘religious’ or ‘literary’ sense – is coextensive with the imaginary life of the speaking subject and, as such, impossible to extract from its experience of meaning. Although she has adopted the notion of the ‘imaginary register’ from Lacan, her understanding of this notion is significantly different: whereas in Lacan’s scheme, the *imaginary* is associated with the Transcendental Ego as a problematic, fictional construct that must be deconstructed in order for analysis to proceed, Kristeva’s critique of the Transcendental Ego does not prevent her from defending the fundamental necessity of imaginary/fictional constructions, which she considers to be both fragile and revolutionary in the life of the subject. As she indicates, due to its inherently imaginary or fictional nature, ‘meaning’ can never be either absolutely ‘objective’ or absolutely ‘transcendental’. This places scientific and religious ‘truths’ equally at risk:

[...] the *imaginary* is neither the objective description that will reach its highest point in science nor theological idealism that will be satisfied with reaching the symbolic uniqueness of a beyond. The experience of *nameable melancholia* opens up the space of a necessarily heterogeneous subjectivity, torn between the two co-necessary and co-present centers of opacity and ideal. (BIS 100)

For this reason, too, Kristeva does not hesitate to observe that “The depressed person is a radical, sullen atheist” (BIS 5). First and foremost “deprived of meaning” or, “not believing in Thou” (BIS 14), the depressed subject remains dedicated to a ‘lost mother’ and unable to connect either to an other or to the Other of ‘symbolic Law’ (BIS 23-24). This idea appears in Kristeva’s work as early as 1975 when, in her analysis of Beckett’s play, *Not I* (1972), she mentions “the impossibility of God’s existence for a speaking subject lacking any object of signification and/or love” (DL 142). Kristeva’s psychoanalytic exploration of ‘imaginary experience’ – together with the ‘illusions’ and ‘disillusions’ that accompany it – is reducible neither to theological claims nor to secular commitments (BIS 102). Beyond hasty divisions into religious or atheist ‘truths’, her primary aim is to respond to a radical crisis of subjectivity and to engage with any discourse able to accompany it. In this regard, Christian logic constitutes the essential dimension of any Western symbolic attempt to assume this task – whether ‘literary’, ‘philosophical’, or ‘psychological’ in name: “The imaginative capability of Western man, which is fulfilled within Christianity, is the ability to transfer meaning to the very place where it was lost in death and/or nonmeaning. This is a survival of idealization [...]” (BIS 103). All of the ‘case studies’ Kristeva undertakes in *Black Sun* bear witness to the fundamental persistence of Christian concerns in Western culture as well as to the limits of both ‘religion’ and ‘atheism’.

3.1.6 Figures of Christian Suffering: Holbein, Dostoyevsky, Nerval, Duras

The first of these studies discusses Hans Holbein the Younger's (1497-1543) painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1522). It resembles Kristeva's early studies of Giotto and Bellini, insofar as its main focus is the capacity of a visual image to affect a revolutionary transformation in perspective without abolishing the necessity of representation. What is at stake here, however, is a meditation on the question that increasingly permeates all of Kristeva's psychoanalytic practice, if mostly on an implicit level: Is it possible to speak/represent, and thus to *rend meaningful*, the 'death of God'? Can this task be accomplished once and for all or, on the contrary, must we embrace its essential interminability? Holbein's painting is significant in this respect for the manner in which it portrays Christ's death appears final, and offers no possibility of Resurrection, as though the artist intended to draw the viewer to the very brink of a certain atheism which he cannot quite affirm:

Christ's dereliction is here at its worst: forsaken by the Father, he is apart from all of us. Unless Holbein, whose mind [...] does not appear to have lead him across the threshold of atheism, wanted to include us, humans, foreigners, spectators that we are, forthrightly in this crucial moment of Christ's life. With no intermediary, suggestion, or indoctrination, whether pictorial or theological, other than our ability to imagine death, we are led to collapse in the horror of the caesura constituted by death or to dream of an invisible beyond. (BIS 113)

In distinction to the common contemporary depictions of Christ's Passion, Holbein's Christ is radically isolated and his death deprived of transcendental glory. Yet Kristeva admires Holbein's work for its avoidance of the excesses of both symbolic 'luxuriance' and iconoclast rejection of representation (BIS 121-22). She regards his painting as an attempt to confront the horror of the

unthinkable and to ‘humanize’ it beyond the claims of “shallow mercantilism of the official Church” (BIS 121) on the one hand, and cynical atheism on the other. Holbein’s vision is “that of man subject to death, man embracing Death, absorbing it into his very being, integrating it not as a condition for glory or a consequence of a sinful nature but as the ultimate essence of his desacralized reality, which is the foundation of a new dignity” (BIS 118). Dangerous in its impact, Holbein’s image succeeds insofar as it embodies within itself the very limit of meaning, while affirming the meaningful, if risky and painful, character of that gesture. In a sense, Kristeva’s analysis suggests that what the image depicts is nothing more and nothing less than the *absolute limit itself* (BIS 122, 124-27 & 135-37). Holbein “leads us, at any rate, to the ultimate edge of belief, to the threshold of nonmeaning” (BIS 135). Yet, in “the discipline of a rigorous technique” offered by Holbein’s effort, this absolute limit becomes simultaneously an experience of faith and beauty; or, to be more exact, of the inseparability of life and death, suffering and love, faith and doubt, beauty and horror, meaning and nonmeaning. (BIS 137)

Kristeva then pursues the question of the ‘death of God’ along a path that allows for an intimate correspondence between psychoanalytic and theological concerns.

But how is it possible for God to die? Let us briefly return to the evangelical meaning of Christ’s death. Theological, hermetic, and doctrinal accounts of the ‘mystery of redemption’ are numerous, complex, and contradictory. While the analyst cannot accept them, he or she might try, by examining them, to discover the meaning of the text as it unfolds within his or her hearing. (BIS 129)

That the analyst cannot accept the ‘truth’ of Christian revelation testifies, in Kristeva’s formulation here, as much to her awareness of the limits of psychoanalytic discourse as to her need to remind the reader of her own conviction concerning the ‘fictional’ character of this revelation. At the same time, she seeks a kind of ‘common ground’ upon which psychoanalytic and theological discourses can encounter each other in a mutually *productive* – rather than mutually *exclusive* – manner. Kristeva thus returns to the motif of ‘sacrifice’, whose logic she considers at once preserved and transcended in the death of Christ as “the offering of an acceptable and accepted gift rather than the violence of shed blood. The generous change of the ‘victim’ into a saving, meditating ‘offering’ under the sway of a loving God is without doubt, in its essence, specifically Christian” (BIS 131). Kristeva appreciates the psychological significance of this theological event insofar as it constitutes the Western subject around an essential discontinuity or *severance*, “which is the truth of human psychic life” (BIS 137): the realization of desire as revolving around an impenetrable limit simultaneously accompanied by the gift of love. “Because Christianity set that rupture at the very heart of the absolute subject – Christ; because it represented it as a Passion that was the solidary lining of his Resurrection, his glory, and his eternity, it brought to consciousness the essential dramas that are internal to the becoming of each and every subject. It thus endows itself with a tremendous cathartic power” (BIS 132). The death of Christ, in Kristeva’s interpretation, can in fact be regarded as the symbol par excellence of the impossible coincidence between love and suffering, life and death, faith and

doubt in the experience of every speaking being. It accompanies subjective affliction to the point of symbolic collapse through its enormous capacity to offer a sense of identification to the subject, rather than through superficial relief (BIS 133):

On the basis of that identification, one that is admittedly too anthropological and psychological from the point of view of a strict theology, man is nevertheless provided with a powerful symbolic device that allows him to experience death and resurrection even in his physical body, thanks to the strength of imaginary identification – and of its actual effects – with the absolute Subject (Christ).
(BIS 134)

In Kristeva's analysis, Holbein's minimalism embodies the very essence of that experience and turns the immediacy of the horror of death into an affirmation of faith or at least forgiveness.

Dostoyevsky's (1821-1881) work, Kristeva suggests, follows Holbein's experience in an intimate fashion,³ and elaborates the Christian logic of forgiveness in the context of what Kristeva calls the 'writing of suffering'. Kristeva admires Dostoyevsky for his ability to stage the manner in which human consciousness is fundamentally constituted around suffering (BIS 181-82): suffering marks the difference between the subject and the other; it marks subjectivity as the experience of an irreversible loss, but it also enables the subject's entry into language. "Likewise, with Dostoyevsky the Christian suffering – a major evidence of humanity – is the sign of man's dependency on divine Law, as well as of his irremediable difference in relation to the Law" (BIS 184). Job would hence be the Dostoyevskian character par excellence (BIS 185-

³ Indeed, as Kristeva observes, Dostoyevsky makes references to Holbein's image in his novel *The Idiot* (1868-69); see BIS 107-8.

86). Conversely, the absence of suffering as an essential ‘truth’ of humanity leads in the direction of a nihilist atheism: Job, deprived of God, assumes God’s vacant spot. “The depressed person’s narcissism becomes inverted in the mania of atheistic terrorism: Kirillov is the man without God who has taken God’s place. Suffering ceases so that death might assert itself [...]. *God does not exist – I am God – I do not exist – I commit suicide* – such would be the paradoxical logic of the negation of an absolute paternity or divinity [...].” (BIS 186). Dostoyevsky’s writing subsumes nihilistic tendencies and, beyond them, bears witness to the necessity of an affirmation of faith: “We know that the metaphysical meaning of such behavior is the nihilistic negation of the supreme value, which also reveals an inability to symbolize, think, and assume suffering. With Dostoyevsky, nihilism arouses the believer’s revolt against transcendental erasing” (BIS 187). In this context, the experience of the writer who holds onto language in the midst of meaninglessness, imitates the experience of the religious exile or martyr who calls upon God (Job), which in turn the analyst finds in the experience of the suffering, modern analysand.

Above all, Dostoyevsky is able to transcend nihilism through an affirmative elaboration of the dynamics of forgiveness in his work: “[...] between suffering and acting out, aesthetic activity constitutes forgiveness. This is where one notices the imprint of Dostoyevsky’s orthodox Christianity, which thoroughly imbues his work” (BIS 190). In Dostoyevsky’s writing, forgiveness becomes coextensive with the experience of reconciliation and resurrection with the other, through the other, and for the other (BIS 195). This entails, first and foremost, the

affirmation of meaning beyond fixedness and the affirmation of love without a mere denial of suffering and alienation. “Forgiveness, as a gesture of assertion and inscription of meaning, carries within itself, as a lining, erosion of meaning, melancholia, and abjection. By including them it displaces them; by absorbing them it transforms them and binds them for someone else” (BIS 206).

Forgiveness constitutes an impossible gift (literary and artistic as much as religious) that breaks the economic logic of hatred, violence, or rejection. As such,

Forgiveness is ahistorical. It breaks the concatenation of causes and effects, crimes and punishment, it stays the time of actions. A strange place opens up in a timelessness that is not one of the primitive unconscious, desiring and murderous, but its counterpart – its sublimation with full knowledge of the facts, a loving harmony that is aware of its violences but accommodates them, elsewhere. (BIS 200)

Once again, Kristeva acknowledges that psychoanalysis remains limited in its capacities unless it opens itself to the Christian experience. Nowhere else in her previous work does she assert as explicitly as she does here that the rejection of Christian logic may itself be a form of nihilism:

Indeed, any modern imprecation against Christianity – up to and including Nietzsche’s – is an imprecation against forgiveness. Such ‘forgiveness’, however, understood as connivance with degradation, moral softening, and refusal of power is perhaps only the image one has of decadent Christianity. On the other hand, the *solemnity* of forgiveness – as it functions in theological tradition and as it is rehabilitated in aesthetic experience, which identifies with abjection in order to traverse it, name it, expend it – is inherent in the economy of psychic rebirth.
(BIS 190)

Confronted with this experience, Kristeva adds, it should be easy even for an atheist analyst to “understand those who believe that God alone can forgive. In

Christianity, however, the stay, divine to be sure, of crimes and punishment is *first* the work of men” (BIS 200). In the context of the analytic relationship, forgiveness assumes the logic of a gift passed from the subject who listens to another who is incapable of forgiving (oneself or the other), and testifies to the fact that the unconscious is ‘reinscribable’ (BIS 205) through a loving discourse: “Forgiveness does not cleanse actions. It raises the unconscious from beneath the actions and has it meet a loving other – an other who does not judge but hears my truth in the availability of love, and for that very reason allows me to be reborn” (BIS 205). Psychoanalytic discourse, in this scheme, turns out to constitute a movement of discourse that remains meaningless unless it incorporates into itself the dynamics of religious experience. On the other hand, this discourse must also resemble the experience found in literary or artistic production:

‘There is a meaning’: this is an eminently transferential gesture that causes a third party to exist for and through an other. *Forgiveness emerges first as the setting up of a form*. It has the effect of an acting out, a doing, a *poiesis*. Giving shape to relations between insulted and humiliated individuals – group harmony. Giving shape to signs – harmony of the work, without exegesis, without explanation, without understanding. Technique and art. (BIS 206)

In this manner, Kristeva’s approach succeeds in preserving an unresolvable tension between analytic, religious, and literary experience: the three kinds of discourse remain necessarily distinct, while at the same time the *precise* nature of their difference cannot be decided in advance, and perhaps can never be decided once and for all. Kristeva allows for this undecidability to disseminate itself in several directions at once, and she magnifies its effect in the second half of her analysis of Dostoyevsky (BIS 208-17), which presents a rather elaborate

consideration of the development of the Christian Trinity and the Orthodox/Catholic schism in the understanding of its dynamics (*Per Filium/Filioque*), as well as some of its spiritual, artistic, and psychological implications. Kristeva's intent is to highlight what she regards as the *originality* of Orthodox logic: its attempt to explore the unstable but productive relationship between difference and identity, which, Kristeva argues, becomes partially lost in the Catholic emphasis on autonomy and equality:

Difference and identity, rather than autonomy and equality, did on the contrary build up the Eastern Trinity, which consequently became the source of ecstasy and mysticism. Orthodoxy nurtured it by adoring, beyond oppositions, a sense of fullness where each person of the Trinity was linked to and identified with all others – an erotic fusion. In that 'Borromean' logic of Orthodox Trinity, the psychic space of the believer opened to the most violent movements of passion for rapture or death, distinguished merely to be joined in the unity of divine love. (BIS 211)

This theological arrangement which establishes "the propensity of Orthodox discourse to explore suffering and mercy" (BIS 211) manifests itself as the basis of Dostoyevsky's writing in a manner that disavows a simple separation of religious and literary concerns. Kristeva believes that the 'Borromean logic' of the Orthodox Trinity is closely mirrored in the Lacanian triad of psychological 'registers', although she also acknowledges that her attempt to 'rationalize' theological issues has its limits: "The Borromean knot that Lacan used as metaphor of the unity and the difference between the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic perhaps allows one to think out this [Trinitarian] logic, assuming that it is necessary to rationalize it" (BIS 210). The limits of a psychological investigation of religious and literary experience are mentioned elsewhere in the discussion:

The writer's position is that of speech: a symbolic configuration absorbs and replaces forgiveness as emotional impulse, mercy, anthropomorphic compassion. To say that the work of art is a forgiving already implies leaving psychological forgiveness (but without ignoring it) for a singular act – that of naming and composing. One will thus be unable to understand why art is forgiveness without examining all the levels at which forgiveness functions and is exhausted. One should begin with that of psychological, subjective identification, with suffering, and the affection of others, the 'characters' and oneself, supported in Dostoyevsky's writings with Orthodox faith. (BIS 214)

It is of utmost importance in this respect to note that the concern with the limits of psychoanalysis, like Kristeva's earlier and current concern with the limits of religion and theology, is extended in the course of her analyses in *Black Sun* to literary language as well and emphasized in a manner never encountered in her previous work. This emphasis is most evident in the discussions of Gérard de Nerval's (1808-1855) poem, "The Disinherited" (1853), and of the writings of Marguerite Duras (1914-1996). Although Nerval's work puts into play the dynamics of a resurrection, its success is not guaranteed; in fact, Nerval's nervous breakdown and his eventual suicide testify to the ambiguous efficacy of any writer's or artist's struggle with suffering, loss, and death. Significantly, Kristeva's analysis focuses on the lack of an effective religious dimension in Nerval's literary struggle:

Christ forsaken by his father, Christ's passion as he descends into hell alone, attract Nerval who interprets this as a signal, at the very heart of Christian religion, of the 'death of God' proclaimed by Jean Paul [Richter], whom Nerval quotes in the epigraph. Abandoned by his father who thus renounced his almightiness, Christ dies and drags every creature down into the abyss. (BIS 163)

Kristeva suggests that Nerval's atheist anguish corresponds to a more extensive sense of nihilism that increasingly permeated European thought and writing in the

course of the nineteenth century, and that is detectable in both Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. Nerval identifies with Christ when he states: “Abyss! Abyss! Abyss! / God is missing from the altar where I am the victim... / God is no more!” (BS 164) At the same time, Kristeva observes that Nerval attempts to find temporary salvation at the very limits of signification by replacing the ‘dead God’ with the “diffuse spirituality” of an obscure, hidden God, “the ultimate refuge of a psychic identity in catastrophic anguish” (BIS 164). Like Holbein and Dostoyevsky, Nerval seeks meaning – religious as much as poetic – within a radical collapse of meaning. “Thus the longing for forgiveness, an attempt to belong to the religion that promises an afterlife, haunts the struggle against melancholia and doubling” (BIS 168-69). Nevertheless, Kristeva remains uncertain as to the psychic and spiritual resources offered by the ‘object’ Nerval identifies with and struggles to secure within the gaps of his language. “Confronting the ‘black sun of melancholia’ the narrator asserts, ‘God is the Sun’. Is this a resurrectional metaphor or a reversal with respect to a solidary obverse seen as the ‘black sun’?” (BIS 169) In the end, Nerval’s poetic brilliance exhausts itself in the face of the fact that the other, beyond reach but perpetually evoked in the verses, “did not show up at the appointment.” (BIS 172)

In the case of Duras, writing in the wake of two major political, social, and spiritual catastrophes – Auschwitz and Hiroshima – and desperately attempting to exorcise the ‘malady of death’ they have revealed at the heart of humanity and its civilizations (BIS 221), the situation is radically more dire; it constitutes, in Kristeva’s view, literature as the very embodiment of the failure of language and

representation. Kristeva finds in Duras's writings a "complicity with illness" (BIS 228) that brings the reader to the verge of madness without offering a psychological, literary or religious 'solution', even a temporary one: "Lacking recovery or God, having neither value nor beauty other than illness itself seized at the place of its essential rupture, never has art had so little cathartic potential" (BIS 228). If Kristeva nonetheless regards Duras's work as fundamental and necessary today, it is to the extent that the abyss of 'silence' contained in its midst "accompanies the distress that has certainly been triggered and increased by the contemporary world but proves to be essential and transhistorical" (BIS 258). In other words, Duras brings to attention the inevitability of the crisis of meaning that afflicts modernity by offering a "literature of limits" which "displays the limits of the nameable" (BIS 258). Insofar as this crisis is at stake, neither 'religion' nor 'atheism' can provide a final response. The question of limits cannot be avoided in any context and by any discourse. This concern permeates all of Kristeva's psychoanalytic inquiries in a fundamental manner and constitutes a crucial reason behind her increasing attempt to establish psychoanalytic language as the movement of a dialogical encounter between psychological, literary, religious, political, and ethical discourses, between their respective experiences of 'sense' and 'nonsense' or meaning and nonmeaning, and toward the inherent 'impossibility' of language and representation.

In this sense, Kristeva's psychoanalytic language closely parallels the movements of deconstruction and negative theology. In numerous instances, psychoanalysis assumes the role of a kind of 'religion without religion'. Before

engaging in a critical discussion of this dimension of Kristeva's thought, let us therefore consider some aspects of Derrida's encounter with negative theology and its attempt to avoid naming the impossible.

3.2 The Limits of Atheism in Derrida's 'Religion without Religion'

We act as though we had some common sense of what 'religion' means through the languages that we believe...we know how to speak. We believe in the minimal trustworthiness of the word. [...] Well... nothing is less pre-assured than such a Faktum...and the entire question of religion comes down, perhaps, to this lack of assurance.

Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge".
In *Acts of Religion* 2002, p. 44

Derrida's refusal to reduce *différance* to a determinable concept parallels the (Christian) negative theological tradition and its complex effort to avoid endowing God with any humanly definable or calculable attributes. Derrida himself admitted, as early as 1968, that "the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology" (MP 6). At the same time, he refused to draw a determinate link between deconstructive tactics and any theological project, even one grounded in negations or denials. This refusal is based on Derrida's belief that, while negative theology recognizes the limitations of language with regard to God, it nonetheless affirms an all too metaphysical divine *hyperessence* (DNT 77-78) beyond Being – and, in a rather metaphysical manner, seeks a path beyond the confines of language, that

would lead to a final, unmediated union with that hyperessence (DNT 79-80). The thought of *différance* necessarily upsets this scheme, even if it does not altogether reject the brilliance of its tactical maneuvers and its admirable effort to preserve God's independence from the conceptual models of Western metaphysics. Nonetheless, Derrida's early observations concerning negative theology led some scholars – most notably Jean-Luc Marion – to suggest that Derrida did not fully appreciate the radically negative sense of the prefix 'hyper' in *hyperessentiality*.⁴ What is at stake in this regard is more than just a defense of negative theology; in an important sense, the debate raises the question of priority: is deconstruction an example of negative theology, or is negative theology an example of a deconstructive gesture?

Derrida's two essays, *How to Avoid Speaking: Denials* (1987) and *Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices* (1991), may be regarded as his direct response to this question, which is also the question of the relationship between deconstruction and negative theology. In a typical maneuver, however, Derrida avoids a direct confrontation leading up to a final solution. Instead, these two texts pursue a series of interrelated motifs in a process of constant displacement and deferral, in order to allow the whole problematic to resonate in a different manner and to open up a path whereby deconstruction and negative theology accompany one another in a kind of parallel movement marked by points of intersection of rupture. Consequently, the two texts may be considered as offering a complex and intriguing meditation on *silence* and *translation* – more

⁴ For detailed critical discussion of this controversy see Dugdale, 1996, pp. 14-28 & 45-79 – bibl. 3.2.

precisely, on the *unavoidability of both*. The question of priority (‘What is an example of what?’) becomes increasingly displaced in order to make room for a parallel, albeit significantly different question, namely: to what extent are these two discourses – one Christian, the other (allegedly) atheist – mutually translatable? And what is it that, in the irreducible singularity of their idiom, resists or undermines proper translation?

3.2.1 Deconstruction and Negative Theology

How to Avoid Speaking: Denials unfolds the deconstructive gesture insofar as it *assumes* and *performs* negative theology while dispersing the convenient unity of what goes under that name (DNT 73-74). As Ilse N. Bulhof observes, in Derrida’s understanding “Even Dionysius speaks in the plural of negative *theologies*” (FIG 208). This is certainly *repetition*, but – to remain loyal to Derrida’s own language – repetition with a difference, or repetition *without* repetition. This always turns out to be common to all negative theologies: the repetition of a denial, which nonetheless also constitutes an affirmation of sorts. One cannot speak, one must speak; one must remain silent where silence as such is always already impossible. In this scenario, nothing is as simple as it seems. At the very onset of his discussion Derrida reminds the reader that those who think otherwise have understood little concerning both negative theology and deconstruction (DNT 74), and hence have found it easy enough to misunderstand their relationship, which is a relationship without relationship. What the two discourses have in common is a fundamental concern with the question of *avoidance*: negative theology seeks to avoid the kind of speech that avoids God

precisely by speaking too comfortably *about* God, while at the same time avoiding the kind of silence that is itself a form of avoidance, like the silence of all comfortable atheism. Deconstruction assumes a similar task vis-à-vis the *différance* that inhabits all language, perpetually rehearsing the disruption of any language that attempts to avoid it, without settling on the kind of silence that, far from being loyal to *différance*, avoids it altogether, and affirms instead the absoluteness of indifference. In this sense Derrida recognizes the radical intimacy between negative theology and deconstruction, one that makes them appear *almost* indistinguishable at times. And yet, this apparent indistinguishability between these two ‘modes’ of speaking remains haunted by the question of their difference. Derrida’s essay attempts to trace this issue more directly than ever before and in a highly careful manner.

Derrida’s argument in this text is not easy to follow. There are enough indications, however, that his central concern is not simply that negative theology claims to move beyond metaphysical language while simultaneously preserving a place of hyper-metaphysical presence, whereby ‘God’ may be said to be *both* without Being *and* more than Being (DNT 90) – in contrast to *différance*, which may be regarded as *neither* being *nor* nothing. Derrida is well aware of the fact that, despite its effort to avoid dialectical ‘reappropriation’, deconstruction itself contains an affirmative and perhaps even *hyperaffirmative* gesture, for instance in the notion of language as *promise*, “The promise of a ‘one must speak’, ‘one must – not avoid speaking’” (DNT 81). Within the confines of such a promise deconstruction constantly must both speak and remain silent (DNT 84). This

promise cannot be simply presumed to achieve a clean, final break with metaphysics. What is of central importance is whether, unlike deconstruction's constant attempt to maintain an opening within all language and thought, the strategies of negative theology – despite its admirable critique of dogmatic ontology – can achieve a kind of 'hyper-metaphysical' closure around its radically negative and potentially exclusivist and presumptuously unmediated access to the 'wholly other' (FIG 187-88). As far as Derrida is concerned, while negative theology correctly asserts the impossibility of translation with respect to God's name, it nevertheless also forgets too conveniently the impossibility of pure names uncontaminated by language. In other words, negative theology's attempt to seek an unmediated experience of God beyond His given names goes simultaneously too far and not far enough. The question that forms the first part of the title of Derrida's text – 'How to avoid speaking?' – announces a meditation on this impossibility.

The issue at stake here concerns Derrida's famous dictum, 'There is nothing outside context'. 'God' is not reducible to the metaphysical logic of human categories, such as Being and nonbeing, presence and absence, or inside and outside. But a God who entirely transcends these categories and remains absolutely uncontaminated by language, thought, or experience, would be meaningless (FIG 243), that is to say, outside any possible human concern.⁵ Derrida respects negative theology's refusal to turn God into an accessible, packaged *product* for pseudo-religious mass-consumption. At the same time, the

⁵ Derrida elaborates this idea in his early critique of Levinas's notion of the 'wholly other' in *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (WD 79-153).

suggestion implicit in his argument is that in order to maintain God as humanly relevant, negative theology must at the very least affirm God as a kind of movement of *productivity* reducible neither to Being nor to Nothingness, presence nor absence, meaning nor non-meaning, but nevertheless somehow manifest in their non-dialectical interplay. If God's name cannot be designated properly, it nevertheless must haunt every negative sentence and, indeed in a crucial sense, *all* of language (DNT 76): an absolutely inaccessible God corresponding to no name and protected by a perfectly inaccessible language would leave no trace (DNT 118). This problematic has a particular relevance in the context of contemporary theological thought: the God of metaphysics and onto-theology may, indeed, be dead; however, the God to come – the Biblical God, for instance, who reveals/refuses His name to Moses as “I shall be who I shall be” (Exodus 3:14), the God who is forever coming – cannot simply arrive outside all frames of human speech and understanding, even if, in another sense, this God must be assumed to be both prior to, and beyond, all meaning and categorical calculation.

If Derrida is more willing than ever to accept the possibility that negative theology's hyperessential affirmation preserves a necessary open wager that undermines all onto-theology, deconstruction's challenge, nonetheless, is that this wager must be always necessarily put into play – first and foremost, the play of language – rather than being removed from all linguistic or, for that matter, categorical contamination. Although the non-concept of *différance* is itself never reducible to language, it nonetheless *always* has to do with it; in fact, *différance* can never be experienced without any categorical context. This means for Derrida

that *différance* is not a *secret*: while it cannot be defined or spoken of in the strict sense, it can nonetheless be *addressed* and put in play in any signifying practice, written or spoken. Derrida's reluctance to draw an equivocal analogy between deconstruction and negative theology has to do with his suspicion that the latter remains susceptible to a certain mystological *secrecy* (DNT 89) around its radically hyperessential 'God' – a secrecy structured (institutionally, hierarchically) around an unmediated knowledge or, indeed, non-knowledge and protected by a small, privileged community from which others can be easily excluded on the grounds that they lack the proper understanding to experience this God 'as such' (DNT 91).

The 'sacred symbols', the compositions, the signs and figures of the sacred discourse, the 'enigmas', and the 'typical symbols' are invented as 'shields' against the many... Since the promise is also an order, the allegorical veil becomes a political shield, the solid barrier of a social division; or, if you prefer, a *shibboleth*. One invents it to protect access to a knowledge which remains in *itself* inaccessible, untransmissible, unteachable. (DNT 93)

Derrida's discussion of the two modes of transmission recognized by Pseudo-Dionysius – one unspeakable/inaccessible, the other philosophical/demonstrative, each bearing the other's silence (DNT 94) – is thus a meditation on the nature and necessity of the 'secret': "At the intersection of the secret and of the nonsecret, what is the secret?" (DNT 94) This returns our discussion to the question of context, of both the unavoidability of context and the impossibility of contextual closure. Hence the paradox: "[W]hat to do in order that the secret remain secret? How to make it known, in order that the secret of the secret – as such – not remain secret?" (DNT 94-95) The questions of secrecy and context turn out to be inseparable from the question of God: the secret of negative theology is, as it

were, the nameless name of its hyperessential God; yet it is humanly impossible to experience (should we say: take?) God out of context, even if all contexts, including that of negative theology, have permeable boundaries. Neither the peculiar, inaccessible language of negative theology nor the secret it revolves around can be delimited in an absolute manner, without a gesture of deliberate, violent exclusion of all other contexts across which they disseminate themselves. Deconstruction's atheological, though not necessarily atheist secret, contrary to the temptation open to negative theology, is that there is no secret *as such* (DNT 95), even if certain 'things' (Being, God, *différance*) must be preserved in the silence of their 'secrecy' – that is, not defined or spoken *about* in the strict sense.

3.2.2 Speaking without Speaking

Derrida's critique, to be sure, stops short of an outright accusation: negative theology's *susceptibility* to a hyperessential affirmation, on the one hand, and to an exclusivist entrenchment, on the other, is never simply *unavoidable*. What saves negative theology from this constant susceptibility and keeps the wager open is, in the first case, the never quite certain *possibility* that the *hyperousios* (or *hyperousioutes*) "exceeds the alternative of a theism or an atheism which would only set itself against what one calls, sometimes ingenuously, the existence of God" (DNT 77); and, in the second case, its reliance on *prayer*, insofar as prayer constitutes a speaking *towards* God – hence, a speaking that preserves *both* a relationship *and* a necessary distance between the speaker and God, preventing any absolute, exclusive claims upon the latter. As Derrida notes, Pseudo-Dionysius begins his *Mystical Theology* with a prayer (DNT 89) in a

manner that maintains a relationship between the author and God, on the one hand, and the author and reader, on the other. Similarly, Augustine's *Confessions* as a whole are structured precisely in this manner: as a prayer addressed to God, but never exclusively, for Augustine at all times invites the reader to become both *witness* to, and *participant* in, his confessional prayer. Derrida goes as far as to affirm that deconstruction as such is structured like a prayer insofar as it constitutes a *practice* that continually addresses itself to the other and responds to the summons of the other. In this sense, both negative theology and deconstruction are inscribed within the promise of language, a promise that compels them "at the extreme limit to affirm or to confirm by speech at least this: that it is necessary to be silent; and to be silent concerning that about which one cannot speak." (DNT 84)

Derrida's direct allusion to Wittgenstein's famous dictum: "Concerning that about which one cannot speak, one must remain silent,"⁶ brings his meditation on silence, which had already begun in *Différance*, to a culminating point. Derrida's suggestion here is that Wittgenstein's dictum has been interpreted too hastily as a simple injunction to silence. The imperative to remain silent about that which cannot be spoken ironically does not let silence be silence, but rather fits into a certain formalist/positivist attitude which either wants to grasp things in their essence, or else discard them from language and thought. Such an imperative is not motivated by a genuine concern for that which cannot be spoken, but rather by a certain need to preserve the semblance of mastery: let

⁶ DNT 81. – Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York, NY: Cosimo, Inc., 2007), p. 27. Is not this also a response to Kant, who forbids reason to speak of certain matters?

us speak only of that of which we *can* speak; at least then, speech will remain our fortress, furnished with nothing but truth. As for the rest, let it remain silent – and *irrelevant*! According to Derrida, Wittgenstein’s injunction as well as the logic of negative theology as understood by Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, contains an open wager: “Even if I decide to be silent, even if I decide to promise nothing, not to commit myself to saying something that would confirm once again the destination *of* speech, and the destination *toward* speech, this silence yet remains a modality of speech: a memory of promise and a promise of memory” (DNT 84). Derrida interprets the French question, ‘Comment ne pas dire?’ as echoing this double meaning of his concern with silence: how to avoid speaking, on the one hand, and “how, in speaking, not to say this or that, in this or that manner? In other words: how, in saying and speaking, to avoid this or that discursive, logical, rhetorical mode? [...] Which comes back to the apparently inverse question: How to say, how to speak?”⁷ The distinction between speech and silence belongs to the same problematic, metaphysical logic as the distinctions between Being and non-being, presence and absence, subject and object. This belonging results in an uneasiness which haunts both negative theology and deconstruction – an uneasiness that cannot be properly resolved, but only affirmed with respect to the always already prior summons of the other,

⁷ DNT 85. – In *The Other Side of Silence: The Poet at the Limits of Language* (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1970, pp. 69-70), Jerzy Peterkiewicz makes an intriguingly similar observation in regards to Norwid’s (a 19th century Polish poet) poetic concept of *przemilczanie* – a term that resists English translation, and suggests a *passing over in silence*, i.e., a deliberate, rather than passive, experience of silence by way of speech, or *language as an event that remembers silence* without simply filling it in.

which, “having always already preceded the speech to which it has never been present a first time, announces itself in advance as a *recall*.” (DNT 97)

Negative theology and deconstruction share the responsibility of recognizing that their capacity for speaking comes from this other – whether this other is inscribed under the name(s) of God or under (non)concepts such as *différance*, trace, or mark – and its enigmatic, but not quite secret, summons (DNT 98). “Thus, at the moment when the question ‘How to avoid speaking?’ arises, it is already too late. There was no longer any question of not speaking. Language has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary, to speak” (DNT 99). Silence is impossible; but it cannot be merely filled in with hasty and presumptuous talk. All speech – including the ‘speech’ of deconstruction – must hence begin with a prayer and proceed by way of prayer.

Negative theology revolves around the following paradox: “God’s command to remain silent carries with it God’s promise to make that silence possible, and to speak God’s command without breaking the silence. In fact, the very event of revelation carries within it this command and this promise; one cannot separate the event of divine revelation and the command to remain silent” (SiP 87). Such a paradox avoids falling into contradiction by means of prayer, for “Prayer keeps the silent secret by not speaking *about* God, but avoids ‘mere’ silence by speaking *to* God. One could say, perhaps, that to pray is to speak without speaking” (SiP 90). If, however, Derrida has learned how to pray from Dionysius or Augustine, his prayer – like every other deconstructive gesture – is

marked by a minute, yet crucial difference, which has to do with destination. Inscribed into the silent prayers of negative theology is at the very least the hope – if not the promise – of a ‘mystological’ (SiP 83) union with God,⁸ whereas deconstruction prays to the impossible Other, the ‘Not-One’ or ‘no one’ with whom there can never be proper union (SiP 43-44). Even the radical negativity of Jean-Luc Marion’s prayer which places God under erasure does not quite escape this logic; as Marion himself asserts, the necessity of respectful silence vis-à-vis God does not constitute a simple atheism, or even agnosticism, but a (Christian) revelation of sorts (SiP 55-59). Or, as Rodolphe Gasché observes, Derrida contends that, in a subtle manner, prayer as praise “maintains an irreducible relation to the logical function of attribution” (Gasché, 1994, 167). Derrida is not simply trying to escape the exclusively Christian claim negative theology holds over prayer, or to avoid Dionysius or Augustine’s demand that we must follow them in a certain manner of prayer, which is the correct one (DNT 117). More importantly, he contends that it is impossible for negative theology or any other discourse to ever fully circumscribe its prayer – and its destination – in the form of a self-enclosed program: “[N]egative theology can keep its secret only by betraying it, can obey its command only by disobeying it, and can fulfill its promise only by breaking it.” (SiP 92)

Prayer must be kept open like a call; otherwise it becomes merely a demand, an imposition. One cannot finally predict in advance or even master the

⁸ According to Derrida, “‘It is necessary to start with prayers’ (*Divine Names*, 3:680d), Dionysius says [...] not so that the power present both everywhere and nowhere shall come to us but so that by our divine remembrance and invocations we ourselves shall be guided to it and be united with it” (DNT 112).

destination of prayer. The ‘priority’ of prayer for Derrida has to do precisely with this inability to assign the proper, final point of arrival. Such a situation is characteristic of all language and every discourse – including most religious discourses, perhaps also that of negative theology – attempts to resolve it with all kinds of metaphysical assurances. In Derrida’s prayer, speech is neither fully present nor fully absent, and does not embrace this all-too simple categorical division. In Antony Dugdale’s words, “Prayer addresses [...] contradictions, but it does not resolve them [...]. Prayer [...] speaks, without speaking; it remains silent, without silence” (SiP x and xii). Neither theism nor atheism can be fully affirmed by means of such prayer: God becomes one of the names for the unnameable, which can only be deferred within the confines of one’s constant address or call, like the Khôra of Plato’s *Timaeus* understood in the radical, rather than the Aristotelian or Christian, sense (SiP 80-82). In this radical sense, Derrida’s prayer *without prayer*⁹ constitutes an undecidable and yet unavoidable *aporia*. The “*neither/nor* may no longer be reconverted into *both...and*” (DNT 106), and it remains radically *atheological* in its reference to that which cannot be determined by any intelligible or unintelligible categories, but which nonetheless “obliges us to speak and to refer to it in a certain and unique manner, as to the wholly-other who is neither transcendent, absolutely distanced, nor immanent and close.” (DNT 108)

⁹ Characteristically, Derrida shies away from finally asserting that the unique form of address he is contemplating is in fact a prayer; indeed, he appears to deny that it is prayer (DNT 108). If I have taken the liberty of speaking here of Derrida’s ‘prayer without prayer’, it is due to the fact that in his later writings, Derrida becomes increasingly more comfortable with the designation of ‘prayer’, even though he continues to problematize the traditional understanding of the nature of prayer.

The problematic of prayer constitutes a convergence of themes such as avoidance, denial, or translation and increases the intimacy between negative theology and deconstruction, only to place this intimacy in question yet again: it makes the dividing line between them tremble unbearably, without erasing it altogether, as though to remind the reader that the question of limits is nowhere more apparent and nowhere more at stake than at the precise instance at which these limits, whether in their metaphysical entrenchment or their common-sense obviousness, are suspended. The issue of limit here is inseparable from the issue of avoidance, which in turn is inseparable from the issue of translation. All this reaches back toward the question of the difference – and thus the question of the relation – between language and silence that had been so important to Heidegger. It is therefore not surprising to find Derrida committing the last pages of his essay on negative theology to Heidegger's effort to avoid speaking of Being. One should not forget, in this respect, that Derrida's study *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* – also originally published in 1987 – shares some of the same concerns that inform *How to Avoid Speaking*. It is not merely by chance that, beginning his study with a discussion of the relation between the German words *Geist*, *geistig*, *geistlich* and the French/English 'spirit' or 'spiritual', Derrida asks, "Do these German words allow themselves to be *translated*? In another sense: are they *avoidable*?" (OSp 1, emphasis added) – and proceeds immediately to reflect on the meaning of avoidance:

I'm thinking in particular of all those modalities of 'avoiding' which come down to saying without saying, writing without writing, using words without using them: in quotation marks, for example, under a non-negative cross-shaped crossing out, or again in propositions of

the type: 'If I were to write a theology, as I am sometimes tempted to do, the word 'Being' ought not to appear in it,' etc.

If Derrida is willing to commit an entire study to Heidegger's failure to avoid using the word 'spirit', it is due to the fact that this failure results in a dangerous appropriation of the term within the context of the Third Reich – an appropriation that is religious as much as political in character. In other words: when he brings back the term 'spirit' in his Rectoral Address of 1933, is Heidegger not positing a kind of 'religion without religion' – a religion that, combining aspects of Greek thought, Christian thought, and German idealism, is not only metaphysical, but indeed in too close a proximity to the demands of Fascist propaganda? For this reason, among others, Derrida never tires of qualifying Heidegger's powerful assertion in his discussion of Sophocles' *Antigone*: 'Tell me what you think about translation and I will tell you who you are' (OSp 3). If Heidegger suspects that everything is a problem of translation, Derrida reminds us that this problem is always already the problem of a certain *untranslatability* between languages, concepts, texts, or contexts: it is equally impossible to avoid translation and to be ever done with the task every translation constitutes. Precisely for this reason Derrida explicitly suggests in the opening paragraph of *Of Spirit* that to translate something – that is, to presume to have translated something once and for all, whether it be 'spirit', 'God', 'death', or 'Being' – is, in a sense, to *avoid* it (OSp 1). Seen in this light, Heidegger's fault with respect to *spirit* may be said to be double: he seeks to avoid the term, particularly its difficult, Latin-Christian associations; and also, he translates it rather arbitrarily into *Geist*, and he attempts to endow it with a determinable and

somewhat impatient meaning that would have to do with the destiny of the German folk.

What intrigues Derrida in *How to Avoid Speaking* is the extent to which Heidegger's attempt to avoid speaking of Being touches upon the question of theology – or, more precisely, negative theology. While Derrida remains skeptical of Heidegger's effort to present Being in writing under *erasure* (SiP 82), his discussion characteristically inquires into a question that leaves him uncertain with regard to Heidegger's assertion that he would have to avoid the word 'Being' altogether if he were to commit himself to a properly religious deliberation on God. "It is not a matter of 'remaining silent,' as one would prefer to do, he [Heidegger] says [...], when the 'thinking of God' [...] is in question. No; the point is, rather, not to allow the word *being* to occur, on the subject of God" (DNT 126). Derrida is referring here to Heidegger's explicit, if not entirely clear, refusal to turn the 'question of Being' into a 'question of God' in his enigmatic pronouncement from 1951. Has Heidegger succeeded in this regard? Has he not, in fact, written a theology, albeit "*without the word being*" (DNT 128) – hence, a kind of negative theology? Or, on the contrary, did he not – having realized the impossibility of his intent – end up writing a theology that is haunted, through and through, by Being?

3.2.3 The Aporia of Derrida's Prayer

Derrida's own response to these questions comes itself in the form of a paradoxical refusal: "With and without the word *being*, he wrote a theology with and without God" (DNT 128). If Heidegger's efforts point to the very

impossibility of a certain avoidance – which, once again, is nothing less than the impossibility of avoiding translation, of pure access beyond contamination – what especially puzzles Derrida in this respect is the complete absence of prayer in Heidegger's work, an absence that places Heidegger's theology without theology in a peculiar non-relation to negative theology. "But there is never a prayer, not even an apostrophe, in Heidegger's rhetoric. Unlike Dionysius, he never says 'you': neither to God nor to a disciple or reader. There is no place, or in any case there is no regularly assigned place, for these 'neither true nor false' utterances that prayers are, according to Aristotle" (DNT 129). It is tempting, of course, to call Derrida's insistence on this point somewhat hasty: for doesn't Heidegger pray in *another way*, according to *another idiom* – much like Derrida himself? How should one interpret, for instance, the fact that Heidegger reads poems, which resemble prayers – poems that address the holy, the sacred, or the gods? Don't these readings undermine any simple distinction between poetic discourse and the discourse embodied by prayer, without necessarily collapsing them into one another? Doesn't this proximity resemble the impossible proximity between deconstruction and negative theology? And what of Heidegger's 'last God', the one who is always yet to come? These questions, which Derrida mysteriously avoids here, demand a more elaborate study; above all, they must be kept open. Instead, the discussion in *How to Avoid Speaking: Denials* concludes with another aporia: Is the absence of prayer in Heidegger's writings an act of deliberate exclusion grounded in his all too careless conviction that religious faith and philosophical reason are incompatible? Or does this absence rather signify

Heidegger's enormous respect for prayer (DNT 130), a respect that leaves him unwilling to contaminate this discursive act of faith with philosophical discourse? Moving from question to question, Derrida's essay appears, in the end, to remain on the threshold, refusing to cross over into any final certainty. In Dugdale's words,

The many answers that Derrida has offered only lead back towards a prior question. The question 'Is deconstruction a negative theology?' leads into 'Is hyperessentiality a form of being?' leads into 'Is the search for divine union a search for a mystological presence?' leads into "Does all silence lead to God?" He leads us across many thresholds, only to leave us, finally, at the edge of this last question, his goal and origin: 'How to avoid speaking?' (SiP 83)

Dugdale's discussion offers a productive elaboration of this problem when he ties Derrida's analysis of Heidegger here to his other essay on negative theology, *Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices* (1992). Returning to some of his earlier concerns, Derrida emphasizes the need for a multiplicity of voices around 'God' first and foremost by multiplying the voices that inhabit negative theology. He begins by reaffirming his unresolved hesitation with regard to a certain "apophatic boldness [which] always consists in going further than is reasonably permitted. That is one of the essential traits of all negative theology: passing to the limit, then crossing the frontier, including that of a community, thus of a socio-political, institutional, ecclesial reason..." (DNT 284). As Dugdale suggests, Derrida's concern with Heidegger has to do with a certain proximity between Heidegger's and Meister Eckhart's understanding of the relation between Being and God, both of which "come up against the same limit, the same divine threshold. Being, God's outer sanctuary (*parvis*), is that dimension in which

God's revelation takes place. The question of Being, though not identical with the question of God, is intimately tied to it" (SiP 83). But whereas Eckhart "passes the threshold of Being toward non-being in order to see what does not present itself" (DNT 121), "Heidegger refuses to follow Eckhart across this threshold" (SiP 84). Dugdale's own concern in this respect is: "Does Derrida follow Eckhart or Heidegger? Does Derrida remain on the threshold, or does he enter the wordless sanctuary of God?" (SiP 84) Dugdale's argument suggests quite correctly that Derrida can fully embrace neither of these two options. If there is a silence that interests him, it is a silence *without* silence, as it were. This sort of silence, as our discussion above indicates, and as Dugdale confirms, is to be found in prayer:

Prayer allows one to pass from radical negativity, eternal retreats and infinite denials into discourse. Prayer rescues the mystic both from 'saying just anything' and from 'saying nothing;' it is the essential moment that is *neither* positive *nor* negative. It *is* an act of language, yet it *is not* predicative, theoretical, *theological*, or constative. Through translation, it carries one across the threshold [...]. It is the address of the other as other, an address that therefore cannot take place. (SiP 90)

To what extent, then, does Derrida's own silent prayer – his prayer without prayer – resemble Heidegger's silence? Dugdale responds with a paradoxical proposition: "Derrida neither does not pray nor does he not-pray" (SiP 94). In other words, he "silently and secretly refuses to address 'God'" (SiP 96), while simultaneously "he recognizes that prayer cannot be avoided, that it is necessary, and that it is respectable. Thus he does in fact pray, but he keeps that prayer secret, under wraps, refusing to repeat it. He prays the prayer of denial and denies the secret of the prayer" (SiP 97). Put differently, Derrida's silent prayer affirms

a ‘desire of God’, which – to borrow Blanchot’s phrase – implies a certain ‘relation without relation’ or, as Derrida puts it in *Post-Scriptum*, occupies a certain no-place between apophatic theology and radical atheism (DNT 284), a desire concerning which it is impossible to conclude once and for all whether it comes “from God in us, from God for us, from us for God?” (DNT 285)

This prayer can only speak from *within* the no-place of a silence *without* silence. But if the prayers of negative theology avoid speaking *about* God and, instead, tend to speak *to* God, Derrida’s prayer, strictly speaking, speaks *neither about God nor to God*. As Dugdale notes, “if one insists on asking ‘But *what/whom* am I praying to?’, one has instantly stepped outside the movement of prayer and into the constative, predicative discourse that both Derrida and negative theology are constantly avoiding” (SiP 98). This contradicts John Caputo’s claim, repeated throughout *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997), that Derrida’s prayer in fact constantly echoes Saint Augustine’s question, “To whom do I pray when I pray to my God?” Perhaps, though, this apparent contradiction constitutes yet another paradox: Derrida can neither properly be asked to whom/what his prayer addresses itself, nor avoid the fact that precisely this gives his prayer the uncertainty of a question without question. If, therefore, Dugdale concludes his analysis by asking whether “the meaning of the atheist desire *of* God remains secret out of a respect *of* God” (SiP 105), one would perhaps be justified in responding: certainly, but only if we acknowledge that this desire constitutes above all the respect for an uncertainty that cannot be resolved merely by attaching the name ‘God’ to it. In other words: one must respect the

infinite and infinitely mysterious exemplarity of God (DNT 314-15) and pray towards it. Or, to apply a Nietzschean metaphor: Derrida's prayer without prayer respects the aporia of the void left in the wake of the death of the metaphysical God: "The desire of God, God as the other name of desire deals in the desert with radical atheism." (DNT 318)

3.2.4 An Impossible Translation

This brings us back to the initial question: Is deconstruction a form of negative theology – or vice versa? The short answer is that the question is unresolvable. This has to do with nothing more and nothing less than the fact that these two kinds of language can never be fully translated into one another, that each revolves around an undefinable idiom that is irreducible to any other idiom. Derrida evokes this impossibility of a final translation by means of a series of questions he poses: "How to speak suitably of negative theology? Is there a negative theology? [...] Is one not compelled to speak of negative theology according to the modes of negative theology, in a way that is at once impotent, exhausting and inexhaustible? Is there ever anything other than a 'negative theology' of 'negative theology'?" (DNT 83) This impossibility applies to any case that involves two or more languages, two or more texts, discourses, or poems; it inhabits even the singularity of every linguistic/discursive idiom 'as such', like an inexplicable crack at its very core. At the same time, deconstruction and negative theology remain on intimate terms, precisely due to their unique preoccupation with 'the impossible'. This, however, does not constitute "the

simple negative modality of the possible” (DNT 289), as Derrida writes in reference to the thought of Angelus Silesius:

This thought seems strangely familiar to the experience of what is called deconstruction. Far from being a methodical technique, a possible or necessary procedure, unrolling the law of a program and applying rules, that is, unfolding possibilities, deconstruction has often been defined as the very experience of the (impossible) possibility of the impossible, of the most impossible, a condition that deconstruction shares with the gift, the ‘yes’, the ‘come’, decision, etc. (DNT 290)

This strange parallel between the two discourses can be extended to the similar manner in which they refuse to become a system, a well-ordered corpus, a definitive method. They rather dedicate themselves to an emptying of the comfortable plenitude or certitude of traditional language. Thus, they bear witness to the necessity of *crisis* in language (DNT 296) or more precisely, to an experience of crisis as the very essence of language (DNT 299). Derrida has deconstruction in mind as well when he asserts: “Negative theology means (to say) very little, almost nothing, perhaps something other than something. Whence its inexhaustible exhaustion [...]” (DNT 295). Doesn’t this ‘inexhaustible exhaustion’ of language always already concern the very name of ‘God’, which “names nothing that might hold, not even divinity (*Gottheit*), nothing whose withdrawal does not carry away every phrase that tries to measure itself against him?” (DNT 300) Doesn’t deconstruction echo, in its own manner and according to its own idiom, the (im)possible conviction, characteristic of negative theological discourse, that “‘God’ ‘is’ the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language?” (DNT 300)

Derrida's *Post-Scriptum* maintains his original suspicion that negative theologies of every kind are filled with a "desire to say and rejoin what is *proper* to God" (DNT 310). Nevertheless, doesn't Derrida's analysis in his two essays on negative theology point to this statement beyond mere statement that "There can [...] be no question of God's death *in language*" (FIG 192)? That the moment one begins to speak, the avoidance of 'God' is no longer possible? That avoiding 'God has never been an option – can never be an option – insofar as language is concerned? That even if one thinks one has succeeded in avoiding 'God' – perhaps especially then – one's discourse will continue to be haunted by 'God'? Negative theology remains attuned to this haunting which takes place in the desert and continually brings to all language the memory of its permanent exile, which, beyond Wittgenstein's dictum on silence, affirms that "whereof one cannot speak, therefore one *must* speak."¹⁰ Precisely for this reason Derrida continues to affirm: "I trust no text that is not in some way contaminated with negative theology, and even among [*sic*] those texts that apparently do not have, want, or believe they have any relation with theology in general." (DNT 309)

The peculiar relation without relation between deconstruction and negative theology is impossible to formulate in precise and final terms. Any attempt to define this relation – including Kevin Hart's statement, which asserts "not that

¹⁰ FIG 192. – Theodor W. Adorno quotes Wittgenstein's maxim, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," and he states exactly the contrary by saying: "If philosophy can be defined at all, it is an effort to express things one cannot speak about, to help express the nonidentical despite the fact that expressing it identifies it at the same time" (Th.W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*. Cambridge, MA & London, UK: The MIT Press, 1993, pp. 101-2. German original 1963). See also Th.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973, p. 13. German original, 1966. See further Valère Novarina, "Ce dont on ne peut parler, c'est cela qu'il faut dire" (1988). In V. Novarina, *Le théâtre des paroles*. Alençon, P.O.L., 1989; and also Marie-Josée Mondzain, "Mort à la mort (L'Origine rouge)." In Alain Berset, ed. *Valère Novarina. Théâtres du verbe*. Paris: José Corti, 2001, pp. 315-327.

deconstruction is a form of negative theology but that negative theology is a form of deconstruction” (Hart, 2000, 186) – is bound to fail. Such attempts ignore the fact that deconstruction, as Derrida understands it, is not simply a method or a theory that can be compared to another method or theory; it is rather a *process* that takes place within every text, discourse, or signifying system of its own accord. Even when one assumes that deconstruction constitutes a particular practice of reading, the question concerning the nature of its relationship to negative theology cannot simply move beyond the *aporia* Derrida is at pains to preserve in his engagement with negative theology. The difference between negative theology and deconstruction, in this engagement, announces itself always *at a point of almost absolute proximity* between these two textual/discursive practices, which, as it were, bear each other’s silence without silence.¹¹ By the same token, there is no final word on the exact difference/correspondence between negative theology and deconstruction; there is only the endless task of their mutual, impossible translation, a task that both negative theology and deconstruction must at once assume and defer with respect to each other.

Beyond Derrida’s resistances toward certain *hyperessential* dimensions of negative theological language, and in spite of persisting attempts to equate deconstruction with ‘radical atheism’,¹² Derrida’s engagement with negative theology testifies to the fact that his work cannot be appropriated to the purposes

¹¹ This is also the case with Hegel over against whom Derrida situates himself in a proximity that best brings difference to the fore. On this see Maurice Boutin, “L’inouï l’indécidable selon Castelli et Derrida: Philosophie de la religion et critique du logocentrisme.” In Marco M.Olivetti, ed. *Philosophy of Religion between Ethics and Ontology*. Padua, CEDAM, 1996, pp. 815-829; p. 821, note 45.

¹² See for instance Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

of either a 'religious' or an 'atheist' project, first and foremost because this engagement dissolves any simple distinction between these two concepts. One can read a religious or non-religious text in a deconstructive manner; however to *decide* – whether from the start or in order to close or conclude the reading – in favor of a religious affirmation or an atheist denial would no longer be deconstructive and can *never* be deconstructive insofar as this would anticipate *one* reading or close the possibility of another.

Derrida's readings – like Blanchot's literary analyses – make it clear that the terms 'religion' and 'atheism' constitute nothing more and nothing less than two names for a certain crisis that afflicts *both* of them equally and simultaneously. The crisis constitutes a chasm between these two concepts, and marks the question of their difference-correspondence, thus allowing us to avoid neither of them by means of hasty proclamations and self-assured definitions. Is secular humanism a form of godless religion oriented toward the deification of Man, or is religion a form of secular humanism projected onto a transcendental Being, God, or gods? These questions multiply themselves in every direction: 'God' becomes the name for the namelessness which remains forever irreducible to any determinable human project, whether religious or atheist.

The question remains: to what extent does Kristeva's psychoanalytic practice, above and beyond its seemingly atheist allegiance, echo Derrida's observations and assume a no-place in the impossible interval between religious and atheist discourse?

3.3 Atheism and the Limits of Discourse in Kristeva's 'Talking Cure'

The naming that psychoanalytical interpretation brings about is not a definition. It is content to retrench the retrenchment (in this, it is the heir of *Verneinung*), and, as a double negation, it opens to the symbolic not as to a fixed truth but as to an indefinite questioning.

Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 2002, p. 146

What analysis reveals is that the human being does not speak and that, a fortiori, he does not interpret without the phantasm of a return to the origin, without the hypothesis of the unnameable, of a *Sachverhalt*.

Julia Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis and the Polis",
In *The Kristeva Reader* 1986, p. 310

In numerous instances Kristeva's early work testifies to her fascination with an unnamable void or an anonymous absence at the core of textual production (A. Smith 18 & 62) that places her in an intimate relation to Blanchot's literary concerns. As Anna Smith observes (88), Kristeva's essays in *Sēmēiotikē* describe poetic language as that which renders signification 'impossible' or constitutes it as an 'empty relation', or as the play of an 'impersonal' movement (Seme 91) that opens onto a 'vast expanse of emptiness' (Seme 275). At the same time, Kristeva's 'unnamable void' corresponds to a certain materiality which at once constitutes the zero-level of meaning and prevents meaning from ever attaining fullness or presence – "to the a-symbolized and a-symbolizable scission, to the nothing that is neither one nor multiple, but rather the 'infinite nothingness' spoken of by speculative philosophy, which we shall posit as matter that is always already split [...]" (RePL 157). This finds its most explicit elaboration around

Kristeva's notion of the *chora* (# 1.4.2) in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (French 1974).

These motifs found in Kristeva's textual theory permeate, in an even more pronounced manner, her psychoanalytic work, although in this context her prior interest in putting the 'unsignifiable' into play through language becomes fundamentally coextensive with a meditation on the limits of language, meaning, and representation. Kristeva's discussions of abjection, love, and suffering in her psychoanalytic trilogy (# 3.1), for instance, offer an extended attempt to accompany subjective experience and its religious, literary, and artistic productions to the very point at which they encounter the absolute limit of signification and to reflect on the implications of such limit for the speaking being. These concerns parallel, on the one hand, Blanchot's attempts to *name* the 'possible' and *respond* to the 'impossible' (InC 48 & 65) at the intersection of literary and religious experiences, and on the other, Derrida's engagements with negative theology, echoing the relationship between language and silence, the necessity of naming *and* of its avoidance, as well as the possibility and impossibility of translation. The proximity between Kristeva and Derrida is particularly intriguing in this regard: both authors pursue a form of 'analytic' practice – psychoanalysis and deconstruction – that continually crosses paths with the aims of certain kinds of religious discourse, while nonetheless remaining distinct from its affirmation of God, whether 'positive' or 'negative' in character. Of special interest is the manner in which Derrida's linguistic and epistemological concerns – how to avoid speaking *about* that of which one cannot speak (God, for

example), without for that matter ceasing to speak *toward* it? – become transposed in the direction of a ‘psychological’ concern. In other words, if Kristeva’s ‘literary’ question – how to speak to literature? (# 2.2.1) – gradually comes to coincide with the psychoanalytic question – how to speak to religion? – the unique challenge that informs Kristeva’s practice revolves around the following problem: how to *accompany* the religious discourse of another subject (the analysand, for example) which one (the analyst, for example) knows to be impossible by definition, but which one cannot by definition reject or dismiss through rationalization – that is to say, *avoid* in all of its immediate and absolute exigency?

Before tracing the development of this problematic and its connection to religion in Kristeva’s psychoanalytic studies, let us clarify some misconceptions. Anne-Marie Smith is quite correct in noting that the concern with ‘speaking the unspeakable’ permeates all of Kristeva’s thought (A.M. Smith, 1998, 68); this observation echoes Toril Moi’s: “To think the unthinkable: from the outset this has been Julia Kristeva’s project” (KrR vi). Anna Smith’s formulation is more accurate: “Rendering the unthinkable thinkable and the thinkable unthinkable is the dual strategy that Kristeva takes on [...]” (A. Smith, 1996, 70). However, Anna Smith also makes the error of suggesting that “Kristeva’s project was to name the unnamable” (107). To be sure, Kristeva’s psychoanalytic studies follow to some extent the traditional Freudian imperative to “retrace the speaking thread, put back into words that from which words have withdrawn” (DL 210). At the same time, Kristeva’s work never allows for the possibility of a *final naming* –

even and especially at the point of the termination of the analytic process. It would be more accurate to suggest, then, that Kristeva's thought remains loyal to Blanchot's double imperative: to name the possible and to respond to the impossible. The nature of the subject's experience *with* and estrangement *from* language, which plays a central role in Kristeva's psychoanalytic practice, is entirely dependent on the subject's ability of maintaining a link with the Other around whom one's discourse revolves, but which cannot be named *as such*, for this Other represents the no-place of Meaning which can never be fully occupied by any particular meaning. In Kelly Oliver's words,

meaning is never transparent. What appears at first glance to be the meaning is just a surface reflection of a deeper heterogeneous process. Moreover, a necessary element of this process is meaninglessness or non-meaning. In part, meaning is composed of nonmeaning. Therefore, meaning is neither present nor metaphysical. As much as it *is*, meaning is *not*. It is the instability of this meaning that makes psychoanalysis an ongoing process whose interpretations are always provisional, never absolute. (Oliver, 1993, 117-18)

Mirroring Derrida's thought on the 'impossible-unthinkable-unstatable' (WD 132), Kristeva's work asserts that "The experience of the other is caught between silence and language" (De Nooy, 1998, 6). Although psychoanalysis as a practice is fundamentally grounded in *discourse* – and thus must preserve the 'non-signifiable' within symbolic practice, rather than regarding it merely as 'lack' or 'nothingness' in the strict sense – its practice nonetheless turns out to be constituted around an essential, irreducible silence.

Kristeva's literary and psychoanalytic explorations echo the question implicit in the title of Heidegger's work, *What is Called Thinking?* (1968) – namely 'what calls for thinking?' – and transpose it into another and also

quintessentially Heideggerian question: ‘What calls for discourse?’ In this scheme the (Kristevan) analyst, like the (Derridean) ‘deconstructionist’, constructs a movement of discourse around “the other of which one does not speak, but to whom one speaks” (WD 123), first and foremost because as soon as one enters language the other speaks through me. Hence, if in Kristeva’s practice the analyst knows, this knowledge is essentially ‘negative’; s/he knows that at its core language/meaning contains a kind of void, and his or her aim is, in the end, to follow the uncertainty presented by this void. The analyst’s discourse thus constitutes something like the discourse of that ‘non-knowledge’ of which Blanchot states, “it is only beyond an achieved knowledge [...] that non-knowledge offers itself as the fundamental exigency to which one must respond; no longer this non-knowledge that is still only a mode of comprehension [...] but the mode of relating or of holding oneself in a relation [...] where relation is ‘impossible’” (InC 208). In Kristeva’s words: “[...] even if the patient sees the analyst as a ‘subject-presumed-to know’, analysts know that they are nothing more than questioning and questioned subjects” (NMS 89). In a sense, Kristeva’s entire psychoanalytic logic – beyond the Freudian logic of the ‘reality-principle’ – revolves around this single insight: to ‘cure’ is to teach the subject to renounce language as a tool of mastery over the world of objects, and to embrace language in its errancy or ‘sickness’ as an open, relational process, one in which neither ‘myself’ nor the ‘other’ can be fixed within an absolute identity. Kristeva’s analytic discourse is a discourse in search of ghosts, specters, phantoms, of a lost time that is nevertheless ever timeless. It is also a discourse ceaselessly in search

of itself and, above all, a discourse on the impossibility of human discourse. Its central purpose is to bring the subject back into the possibility of this impossibility, to allow her to live within the promise of this impossibility, to speak again within the summons entailed by this impossibility, which “separates the place where ‘I’ speak, reason, and understand from the one where something functions in addition to my speech [...]” (DL 210)

3.3.1 The Unnamable

In a rich and challenging early text entitled “Place Names” (1976), Kristeva posits an immediate connection between linguistic, psychoanalytic, religious, and epistemological concerns. This connection here has to do with the experience of infancy, which marks the crossroads between biology and symbol or ‘life’ and ‘discourse’ (DL 272), and which Kristeva believes to be at the root of both the Christian and the analytic experience. In a curious twist that seeks to subvert Freud’s tendency to privilege meaning as presence and that carries a resonance of Augustine’s evocations of infancy in *Confessions* 4:1, Kristeva suggests that, to some extent, the speaking subject always remains an *in-fans*, deprived of proper access to speech. “The discovery of the Freudian unconscious severs the always possible umbilication of man to the child; the notion of ‘infantile sexuality’ allows for the examination, not of he who does not speak (*in-fans*) but of what within the speaker is not yet spoken, or will always remain unsaid, unnamable within the gaps of speech.” (DL 272)

According to this logic, “neurosis – or the speaking subject – can never be dealt with at the level of drive, or through a child at zero degree of symbolism, but

rather always through a narrative ‘texture’, that is, a texture of language and phantasm [...]” (DL 276). Kristeva’s comments are guided not by the intention to contradict Freud, but rather by her concern that, within the Freudian scheme, the ‘unnamable’ can only be approached in two ways: either it must be rationalizable through speech, or else excluded from analytic consideration. Psychoanalysis, in this sense, is constituted around a certain impossibility, which is first and foremost the impossibility of constituting itself as a self-enclosed discourse with a privileged access to ‘truth’ beyond the necessity to speak *differently* (DL 281): “[...] the real stakes of a discourse on childhood within Western thought involve a confrontation between thought and what it is not, a wandering at the limits of the thinkable. Outside of poetic practice [...], the analytical solutions to this question (this Freudian ‘error’) always appear problematic [...]” (DL 276). Poetic and literary practice – but also Christianity – offer a discourse on that which, being ‘prior to the sign’, challenges the closure of meaning within a merely rational elucidation (see DL 281). A rather obscure discussion of the logic of ‘naming’ follows, and Kristeva affirms that “the dynamic and semantic ambiguity of proper names, their lack of precision as to the notion of identity, and their impact within unconscious and imaginary constructs” (DL 290). She asserts: “From our point of view, [...] the proper name is a substantive of definite reference (therefore similar to the demonstrative) but of indefinite signification (‘cognitive’ as well as ‘emotive’), arising from an uncertain position of the speaking subject’s identity and referring back to the pre-objectival state of naming” (DL 290). Naming thus always originates in, and returns to, a place that cannot be properly named. At the

end of her essay, Kristeva refers to this place as *chora* (# 1.4.2), alluding enigmatically to its strange positioning between the necessity of analysis and a certain religiosity; at the “ultimate limit of meaning where, if analysis is lacking, transcendence takes root.” (DL 291)

Kristeva pursues the question of ‘naming’ and its uncertain or ambiguous relation to ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ in a more rigorous manner in “The True-Real” (1979). The notion of the ‘true-real’ [*vréel*] that Kristeva employs in this text attempts to displace the ontological and rationalist understanding of truth as *correspondence* to ‘being’, ‘reality’, ‘judgment’, or ‘identity’, which dismisses “as *madness, mysticism* or *poetry* any attempt to articulate that impossible element which henceforth can only be designated by the Lacanian category for the *real*” (KrR 217). The ‘true-real’, in Kristeva’s view, is a more appropriate designation for a truth that has lost its secure, metaphysical bearings, but is nonetheless affirmed in a new manner in psychoanalysis, art, and literature. Kristeva is particularly intrigued by Freud’s rare use of the term ‘truth’, as well as by his association of it with religion. “It is obvious then,” Kristeva argues, “why the Freudian text most concerned with ‘truth’ is one on religion, *Moses and Monotheism* [1938],” a text she considers to be “of prime importance for [...] understanding [...] the real issues at stake in psychoanalysis and perhaps even in monotheism and what remains of it today.” (KrR 222)

In Freud’s interpretation, religious narratives present a ‘historical’ rather than a ‘material’ truth (KrR 222), and testifies to the emergence of the symbolic function – including the “advent of logic” (KrR 223) – as a process of alterity and

negativity. “Separation, rejection, displacement, gap [*béance*] – isn’t it in this way that language constitutes itself and operates in the radical discoveries of Freud?” (KrR 223) The symbolic function, in other words, is constituted around an unspeakable, impossible ‘true-real’, which the speaking subject must simultaneously assume and disavow in order to enter the world of signs. Regardless of whether or not the murder of the father described in Freud’s account of the emergence of monotheism actually took place, this murder is inscribed within the linguistic process. Kristeva’s observations resonate deeply, albeit differently, with the language found in Derrida’s discussions of negative theology:

Not only is truth murder [...] but *truth* is nothing more than language as a mechanism of displacement, negation and denegation. Freud’s work therefore traces a movement in which *truth* is continually put up and knocked down, a process that confronts it in its safest haven, religion, destroys it as *identity* (Being, correspondence to Being, etc.) and leaves only a system of passages, folds, thresholds, catastrophes – in short, negation. (KrR 224)

Kristeva thus considers the speaking being to be suspended between two extremes: on the one hand, the neurotic disavowal of language/desire in favor of an impossible ‘reality’ and, on the other hand, the psychotic disavowal of reality in favor of language as the only ‘truth’ (KrR 226). Negotiating between these extremes, major religious discourses in Kristeva’s interpretation were first to put in play the “enunciative *truth* of language” (KrR 233), which involves the recognition of a certain ‘undecidability’ marking any ‘proper name’, and of the essential manner in which it “gives rise to fiction as the permanent separation of language from itself” (KrR 235). Kristeva concludes that these discourses and the

unique experience of truth they bear cannot simply be replaced by any ‘rational’ discourse; their gradual decline must therefore be accompanied by a literary practice which puts their ‘true-real’ into play in its own manner, outside traditional theological and communal restraints (KrR 233). The question remains, as far as Kristeva is concerned: to what extent is the contemporary subject, deprived of the former security of religious practice, prepared to assume the risk entailed in this new signifying venture, whose “backdrop is a void” (KrR 236) or – as Kristeva puts it elsewhere in 1978 – to learn to “speak in the place where it [ça] doesn’t speak” (KrR 275)?

The unnamable gap in signification explored in “The True-Real” is elaborated – particularly in terms of its more psychotic ramifications – around the experience of the ‘abject’ in *Powers of Horror* (# 2.2.7). The encounter with the unnamable assumes here the character of a radical discomfort: the speaking being is first and foremost a ‘blank subject’ (PoH 6) forever “marked by the uncertainty of his borders” (PoH 63), dwelling within the fragile world of language and signification which, haunted by an otherness that is impossible to grasp, can easily collapse and reveal the void around which it revolves.

Due to her concerns with the pathological dimension of the experience of abjection, Kristeva’s discussions in *Powers of Horror* emphasize the necessity of ‘sublimation’ which “is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pronominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal” (PoH 11), even if the abject marks an absolute limit of the signifying function. In this scheme, different manifestations of the sacred reflect different

‘organizations’ of the unnamable. As the first defense against the experience of the abject, monotheistic logic sets up the ‘apparition’ of a ‘dead father’, which haunts the speaking being as its impossible yet necessary Other, enabling him/her to construct a symbolic, ‘sacred’ universe in place of the ‘non-objects’ marking the limits of language and meaning (PoH 10-12).

More than any previous text in Kristeva’s oeuvre until this point, *Powers of Horror* attempts to indicate the fundamental proximity between religion and psychoanalysis. In a sense, analytic discourse imitates religious logic, albeit beyond its attempts to set up “the unadulterated treasure of the ‘pure signifier’ [...]” (PoH 27). Keeping the wound at the core of subjectivity open, rather than attempting to close it up through superficial cures or transcendental promises, psychoanalysis constitutes “a heterogeneous, corporeal, and verbal ordeal of fundamental incompleteness: a ‘gaping,’ ‘less One’” (PoH 27; see 31). Analytic discourse does not merely constitute a psychological attempt at explaining unconscious anxieties, neuroses, or perversions; it is the most elaborate contemporary response to the question of symbolic, subjective, linguistic, biological limits. It is a response to the impossible otherness that these limits demarcate.

It will then fall upon analysis to give back a memory, hence a language, to the unnamable and namable states of fear, while emphasizing the former, which make up what is most unapproachable in the unconscious. It will also fall upon it, within the same temporality and the same logic, to make the analysand see the *void* upon which rests the play with the signifier and primary processes. (PoH 37)

Kristeva carefully notes that the void to which she refers is never merely ‘nothing’, but a *heterogeneity* that punctures every symbolic production and

challenges its attempts at closure. The ‘Imaginary Other’ of the analytic process, which situates itself at a point of almost absolute proximity to the ‘divine’ or ‘sacred’ fold from which the subject emerges, is nonetheless not a metaphysical elsewhere (A. Smith, 1996, 166). According to Kristeva, “one can say nothing of such (effective or semiotic) heterogeneity without making it homologous with the linguistic signifier. But it is precisely that *powerlessness* that the ‘empty’ signifier, the dissociation of discourse, and the fully physical suffering of these patients within the faults of the Word come to indicate” (PoH 51). In this sense, the subjective suffering to which psychoanalysis and literature bear witness today, beyond its particular psychosomatic and intersubjective ‘causes’, presents the most radical experience of the limits that define the life of the speaking being. The central, revolutionary task of psychoanalytic practice, in Kristeva’s understanding, is to avoid “turning the ‘symbolic system’ into a secular replica of the ‘preestablished harmony’ or the ‘divine order’” (PoH 67), while at the same time to maintain in play the unavoidable divine void of the Imaginary Other. Psychoanalysis is thus a practice that is neither ‘sacrificial’ nor ‘rationalist’; it inserts itself into the very midst of the unbearable tension that simultaneously divides and links the modern experience with its scientific, political, and economic aspirations, and the experience of the monotheistic religions. Kristeva affirms the difficulty of the challenge in the closing remarks:

Nothing preordains the psychoanalyst to take the place of the mystic. [...] And yet, it would perhaps be possible for an analyst (if he could manage to stay in the only place that is his, *the void*, that is, the unthinkable of metaphysics) to begin hearing, actually to listen to himself build up a discourse around the braided horror and fascination that bespeaks the incompleteness of the speaking being but, because it is heard as a

narcissistic crisis on the outskirts of the feminine, shows up with a comic gleam the religious and political pretensions that attempt to give meaning to the human adventure. (PoH 209)

3.3.2 The Impossible Other

Kristeva's analyses in *Tales of Love*, despite the seemingly drastic difference of their subject-matter from the thought of abjection, remain from the outset preoccupied with the limits of discourse. The lover's discourse, Kristeva observes, is the experience of language as a response to the other, albeit an other whose exact identity for the subject remains uncertain (TaL 2). To be more precise, it is the experience of a certain unspeakability: in love, "one does not speak *of*. One simply has the impression of speaking at last, for the first time, for real" (TaL 3). The lover's discourse is fundamentally constituted around the experience of the incapacity to fix the object of love within language; without this incapacity, the subject would have few reasons to speak. Therefore, such incapacity appears to Kristeva as intrinsic to the birth of the subject within the symbolic, as abjection had been previously. If love is nothing less than affliction (TaL 6), it also indicates that without affliction there can be no subject, no object, and no language that both links and separates them. While religious discourses recognize this situation by positing the Ideal Other, psychoanalysis recognizes that the Ideal Other is a necessary, but ultimately empty place. The analyst enters into this emptiness, not in order to assume the role of the dead God, but in order to announce to the speaking subject that, beyond God's death – which is also the death of the philosophical, absolute Ideal and of the Transcendental Ego – there *is* an Other to whom language testifies insofar as it is the language of love. In this

manner, “Man as a fixed, valorized entity finds himself abandoned in favor of a search, less for his truth (a point of view that conceals the fideism of a number of psychoanalysts) than for his innovative capacities.” (TaL 15)

Consequently, Kristeva’s explicit affirmation of the “notion of emptiness, which is at the root of the human psyche” (TaL 22), can take place only in the context of another affirmation, namely that of transference love, which constitutes a discursive identification as the experience of the irreducibility of both difference and relation (TaL 23-24 & 26). Positioned between this twofold experience of the ‘paternal’ and ‘maternal’ function, “infinitely and without an end” (TaL 29), the Kristevan analyst remains close to a certain religiosity insofar as s/he recognizes that the essential role of language in the constitution of the speaking being is accompanied, in Freud’s thought, by a profound concern with monotheism (TaL 27). Passing through this proximity between psychic and religious formation at the ‘zero degree of subjectivity’ (TaL 30), the analyst puts amatory identification into metaphorical play “in order to accompany the patient as far as the limits and accidents of his object relations [...], cutting through language, in the direction of the unspeakable” (TaL 29). The essential coincidence between the movement of metaphor and identificatory love, Kristeva asserts, resists the logic of ‘cause and effect’ and makes questions of priority undecidable: “The object of love is a metaphor for the subject – its constitutive metaphor, its ‘unary feature,’ which, by having it choose an adored part of the loved one, already locates it within the symbolic code of which this feature is a part” (TaL 30). A similar undecidability marks the emergence of the ‘subject’ and the ‘other’ within language: “The

subject exists only inasmuch as it identifies with an ideal other who is the speaking other, the other insofar as he speaks” (TaL 35). The only certainty characteristic of this situation is the absolute inaccessibility of the Other.

Kristeva’s argument in this regard sets up an especially intimate correspondence between psychoanalytic and negative theological discourse: “Transferred to the Other [...] as to the very place from which he is seen and heard, the loving subject does not have access to that Other as to an object, but as to the very possibility of the perception, distinction, and differentiation that allows one to see. That Ideal is nevertheless a blinding, nonrepresentable power – sun or ghost” (TaL 36). This Other around which poetic, religious, and psychoanalytic discourses revolve – each according to its own idiom – is not the ‘pure signifier’, but “the very space of metaphorical shifting” (TaL 38). In a sense, it is the slippage of *différance* through endless *mediation*, but one that, in Kristeva’s scheme, also embodies “nonrepresentable drive heterogeneity.” (TaL 38)

The words and afflictions of modern analysands and writers alike, in Kristeva’s view, bear witness to this experience, whose emptiness both philosophical and theological idealizations have attempted to cover up with words. Kristeva is quite willing to recognize instances in which religious languages have attempted to testify to the unspeakability of their ‘ideals’. She mentions Biblical love, for instance, which “establishes the loved one (who is also loving) as a subject in the strong sense of the term,” but whose “correlative is non-representability” (TaL 84): God’s love can only be mediated through a ‘third party’ – the prophet Nathan and queen Sheba, respectively – as indicated by the

only two explicit references to it in the Bible (2 Sam. 12:24-25 and 1 Kings 10:9). Even in His love, God remains an object that is partly lacking, never fully present or incarnate. Similarly, Kristeva's studies of Bernard of Clairvaux and the Virgin Mary indicate the effort, within Christian thought, to constitute a symbolic logic that takes into account an unsymbolizable heterogeneity: affect or drive as much as the impossible, maternal 'gap' which prevents the Trinity from attaining full presence or completion. In spite of this, the analyses found in *Tales of Love* testify mostly to the manner in which Western religious language, developed between the Platonic and Neoplatonic theology of the One and the Aristotelian attempt to "elaborate a univocal philosophical language untainted by any poeticalness" (TaL 270), tends to emphasize unity, identity, and reconciliation.

Kristeva traces this philosophical development in the most linguistically oriented chapter of the book, "Throes of Love: The Field of Metaphor," in which she argues for a 'metaphoricalness' (TaL 268) that, beyond its ontotheological conceptions and connotations with analogy grounded in the relation between the subject and the One (TaL 275), would accommodate her understanding of the irreducibility of the *poetic* dimension of language. More than in theological thought, this dimension is prevalent in Biblical language, in which "The unthinkable, the ontological, is based on the theological unthinkable, which, although unthinkable, but perhaps for that very reason, sets the structure of the investigation" (TaL 270). The 'unthinkable' in this context always remains entrenched in its association with a divine oneness, as the essential cause that can be appropriated through analogy. Kristeva associates metaphor with a

conveyance of meaning in language that blurs the borders between subject and object (TaL 268) and installs an inherent undecidability or unthinkability within the discursive process.

Metaphoricality consequently appears to me as the utterance not only of a being as One and acting, but rather, or even on the contrary, as the indication of uncertainty concerning the reference. *Being like* is not only *being* and *nonbeing*, it is also a longing for *unbeing* in order to assert as only possible 'being,' not an ontology, that is, something outside of discourse, but the constraint of discourse itself. The 'like' of metaphorical conveyance both assumes and upsets that constraint, and to the extent that it probabilizes the identity of signs, it questions the very probability of the reference. *Being? – Unbeing.* (TaL 273)

In Kathleen O'Grady's account of this dynamic, "The sign is dispersed, made ambivalent; a paradox, the metaphor is both one and other, neither this nor that. It is equivocally consolidated in difference yet bound by similitude, causing meaning to shift and open up [...]. The metaphoric movement refuses to allow the illusion of presence in the signifier" (Anderson & Clack, 2004, 160).

Kristeva's aim is to replace 'being' with the discursive encounter between the speaking subject and the Other, in which "ontology becomes subordinate to the signifying structure that sustains a given subject in its transference upon the Other" (TaL 274). Psychoanalysis, in Kristeva's argument, is grounded in this dynamic and replaces an absolute point of reference with the undecidable and provisional event of interpretation, taking place within a transference relation.

For the first time love, and with it metaphoricalness, are removed from the authoritarian dominion of a *Rex externa*, necessarily divine or deifiable. Love and metaphoricalness, thus deontologized or, in the extreme, dehumanized, henceforth constitute a determination of language with all its resources spread out. The subject himself/ herself is merely a subject: a provisional accident, differently renewed within the only *infinite* space where we might unfurl our loves, that is, the infinity of the signifier. (TaL 276-77)

Within this context, something must remain unsaid, impossible, in order for love and desire to sustain themselves in relation to the Other. Kristeva's discourse on love is a meditation on an impossible object (TaL 263) rather than a series of narratives on 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' love. All of the textual readings presented by Kristeva in the last section of *Tales of Love* follow precisely this kind of 'unnamability' as it unfolds at the crossroads between literary and religious metaphor. Unable to draw a proper line between the two, Kristeva suggests something like a 'religion' *beyond* religion that, rather than emptying out the 'positive' content of the Judeo-Christian tradition, traverses its insights, symbols, concepts and experiences and exposes them to the risk entailed by the namelessness of the lover's discourse – and of *poiesis*: "forsaken by faith but ever loving, [...] we are the faithful of the last religion, the esthetic one." (TaL 279 – despite 2.2.2)

In the first of these readings, Kristeva considers the quietist mystic, Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717), whose religious experience revolved around the radical passivity of a love "described as being 'work without work, 'passive night,' 'deprivation of everything, 'demise', 'disappropriation'" (TaL 303). Although Guyon heretically propagated a nonmediated access to God through love, Kristeva emphasizes "the *void* that was the true object of Jeanne's orison: [...] the experience where the *Self* is emptied in order to become fully a *Subject*, equal with her beloved God [...]" (TaL 305). This mystical union, in Kristeva's interpretation, is thus achieved through the experience of radical "nonknowledge and restraint" accompanied by "an ineffable silence" (TaL 305). Kristeva regards

Guyon's experience as offering a direct challenge to the certainty of Cartesian self-presence, "which claims that the dream itself finally is a representation with the one that makes up the idea"; "carried away by logorrhea to the brink of aphasia, nothingness, the unspeakable, [Guyon] sets up something else – but what?" (TaL 312) Kristeva lets the question resonate before suggesting that beyond anguish and delusion, Guyon succeeds in confronting the 'nonrepresentable' at the 'zero degree of subjectivity' (TaL 313) insofar as she assumes the role of the loving subject within the 'work without work' that constitutes her mystical writing. As such, she anticipates the modern writer's struggle "to name what is closest to the unnameable along that loving curve made up of narcissism. The naming that results is necessarily exploded, pulverized." (TaL 314)

The subsequent discussions of Baudelaire and Bataille confirm Kristeva's increasing conviction in her psychoanalytic work that modern literature necessarily contains a dimension intimately bound up with the concerns that permeate negative theology, even if she never quite allows herself to enter into a direct confrontation with this theology. The radical negativity of negative theology is subsumed, in Kristeva's reading, under the radical negativity of the poetic process without being simply abandoned. "Baudelaire as lover, Baudelaire as a Catholic, Baudelaire as a mystic: they may not be the same but they constitute a text wholly founded on *metaphor*" (TaL 318). What emerges from this text is an experience on the border of poetry and prayer which "retains only the absolute necessity of an Other, a pure place of being that need not be inhabited

by an actual being” (TaL 320). Kristeva once again identifies this place with the ‘Imaginary Father’ who, standing for the symbol itself, enables the subject to unfold (TaL 320-21). Suspended between the abyss of nonmeaning and the infinity of meaning, “Baudelaire is wholly a being of signs” (TaL 324); and yet the God which he seems to equate with “the subject of writing [...] is not a Self” (TaL 324) but a nothingness of sorts, one that cannot be filled (TaL 324-25). For Kristeva, the dichotomy that characterizes Baudelaire’s logic testifies to an impossible love, and its antitheism consists of an attempt to experience at once the limits and the infinitude of language: “[...] this ‘Infinity...never known’ is also the horizon of the *emptiness* that ‘hollows out the Heavens’” (TaL 332). Kristeva affirms the theological undecidability inherent in Baudelaire’s texts: “Metaphor as damaging the Single meaning, as symptom of its toppling over into infinity, is then the very discourse of love: the place where God topples over into Satan and *vice versa*” (TaL 336). The ground of this metaphorical shifting within a discourse of love constitutes “an enigmatic area of darkness. The unknown. Like a metaphor.” (TaL 340)

Bataille similarly employs an antithetical metaphoricity in an attempt to evoke a certain ‘nothingness’ that is not quite a ‘nothing’ – “Perfect darkness alone is similar to light” (cited in TaL 365) – but rather, “that which is not visible because no code, convention, contract, or identity holds it up” (TaL 366). While Kristeva associates Bataille’s text here with an erotic maternal non-object, both obscene and obscure, she insists on the necessity of preserving its unrepresentability as the propelling force behind its literary-mystical experience.

Kristeva's language here attains a proximity to Augustine's language, on the near side of a certain negative theology:

Figurative language, literature, then owe it to themselves to measure up to that invisible and also to its drive intensity. They must produce a fading out of meaning at the same time as a conveyance of meaning...toward what? Toward a point where the turmoil of passion persists, a passion that took hold of the loving subject before the naked, sublime, or disgusting body of the loved one. (TaL 366)

According to Kristeva, 'outside' the experience of God (TaL 367) Bataille's 'posttheological' writing carries within itself the experience of the sublimity of metaphor as "the sign of unbeing": humanity deprived of unmediated access to being, but nonetheless capable of experiencing this impossibility through a certain erotic, productive sublimation. Beyond such a sign, "metaphysics has been resolved into conveyance, transference, a perpetual motion of senses and meaning." (TaL 369)

3.3.3 The Unspeakable 'Thing'

Kristeva's discussions of language and melancholia in *Black Sun* take these analyses further and reveal a strange paradox at the heart of all meaning. On the one hand, the speaking being's entry into language constitutes an event that may be called 'religious', since meaning requires nothing less than the "bond of faith" (BIS 14); by the same token, the state of 'asymbolia' that characterizes the depressive experience becomes associated with a certain atheism. On the other hand, the melancholy subject is not simply an unbeliever, but also a kind of mystic who refuses to recognize the essential impossibility of all representation, the fact that one can never have full access to the first, ideal love object, beyond

language. This atheist/mystic is hence haunted by the ‘Thing’, which Kristeva defines as “the real that does not lend itself to signification [...] [and lives with] the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good [...] that [...] no word can signify” (BIS 13). Attached to the ‘Thing’, the melancholy subject is capable neither of an ‘atheist’ affirmation of its impossibility nor of a transposition/translation of that impossibility through a ‘faithful’ connection to the Other. In Kristeva’s view, the two are necessarily coextensive.

In Christian terms, the ‘Thing’ within this scheme is like the ‘dead God’ of onto-theology. It is not by accident that, in one instance, Kristeva refers to the “in-itself Thing” as the *Res divina* (BIS 68) while the ‘Other’ is the ‘void’ that opens up beyond this ‘God’ and calls for an endless process of naming and *mourning* (BIS 40-41). As Kristeva puts it, “language is, from the start, a translation” (BIS 41). Embracing the inevitability of both silence and speech, the task of translation can only be assumed through a certain renunciation of presence and mastery: “Our gift of speech, of situating ourselves in time for an other, could exist nowhere except beyond an abyss. Speaking beings [...] demand a break, a renunciation, an unease at their foundations” (BIS 42). The denial of this situation results in a kind of fetishistic, *impossible* mourning: “Depressed persons, on the contrary, disavow the negation: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted” (BIS 43). Renouncing their necessary exile within language – within the emptiness of meaning – such subjects are ironically left with nothing but the very void they are

seeking to avoid. “The depressed speak of nothing; they have nothing to speak of: glued to the Thing (*Res*), they are without objects. That total and unsignifiable Thing is insignificant – it is a mere Nothing, their Nothing, Death” (BIS 51). Deprived of the dynamics of translation, their language itself becomes a kind of alien, dead object or “dead letter” (BIS 63), an empty crypt constructed to preserve the unnameable, enigmatic Thing, which “will not be translated in order that it not be betrayed” (BIS 53). Such language at once names nothing and fails to avoid naming that which cannot be named; it forgets that it speaks around a void, while simultaneously insisting on speaking only the void.

Kristeva’s discussion leaves little doubt that she regards the melancholy subject’s experience as a close parallel to the ongoing modern inability – both religious and secular – to properly mourn the loss of traditional, metaphysical certainties (including the existence and/or nature of ‘God’) and to translate this mourning into a new signifying practice that does not dismiss the fundamentally multidimensional character – psychoanalytic, literary, religious, social, or political – of its transposition. Nevertheless, Kristeva asserts that the ‘Western’ metaphysical/melancholy belief in ‘conveyability’ – naming the ‘in-itself’ which cannot be named (BIS 66), whether it be ‘mother’ or ‘God’ (BIS 68) – is a crucial, necessary development within the constitution of Western subjectivity and the current experience of its transposition within a new discourse. Similarly, the psychoanalytic attempt to posit “the existence of that other language and even of an other of language, indeed of an outside-of-language, is not necessarily setting up a preserve for metaphysics or theology” (BIS 66). Indeed, “the polyvalence of

sign and symbol” to which psychoanalysis attests while traversing artistic and literary productions, “affords the subject a chance to imagine the nonmeaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing.” (BIS 97)

Positioned at the threshold of asymbolia, Holbein’s image of the ‘death of God’ (# 3.1.4) constitutes in Kristeva’s view a near-perfect attempt – within *and* beyond metaphysics – to bear witness to the impossibility of meaning without completely surrendering to this impossibility. If Holbein’s painting is ‘theological’ in character, it is so in a radically negative manner: according to Kristeva, it embodies Hegel’s assertion that, “‘*God is dead, God himself is dead*’ is a marvelous, fearsome representation, which offers to representation the deepest abyss of severance” (cited in BIS 136). As such, art enters the space previously occupied by prayer. In Kristeva’s analysis, it “might perhaps replace prayer at the critical place of its appearance – where the nonmeaning becomes significant, while death seems visible and livable” (BIS 138). Like some of Celan’s poems (# 2.1.5) Holbein’s painting constitutes prayer in the purest sense, namely prayer as ‘severance’ acknowledging the speaking subject’s experience of fundamental incomprehensibility and seeking God within the abyss of God’s death, rather than finding superficial comfort in praising God’s glory. For Kristeva, as for Blanchot (# 2.1.5), the experience of prayer becomes the experience of exile from something or someone that cannot quite be named; the Jewish dimensions of Blanchot’s thought become translated into Christian terms in Kristeva’s writings.

Such experience of exile, revolving around an unnamable loss that appears religious at its core characterizes, according to Kristeva, Nerval's poem, "The Disinherited":

An initial deprivation is [...] indicated at once; it is not, however, the deprivation of a 'property' or 'object' constituting a material, transferable heritage, but the loss of an unnameable domain, which one might, strangely enough, evoke or invoke, from a foreign land, from a constitutional exile. This 'something' would be previous to the detectable 'object': the secret and unreachable horizon of our loves and desires, it assumes, for the imagination, the consistence of an archaic mother, which, however, no precise image manages to encompass. (BIS 145)

The poem testifies to what Kristeva understands as the essential condition of every speech, namely "the uncertainty of naming" (BIS 147). This at once enables the subject to dwell within a meaningful universe, and inevitably separates the subject from that of which s/he speaks. The unnamable – whether it be 'God', the 'maternal body', or the 'unconscious' – haunts the subject's discourse either as the dead, impossible 'Thing' or as the signifying, loving, but equally impossible 'Other'. Nerval's language gives voice to this haunting through a polyvalence of names inscribed into a poetic process that neither offers a master-name nor collapses into asymbolia but – "taking us to the threshold of naming, to the edge of the unsymbolized" (BIS 165) – remains on intimate terms with a certain kind of prayer: "The series of names attempts to fill the space left empty by the lack of a sole name. Paternal name, or Name of God" (BIS 163). Kristeva considers the process through which Nerval achieves his sublimatory naming as offering a form of polytheistic (BIS 165) negativity that negates the singularity of the One Name and *indicates* rather than *defines* its abyssal referent through a series of nominal, poetic displacements. Yet Kristeva asserts that,

despite Nerval's allusions to the 'hidden God' beyond the God who is already dead (BIS 164), "we are not engaged here in a debate internal to Jewish or Christian monotheism, about the possibility of naming God, about the oneness or multiplicity of names" (BIS 164). Kristeva suggests that, beyond theological and negative theological concerns with the nature of the correspondence between language and God, Nerval's poem – which presents "signs without signified" (BIS 165) – offers a radical meditation on the crisis inherent in all meaning and all subjective experience: "Instead of pointing to their concrete referent, those names indicate, rather than mean, a massive, uncircumventable, unnameable presence, as if they were the anaphora of the unique object; not the mother's 'symbolic equivalence', but the shifter 'this', empty of meaning." (BIS 164)

Despite the radical ambiguity of this theological *and* poetic positioning, Kristeva regards Nerval's poem "The Disinherited" as a profound attempt at 'incarnation' and 'resurrection' (BIS 171) in the midst of an encroaching crisis of classical and religious thought and the nihilism that accompanies it. Beyond the absence and abyss they embody, Nerval's words continue to address themselves to an ideal Other that, in the last analysis, is perhaps nothing more and nothing less than language as an enigmatic relation without relation or, more precisely, relation as renunciation. Kristeva is careful to emphasize this in her analysis of Marguerite Duras's work. Similarly to Holbein, Nerval, or Dostoyevsky, Duras presents the subject's encounter with a certain 'nothing' and the unease or affliction that accompanies this encounter, albeit without the sublimatory beauty, idealization, or forgiveness found in their work. Instead, Duras's writing retains

the experience of an essential, irremediable ‘disconnection’ “deprived of bonds” and “detached from the other” (BIS 245); the hollowness of her language does not testify to a bond of faith affirmed over an abyss but only pulls the reader into the void of its infinite suffering. This writing remains crucial as “a literature of limits because it also displays the limits of the nameable” (BIS 258). Nevertheless, beyond the necessity of the silence it bears, its “obsessive conjuring up of a ‘nothing’ that might epitomize the malady of suffering [...] point[s] to a disaster of words in the face of the unnameable affect” (BIS 258). Thus, if Kristeva can still assert in *Tales of Love* that “psychoanalysis skirts religious faith in order to expend it in the form of literary discourse” (TL 38) it is because literature, like art or music, remains closer to the void which it does not fill but rather assumes within the movement of language. In *Black Sun* this ‘advantage’ of literature or art is no longer certain: Holbein and Dostoyevsky are, to a large extent, able to speak toward a void only because religious discourse has prepared the ground for such speaking and, indeed, accompanies their literary and artistic production in this risky venture. Conversely, Duras’ writing remains entrenched within a void it cannot translate, and therefore emerges as an extensive representation of psychic collapse as literary as it is atheist in essence.

Kristeva’s avoidance of negative theology in the context of her psychoanalytic thought is surprising and, indeed, regrettable, given the radical similarity of the concerns that appear in the two ‘discourses’. A plausible explanation for this avoidance may be that throughout her psychoanalytic studies, Kristeva considers *all* religious discourse as a discourse on something – an

experience, an event, a truth – that points to an irreducible, unnamable otherness and, *only* as such, is constitutive of meaning; seen in this light, negative theology would be a subsequent (theological) elaboration of a more essential (religious) concern – one among many. However, Kristeva does not simply *neglect* negative theology; rather she finds that its innermost concerns permeate certain kinds of artistic and literary practice which have become more radically ‘religious’ than most of what passes for ‘religion’ today, for instance religion as political ideology, as a means of preserving social cohesion and as a tool for social manipulation, as a question of ‘values’, ‘morals’, and ‘tradition’, or as an object of mass consumption. By the late 1980s, Kristeva becomes increasingly comfortable with the fact that psychoanalytic and religious discourses not only traverse one another but, in fact, follow a very similar trajectory from the very beginning: as she phrases it in a direct allusion to Lacan, if “the unconscious is not structured like a language but like all the imprints of the Other” (BIS 204), Kristeva also explicitly asserts that “I speak of religions because the question of the other is *fundamentally*, I think, a *religious question*” (Interviews 41; emphasis added). Insofar as they constitute a conversation with the ‘unspeakable’ that remains suspended between language and silence, suffering and salvation, love and loss, faith and doubt, religion and psychoanalysis traverse one another in an essential manner.

3.3.4 Psychoanalysis and Faith

Kristeva’s recognition of this proximity between psychoanalytic and religious endeavors results in the publication of *In the Beginning Was Love*:

Psychoanalysis and Faith (French 1985), which directly addresses the question of this proximity with respect to the question of the limits of religious belief and of rationality. Psychoanalysis is a practice that steps into the void left over by religious and theological practice – offering a cure through what Freud in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) called, following the Gospels (John 1:1), “Our God Logos” (IBL 3). Yet it constitutes neither a positivist understanding of reason nor an all-encompassing, utopian solution to every kind of crisis (IBL 1-2). Rather, psychoanalysis is first and foremost a transferential discourse that, taking place between two subjects, is not simply a rational, intersubjective exchange, but more fundamentally a discourse always already “directed to an impossible other” (IBL 7). This other, Kristeva suggests, constitutes the speaking being as a kind of passionate relationship grounded in analysis as dislocation, interpretation, transposition and reducible neither to mere biology (affects/drives) nor to mere illusion (fantasy) (IBL 8-9). Put differently, Kristeva seeks to move beyond the Freudian notion of religion as a ‘glorious illusion’ (IBL 9) in order to affirm “the resurrection of the imagination” (IBL 18) and the epistemological importance of that which, in traditional terms, is referred to as ‘irrational’, beyond simple oppositions between truth and fiction, presence and absence, or faith and reason. “In this respect analysis, like illusion, seems interminable,” Kristeva argues (IBL 20). She adds: “The analyst today is in a position different from that of Freud. He is less scrupulously a rationalist, or perhaps one should say less guilty in the face of rationalism and still less optimistic about the beneficial powers of reason” (IBL 20). None of this implies, however, that the proximity between

psychoanalysis and religion can be decided from the onset and rendered unproblematic. As Kristeva points out, the purpose of psychoanalysis is not altogether to restore “value to religion” (IBL 21); at the same time, she denies that this purpose has to do with establishing “a Stoic world composed of lonely men and women without ties to one another and without religion.” (IBL 51)

Kristeva attempts to clarify this paradox throughout her lecture by way of a careful consideration of the dynamics of ‘faith’. She asserts that something like faith is necessary from the very beginnings of subjective existence, insofar as it is coextensive with the “‘semiotic’ leap toward the other, this primary identification with the primitive parental poles close to the maternal container” (IBL 26). In other words, the human being is essentially a *speaking* being – which is to say, a being who listens to and speaks to an other. This speaking relation/separation is impossible without a bond that is not reducible to language; as Kristeva notes, “Saint Augustine goes so far as to compare the Christian’s faith in God with the infant’s relation to its mother’s breast” (IBL 24). In an important sense all of Kristeva’s theory revolves around the place whereby the speaking being encounters herself as an ‘in-fans’ – i.e. a being who does not (yet) speak, who remains not yet in full grasp of proper names, but who nonetheless must continue to cry out towards what it cannot name in an *anacletic* manner, that is, as that upon which its subjectivity depends, even if this subjectivity is orphaned today (IBL 55). This primary ‘faith’, Kristeva suggests, cannot be repressed by way of positivist, atheist ‘understanding’: “Repression can be atheist; atheism is repressive, whereas the experience of psychoanalysis can lead to renunciation of

faith with clear understanding” (IBL 26). Ironically, Kristeva’s somewhat careless assertion here comes across as itself quite rationalist; in fact, her point is that analytic discourse takes place in light of a certain understanding that accepts the impossibility of absolute identity and truth without otherness and renounces at once the subject’s unmediated access to immanence *and* transcendence as *presence*, without abandoning the process which maintains both the connection to, and the separation from, the Other. “A certain fideism, or even degraded forms of spiritualism, thereby find their way into psychoanalytic ideology.” (IBL 26)

Kristeva does not allow here for a comfortable affirmation of religion, and insists on the ‘worldly’ orientation of the analytic process: “*Other* in language, otherness in speech, here and now rather than in some ‘other’ world, the analyst listens and speaks, and by so doing makes the other less hellish [...]. The result is not to prepare that other for some sort of transcendental existence but rather to open up as yet undefined possibilities in this world” (IBL 27). Be that as it may, Kristeva does not cease to consider this situation in Judeo-Christian terms, acknowledging that it cannot be fully grasped in a strictly psychological manner:

In reality, it is the biblical God who inaugurates separation at the beginning of creation. He creates a division which is also the mark of His presence ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth’ [...]. Psychologically, however, it is Christ’s Passion, the ‘folly of the cross’, as Saint Paul and Pascal called it, that reveals the somber division that is perhaps the paradoxical condition of faith: ‘Father, Father, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (IBL 31)

If, in both scenarios, language plays a central role, one must note that it simultaneously assumes the place of a certain ‘void’ and marks at once a relationship and a schism between ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’ and between

the subject and the other. “All plenitude turns out to be inscribed upon a ‘void’ which is simply what remains when the overabundance of meaning, desire, violence, and anguish is drained [in the process of analysis] by means of language” (IBL 34). Religious or not, the subject cannot avoid the truth of “the essential alienation that conditions our access to language, in the mourning that accompanies the dawn of psychic life” (IBL 41). In the final account, the analyst’s role is to accompany the speaking subject to the edge of this emptiness/affliction, helping him or her give meaning to it while leaving it empty. (IBL 35)

Kristeva’s logic in this lecture continues to run into the same fundamental problem that characterizes all of her psychoanalytic thought. On the one hand, she psychologizes the very ‘emptiness’ she seeks to protect against any form of explicit or implicit theologization. She states, for instance, that “the Credo embodies basic fantasies that I encounter every day in the psychic lives of my patients” (IBL 39); or that, “More than any other religion, Christianity has unraveled the symbolic *and* physical importance of the paternal function in human life” (IBL 40). Nonetheless, every attempt to proceed with this psychologization sooner or later runs against a certain surplus embodied within religious (Judeo-Christian) language that resists rationalization, psychological or otherwise, and provides words and images “for even the fissures in our secret and fundamental logic” (IBL 41), thus enabling language to continue unfolding beyond an essential absence. Psychoanalysis, like religion, is therefore itself in need of a certain fiction it constructs around a ‘truth’ that cannot be symbolized. By the same

token, psychoanalysis and religion can never quite avoid one another: analytic discourse must constantly address itself toward religious desire in order to cleanse it of its illusions of presence, while simultaneously acknowledging that these illusions are not exclusive to the religious subject and that religion is indispensable for the ‘labor of meaning’ to continue taking place.

Kristeva struggles to resolve this problem by suggesting that “analysis is not less than religion but more” (IBN 52) insofar as it parallels a certain experience of faith and, beyond religious fantasies and illusions, connects it to a certain ‘knowledge’, which constitutes a ‘non-knowledge’ of sorts (# 3.3). In this sense, Kristeva’s logic constitutes neither a psychological apology for the Judeo-Christian tradition nor simply the final announcement of its ‘failure’; rather it anticipates the logic found in Derrida’s ‘religion without religion’ (# 3.2.2): psychoanalysis and deconstruction affirm their inability to *replace* religion once and for all, while simultaneously moving beyond its ‘positive’, onto-theological content in order to respond to an impossible Other. Kristeva, however, is more insistent than Derrida on the continuing necessity to explore religious ideas, narratives, and images insofar as they testify to the development and transformations of the subject-in-process/on trial, as well as to the crises of meaning this subject undergoes within secular contexts.

Kristeva never convincingly assumes, in this regard, the task of clarifying why the ‘religious’ or ‘non-religious’ ‘nature’ of this unnamable ‘Other’ must be decided in advance – as she often does, implicitly or explicitly – especially since she claims toward the end of her lecture that one can only act as an analyst insofar

as he “himself remains an analysand” (IBL 60). Kristeva does, in any case, recognize that what is at stake here is nothing less than the relationship between psychoanalysis and nihilism, which corresponds fundamentally to Nietzsche’s pronouncement concerning the ‘death of God’. While Freud’s project, according to Kristeva’s interpretation, may be considered as “the culmination of the nihilist program” (IBL 60), it is only to the extent that, like Nietzsche before him, the founder of psychoanalysis was not simply “echoing the cry of unbelievers who posit nothing (*nihil*) in the place of God” (IBL 59). Kristeva therefore asserts that beyond a certain nihilistic gesture, the “vital efficacy” of psychoanalytic practice “is inseparable from its ethical dimension, which is incommensurable with love: the speaking being opens up to and reposes in the other” (IBL 60). Once more, Kristeva avoids the question of the undecidability of the unspeakable ‘Other’ even when she insists precisely on such undecidability: “On the one hand there is nothing (*nihil*) but the knowing subject; on the other hand I know that the subject derives from an alien significance that transcends and overwhelms it, that empties it of meaning” (IBL 61), reminding that “The Other is in Me” - that “I am an Other” (IBL 55), and nothing if not that. While Kristeva avoids this question, she implicitly affirms that psychoanalysis inevitably passes through the experience of an essential undecidability and encounters its own innermost limit as a discourse: “The analytic process is first and foremost an unfolding of language, prior to and beyond all unification, distantiation, and objectification” (IBL 60). This means that psychoanalysis can never convincingly verify that ‘God is unconscious’ and, more importantly, that its role is no longer reducible to becoming the servant of

the Freudian ‘reality principle’. As the ‘guardian’ of the ‘unnamable’, psychoanalysis must rather continually assume the task of translation within discourse, for its (interminable) aim is to keep the ‘Other’ in play rather than to declare its theological or nontheological essence. As Kristeva herself asserts, “Besides calculating knowledge we have a discourse that encompasses both allusion and illusion – displacement born of the *interminable quest* for an adequate fit between ‘meaning’ and ‘object’ (IBL 62; emphasis added). In this context, the religious and secular subject alike are always bound to ask, not so much ‘*Who* am I?’ as ‘*Where* am I?’ (PoH 8 – # 2.1.5)

Psychoanalysis thus situates itself at the very heart of rationality, as a rational discourse that constantly announces the impossibility of final rationalization. Indeed, Kristeva’s concluding remarks reveal that despite the seemingly ‘atheist’ tone of her entire psychoanalytic endeavor, she remains aware of the all-too-religious dimensions of contemporary secular culture caught up in a technological, medical, and scientific pursuit of the deification of Man as absolute value: “As the ‘rights of man’ are expanded to embrace Godlike powers, the analyst detects the manic cry of the nihilist: ‘The Creator is dead, and I have taken his place’” (IBL 62). Kristeva’s logic here could be formulated as follows: psychoanalysis bears the task of continuing to affirm the ‘death of God’, but also of reminding the contemporary Western subject, comfortable in his or her identity as a self-made, rational individual, that there is no ‘salvation’ – and, indeed, no psychic life or subjectivity – beyond this ‘God’, thus beyond a certain kind of religious experience. Kristeva’s assertion that God is infinitely analyzable

testifies to the fact that no analysis can occur without taking God into consideration beyond God's allegedly 'proper', onto-theological designation. Like the practice of writing, psychoanalytic practice ventures into an impossible realm in order "to confront an archaic authority, on the nether side of the proper Name" (PoH 75). Psychoanalysis dwells in the gap that separates religious dogmatism and its reversed mirror image, secular nihilism. It draws attention to the fact that at the limits of discourse neither religion nor atheism can establish a proper place of rest, since 'truth' and the 'unnamable' coincide in the experience of the speaking being. Thus, echoing Derrida's engagement with negative theology, Kristeva's psychoanalytic considerations of the 'unnamable' attest to the fact that, as far as meaning is concerned, the speaking subject can be 'cured' neither of 'God' nor of 'radical atheism'. The 'death of God', like analysis itself, is at once terminable and interminable, since it constitutes first and foremost the name for a fundamental crisis whose denial cannot be equated with a cure. Whereas Derrida follows the negative theological concern – how to *avoid speaking (about God)?* – Kristeva performs a kind of eccentric reversal of this question: how to avoid speaking about the *death of God* considering this 'death' can never be quite *avoided*? Insofar as religious discourse parallels this aim and addresses itself to the experience of the 'impossible', its difference from psychoanalysis and from literary or, for that matter, philosophical discourse remains at once necessarily *uncertain* and certainly *necessary*.

These concerns constitute a crucial dimension of Kristeva's critique of late 'secular' modernity, which, in the course of the 1990s, becomes central to her thought.

Chapter 4

Homo Religiosus and the Crisis of Secularism

[P]revious social forms counted on a certain calm, and crisis came periodically; but now an epoch has opened when we live in permanent crisis. [...] At this moment, the problem arises of two alternatives: is this crisis a suffering, is it a pathology? Or is it a creation, a renewal?

Julia Kristeva, *Interviews* 1996, p. 37

What was at stake wasn't replacing bourgeois society's value by other ones, but instead [...] questioning a model of humanity that had absorbed into itself the transcendent ideal (God) and which, from this immanence, was in hot pursuit of 'values' and 'objects.'

Julia Kristeva, "What's Left of 1968?", in *ReSS* 2002, p. 26

From prayer to dialogue, through art and analysis, the capital event is always the great infinitesimal emancipation: to be restarted unceasingly. Without it, all that globalization can do is calculate the growth rate and genetic possibilities.

Julia Kristeva, *Infinite Revolt* 2002, p. 223

'God is dead' is undoubtedly a madman's project, certainly a risky and perhaps impossible act, but it engages the West, and brutally so ever since the nineteenth century, insidiously since its Greek, biblical, and evangelical origins.

Julia Kristeva, "Bulgaria, my Suffering," in *CrES* 2000, p. 180

In her study of nihilism in Kristeva's critique of modernity, Sara Beardsworth observes that, rejecting any simple meta-narrative of collapse, "Neither her [Kristeva's] psychoanalytic thought nor her conception of the aesthetic turn on the premise of *a wholesale loss of transcendence*. The movement of transcendence, rescued from its placement in the beyond, is a central feature of her thinking"

(Beardsworth 2004, 13). While the first part of Beardsworth's assertion is correct, the second does not emphasize enough the significance of Kristeva's ongoing concern for the 'impossible' or the 'unnamable' in her critique of *both* religious *and* secular dimensions of late modernity. Consequently, Beardsworth's otherwise important contribution to understanding Kristeva's work falls somewhat short of appreciating the complexity of the relationship between religion and secularism in Kristeva's psychoanalytic, political, and cultural analyses since the early 1980s. Although she clearly recognizes that Kristeva's critique follows in the footsteps of such seminal authors as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Horkheimer and Adorno, all of whom emphasized the nihilist dimensions of *both* Christian dogmatism *and* modern rationalism, Beardsworth's interpretation of Kristeva's understanding of religion¹ is limited insofar as it focuses on one isolated text, in this case *Powers of Horror*.

What Beardsworth calls the 'failure' of religion in Kristeva's work in fact constitutes a more extensive 'crisis of meaning' in Western culture that is simultaneously secular in character. After *Powers of Horror* (1982 – French 1980) Kristeva becomes increasingly concerned with the impasses of secular/atheist discourse, as well as with the inability of late secular modernity to respond to these impasses and to address the question of its own limits. Despite occasional attempts to the contrary, Kristeva's late thought testifies to the *permanency* of the 'crisis of religion' rather than equating this crisis with the inevitable dissolution of religious discourses and practices. Indeed, Kristeva's emphasis on the 'crisis of religion' in her early thought is replaced by, or at least

¹ See especially pp. 1-21 & 115-142.

paralleled with, her preoccupation with the ‘crisis of secularism’, particularly since the late 1990s. Implicit to this concern is the question: to what extent must we seek to preserve religious practices and discourses in the context of a culture that continues to ignore the ‘crisis of religion’ by setting up the safety net of administrative management, consumerism, and entertainment? Put otherwise: to what extent does the contemporary speaking subject bear witness to its own essence as *homo religiosus*, and to what extent is *homo religiosus* today merely a spectral manifestation within the ‘secular’ experience of modern Western culture? If modernity is on trial here, it is in the same sense in which Kristeva understands the *sujet-en-procès* to be a subject-in-process/on trial (# 1.4.2).

Kristeva’s late writings address these questions through a psychoanalytic lens but also – as in most of her early work – along a variety of interrelated paths bringing together literary, political, ethical, and religious considerations. This chapter explores the developments in Kristeva’s late thought by dividing them into three themes: Kristeva’s concern with the ‘crisis of subjectivity’ within the ‘society of the spectacle’ (#4.1); her rethinking of the connection between psychoanalysis and politics in the context of the ‘crisis of democracy’ (# 4.2); and her understanding of the ‘sacred’ and its correspondence to feminine and humanist experience (# 4.3).

4.1 Psychoanalysis, Modernity and the Secular Subject in Crisis

[A]s a transformation of man’s relationship to meaning this cultural revolt (which is the psychoanalytic experience) intrinsically concerns

public life and consequently has profoundly political implications.

Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 2002, p. 11

[I]n these somber times when the nihilist certitude of some encounters the fundamentalist exaltation of others, what worries me is whether the believers, and especially those who believe they don't believe, will be capable of reading into my reflections 'a big question mark', as Nietzsche wrote, at the place of 'greatest gravity'.

Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe* 2009, p. vii

Heidegger would say that 'only a god can save us' [...]. I think this is a reactive, if not reactionary attempt and temptation. The situation is rather one of trying to live without an absolute shelter and, at the present moment, to live in permanent crisis. In this context of permanent crisis, art is an extremely important companion, but not the only one; we must not [...] make it into the God of our times.

Julia Kristeva, *Interviews* 1996, p. 215

Despite Kristeva's apparent focus on problems of 'subjectivity' throughout the 1980s, her psychoanalytic work always proceeds within the assumption that the subject constitutes a kind of microcosm of his or her culture and that, subsequently, every organization and experience of subjectivity mirrors social, cultural, religious, and political arrangements and its particular 'crises'. Therefore, a critique of modernity remains inherent to all of Kristeva's psychoanalytic ventures into subjective 'afflictions' in contemporary Western culture, as Kristeva's concluding remarks in *Tales of Love* and *Black Sun* indicate. More importantly for our purposes, Kristeva's psychoanalytic critique elaborates her early belief that the 'crisis of religion' constitutes one of the central experiences of Western modernity. According to her, this crisis entails not merely the dissolution of religious structures but also the inability of modern rational

discourses to move beyond the logic and language of onto-theological monologism. Kristeva's careful engagement with religious texts and their complex correspondence to current subjective crises throughout the 1980s, and also her growing awareness that the philosophical, political, and literary eruptions of post-structuralist discourse and its practice of difference and plurality have failed to curb the emergence of the 'society of the spectacle', lead her, if not toward a major reorientation in her thought, at least toward a series of subtle but significant displacements in emphasis in the 1990s. Central to this development in Kristeva's thought is the idea that, insofar as the contemporary crisis of meaning revolves around the 'impossible' or the 'unnamable', religion and 'the sacred' remain, as it were, the *unthought* dimension of secular culture. If Western secularism constitutes a failure of sorts, it is because it has failed not so much to *move beyond* the ruins of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but rather to properly *recognize its own foundations* within this tradition and *its own experience* within the *ongoing experience of its ruins*. Religion, in this sense, constitutes both the possibility and the impossibility of secular/atheist culture, the reminder of its limits within the infinity of meaning. The 'crisis of religion' and the 'crisis of secularism' in late modernity are not only necessarily coextensive but, indeed, equally permanent in character. Psychoanalysis in Kristeva's scheme becomes the discourse *par excellence* on this double crisis.

Kristeva evokes the permanence of this double crisis and the essential role psychoanalysis plays in bringing it to attention and responding to it in the closing chapter of *Tales of Love* when she speaks of the "Jewish and Christian West,"

which nurtures the “crisis basic to the speaking condition and sustained by it” (TaL 372). Kristeva argues that this crisis cannot be resolved by setting up another version of ‘the One’ (TaL 379), or by filling the void at the heart of the speaking subject with ever new meanings (TaL 380); this would only imply that meaning as such can eventually be cured of...meaning through a reduction to precise correspondences between words and things. Rather, the aim should be to develop “a discourse where his own ‘emptiness’ and her own ‘out-of-placeness’ becomes essential elements [...]”. What is at stake is turning the crisis into a *work in progress*.” (TaL 380)

Kristeva recognizes, however, that one of the essential features of late modernity has been precisely to initiate an elaborate process of remedying, and therefore *denying*, the crisis with the help of science, technology, medicine, economic and political administration, and perpetual mediatization – which, as Kristeva puts it in 1985, are “secular forms of the sacred” (Interviews 27) – and, in the end, results in the ‘abolition of psychic space’ (TaL 373). Kristeva makes it apparent here that, while this response corresponds to a certain theological disenchantment, it would be equally wrong to abandon the resources provided by the religious narratives and ideas, even though they must be reinterpreted in a different manner: “If the ‘crisis’ of psychic space sinks its roots into the ‘death of God,’ let us remember that for the West, ‘God is love’. Paul’s agape of the cross, John’s ‘God is love’, doubtless leave us cold, but empty, too. Freud, the post-Romanticist, was the first to turn love into a cure; he did this, not to allow one to grasp a truth, but to provoke a rebirth [...]” (TaL 381). Psychoanalysis emerges

as Kristeva's preferred discourse in this context due to her realization that, having inherited the void that emerged in the wake of the 'death of God', secular culture repeats the religious/theological gesture of filling the void and, in this manner, participates in the failure of religious discourse while simultaneously rejecting the continuing significance of that discourse.

The urgency of this crisis – religious as much as political in character (BIL 222) – becomes even more apparent in the final chapter of *Black Sun* (1989 – French 1987), in which Kristeva asserts that a “malady of death” has permeated Western culture in the wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, resulting in a “tremendous crisis of thought and speech, a crisis of representation” accompanied by “economic, political, and juridical bankruptcies” and leading to “psychosis, depression, manic-depressive states, borderline states, false selves, etc.” (BIS 221) Beyond the ‘death of God’ (BIL 222), accepted in principle but never properly considered, “never has the power of destructive forces appeared as unquestionable and unavoidable as now, within and without society and the individual” (TaL 221). This situation reveals a fundamental impoverishment – in both religious and secular practice – in contemporary representation; the incapacity – manifest as much in the attempt to fix meaning as in the tendency toward ‘asymbolia’ – of modern Western culture to address a ‘nothingness’ which, in a monstrous twist, assumes the all too concrete presence of gas chambers and the atomic bomb: “On the edge of silence the word ‘nothing’ emerges, a discrete defense in the face of so much disorder, both internal and external, incommensurable. Never has a

cataclysm been more apocalyptically outrageous; never has its representation been assumed by so few symbolic means.” (BIS 223)

4.1.1 New Maladies of the Soul

Kristeva begins to examine this condition of late modernity – this double incapacity to *name* its crisis and to refrain from *final naming* – and the disintegration of subjective experience that accompanies it in a more extensive manner in *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995 – French 1993). In many ways, the text is an extension of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic trilogy (#3): it discusses questions of abjection, narcissism, and melancholia in light of the transformations taking place in Western civilization at the end of the millennium. These transformations radicalize subjective afflictions and push them in the direction of personal and collective psychosis (Interviews 86). Kristeva employs the term ‘soul’ in this text in order to emphasize the essentially heterogeneous constitution of the ‘psyche’: biology *and* culture, body *and* language, desire *and* reason, the namable *and* the unnamable (see NeMS 4 and also Interviews 86). Yet the term is also a provocation of sorts, aimed at *both* the intellectual, scientific, and psychiatric atheists comfortably entrenched in their unreflective ‘secularism’, *and* at the numerous individuals in Western societies who participate in what Kristeva presumes to be the popular trend of an uncritical ‘return to religion’: “As for the renewed interest in religion, we have reason to wonder if it stems from a legitimate quest, or from a psychological poverty that requests that faith give it an artificial soul that might replace an amputated subjectivity” (NeMS 7). For the mediatized, atheist consumers and the ‘new believers’ alike, “Actions and their

immanent abandonment have replaced the interpretation of meaning”; having, at least in principle, abandoned metaphysics, yet nonetheless immersed in metaphysical anxiety and the need for new meaning, “Modern man is losing his soul, but he does not know it [...]” (NeMS 7)

Kristeva asserts at the outset that, as far as the crucial role of psychoanalysis in this context is concerned, her aim is not reducible to resolving the increasingly unbearable tension between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ interests, for it would be impossible to consider the ‘psychic drama’ of the modern subject without an appeal to both:

The West has been crafting inner life since the beginning of the Christian era, when Plotinus transformed a Janus-faced Narcissus into two hands joined in prayer. Inner life has been reinforced by the spiritual path and carnival of the Middle Ages, and it has been shaped by Montaigne’s fragile ego, Diderot’s passions, and the meditations of Hegel and Kant. It has since become a psychic drama, a psychodrama. (NeMS 27-28)

The purpose of psychoanalysis is not merely to *cure* this or that aspect of subjective experience, but rather to bear witness – by positioning itself between a certain ‘knowledge’ and a certain ‘ignorance’ – to the impossibility of ‘truth’ at the crossroads of language and silence (NeMS 87), in order to “strive for a new form of self-knowledge, one that Freud has already outlined by placing the ‘malady’ at the very essence of the psyche and by making psychic life into an interminable construction-destruction” (NeMS 44). Kristeva argues that, while Christian theologians of the past have, for the most part, sought to resolve the tension by “granting their subjects a single object in which to delight – that is, God (as Saint Augustine said, *res qua fruendum est*)” (NeMS 76), the implementation of the ‘death of God’ within secular practice has opened up a

hysterical, depressive, and psychotic void, which demands a fundamental reconfiguration of subjective experience.

Kristeva's discussion here echoes her reflections from the 1980s, placing psychoanalysis at a radical proximity to negative theology; but the analyses contained in *New Maladies of the Soul* make it more clear that only insofar as it follows the path of uncertainty by permanently assuming the "psychological profile of a question" (NeMS 89) can psychoanalytic discourse be regarded as constituting the possibility of a proper response to the crises of late modernity.

By giving a name to that which cannot be formulated, I put it into question. [...] Analytic name-giving is not a definition, for it is content to repudiate the repudiation [...] and – a double negative – it enables the symbolic to expand into an *indefinite questioning*. For even if the patient sees the analyst as a 'subject-presumed-to-know', analysts know that they are nothing more than questioning and questioned subjects. (NeMS 89)

In a fundamental manner, psychoanalytic discourse brings to attention the analyst's "knowing that I [the analyst/analysand] do not know." By way of this gesture, it enables the modern subject/culture to assume a similar position of 'non-knowledge' constituted in a discursive encounter between the subject-as-other and the Other as the impossible no-place of Meaning. If this 'no-place' is, as Kristeva occasionally suggests, no longer 'religious' today, it cannot avoid the perpetual exigency of what goes by the name of 'religion'. For this reason, Kristeva offers two readings of the biblical text: she returns to her analyses of biblical abominations in *Powers of Horror*, and she simultaneously attempts to correct the reductionism of her previous work by taking into account the revolutionary potential found in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Gospels.

4.1.2 Reading the Bible as a (Modern) Text

Kristeva's reading begins with the crucial acknowledgment of its own limits with respect to the religious text, as well as of the gesture of violation inscribed into any attempt (psychoanalytic, semiological, or otherwise) to venture beyond these limits. This gesture is as questionable as it is necessary:

[...] we must not forget that any interpretation of a religious text or occurrence assumes that it can be made into an object of analysis, even if it means admitting that it conceals something that cannot be analyzed. Of course, we may question this interpretive obsession that tries so desperately to make the Holy Text say what it does not know it is saying, and I shall return to what I believe to be the motivation behind this eternal return to divinity, a return that may be glorious or profane. (NeMS 115)

The Talmudic and cabalistic traditions contain, according to Kristeva, a profound awareness of the necessity of ongoing interpretation – revolving around “a Single yet Infinite Meaning that supports human desire in the face of God” (NeMS 116). As *New Maladies of the Soul* shows, this awareness is lacking considerably in the modern, secular subject. Beyond its attempts to organize and curb abjection, the experience of reading and interpretation constitutes for Kristeva the essential ritual of the Judaic tradition, as though in anticipation of the experience of psychoanalytic ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth’. Although the anthropological examinations of biblical taboos on which she had previously relied are still essential to a proper understanding of the Bible, Kristeva presently admits that they ignore the central question of the linguistic relationship that constitutes the biblical subject and his/her addressee or ‘Other’: “*Who is speaking in the Bible? For whom?*” (NeMS 117) This necessary question no longer experienced by the modern subject deprived of God and Meaning constantly re-constitutes the

biblical subject on the very border of his/her subjectivity insofar as it “maintains a specific relationship of *crisis*, *trial*, or *process* with his God.” (NeMS 117)

Deprived of its own addressee at once loving and unnamable/unrepresentable (NeMS 121) that would give meaning to its crises, modern culture is unable to maintain “the *position of subjectivity*, that is, a being for and by the Other” (NeMS 122). This modern void does not allow for an easy theological or antitheological response. Psychoanalytic discourse steps into this void; hence the significance of Kristeva’s question: “Why is it that ever since Freud, analytic attention has invariably focused on the sacred, and more specifically on the biblical sacred?” (NeMS 123) The answer has to do with “the interpretive posture itself” (NeMS 123) at the intersection of silence and speech, which constitutes psychoanalysis as a ‘Jewish science’ of sorts, albeit one marked by a profound ambiguity vis-à-vis the ‘sacred’. On the one hand, the psychoanalyst interprets the sacred text through its psychic dramas at a point of almost absolute proximity to the religious experience of the Imaginary Father it embodies, and “is attentive and even vulnerable to the biblical text” (NeMS 123), so that “the never-attained end of analysis is analogous to the logic of the Bible” (NeMS 125). In this sense, the analyst remains on the side of the ‘sacred’, refusing to side with the atheist rationalist and following the path of a (non-) meaning that is “multifaceted, indefinable, set ablaze”. This requires from the analyst to “cling to the Bible’s rigor, logic, and love, so that this fire might *be* and not die down right away” (NeMS 125). On the other hand, “analytic interpretation defuses all beliefs: the psychoanalyst [...] is banished from

churches and temples” (NeMS 123). Putting into play the subject’s relation to the “Meaning of the Other” (NeMS 124), the analyst nonetheless negates the process of the transcendental power of this relation and the process of its mystification.

Between these two impossible aims that characterize its role in late modernity, psychoanalysis proposes “an imaginary construction that can serve as an indefinite and infinite truth. As opposed to a positivist interpretation, which would delimit reality by giving itself the last word – the strongest word – analytic interpretation [...] makes no attempt to hide its status as fiction, as a *text*” (NeMS 123). Analytic discourse is marked by a *double* refusal: “Consequently, analysts are obliged to distance themselves from Faith in the Goddess of Reason as well as from religious Faith” (NeMS 124). Occupying a radically critical/ethical, though fragile, non-position in the midst of modern ideological pursuits and dangerous illusions, psychoanalytic discourse thus parallels the movement of deconstruction: “Neither biblical, rationalistic, religious, nor positivist, the place of the analyst is always elsewhere and deceptive, notable for the attention it gives to emptiness. [...] This is enough to irritate believers, which amounts to almost everyone, in spite of what we might think” (NeMS 125). In Kristeva’s view, this ambiguity poses a necessary challenge to the positivist tendencies of modern thought and its endless schisms and refinements, as well as to the rejection of interpretation that characterizes today’s ‘society of the spectacle’. A similar challenge vis-à-vis modernity remains intrinsic to the biblical text. In Kristeva’s concluding words: “We should read the Bible one more time. To interpret it, of course, but also to

let it carve out a space for our own fantasies and interpretive delirium.” (NeMS 126)

Kristeva follows this analysis with a brief reading of the Gospel according to John; not merely in order to *explain* the text psychoanalytically, which she does to some extent by identifying in it something like a ‘theory of the subject’ (NeMS 127), but above all in order to follow this text’s attempt to *renew* the biblical tradition through the experience of a ‘new semiology’ (NeMS 128). In this scheme, Kristeva argues, a sign does not simply indicate; it responds to the other’s sensory experience and offers “a replenishment of affects” (NeMS 128). The text continually “reintroduces the body and the sensations” into the narrative and, in the process, “incorporates the community of constituents (in the form of bodies) into John’s new semiology” (NeMS 129). Developing a set of identifications as well as differences between God’s love, the passionate subjectivity of the Son, and the community of believers, the text, in Kristeva’s interpretation, testifies to the fact that “*Signification* means *trusting* the other” (NeMS 129) beyond mere *knowledge* and the immediacy of vision (NeMS 130). In Kristeva’s understanding, a similar dynamic – at once that of semiology and transference – underlies the Eucharistic experience of transubstantiation, “which exposes the believer to the diverse realms of subjective experience – from affects to sublimated love, from an all-consuming violence to an assimilating trust and vice versa” (NeMS 131). The complex process of ‘subjectivation’ manifest in this experience offers two (psychoanalytic) advantages for the modern subject, according to Kristeva’s reading of John 6:6: “First, phantasmatic participation in

God's infinite meaning opens the subject to the infinite time of interpretation, a time that might be considered eternal. Second, symbolic identification with the Son of God, which is centered on speech, has a direct effect on the body" (NeMS 131). In other words, John's text transports the sign beyond the level of metaphor and brings together the infinity of translation and a corporeal identity between the subject and the Other (NeMS 132). The heterogeneous character of this experience of subjective interiority and its displacement, in Kristeva's view, will be adopted by Neoplatonism and the Church Fathers; following the development of Cartesian and Hegelian thought, it will find its way into psychoanalytic practice. The significance of this transformation should not be underestimated, since "Modern man lacks the words and images needed to celebrate this imaginary prehistory of the individual" (NeMS 144). Kristeva believes that today, only psychoanalysis and modern literature – Joyce for instance, whose textual adventures between sign and body Kristeva regards as at once Catholic and 'post-Christian' in character (NeMS 175-76) – bear witness to this 'prehistory' and its undeniable contemporaneity.

4.1.3 Revolt and Modern Culture

Kristeva's critique of late modernity reaches its apex in the second half of the 1990s, in two volumes translated into English as *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt* (2000 – French 1996) and *Intimate Revolt* (2002 – French 1997-98), both bearing the subtitle: *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*. Kristeva's explorations of the question of 'revolt' – more precisely, of the current Western culture's *inability* to experience revolt (SNR 1) – in these texts attempt to assert

the continuity of her entire intellectual project, together with a reassessment, recovery, and renewal of her earlier thought. Kristeva returns to her early preoccupations with writing and revolution, reinterprets or elaborates certain philosophical aspects of her psychoanalytic theory, and seeks new ways to examine the crises of ‘modern man’ (IRe 3). Once again, she poses the question of the possibility of addressing the ‘impossible’ (Other) in current Western culture. Most importantly for the purposes of this study, Kristeva’s two works make explicit what remains mostly implicit in her psychoanalytic ventures between 1983 and 1993: namely her conviction that the *impasses* of both religious *and* secular discourses mark one of the essential features – perhaps the *single* most essential *crisis* – of Western modernity at the turn of the millennium.

As Kristeva emphasizes in the introductory chapters of both texts, a fundamental reconsideration of the meaning of ‘revolt’ is crucial to the critique of modernity. She returns to its Latin origin in *volvere*, suggesting a ‘curve’, ‘entourage’, ‘turn’, and ‘return’ (SNR 2) and its French and Italian developments indicating ‘envelopment’, ‘curvature’, ‘vault’ as well as ‘circular movement’, ‘temporal return’, or ‘turning back’ (SNR 1-2). The term is overdetermined with a wide variety of associations, from ‘consultation’ to ‘rereading’, ‘upheaval’, ‘unfolding’, ‘reassessment’, ‘rediscovery’ and, finally, ‘renewal’ or ‘recovery’. Kristeva thus attempts to expand rather than abandon the political significance of the term ‘revolt’ in order to include the back-and-forth movement of interpretation (SNR 2) along with the sense and non-sense – its detours, uncertainties, repetitions, upheavals, renewals, and transformations (SNR 4) – necessarily

embodied in it. In psychoanalytic terms, such revolt entails three ‘figures’: transgression; repetition, working-through; and displacement, combinatives, games (SNR 17). Understood in this sense, ‘revolt’ embodies a productive and critical assumption of the crisis of meaning rather than a pathological assumption or denial of this crisis. It demands interminable translation, interpretation, and questioning. In an allusion to Heidegger, Kristeva refers to this process as “an impossible temporalizing” (SNR 16). In this schema, revolt constitutes an intimate – and hence singular, unique, personal – experience, but only insofar as it occurs within a larger symbolic (cultural, religious, ethical, aesthetic) context. This approach eliminates the simple option of choosing between individual and collective aspirations:

It is no longer a matter of conforming to the universal (in the best of case, everyone aspiring to the same values, human rights, for example) or asserting one’s difference (ethnic, religious, sexual) as untouchable and sacred [...]. ‘There is meaning’: this will be my universal. And ‘I’ use the words of the tribe to inscribe my singularity. *Je est un autre* (‘I is another’): this will be my difference, and ‘I’ will express my specificity by distorting the nevertheless necessary clichés of the codes of communication and by constantly deconstructing the ideas/concepts/ideologies/ philosophies that ‘I’ have inherited. (SNR 19)

The practice of revolt cannot limit itself either to a withdrawal to ‘old values’ or to an abandonment of such values in favor of new values that will be just as unquestionable. “When one recognizes that the contradictions of thought and society are not soluble, then revolt – with its risks – appears as a continuous necessity for keeping alive the psyche, thought, and the social link itself.” (SNR 144)

Kristeva's return to 'revolt' has much to do with her belief that Western culture, as a civilization for which politics embodies a form of secular religion, has become entrenched in a somewhat self-congratulatory conviction concerning the allegedly unquestionable success of its social and political liberties as well as of its ideological and metaphysical subversions, past and present. Kristeva suspects that this culture in fact remains perversely conformist and normalizing, insofar as it has become caught up in its own mediatized spectacle consisting of entertainment and consumerism (SNR 6 & 10; see ReSS 101); as a result, it is less and less capable of critical reflection. When it occurs, critical thought usually assumes the form of a rejection of the philosophical, political, religious or literary/artistic tradition in the name of 'freedom' and 'progress', rather than its careful reconsideration. "We are confronted with the destruction of our foundation" (SNR 10) in the wake of which neither art nor religion remains certain as to its purpose. Kristeva's assessment of this situation is quite severe:

Generally, when the media employ the word 'revolt', we understand nothing other than this nihilistic suspension of questioning in favor of so-called new value, which as values, precisely, have forgotten to question themselves and have thereby fundamentally betrayed the meaning of revolt that I am trying to emphasize here. [...] The pseudorebellious nihilist is in fact a man reconciled with the stability of new values. And this stability, which is illusory, is revealed to be deadly, totalitarian. I can never sufficiently emphasize the fact that totalitarianism is the result of a certain fixation of revolt in what is precisely its betrayal, namely, the suspension of retrospective return, which amount to a suspension of thought.
(IRe 6)

This situation is accompanied by two developments: on the one hand, the dissolution of central power/authority accompanied by an anonymous but nonetheless normalizing social order grounded in financial calculation, public

administration, and techno-scientific as well as political management (SNR 4-5 & IRe 4-6); on the other hand, the emergence of the 'patrimonial' individual (SNR 6) assured of his or her free status but unable to understand or experience him/herself as a *subject* through the Other and for the other. (IRe 8)

Kristeva's aim, in this respect, is to consider what she regards to be the fundamental necessity of a 'culture of revolt' for both psychological and collective life (SNR 7) in light of those dimensions of Western civilization – especially its philosophical, religious, literary, and psychoanalytic aspects (SNR 7-8) – that preserve the possibility of such revolt in late modernity. This implies "going beyond the notion of the text [...] which has become a form of dogma," in order to bring into focus "the notion of experience" insofar as it revolves around "the rebirth of meaning for the other" (SNR 8). Kristeva is not simply rejecting the notion of the 'text' here, just as she is not limiting 'experience' to something purely physical beyond meaning. Rather, she argues that Western culture has hastily absorbed the notion of the 'text' to the point where it has lost its critical role, thus giving rise to a culture of texts and images in which experience at the intersection of 'body' and 'meaning' becomes impossible. In this context, death, love, suffering, or jouissance – all experiences that literature and religion have engaged with in the past – are reduced to the status of media events: televised, reported, performed, studied and exploited, yet without affecting our language and thought in an essential manner. Kristeva understands 'experience' and 'meaning' as necessarily coextensive, and 'revolt' becomes for her nothing more and nothing less than the name for their mutual transformation 'incarnated' within a

discursive, interpretive practice that responds to “the being-as-other of human existence” (SNR 17). This practice must remain exposed to risks and cannot be superficially stabilized by means of a calculable ‘technique’ or ‘method’ – which, as Kristeva insists, psychoanalysis is *not* (SNR 67) – with fixed rules: “I am seeking experiences in which this work of revolt, which opens psychical life to infinite re-creation, continues and recurs, even at the price of errors and impasses. Because [...] it is not enough to revive the permanence of revolt, which technology may have blocked, in order to recapture happiness or some sort of serene stability of being” (IRe 6). This involves an all-encompassing transformation of our individual and collective relationship to meaning, beyond simplistic distinctions between political ‘action’, theoretical ‘thought’, or psychological ‘cure’:

[...] it is not exclusively in the world of action that this revolt is realized but in that of psychical life and its social manifestations (writing, thought, art), a revolt that seems to me to manifest the crises of modern man as much as the advances. Yet as a transformation of man’s relationship to meaning this cultural revolt intrinsically concerns public life and consequently has profoundly political implications. In fact, it poses the question of another politics, that of permanent conflictuality. (IRe 11)

4.1.4 Religious Revolt

From the very start, Kristeva leaves no doubt that what is at stake in her ‘project’ is nothing less than the question of the possibility of passing *through*, and perhaps *beyond* ‘religion’ toward a new experience of the ‘impossible’. While the dissolution of the Roman Empire had been compensated for by the emergence of Christianity with ideas, arts, writings and architecture that gave

birth to a new culture and a new subjectivity, Kristeva is not convinced that a similar source of renewal can be found amidst the ruins of Western modernity and the threat of subjective ‘normalization’ and technological ‘automation’ (SNR 7): “Today, I am not certain that a new religion is arriving or that this would even be desirable. But I think we all need an experience, by which I mean something unknown [...]” (SNR 10). Kristeva alludes to Heidegger’s well-known but enigmatic pronouncement: “Only a God can save us” (SNR 7), in his interview of 1966 published in May 1976 in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. There are hints that a renewal/revolt of Western culture can take place through contemporary experiences of art and literature at least insofar as these “situate us [...] *at the borders of the sacred* and ask us not to contemplate images but to commune with beings” (SNR 10 – emphasis added); and yet, Kristeva suspects that the *uncertainty* that characterizes this situation is itself of utmost importance. The term ‘impasse’ makes a frequent appearance throughout both *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt* and *Intimate Revolt* (SNR 7, 29, 77, 78, 112; IRe 262, 263, 267), and it is applied in equal measure with respect to ‘religion’, ‘secularism’, ‘politics’, or ‘modernity’ – as though to parallel Derrida’s increasingly frequent use of the term ‘aporia’ in his work on religion. While she declares the need for a new ‘humanity’ whose language and thought “take the risk of confronting religion and the metaphysics that nourishes it” (SNR 18), Kristeva remains highly skeptical of any hasty attempts by ‘facile secularisms’ (SNR 13) to assert the ‘death of God’. In their place, she prefers to follow the path of a more fundamental questioning that – beyond the metaphysical/theological One, but

without abandoning the subjective experiences ‘sanctified’ by monotheistic religion (SNR 18) – seeks “the possible or impossible meaning of modern atheism.” (SNR 18)

Kristeva finds this kind of questioning humanity in the literary and intellectual pursuits of Louis Aragon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Roland Barthes; for this reason, a considerable portion of the two volumes on revolt explores their texts. Yet she is equally clear that the experiences of revolt to which these authors gave words would not be possible without the Greek and Christian experiences, both of which remain fundamentally relevant today:

Since Socrates and Plato and more explicitly with Christian theology, man has been invited to a ‘return’. Some of you still maintain the traces of this, if not the practice. This is notably the goal of Saint Augustine’s repetition, founded on the retrospective link to the already-there of the Creator: the possibility of questioning one’s own being, searching for oneself (*se quaerere*: ‘quaesto mihi factus sum’), is offered by this aptitude for return, which is simultaneously recollection, interrogation, and thought. (IRe 5)

The meaning of the Augustinian experience of ‘going in quest of oneself’ in relation to an Other must be rediscovered in a new, post-metaphysical manner today. This is due to Kristeva’s belief that modern nihilism, marked by the rejection or abandonment of the religious, literary, and intellectual heritage and their inevitable replacement by other dogmas, is the result as much of “the desacralization of Christianity” as of Christianity’s “own intrinsic tendencies toward stabilization and reconciliation in the immutability of being” (IRe 6). Characterized as a certain ‘interval’ between the ‘not yet’ and the ‘already no longer’, Kristeva’s “concept of man in revolt distinguishes the modern man from both the Christian man, reconciled with God (‘coram Deo’), and the nihilist, his

enraged but symmetrical opposite” (IRe 7). The introductions to both volumes on revolt make it apparent that, as far as Kristeva is concerned, psychoanalysis – insofar as it situates itself at the crossroads of a certain philosophical, religious, and literary practice – constitutes the privileged experience of revolt, and enables a passage beyond Christianity and nihilism that is simultaneously an experience of ‘anamnesis’ or ‘recollection’ (IRe 8). However, the sense of an impasse remains.

If revolt

announces a veritable transformation of man issued from the Christian eschatology of retrospection as the path of truth and intimacy [...] [t]he Freudian discovery is not a rejection of this tradition but a deepening of it to the limits of conscious unity; starting here, the Freudian path announces a possible transformation of our culture, inasmuch as it initiates another relationship to meaning and the One.” (IRe 10)

The contemporary, *critical* significance of Kristeva’s long-standing obsession with Freud’s account of the murder of the primordial father finally becomes apparent in *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*: despite its ‘fictional’ character, Kristeva considers it as a crucial reminder of the original inseparability of the experiences of religion, society, and revolt. A return to the question of this inseparability is therefore essential to any critique of late modernity and its allegedly ‘secular’ status: “[...] for Freud, the social order is fundamentally religious. Which leads us to the first question: if the rebellious man is a religious man, what happens when the man is no longer religious? Is he still rebellious?” (SNR 13) Kristeva’s question is coextensive with her increasing effort to develop a critique of contemporary Western models of power/authority and its implications for subjective identity in connection to psychoanalytic observations on the Oedipus complex. In a sense, Kristeva regards the ‘death of God’ as a

repetition of the murder of the primordial father, except this time – due to its uncritical nature – the event results merely in a certain power vacuum (SNR 24-25) whose consequences are not only religious, but also political, moral, and psychological: “Perhaps this is where we are: neither guilty nor responsible but consequently incapable of revolt” (SNR 15). Kristeva believes that the emergence of a wide variety of fundamentalisms or nihilisms (SNR 30) – political, economic, and scientific, as much as religious – in late modernity directly corresponds to the ambiguous character of this situation deprived of a transcendental, sacred signifier, space, or law with which the individual and his or her community can identify, which leads many groups and individuals to feel excluded or persecuted, while also excluding and persecuting others in an attempt to preserve their illusion of access to a transcendental identity. (SNR 21-24)

The essential question Kristeva poses in this regard is the following: is contemporary Western culture capable of assuming the benefits of the experience (and logic) of religious revolt without repeating the violence and the exclusion or persecution of others inscribed into it, and without recourse to a meaningless proliferation of ‘values’ under technological and economic pressures? (SNR 24-25) For Kristeva, “This is an important question, and allow me to emphasize it, for it concerns nothing less than the surpassing of *Homo religiosus*” (SNR 24). It may be tempting here to assume that Kristeva’s question implicitly affirms the absolute necessity of such *surpassing*, especially since she explicitly declares “the impasses of religious form or revolt” today (SNR 29); it is important to note, however, that Kristeva’s response to this essential question is neither immediate

nor final, but rather arrives without arriving, as it were, in the form of an ongoing displacement and reformulation throughout the two texts on revolt. Such ‘interminable’ displacement entails the “movement toward the infinite and the indefinite” (SNR 29) and corresponds intimately to the very aim of psychoanalysis (SNR 29); above all, it constitutes the very definition of ‘revolt’, as Kristeva understands it, beyond a simple opposition between prohibition and transgression. Insofar as psychoanalysis takes up the task of revolt it establishes something like a ‘sacred space’ within secular culture, a space that neither rejects ‘religion’ nor assures a victory for ‘atheism’, but rather displaces them infinitely with respect to one another within the movement of discourse. “The secular belief – whose foundations we are still seeking, which must neither be too reductive nor too lethal – might be described as this: with language, we will be better able to think about the meaning of a statement such as ‘God is within us’. If God is within us, it is because we are speaking beings” (SNR 30). If Kristeva’s statement sounds like a rationalism, her argument also suggests that we can never decide, once and for all, whether *homo religiosus* constitutes merely a problematic, archaic specter haunting the modern subject, or the very essence of the speaking being always already in need of the Other who must remain nameless: “The Word can reveal your truths to you by reconciling you with...whom? Not merely with yourself but with the other of the psychical, indeed, the other of language. There is no modern word for this” (SNR 59). As Kristeva indicates, this ‘Other’ points in the direction of a certain atheism which nonetheless remains within its own proper limits: “I am not sure ‘atheism’ means

anything more than taking the other and exploring it” (SNR 106). Referring to Freud’s famous text on religion, she adds: “The future of an illusion? Necessarily!”, and warns the reader against “militant antireligious counterinvestment.” (SNR 106)

4.1.5 Oedipus at the Crossroads

Kristeva does not reduce everything to language, but rather posits a certain impossibility around which language revolves. She paraphrases Lacan: the subject speaks over a gap whose truth cannot be told entirely (SNR 32). This situation demands of psychoanalysis that it repeat a certain experience of the Judeo-Christian logic of forgiveness (IRe 16-17), of “the giving of meaning [...] in the mode of questioning” (IRe 145), rather than erect a new edifice of ‘truth’. Psychoanalytic revolt hence recognizes itself not as a ‘strategy of knowledge’ occurring between two Egos (SNR 67; see IRe 25-26), but as “a perilous place, a place of subjective incoherence, a difficult position for subjectivity. Revolt here is not an advance toward ‘singing tomorrows’ but, on the contrary, a return and a process” that embodies what Mallarmé called “a prior future” (SNR 50). Kristeva’s attempt to resurrect the ‘paternal function’ (SNR 30) at the heart of this psychoanalytic revolt is not a return to a classical model of authority grounded in the traditional family structure; rather, it aims to transform this model while preserving the necessity of both identity and difference that it embodies and to rethink the opposition between prohibition and transgression. (ReSS 120)

The oedipal revolt should be regarded in terms of a paradoxical double *failure*: on the one hand, Oedipus must undergo a (symbolic) castration (SNR 76-

77); on the other hand, the (symbolic) ‘father’ – including the analyst (IRe 40) – must always be put to death in order to remain the guarantor of authority and of the birth of the thinking and yet not absolute subject (SNR 85). In Kristeva’s words, “the oedipal object is an object forever lost and sought” (SNR 76), and “There is no signifier that is not lacking, no father who does not become dead” (SNR 86). Kristeva’s return to the oedipal triangle is therefore a return to the impasses of freedom and authority, both of which she considers as lacking in the modern subject’s experience. This difficult crossroads must be occupied without hasty decisions: “How are we to understand the sense of this impasse? A particular destiny of the human being is in question here [...]” (SNR 77). “Between these two impasses, the path of revolt is narrow [...]” (SNR 78). The logic of this argument offers a deeper insight into Kristeva’s ongoing ambivalence with respect to the ‘death of God’. If, in a sense, she constantly seeks to affirm the necessity of this ‘death’, she also remains skeptical of the modern subject’s attempt to posit him or herself as an Oedipus who *does not fail* in this murder, who avoids symbolic castration and *resolves* the riddle of the Sphinx once and for all, forgetting the limits of representability and acquiring unmediated access to the truth of the ‘sacred’. (SNR 89-90)

4.1.6 Figures of Revolt: Aragon, Sartre, Barthes

The choice of three ‘rebellious’ authors Kristeva discusses in the *Sense and Nonsense of Revolt* and *Intimate Revolt* – Louis Aragon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Roland Barthes – is highly indicative in this respect. Along with their correspondence to the ‘three figures of revolt’ she finds in Freud (# 4.1.2) and

beyond their oedipal, atheist displacement of the One/God, their writing responds to an ‘impossible’ (SNR 107), to the limits of meaning and being (SNR 112) that have been mostly forgotten by late modernity’s self-assured, techno-scientific, consumerist, secular iconoclasm: “[...] beyond this conflict with the father and the law, and especially when the place of the father is vacant and the son is illegitimate, another variant of the tragic appears, beyond the oedipal tragic: it is the confrontation with what must be called the impossible” (SNR 144). It is not by accident that Kristeva’s readings of these authors lead in the direction of a certain questioning of the position of late modernity with respect to religious discourse.

In the context of Aragon’s (1897-1982) work, Kristeva takes up the theme of the impossible in terms of literature’s experience of *a-thought*²: writing-as-thinking at the limits of the thinkable or writing as a constant passage between sense and nonsense, which also implies a practice of language grounded in the recognition that “all naming is always already displaced, inauthentic, unreal, imaginary, since I always name to the side” (IRe 181). This practice positions itself between the two impasses of oedipal revolt, as well as between the ‘paternal function’ and a certain sacralization of the ‘maternal’:

On the other side of the phallic cult, a-thought scandalizes our phallic aptitude for knowledge [...]. If it desacralizes knowledge-as-thought, if it desacralizes the phallus, a-thought involves the risk of identity collapse. On the other hand, if it sacralizes feminine *jouissance*, it runs the risk of erecting a new religion: the prospect of occultism and political utopias. The true scandal of the surrealists, cast in the face of culture, was to remain between the two, in the crucial of a-thought. (SNR 121)

² SNR 113 & 120-21. - As Juliana de Nooy observes, the negative prefix *a-* is inaudible in French because the distinction between *la pensée* and *l’a-pensé* is blurred (KCR 121).

The practice of revolt that embodies this ‘a-thought’, Kristeva contends, corresponds to the crisis of meaning in all of its dimensions: “To speak of revolt does not call to mind integration, inclusion, and unchanging social idyll but underscores that economic, psychological, and spiritual contradictions exist and also that these contradictions are permanent: they are not solvable” (SNR 144). The experience of the ‘a-thought’ in Aragon’s and other surrealists’ work presents us with a difficult atheism whose logic remains as yet undecidable and is necessarily permeated by errors:

Without God and without the more insidious as well as more fragile certainty of the boundary, the norm, what judgment is possible? And if we maintain it – which in fact seems indispensable if ‘I’ want to continue establishing connections at the heart of a livable community – how can one unthink, a-think this threatening logic of the arbitrary, of nothingness, of the forgetting that subtends the signs of language, that is, the faculty of thinking itself? (IRe 203)

In the face of this task, current cultural and political arrangements, along with their attempt to establish a new, secular version of the sacred, will not suffice: “One must also recognize that in the face of these errors and errancies, so-called nontotalitarian, democratic culture – with the exception of its margins of exploration [...] – remains disastrously conformist: a culture outside of history and its crises, forged by pious wishes for a claming normativity and transcendence, as obsolete as they are unattainable.” (IRe 203)

In her discussions of Sartre, Kristeva attempts to find parallels between psychoanalytic and Sartrean paths toward an ‘impossible truth’ (SNR 166) in which the subject’s necessary experience of being-for-the-Other is constituted otherwise than through *knowledge*. Citing Sartre’s assertion in *Being and*

Nothingness (1943), “My relation to the Other is first and fundamentally a relation of being to being, not of knowledge to knowledge” (SNR 180), Kristeva warns against cognitivist or rationalist reductionisms of this dynamic: “[...] psychoanalysis would do well to reread this Sartrean debate concerning ‘knowledge’, ‘consciousness’, and ‘being’ when they try painstakingly to define the other, confining it within strategies of knowledge and knowing intersubjectivity” (SNR 180). In *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*, Kristeva does not conceal her belief that although psychoanalysis, like Sartre’s writing, is strictly speaking an atheist practice, its discourse on the Other aligns itself with a certain ‘religiosity’ in which the proper name of the Other cannot be decided absolutely and in advance: “[...] we do not know if God exists, but we need the idea of perfection, and we situate it in the place of God; we do not know if the other is approachable, but we strive to apprehend the interiority of our consciousness or the possibility of *Mit-Sein* [Being-with] through an ‘intuition of transcendence’ concerning others [...]” (SNR 181)

These concerns are elaborated in *Intimate Revolt*, this time around the necessity of the subject’s encounter with ‘nothingness’ (IRe 123). The imaginary experience in the process of revolt demands the risk of a certain self-transcendence, self-annihilation, or *mise en abîme* (IRe 125). Psychoanalysis, in this respect, follows aspects of Sartre’s thought, for its constructions and the impossible ‘objects’ it speaks toward “are always already on the mode of not being” (IRe 127). Kristeva is particularly interested in the relationship between Sartrean and psychoanalytic understanding of ‘faith’ in the context of the

subject's experience of nothingness. Sartre's concept of "bad faith consists of positing one's transcendence as facticity, and one's facticity as transcendence" (IRe 133). Thus all faith must necessarily be regarded as bad faith: "Insofar as faith is adherence and adherence betrays (in that it arrests) movement (the perpetual nihilation-transcendence that is specific to consciousness), faith revels in the ambiguity of bad faith: it wants to be transcendence, and yet it fixes transcendence in certainty" (IRe 133). This logic is aimed as much against the religious adherence to 'God' as "the illusion of totalization" (IRe 133) as it is against the humanist adherence to the certainty of 'values' (IRe 134). Sartre's 'radical atheism', which he himself declared "a cruel and long-range affair [...] nevertheless does not abandon the exigency of sovereignty: a sovereignty understood as a continually replayed transcendence, thereby eluding all certainty. This is the meaning of Sartrean atheism, which has nothing to do with nihilism but rather with an untenable freedom regarding being and meaning." (IRe 135)

Although Kristeva appreciates Sartre's thought in this respect, she also asserts that psychoanalytic practice moves beyond the Sartrean experience of consciousness as freedom and as the knowledge of this freedom "transparent to itself, with no omissions and no secrets" (IRe 136). As a theory of the unconscious, psychoanalysis avoids the temptations of religious faith and yet recognizes, against Sartre, the inescapable necessity of a certain faithful, if illusory, adherence or identification to the Other (IRe 138). The purpose of psychoanalytic practice is to endlessly maintain the opening and unfolding of 'psychical life' (IRe 139): "Against bad faith or faith altogether, fantasies are

continually revived and questioned again but by no means extinguished as if they betrayed a ‘bad’ neurosis. It is a matter of restarting their creation, assuring them a long life in their interminable exhaustion [...]” (IRE 139). Kristeva’s project once again recalls Derrida’s engagement with negative theology. The purpose is not simply to reconcile various discourses or experiences in the context of a single ‘knowledge’ or ‘practice’, but “to promote what is perhaps humanity’s most sovereign venture: questioning transcendence in transcendence itself, *to the point of atheism*” (IRE 139; emphasis added). At a point of almost absolute proximity to atheism, Kristeva explicitly acknowledges the danger of a final naming of the impossible and identifies this danger at the heart of the late modernist project:

Supported by technological advances in all fields, the objectified imaginative consciousness no longer recognizes the impossible or nothingness. The total spectacle, henceforth objectified and reified, can only tend – if a tension still exists – toward its own extension. This is the one and only tendency of the total spectacle. The virtual thus realized eliminates nothingness and transcendence and in this sense may coincide with a radical atheism more implacable than any rationalist militantism: all is visible and transparent, nothing negative remains that cannot be represented or calculated. (IRE 140)

In Anna Smith’s words, “A place for everything and everything in its place: such, according to Kristeva, has been the passion and proclivity of a dominant tradition of Western thought” (A. Smith 1996, 87). In *Intimate Revolt*, Kristeva indicates her suspicion that a similar, nihilist logic permeates the secular, modern attempt to relegate religious discourse to its own ‘proper’ sphere, as had previously been done with ‘art’ and ‘literature’. Between the ‘bad faith’ of the modern, secular, rational subject, and the naïve faith of the religious fundamentalist (IRE 140), Kristeva’s aim is to affirm revolt-as-interrogation, testifying to the experience of

subjectivity as a kind of ‘knowledge without knowledge’ positioned with respect to the Other: “I think I know, but I am giving up and letting you speak [...]. The naming that psychoanalytical interpretation brings about is not a definition. It is content to retrench the retrenchment (in this, it is the heir of *Verneinung*), and, as a double negation, it opens to the symbolic not as to a fixed truth but as to an indefinite questioning.” (IRe 146)

Kristeva’s interest in Barthes is similarly grounded in her appreciation for the interminability of interpretation that characterizes his textual practices. Beyond ‘God’ and other ‘values’, Barthes bears witness to the fact that by the middle of the twentieth century meaning has ceased to be merely a *possibility* for the human being (SNR 189). “Barthes was convinced modernity had come to this point: to this *mise en abîme* of the possibility of signifying. For him, the crisis of God, the crisis of values, was, fundamentally, nothing other than this impossibility of unitary meaning that prefigures the germination of meaning and its revival and renewal” (SNR 189). The role of critical theory in this regard is to accept the urgency and irreversibility of this situation in order to transform, rather than deny, the subject’s relationship to meaning: “Thus to *decipher* at the very moment that meaning was being lost seemed to Barthes the last revolt remaining when ideologies revealed their lethal stupidity [...]

(SNR 190). This gesture, according to Kristeva, parallels Blanchot’s experience in *The Space of Literature* of writing as a form of eccentric atheism – both infra- and extrareligious in character (SNR 198 - # 2.1.5) – that marks a certain ‘loss of being’. “From this place of lack or loss of being, writing, according to Blanchot, leads to a dazzling

light that is faceless and nameless. We can decipher a metaphor for God here, the Jewish God in particular, the most demanding God in truth. At the same time, it is an attempt to lay out the territory of the sublime as entirely Other, [...] the impersonal” (SNR 197-98). For Barthes as for Blanchot atheism makes sense only insofar as it constitutes a practice of perpetual displacement rather than a final affirmation. This practice revolves around what Barthes calls, in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1980), “this empty and yet significant place called the zero degree of the sign” (cited in SNR 214). In Kristeva’s words: “Do you question faith and God? Know at the outset that it is your aptitude for meaning itself that is in question [...]” (SNR 214)

If Kristeva commits an entire chapter of *Intimate Revolt* to Barthes’s reading of Ignatius of Loyola’s (1491-1556) *Spiritual Exercises*, it is due to her observation at the end of *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt* that, although it “concluded with the ‘suspension’ of the (divine) sign in Loyola: the silence of God” (SNR 214), Barthes’ reading “both realizes and reverses its atheism” (SNR 214) within “the infinite pleasure of the text” (SNR 215). Barthes finds delight in following Loyola’s at once sensual and mystical experience of *loquela*, described as “an intimate word, [...] a speechless voice, at the borders of affect and hallucination, that initiates representation [...]” (IRe 47). Kristeva, in turn, delights in the manner in which, “closest to the unthinkable pathos of the soul” (IRe 47), Loyola’s thought unfolds at the crossroads of body and meaning, prayer and tears. This sets up one of the foundations of future psychoanalytic practice (IRe 49) and carries a continuing relevance for the destiny of the ‘Western

imaginary' (IRe 96). Barthes and Kristeva alike are fascinated by Loyola's ability, through writing, to bring about a certain "multiplication of the place" (IRe 97) within the multilayered character of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Barthes' analysis addresses Loyola's literal, semantic, and allegorical text, as well as what he regards as, in Kristeva's formulation,

A fourth and final text, implicitly woven into the letter, content, and actions of the *Exercises*, [which] is constituted by the supposed and awaited response from God. The *Exercises* harbor a 'sign' liberated by the Divinity, which makes them a 'semiophany' rather than a theophany (p. 53). However, this 'sign' remains awaited, 'suspensive' (p. 75); it is missing. In fact, in the end a strange void structures this enormous and exhausting construction of language [...]. (IRe 97)

The complexity of Loyola's religious text calls for a "polyphony of reading" (IR 97), which does not allow for simple interpretations. Loyola's language confronts an initial silence, leading the reader to the brink of a divine void: "The mantic act – the ancient art of questioning the Divinity and the construction of interpretations while awaiting a second facet of meaning, true meaning, contained in the response of the Divinity – would thus be an appeal following a 'profound deficiency of speech', 'the awareness of human aphasia,' a call for interlocution" (IRe 97). Embodying the realization of this fundamental 'deficiency' of human speech, Loyola's "silence is followed by a question and, with it, a reading or, rather, a re-reading, an infinite and ritualized repetition" (IRe 97) that involves the movement of desire and questioning toward the impossible Other.

Loyola assumes, as it were, the role of a passionate lover whose experience is "an experience in suffering" (IRe 12). The expression *en souffrance*, as Jeanine Herman points out, can be taken in its double French sense of "lost, as a

package”, and “awaiting delivery” (IRe 12). Loyola’s discourse remains immersed in affect; it brings body and word into an intimate correspondence, constantly resurrecting the former through the latter, even as he subjugates it to thought. Kristeva remains attentive to the analytic significance of his *loquela* which she regards as a kind of heterogeneous ‘prelanguage’ that anticipates her notion of *signifiance*, “an infralinguistic mark, at the exact border between the outpouring of tears and the appearance of words” (IRe 105) insofar as it “does not fix us in the discontinuity of the linguistic code” (IRe 106). Kristeva agrees with Barthes’ observation that Loyola’s ‘logotechnique’ presents something like a Christian psychotherapy, albeit one in which the transferential relationship between the subject and God can never be resolved. Kristeva, along with Barthes, is intrigued by the way this relationship, on the fourth level of the text, constitutes at once a sense of reassurance in the unfolding of thought *and* the suspension of judgment and certainty:

Yet [...] this ‘unfolding of thought,’ composed of an arborescent and infinite binarism, culminates in uncertainty. [...] To the questioning of the exercitant, God offers no definite answers. [...] God suspends his answer and leaves the exercitant not with the humanist necessity of making his own judgment but quite simply with the ‘unfolding of thought’: with the richness and complexity of the language that he has composed, made of sensations, *loquela*, fantasies, and infinite binary trees, with this sort of mise-en scène of the psyche and its heterogeneous logic. (IRe 109)

Grounded in the ‘silence of God’, “The dialogue with the Divinity does not have a mark, a clear sign” (Ire 110). As Kristeva puts it, citing Barthes, “[...] the only solution is ‘to make the withholding of the mark itself into an ultimate sign’” (IRe 110). Kristeva asserts that insofar as “the Jesuit is inclined toward nothing, decides nothing, except to be inclined toward nothing (according to Jerónimo

Nadal, Ignatius of Loyola's follower)" (IRE 110), his thought stands in contrast to the moral judgment entailed in 'humanist freedom'. Like Barthes, she is skeptical of the logic of 'self-mastery' contained in Loyola's exercises. Nevertheless, she concludes by emphasizing the significance of Loyola's experience for the modern subject, insofar as this experience is characterized by a radical receptivity in which the suspension of judgment is accompanied by judgment as an infinite process, open to every possibility. The name of God in this context is precisely what triggers this process and maintains its unfolding through the uncertainty of the divine response:

But what if this God is simply 'the unfolding of thought', as Loyola suggested? The subject is placed before a very particular freedom: not to judge once – meaning definitively and dramatically, once and for all – but to judge over and over again, endlessly. The endlessness of the suspended code puts the subject (this 'one,' this indifferent cadaver) at ease in the endlessness of History. (IRE 111)

In this reading, Loyola's experience remains on intimate terms with a certain atheism which refuses the entrenchment of late modern secularism: "[...] perhaps this hollowing-out of meaning was finally the fulfillment of atheism, in the sense of a resorption of God, which one would distinguish from secularism, a perpetual and symmetrical combat with God" (IRE 111). Kristeva argues that Loyola's experience mirrors certain kinds of contemporary art and literature, with its profusion of meaning or representation, on the one hand, and its openness to the heterogeneity of affect on the other. Beyond his dogmatic adherence, Kristeva finds that Loyola's spiritual exercises and prayers embody the experience of revolt: they point to the religious subject's 'going in quest of oneself' through the 'unfolding of thought' in the interrogative mode.

If Kristeva's critique of late modernity remains cautious with respect to religion, it also bears witness to the necessity of a renewal/revolt that remains impossible without the involvement of certain kinds of religious discourse and practice. If, as Kristeva asserts, "we all need an experience" (SNR 11), contemporary Western culture will likely continue to equate experience merely with access to information, to products, and to entertainment, unless it proves itself capable of engaging with the experience in the sense in which it was understood by the "Church Fathers, mystics or theologians" (ReSS 91): experience as a process of questioning at the border of meaning and nonmeaning, as an openness to the complexities of human desire and suffering, limits and aspirations; and as an ongoing transformation of meaning and subjectivity. The 'culture of revolt' Kristeva seeks is one that, at a point of almost absolute proximity to atheism, traverses religious discourse; beyond religion but not quite without it, such revolt "announces a veritable transformation of man issued from the Christian eschatology of retrospection as the path of truth and intimacy" (IRe 10). If 'atheism' is still a meaningful word in this schema, it is so only insofar as it inscribes itself within a movement of revolt where theism and atheism displace one another infinitely, forbidding one another from assuming a comfortable, fixed position (# 2.1.5).

The next section explores the political dimensions of this increasingly eccentric relationship between religious and secular concerns in Kristeva's critique of late modernity.

4.2 The Politics of Exile, the Crisis of Democracy, and the ‘Return of Religion’

You will have understood that I am speaking the language of exile. The language of the exile muffles a cry, it doesn’t ever shout. [...] Our present age is one of exile.

Julia Kristeva, “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident”, in *KrR* 1986, p. 298

But let us nevertheless take the measure of this huge fact, namely that in the world of advanced capitalism [...], God is dead. And let us try neither to steer clear of it nor to take advantage of it.

Julia Kristeva, “Bulgaria, my Suffering”, in *CrES* 2000, 182

There can be no sociopolitical transformation without a transformation of subjects, in other words, in our relation to social constraints, to pleasure, and, more deeply, to language.

Julia Kristeva, *Interviews* 1996, p. 115

Kristeva’s ‘psychoanalytic turn’ might give the impression that she has betrayed the political aspirations present in her textual practice in favor of the analysis of individual subjects. Kristeva’s attempts to affirm the continuity of her political concerns in her psychoanalytic work, on the contrary, can easily leave one with the sense that her new political vision involves putting everyone on the psychoanalytic couch. This section clarifies the political dimensions of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic practice, particularly with respect to the crisis of modernity and to the relationship between politics and religion in her late thought.

4.2.1 Psychoanalysis and the Polis

A careful reading of Kristeva’s early writings, especially *Revolution in Poetic Language* (French 1974), reveals that psychoanalysis has always played a

significant role in her textual politics. In the late 1970s Kristeva begins to regard psychoanalysis as an indispensable political practice in its own right. In “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident” (1977), she describes her version of the psychoanalyst as a dissident who takes up the crisis of meaning afflicting all aspects of Western culture. Kristeva situates psychoanalytic practice and its political significance for the subjective experience and identity between the Judeo-Christian tradition – itself “in a state of terminal crisis” (KrR 293) – and those forms of Marxism and ‘Freudianism’ that seek to replace religion by deifying ‘reason’:

Though it may resemble Judaism when it seeks to transcribe this social limit as the split, wound or truth in every speaking being, or Christianity when it articulates the *jouissance* arising from the ability to transcend this limit in a resurrection that is as imaginary as it is symbolic or real, psychoanalysis and its spiritual spin-offs none the less still remain today a site of active dissidence in the face of an all-embracing rationality. (KrR 295)

The psychoanalyst, whose dissidence entails “ceaseless analysis” and critical “vigilance” between identity and difference, law and subversion, rationality and psychosis (KrR 293 & 299-300), is distinguished from the political rebel who directly attacks authority, and from the writer who plays with the limits of language and identity. Kristeva’s argument brings into focus the necessity of affirming the experience of ‘exile’ to which the psychoanalyst bears witness today. This experience should be understood as much in a metaphysical as in a political sense; it involves the acknowledgement of the crisis of meaning and the death of God as simultaneous events:

Exile is already in itself a form of *dissidence*, since it involves uprooting oneself from a family, a country or a language. More importantly, it is

an irreligious act that cuts all ties, for religion is nothing more than membership of a real or symbolic community which may or may not be transcendental, but which always constitutes a link, a homology, an understanding. The exile cuts all links, including those that bind him to the belief that the thing called life has A Meaning guaranteed by the dead father. For if meaning exists in the state of exile, it nevertheless finds no incarnation, and is ceaselessly produced and destroyed in geographical or discursive transformations. Exile is a way of surviving in the face of the *dead father*. (KrR 298)

If religion is the most significant and the most natural counterpart to psychoanalytic dissidence at this point in Kristeva's thought, this has to do with what she assumes to be the essential association between religion and the fixity of law, absolute knowledge, or monological meaning. Sustained by its "perverse belief in limits" (KR 295), psychoanalysis preserves the capacity for thought by bringing "about multiple *sublations* [rather than representations or institutionalizations] of the unnamable, the unrepresentable, the void." (KrR 300)

The political role of psychoanalysis is nowhere more affirmed than in "Psychoanalysis and the Polis" (French 1981). At the beginning of her essay, Kristeva states that "There are political implications inherent in the act of interpretation itself, whatever meaning that interpretation bestows" (KrR 303). Nevertheless, she immediately announces that in the context of contemporary Western culture, it no longer suffices to act in a merely 'political' fashion, since Western 'politics' is as permeated with metaphysical assumptions and gestures as 'religion' or 'science':

To give a political meaning to something is perhaps only the ultimate consequence of the epistemological attitude which consists, simply, of the desire *to give meaning*. This attitude is not innocent but, rather, is rooted in the speaking subject's need to reassure himself of his image and his identity faced with an object. Political

interpretation is thus the apogee of the obsessive quest for A Meaning. (KrR 303-4)

In the course of the twentieth century it was precisely the desire to simply *give political meaning* that resulted in the establishment of two deadly totalitarianisms: Fascism and Stalinism (KrR 304). Considering this situation, Kristeva's aim is to posit psychoanalytic interpretation as a political *practice* that traverses 'politics' and simultaneously avoids becoming trapped in its metaphysical aspirations:

Psychoanalysis, critical and dissolvent, cuts through political illusions, fantasies and beliefs to the extent that they consist in providing only one meaning, an uncriticizable ultimate Meaning, to human behavior. If such a situation can lead to despair within the polis, we must not forget that it is also a source of lucidity and ethics. The psychoanalytic intervention is, from this point of view, a counterweight to political discourse which, without it, is free to become our modern religion: the final explanation. (KrR 304)

Psychoanalytic interpretation moves beyond Marxist reductions of all human experience to an accessible, present 'World' (KrR 313) on the one hand, and the neutralizations of both the subject and the object of interpretation prominent in the American appropriations of deconstruction (KrR 303). By the same token,

The Freudian position on interpretation has the immense advantage of being midway between a classic interpretive attitude – that of providing meaning through the connection of two terms from a stable place and theory – and the questioning of the subjective and theoretical stability of the interpretant which, in the act of interpretation itself, establishes the theory and the interpreter himself as interpretable objects. (KrR 306)

Of particular importance in this scheme is Kristeva's insistence on the *unnamable* (KrR 310), on "the unsymbolizable condition of the desire to speak and to know" (KrR 307) around which the interpretive process must unfold, and simultaneously acknowledge the impossibility of full mastery: "*There is meaning, and I am*

supposed to know it to the extent that it escapes me” (KrR 310). No discourse, whether individual or collective, can be sustained without this enigmatic void, which reveals at once the irreducible heterogeneity of meaning and its inevitable incompleteness (KrR 312), and which attests to the speaking being’s fundamental “desire for the Other” (KrR 311). All effective political and religious discourses make use of this fundamental desire. They succeed in doing so only to the extent that they conceal it behind the apparent closure of their symbolic constructions. Psychoanalysis, on the contrary, prevents such closure, which is as theological as it is political in nature; bearing witness to the essential incompleteness of meaning, interpretation, and human desire, it puts into practice a new concept of ‘the political’ and ‘the ethical’. “That is where, it seems to me, the modern version of liberty is being played out,” Kristeva concludes, “threatened as much by a single, total and totalitarian Meaning as it is by delirium.” (KrR 319)

4.2.2 Foreignness

Nearly a decade later, Kristeva resumes these concerns in *Strangers to Ourselves* (French 1991). She considers the experience and concept of foreignness in the West by weaving historical narratives, psychoanalytic observations, religious ideas, and political developments into a single critical study. The figure of the foreigner appears in a multiplicity of guises – ethnic, religious, political, sexual, linguistic – before Kristeva finally arrives at the essential, psychoanalytic question of the subject-as-other. Underlying this study is Kristeva’s ongoing concern with *both* the privileging of *identity* in a variety of Western discourses *and* the emphasis on *difference* in poststructuralist thought,

which tends to neglect the long-standing and complex tradition of addressing, even welcoming, the other in Western history (StO 1). Kristeva's text aims to recover aspects of this tradition in order to contribute to a contemporary politics that brings together psychoanalytic and political practices and is grounded in the recognition of the modern speaking – hence necessarily *political* – subject as a metaphysical, psychological, and political exile. In Kristeva's words, "The modification in the status of foreigners that is imperative today leads one to reflect on our ability to accept new modalities of otherness. No 'Nationality Code' would be practicable without having that question slowly mature within each of us and for each of us." (StO 2)

In light of the at once nationalistic and individualistic tendencies of late modern societies, the question of the foreigner cannot be adequately addressed today without a careful consideration of the crisis that takes place at the intersection of religious and ethical discourse:

The violence of the problem set by the foreigner today is probably due to the crises undergone by religious and ethical constructs. This is especially so as the absorption of otherness proposed by our societies turns out to be unacceptable [*sic*] by the contemporary individual, jealous of his difference – one that is not only national and ethical but essentially subjective, unsurmountable. (StO 2)

For Kristeva, the historical emergence of a certain experience of hospitality vis-à-vis foreigners became possible in the West largely within the context of Judaic, Greek, and Christian thought (StO 2). This led to the development of the humanist tradition and 'human rights' in the course of the Enlightenment; thus contemporary political and ethical concerns must necessarily pass through 'the spirit of religion' (StO 40). Above all, the question of the foreigner acquires a

new urgency in the wake of the death of God, as much for those atheists who rely solely on ‘ethics’ as for religious believers. Today, “The image of the foreigner comes in the place and stead of the death of God and, with those who are believers, the foreigner is there to bring him back to life” (StO 40). Kristeva indicates here – in a manner that recalls Blanchot’s thought on religion (# 2.1.3) – that if ‘God’ remains a possibility for the contemporary religious subject, it should only be to the extent that ‘God’ constitutes for us the very experience of foreignness, otherness, estrangement, or exile.

Kristeva begins her historical analyses with ancient Greek city-states. The notions of ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’, and ‘citizenship’ among the Greeks could only be developed in relation to a foreigner who remains excluded, other, incomprehensible (StO 51). Relying on Aeschylus’s account of the Argos shrine, she specifies that “a religious space, before and perhaps in spite of political considerations, secured for the foreigner a place where he was untouchable” (StO 47). Although Kristeva associates the appearance of the first ‘political cosmopolitanism’ to Stoic ethics, especially with Cleanthes’ notion of a multitude of individuals living under one law, she also points out that this political idea was essentially religious in character: “His project called for a religious community, a mystical coming together of fraternizing foreigners, much more than a political dominion always concerned with the economic interests of the polis” (StO 56-57). Kristeva returns to this issue elsewhere: “From that moment the question arises as to whether cosmopolitanism is anything but a religious reality, without ever being

capable of becoming a political reality. The question is still valid today.” (StO 61)

The contradictions characteristic of the Greek experience in which the citizen’s identity is grounded in a certain conception of foreignness allowing for a partial openness to the other within the community are echoed in the Jewish experience, which “established the basis of a sacred nationalism, [...] [which] nonetheless harbors in its very essence an inherent inscription of foreignness” (StO 65). Despite the numerous affirmations of the exclusiveness of the ‘chosen people’ in the biblical text, “the Jewish people’s covenant with its God is an outgrowth not of favoritism but of choice founded on ordeal” (StO 66). Through the experience of its ordeal of exile, the Jewish community becomes particularly sensitive to questions of justice and foreignness, as indicated in many textual commentaries (StO 67). Furthermore, the notion of ‘covenant’ has inscribed questions of responsibility, obligation, and identity into the very heart of the Jewish tradition, along with the crucial question of the universality of God’s love for His people (StO 66-67). The paradoxicality of Jewish logic is never resolved in Kristeva’s view: “I have been ‘chosen’, but the privilege of being chosen is nevertheless ‘accessible to any individual, at any given moment’.” (StO 69)

According to Kristeva, the Greek polis and the Jewish experience of exile, along with Jewish messianism, lay the foundations for the metaphysical experience of foreignness in the context of the Christian *Ecclesia* defined as an ‘ideal community’ (StO 62, 77, and 80-81). The Christian community was essentially heterogeneous from the start, composed of foreigners and exiles, of

socially, politically, and legally marginalized individuals (StO 78-81). Paul is the very embodiment of the ‘foreigner’, mirroring in turn the self-professed foreignness of Christ (StO 78 & 83) and the necessity of becoming a foreigner in order to partake of the Christian experience of God (StO 78). Kristeva appreciates the impossible unity inscribed into the early Christian experience cutting across national, ethnic, linguistic and legal bonds, and dissolving the proper distinctions between identity and difference: “Foreigners could recover an identity only if they recognized themselves as dependent on the same heterogeneity that divides them within themselves, on a same wandering between flesh and spirit, life and death” (StO 82). With Augustine, the experience of the foreigner becomes subsumed within the notion of the religious subject as necessarily a spiritual pilgrim – as chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews states – deprived of a proper home and always wandering, on the way (StO 83-85). In this scheme, the pilgrim assumes to task of *caritas* and extends love to everyone beyond the immediacy of his or her neighborhood in a manner that enables the recognition of “[d]ifferences between the worthy and the unworthy, the faithful and the unfaithful, the good and the bad –and even the heretics: those are not to be reconciled but brought together through the possibility of giving and the acceptance of what is given” (StO 84). Kristeva bemoans the fact that the early Christian understanding of foreignness and difference becomes subjugated to the Roman Empire’s attempt to remain unified under a single religious vision, whereby “One foreigner drives out the other” (StO 90). As a result, Christian

hospitality in the Middle Ages would only be extended to other Christians only, and even then accompanied by exceptions and abuses. (StO 87)

Kristeva's analyses in *Strangers to Ourselves* are never merely 'historical' in nature; they are intended, rather, to place current concerns in context, calling attention to the ways in which philosophical, theological, and political experiences of the past continue to both sustain and limit late modernity's encounter with the 'other'.

Facing the problem of the foreigner, the discourses, difficulties, or even the deadlocks of our predecessors do not only make up a history; they constitute a cultural distance that is to be preserved and developed, a distance on the basis of which one might temper and modify the simplistic attitudes of rejection or indifference, as well as the arbitrary or utilitarian decisions that today regulate relationships between foreigners. The more so as we are all in the process of becoming foreigners in a universe that is being widened more than ever, that is more than ever heterogeneous beneath its apparent scientific and media-inspired unity. (StO 104)

The contradictions of the Greek, Jewish, and Christian attempts to reconcile communal identity and universal or cosmopolitan aspirations find their way into Renaissance humanism, both religious and political in spirit, and into its rational and, in a sense, spiritual implementation during the Enlightenment, with 'human rights' (StO 152). The essential dilemma that characterizes the affirmation of the universality of human rights and the simultaneous recognition of legal rights and privileges on the national level, along with corresponding exclusions (StO 124), has been inherited by modern democratic states:

The difficulty engendered by the matter of foreigners would be completely contained in the deadlock caused by the distinction that sets the *citizen* apart from the *man*: is it not true that, in order to found the rights that are specific to the men of a civilization or a nation – even the most reasonable and the most consciously democratic – one has to

withdraw such rights from those that are not citizens, that is, other men?
(StO 97)

This dilemma is playing itself out in the global context today, which reflects an increasingly more difficult tension between particularist and universalist interests (StO 98). While Kristeva appreciates the social, political, and legal advantages of the democratic solution to this dilemma, together with its universal aspirations to affirm the “dignity of the human being” (StO 152-53), she remains concerned with what she considers to be the lack of a more fundamental, critical meditation on the question of foreignness in democratic societies, which results in ever new and ever more complex forms of exclusion, conflict, or violence. “Between the man and the citizen there is a scar: the foreigner.” (StO 98)

Kristeva proposes that an adequate response to this problem must bring a renewal of both the political and the legal heritage of the Enlightenment, which balances “the rights and duties of citizens with respect to non-citizens” (StO 153), and also an ethical and educational model that takes into account psychoanalytic insights into subjective desires and symbolic constructions. “Such an ethics should reveal, discuss, and spread a concept of human dignity, wrested from the euphoria of classic humanists and laden with alienations, dramas, and dead ends of our condition as speaking beings” (StO 154). This statement echoes Kristeva’s following declaration, in the opening chapter: “It is not simply – humanistically – a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself” (StO 13). This double approach constitutes a cosmopolitanism “without conclusion, [...] in the sense of a permanent shattering” (StO 167), and it carries the potential of “achieving a

polytopic and supple society, neither locked in to the nation or its religion, nor anarchically exposed to all of its explosions.” (StO 154)

4.2.3 Nationalism, Fundamentalism, Cosmopolitanism

The psychoanalytic-ethical ‘intervention’ into the religious and political history of the state and of human rights is particularly necessary in light of the dangerous, utopian and always potentially totalitarian displacement of the notion of ‘religious community’ with the sacralization of the ‘national community’ (StO 173 & 177-79). Such an intervention may bring about a new experience of cosmopolitanism grounded in the recognition of the necessary relationship between difference and identity, and beyond the limitations of traditional, metaphysical categories: “Could cosmopolitanism as moral imperative be the secular form of that bond bringing together families, languages, and states that religion claimed to be?” (StO 173) Despite its romantic and humanistic affiliations, psychoanalysis remains relevant insofar as it preserves within itself a certain kind of religious logic beyond the ruins of religious dogmas and institutions, because it “bears the biblical tones of a foreign God or of a Foreigner apt to reveal God” (StO 181). The ‘God’ with which psychoanalysis confronts us today is thus not the One who guarantees communal and subjective unity, but the impossible Other who reminds us of the inevitability and, indeed, necessity of humanity’s experience of a certain psychic, social, and political dispersal, estrangement, caesura. Kristeva’s conclusion emphasizes the essential multidimensionality of this contemporary experience presented by psychoanalytic practice:

The ethics of psychoanalysis implies a politics: it would involve a cosmopolitanism of a new sort that, cutting across governments, economies, and markets, might work for a mankind whose solidarity is founded on the consciousness of its unconscious – desiring, destructive, fearful, empty, impossible. Here we are far removed from a call to brotherhood, about which one has already ironically pointed out its debt to paternal and divine authority [...]. (StO 192)

The problem of nationalism and foreignness is taken up again in *Nations without Nationalism* (1993). While many of the historical observations from *Strangers to Ourselves* are repeated in this short text, Kristeva's analyses here are much more attuned to what she describes as the fragmentation of individual and collective identity in Western societies (NWN 2), and as the return to various forms of fundamentalism that accompanies this crisis. According to her, the crisis has been triggered by the 'bankruptcy' of revolutionary politics (Marxism) on the one hand, and the liberal displacement of religious, national, and ethnic affiliations, on the other. In the wake of these developments, Western individuals are increasingly taking shelter "under the most massive, regressive common denominators: national origins and the faith of our forebears. 'I don't know who I am or even if I am, but I belong with my national and religious roots, therefore I follow *them*.' Thus does the contemporary Hamlet soliloquize, and it is a rare person who does not invoke a primal shelter to compensate for personal disarray" (NWN 2). In distinction to this 'cult of origins' and the exclusions or persecutions to which it inevitably leads (NWN 3), Kristeva offers the subjective, social, political and religious experience of return-as-loss within the context of psychoanalytic practice. Rather than neglecting the very subjective and communal needs that lead to fundamentalist regressions and extremist acting-out,

psychoanalysis “invites us to come back constantly to our origins (biographies, childhood memories, family) in order better to transcend them. ‘This is why a man must leave father and mother’ (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7; Ephesians 5:31). What if Freud alone allowed us to come close to carrying out that biblical and evangelical exhortation?” (NWN 4)

Kristeva’s assumptions concerning the political and psychological role of religion in contemporary Western culture are rather paradoxical here. On the one hand, she argues that a simple rejection of the Christian tradition and the numerous resources it offers for addressing questions of identity and difference, desire and suffering, or the primacy of the Other is not an option. On the other hand, she asserts that secular thought has brought about a “definite reversal” of that tradition, and she warns against the temptation to establish “a new salving religion” (NWN 4). Kristeva’s notion of ‘cosmopolitanism’ can be seen as an attempt to preserve this paradox while avoiding both religious and political contradictions. Grounded in democratic principles and following in the footsteps of Montesquieu’s *esprit général*, Kristeva’s cosmopolitanism involves an acknowledgment of the necessity of the nation insofar as its essential function is to protect linguistic, religious, ethnic, or political differences and affiliations beyond their attempt to posit the absolutism or purity of their origins:

The nation as a *series of differences* consequently demands that particular rights be highlighted (those of individuals, with their behavioral or sexual peculiarities; those of families, with the couples’ new modes of living together or not together; those of ethnic groups, with their customs, beliefs, religions) while they are being absorbed into the lay aggregate of the nation where such differences, which are acknowledged, nevertheless give way before the ‘general interest’, the *esprit général* favored by Montesquieu. (NWN 41)

Kristeva thus situates her cosmopolitanism at “the crossing of boundaries” that remains sensitive to a certain universalism and, indeed, to the need for some kind of political unity, albeit one capable of recognizing the inevitability of ruptures within its structure. If the ‘nation’ takes over the role previously played by ‘the sacred’, it is nonetheless “stripped of the sacral aspects of its totality to the advantage of the greatest growth of its members” (NWN 43). As Samir Dayal points out in another context, Kristeva’s universalism is not the universalism of the metaphysical ‘One’. (CrES 20)

Kristeva’s understanding of the ‘nation’ positions itself against the romantic, utopian, and ultimately totalitarian idea of *Volksgeist* (NWN 33) in order to emphasize a ‘transnational’ cosmopolitanism (NWN 16) that respects and promotes the singularity of human experience on every level. Here, ‘human rights’ are always prior to the ‘rights of the citizen’ (NWN 27), yet the former no longer correspond to a simple, humanist, rational category, but to the experience of an essential, shareable otherness: “[...] let us know ourselves as unconscious, altered, other in order better to approach the universal otherness of the strangers that we are – for only strangeness is universal [...]” (NWN 21). Although Kristeva’s implicitly affirms that the ‘rights of the religious believer’ should not be privileged over the political rights of the individual subject (NWN 40), she does not shy away from admitting that her cosmopolitanism constitutes, quite directly, an extension of certain dimensions of the Christian tradition and preserves within itself the spirit of Paulinian *ecclesia* and of Augustinian *civitas peregrina* and *caritas* (NWN 22). In Kristeva’s words:

It would seem to me that to uphold a universal, transnational principle of Humanity that is distinct from the historical realities of nation and citizenship constitutes, on the one hand, a continuation of the Stoic and Augustinian legacy, of that ancient and Christian cosmopolitanism that finds its place among the most valuable assets of our civilization and that we henceforth must go back to and bring up to date. But above all and on the other hand, such upholding of a universality, of a symbolic dignity for the whole of humankind, appears to me as a rampart against a nationalist, regionalist, and religious fragmentation whose integrative contractions are only too visible today. (NWN 26-27)

Kristeva recognizes that her logic – inspired by European humanism, both Christian and secular – could be regarded as entailing a rejection of non-Western cultural, religious, and political experiences; yet she refuses to see this logic as contradictory to the spirit of its own cosmopolitan openness to the other, the stranger, or the foreigner:

Far be it from me to claim a cultural hierarchy and much less so the supremacy of one over the others. Nonetheless, we must note that as far as recognizing the other is concerned – the other as different, as foreign – Western culture has, with its Greek, Jewish, and Christian components, traveled a road as difficult, as strewn with risks and pitfalls, errors and crimes, as in other respects it bears uneasy meditations and promises that await their individual and social fulfillment. (NWN 38)

Kristeva goes on to ask: “Is it possible that the ‘abstract’ advantages of French universalism may prove to be superior to the ‘concrete’ benefits of a Muslim scarf, for instance?” (NWN 47) She suggests that the question cannot be resolved in advance, but rather must be considered seriously by all participants, beyond the distortions of political correctness and the inflexible entrenchment of religious communities. For her, “an inflexible comprehension of secularism has often pushed back into darkness of ‘relics’ or ‘archaism’ those customs, moral, and manners that perhaps do not make citizens but profoundly shape human beings” (NWN 62). The kind of questioning she promotes must remain sensitive to the

fact that secular and religious experiences alike remain essential to the life of Western societies.

Kristeva's cosmopolitanism mirrors her notion of intertextuality (# 1.4.4) insofar as it opens itself to a radical pluralism in the midst of which one nonetheless assumes a position, even if this position is temporary and subject to transformation. In this manner, too, Kristeva's politics aligns itself with Hannah Arendt's attempt to reconfigure the meaning of the 'political' around the experience of narrative or, more precisely, as a public intersection of subjective narratives (CrES 8-10) allowing for a sharable but non-totalizing experience of meaning (CrES 83). Kristeva's textual and psychoanalytic experience, however, moves her understanding of the political process beyond Arendt's trust that "language cannot be mad" (HA 27) because it is the guarantor of the communal bond. Kristeva affirms, instead, the experience of language as the place of dispersal in which that bond is put into question, though only in order to be perpetually renewed:

What will remain for us will be the duty to care for the language, the speech, of each one of us, and to protect the community bond itself. Not in order to re-establish them in an eternally fixed and not mad identity that would underpin our 'yes' or our 'amen,' but rather to make possible provisional revelations of *who* without forgetting the extent to which they are provisional. (HA 88)

All of Kristeva's political engagements with questions of foreignness, democracy, nationalism, citizenship, cosmopolitanism, universalism, and fundamentalism must be read in light of this statement.

4.2.4 Religion, Democracy, and European Identity

In a collection of essays entitled *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000), Kristeva's explorations of the limits and benefits of 'Europe' as a political entity become directly coextensive with her attempt to bring attention to the 'crisis of meaning' at the heart of modern political, religious, ethical, and social discourses and institutions. The core of Kristeva's critique here is found in the essay "Europe Divided: Politics, Ethics, Religion" (CrES 111-62), in which she detects a certain failure within contemporary European culture to continue the task of thinking and questioning its conception of the human 'person' or 'subject' (CrES 114-15). Kristeva associates this failure with the emergence of a "model of society that privileges economic performance and technological innovation" (CrES 115), and that uncritically regards this model as not only natural, but also optimal to the promotion of subjective freedom and democratic principles. Kristeva argues that the European experience of subjectivity must be fundamentally reconsidered in all of its dimensions – philosophical, religious, and political – "if Europe is to be *meaningful* and not just *useful*" (CrES 16). More than any other of her political writings, Kristeva's essay emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the religious origin of European democracy and its conception of the subject: "In this identification of the subject with freedom, an identification that crystallized at the intersection of Greek, Jewish, and Christian experience before being formulated by Kant, resides the essence and the most precious advantages of European civilization." (CrES 117)

Kristeva's attempt to recover aspects of this multidimensional, European tradition is eccentric in its originality. She begins by postulating a certain split between "different experiences of freedom in Europe" (CrES 117) toward the end of the 18th century: on the one hand, the Kantian notion of the rational, autonomous, self-determining individual "whose genealogy goes back fundamentally to Saint Paul and Saint Augustine, then to Luther and Protestantism" (CrES 120); on the other hand, the popularization of the Hesychastic tradition in Russia by the monk Païssi Velitchkovski (1722-1794), who translated into Russian a collection of Greek texts on the prayer of the heart compiled by Nicodemus the Hagiorite (1749-1809) (see CrES 118-19). In Kristeva's words, "A certain *freedom* of the believer is declared there, one that is only a *silence of the ego*, a displacement of the intellect and rational reason toward the heart, understood as the pole of an *unrepresentable infinity* and the source of an intuition of an *ineffable* divinity" (CrES 119). Apart from these two 'freedoms', Kristeva detects a third, 'libertine', tradition of dissidence and solidarity which, curiously, she associates as much with secular as with Catholic ideas. (CrES 124-25)

According to Kristeva's Weberian interpretation, the Kantian-Protestant model of freedom follows a cause-effect logic, and constitutes the predominant model that has shaped contemporary liberal democratic societies: "Its injunction amounts to this: adapt yourself to a cause (which, nowadays, is no longer either God or a transcendence, though these are more present than they are said to be, but is economic causality); adapt yourself to the economy; adapt yourself to the

dollar – and you will be free...in that causality” (CrES 121). Passing through Heidegger’s critique of freedom as productivity and calculation, Kristeva points out the correspondence between freedom and causality: “[...] a causality, let us remember, that is ultimately practical, pragmatic, economic, scientific, but fundamentally ‘divine’ – also has its radical anthropological and social consequences in the political and moral context of Europe and, more generally, in the process of globalization that affects humanity” (CrES 122). Siding with Heidegger, Kristeva emphasizes the Greek (Parmenidesian and Platonic) notion of freedom as

prior to any cause, for which Being *presents itself, gives itself, surrenders itself, frees itself* in understanding and dialogue [...]. In contrast to the constraints stipulated by causes, be they divine, social, or technological, freedom *is*: so state not only the libertine and the Enlightenment atheist, but also the poet and the revolutionary of the rights of man. (CrES 122)

Kristeva detects this experience of freedom in Catholic discourse and practice; beyond the restrictions and centralizations of its institutional framework, this experience has repeatedly produced a certain tradition of ‘antiestablishment Christianity’ (CrES 123). This tradition, Kristeva argues, rejects the demands of neither understanding nor of faith, and “the focus of spirituality in the self, the responsibility and the insubordination of the believer, could take the form of a subtle dissidence that went as far as the believer’s gaining his independence vis-à-vis the highest cause, God: did not Meister Eckhart demand that God release him, leave him free of God?” (CrES 124)

Kristeva sees a correspondence between this experience of an essential, dissident freedom within the bounds of a certain faith and understanding, and the Rousseauian affirmation of individual liberty as the highest aim of the social-political bond (CrES 124-25). In both instances, Kristeva detects an effort to bring together freedom-as-solidarity with freedom-as-singularity, against the causal, rational experience of freedom. She therefore asserts:

While an adaptation on the part of democracies to technological pressures made the Protestant countries highly efficient in the golden age of industrialization, the primacy of freedom over technological cause – not only the freedom to produce but the freedom to think and live – provides a new dynamic nowadays for the Catholic countries like France, Italy, Spain, and Poland. (CrES 125)

Kristeva's intention, however, is to draw attention to the complementarity of these two conceptions of freedom – 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' – and to the necessity of a critical meditation on this complementarity in current Western culture (CrES 126). The crisis that afflicts the modern European subject and the social bond today stems, according to Kristeva, from a certain overestimation of the libertarian dimensions of the two experiences of freedom in the West. The consequence of this is a social fragmentation that, in democratic and post-communist countries alike, results in subjects who are "*liberated* but nonetheless not *free*" (CrES 132). According to Kristeva, psychoanalysis offers a significant contribution to the critical reconsideration of this fragmentation because it bears witness to the necessity of oedipal dynamics, i.e., to the impossibility of subjective freedom outside intersubjective bonds. Yet this contribution is not sufficient if it does not take into account the resources offered by the various religious traditions that have shaped – and continue to shape psychologically as

much as ethically, politically, or spiritually (CrES 133 & 177) – European subjectivity, albeit beyond what she regards as their current attempt to re-establish the primacy of dogma in response to the crisis of meaning in democratic countries (CrES 130). Kristeva thus examines the Orthodox Christian tradition insofar as this tradition has been excluded from the Protestant-Catholic conception of ‘liberty’ and its liberal, democratic transposition.

Kristeva begins with the suggestion that, “In contrast to the freely willed clarity of understanding, to its emphasis on questioning and critique, which extends to the point of putting in question not only the godhead but the social bond itself, we have [in Orthodox spirituality] the exaltation of an ineffable religious inwardness and of the ecclesiastical community in which it flourishes” (CrES 134). Parallel to Western Christian nihilism, fulfilled in rationalist individualism and the capitalist, techno-scientific reduction of reality to calculation and production, the Orthodox tradition, with its focus on passionate, mystical adherence to an ideal authority and its political instrumentalization, leads to its own version of nihilist, atheist fulfillment in Communist totalitarianism (CrES 134-37). At the same time Kristeva is interested in the difference in subjective dynamics this tradition reveals, especially in its theological elaboration of the Trinity. In distinction to the Catholic equalization of the Father-Son figures, the Orthodox Trinity in Kristeva’s interpretation constitutes the manifestation of the (oedipal) submission of the Son to the Father, or at least a fusion with Him (CrES 138-39): “[...] without an explicit insistence on the oedipal triangulation that leads to the autonomous ‘self’, without its highlighting

in doctrine or education, the Orthodox subject tends to remain in a logic of communion based on the dual relationship” (CrES 143). The lack of oedipal rebellion in this schema offers the advantage of a non-destructive exaltation of the divine, which Orthodoxy tends to experience as protective, rather than severe and inaccessible (CrES 140-41). But this dynamic, which humanizes the divine, also leads to an obedient passivity that prevents the subject’s entry into language and critical thought; Kristeva describes it as “a *theology of experience* and not of knowledge, since the subject is invited to a personal communion and ontological participation that hold back from enlightenment.” (CrES 146)

Apart from its psychoanalytic eccentricities, the difficulty of Kristeva’s argument has much to do with the rapid pace of its logical and theological leaps; some require more careful elaborations or justifications, others appear quite contradictory to her analytic aims elsewhere. Kristeva observes that the nihilistic humanization of God in Orthodox Christianity (CrES 177) is simultaneously accompanied by a ‘non-knowing’ communion in which God becomes radically (and nihilistically) detached from all human affairs (CES 147). But she does not sufficiently clarify this concern in light of her own insistence on psychoanalysis as an *experience* of a certain ‘non-knowledge’, bearing witness to the secular and theological presumptions of Western metaphysics. Be that as it may, one can understand Kristeva’s logical maneuvers here in terms of an attempt to find a balance between subjective experience and subjective knowledge. In this sense, Kristeva is concerned that the divine ineffability and the rejection of representation it entails lays the foundation for a certain nihilism in which *Deus*

absconditus becomes coextensive with *homo absconditus* (CrES 148), i.e. a subject no longer capable of conceptualizing his or her subjectivity.

In parting company with philosophical dialogue and wisdom, affective participation in divinity withdraws from the *eidos* and hence from thought itself: God is neither this nor that, neither affirmation nor negation, not even ‘God’ according to Gregory Palamas. Absorbed in the unrepresentable, Orthodox faith has a glorious and inaccessible divinity looming over the universe and, at the same time, evacuates God from human reality. United with man but unthinkable by him, God is not dead, but he implodes in man. Symmetrically, by participating in this way man is a microtheos and a microcosm, but equally inconceptualizable [*sic*] and unfathomable. (CrES 147)

Once again, however, Kristeva points to the subjective and spiritual liberation involved in this *negative* religiosity. With Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Palamas, she argues, the mysteries of *affect* and *prayer* replace the logical exercises of Catholic and Protestant theology (CrES 147 & 149), and “this mystery brings forth endless delights: the cult of *silence*, spiritual excellence being silent and contemplative; of tenderness (*katanyxis*) that does not judge but welcomes; of the unification of awareness and the heart that occurs in the *love of beauty (philocalia)*.” (CrES 148)

Kristeva returns to this seemingly contradictory problematic of Orthodox Christian logic in another essay included in this volume, “Bulgaria, my Suffering” (CrES 163-82). Her assessment is informed by her reflections on the religious conflict in the Balkans and by what she regards as the nihilistic anarchism of Orthodox countries after 1989, and is thus more pessimistic in tone:

But let us not be too quick to rejoice in this humanization of the divine in Orthopraxis. Isn’t reducing the highest value (God) to human value the final trap of nihilism, if it is true that the order of human values is corruptible and pervertible? The trap of this *instrumentalization of the divine in the human* lies in the abasement, the devaluing, indeed the

annulment of the ideal itself: of God himself (God is neither this nor that, neither affirmation nor negation, not even ‘god’ according to Gregory of Palamas); of spiritual authority (apart from its institutional form); but also of *eidos* itself, of idea, representation, thought. (CrES 177)

According to this interpretation, Christian Orthodoxy constitutes a radical version of negative theology that is capable neither of *thinking God* nor of *experiencing the ‘death of God’* in the necessary manner in which it has been experienced in the Catholic and Protestant traditions of Western Europe (CrES 178-80). In the Orthodox experience, “the absence of God is neutralized [...] into the cult of an unknowable God; God is not dead but he implodes in the Orthodox man” (CrES 179) and provides for his ‘paranoid’ and ‘masochistic’ satisfactions. Kristeva adds:

I am taking a risk in pointing out, above and beyond the obvious benefits of this religious experience, the *most solid form of nihilism* known to Western culture. The implicit tenet of Orthodox faith would be ‘I am God, who is not God’, the diametrical opposite of the Cartesian ‘I think, therefore I am,’ the possibility of which it cancels. ‘I am God, who is not God’: the conjoining of the absolute and the nothing. Will to total power, and total poverty. (CrES 179)

Despite these critical assertions, Kristeva’s aim – particularly in “Europe Divided” – is to draw attention to the Orthodox emphasis on *dependence* and *communion* as essential components of subjective experience, insofar as this emphasis can provide a necessary alternative to the Western focus on autonomy and its symmetrical other, ‘automatization’ or ‘robotization’ (CrES 151). This concern is explicitly expressed in the following comment:

We may wonder whether creating bonds among free individuals is still a possible goal for modern man. To achieve it, we would perhaps have to rehabilitate those deep, passive, and sensory layers of interpersonal communion, of *subornost* (Soloviev) and recognize the ‘integral,

superindividual, and communal character' of the person, according to Trubetskoy, as suggested by Orthodox psychology as interpreted by Florensky, Badyaev, and Bulgakov. (CrES 152)

In this manner, at the intersection of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions, the modern conception of freedom, "too sure of its freedoms and not always aware of its failures" (CrES 155), could be reinterpreted as the exigency of a certain balance between individualism and collectivism, as well as between knowledge and experience: "To balance freedom with bonds would amount to balancing understanding with the sensory" (CrES 152). According to Kristeva, this reevaluation of the concept of 'freedom' is essential to a proper response to the crisis that afflicts Western democracies and whose urgency – both religious and secular – cannot be evaded. Kristeva's conclusion points to the fundamental manner in which her political, philosophical, and psychoanalytic analysis elaborates the Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian critique of modern nihilism along the borderline between a certain 'atheism' and a certain 'religiosity':

'A' god cannot save us, as Heidegger hoped. But it would be historically just if we were to begin to federate the diverse currents of Christianity that, for the most part, share spirituality in Europe. Then, starting with this federation, difficult but essential to constitute, there would have to be undertaken a moral and subjective reconstruction of the formerly Communist Orthodox countries. Only then, on the basis of this revised and renewed tradition, could a true secular and critical labor of education and philosophical questioning become possible, inviting freer inquiries later on. But a democratic administration and economy cannot be created without rebuilding a free subjectivity. The two tasks, political and spiritual, are parallel. (CrES 158)

By the same token, Kristeva suggests the necessity of a psychoanalytic intervention into a world increasingly threatened by religious wars. This intervention would force religious traditions to reexamine their own unconscious

desires, both loving and destructive, as well as their continuing, utopian fantasies and nihilistic presumptions, and would affirm freedom as the possibility of “beginning oneself anew with the other” (CrES 158). Otherwise, current attempts at religious dialogue cannot lead to a lasting reconciliation (CrES 160). In the midst of a global religious conflict, which is only one of the faces of a more extensive crisis, both the *resources* of religious traditions and their *impasses* must be taken into consideration by everyone: “The transmutation of religious memory [...] must spare no one, neither ‘them’ nor ‘us’.” (CrES 161)

4.2.5 The Politics of Revolt

Although Kristeva rarely touches upon politics in her two volumes on revolt, she leaves little doubt that her thought on revolt constitutes a redefinition of the notion of ‘the political’. She explicitly affirms this idea in one of the interviews in which she discusses her notion of revolt: “I would like to strip the word ‘revolt’ of its purely political sense. In all Western traditions, revolt is a very deep movement of discontent, anxiety and anguish. In this sense, to say that revolt is only politics is a betrayal of this vast movement” (ReSS 99). Political revolt is inseparable from the questions of ‘the subject’, ‘truth’, ‘belief’, or the ‘impossible’; in its constant renewal of questioning and doubting (ReSS 101 & 120) it constitutes the very essence of freedom: “In counterpoint to certainties of beliefs, permanent revolt is this putting into question of the self, of everything and nothing, which clearly no longer has a place” (IRe 223; see ReSS 12). Beyond this redefinition, Kristeva returns to her earlier concerns with the problem of freedom in European democracy in the second part of *Intimate Revolt*, taking into

consideration the psychoanalytic, political, and religious dimensions of this problem.

Kristeva observes that within Freudian logic freedom is never simply associated with the lifting of repression or, what amounts to the same, with giving free reign to one's desires and appetites. Rather, freedom is experienced to the extent that the subject becomes capable of exercising choice "within a link" (IRe 232) – that is, in accepting the necessity of the other.

Freud, thus, places psychoanalysis in the wake of Aristotle, Paul, and Augustine: in short, he is strangely Christocentric, as Lacan bluntly put it. In the freedom of this desire, to offer his flesh to the ideal of his father: the glory and hell of redemption, through which Judeo-Christian monotheism paroxysmally and therefore truly admits a universal structure of human desire, caught in the snare of meaning. (IRe 229)

Despite its intimate resemblance to a "vivid Judeo-Christianity" (IRe 234), psychoanalysis affirms a plurality of communal ties (IRe 231 & 233) that can be perpetually questioned beyond theological and institutional attempts to establish a fixed 'system of values' (IRe 235), one inevitably resulting in the exclusion and, in some cases, the persecution of the other. In other words, psychoanalysis continues the religious 'function of truth' (IRe 235) and the tradition of freedom contained in the Judeo-Christian tradition, while simultaneously offering the experience of choice within a radical heterogeneity of meaning, along with the promise of freedom "as the possibility of self-beginning" (IRe 262) or freedom-as-interminable-questioning (IRe 233 & 236). Psychoanalytic freedom is positioned neither on the side of religious unity nor on the side of liberal, secular individualism (IRe 263); its atheism, Kristeva argues, paraphrasing Sartre's

pronouncement, “may well be a luminous experience and a long-range affair [...]” (IRe 237)

In the concluding chapter entitled “Europhilia-Europhobia”, Kristeva connects these reflections with the ‘politics of solidarity’ (IRe 256) she had charted out in *Crisis of the European Subject*. The question of freedom becomes coextensive here with the capacity for *hospitality*, which Kristeva defines as “the minimum definition of humanity” (IRe 257). The emphasis on hospitality constitutes Kristeva’s attempt to return to her concern with the foreigner (# 4.2.2) and with difference in a more ‘affirmative’ manner, while simultaneously bringing into focus the intrinsically political aims of her entire theoretical project:

Hospitality should not be the simple juxtaposition of differences, with the domination of one model over all the others, but, on the contrary, a taking into consideration of other logics, other freedoms, so that each way of being becomes more multiple, more complex. [...] French theory in the end has no more noble or more urgent vocation than to draw attention to human diversity in the experience of freedom. (IRe 268)

Here and elsewhere around this time, hospitality corresponds to what Kristeva calls ‘freedom as revelation’, or freedom as an always necessarily prior opening up of a ‘place’ (ReSS 114) for thought, discourse, and exploration: “Before any beginning, adaptation, undertaking or success, freedom consists in revealing yourself to the other” (ReSS 76). Kristeva recognizes, in this respect, the continuing contributions of what she calls “certain humanist tendencies of the Catholic Church” (IRe 264) to the experience of freedom-as-hospitality; she emphasizes the need for a more extensive encounter between critical thought and the ‘religious imaginary’ (IRe 267). In the end, Kristeva retreats from her

previous privileging of the psychoanalytic ‘solution’: “I should point out that no one has the monopoly on it and that the Protestant world, like the Catholic world, is fertile with the potentialities of this freedom” (IRe 267). Insofar as freedom is necessarily experienced through encounter, the central question is: to what extent do contemporary subjects encounter one another merely as ‘individuals’, ‘citizens’ or, for that matter, ‘clients’, rather than subjects always already inhabited by an otherness?

The issue of the relationship between political and religious aspects of revolt is elaborated in a collection of interviews published under the title *Revolt, She Said* (2002).

Kristeva identifies the events of May 1968 – the extensive strikes and street riots – in Paris as crucial to her realization of the cultural, political, religious, and subjective urgency of the crisis of meaning underlying Western culture, as well as to her attempt to include the experience of revolt at the heart of her literary theory, psychoanalytic practice, and political and cultural critique. Kristeva emphasizes her belief that these events constituted nothing less than a public manifestation of the ‘death of God’ (ReSS 25), although in the complex, Nietzschean sense of a certain ‘transubstantiation’ of ‘values’: “If ‘God’ was one of these Values, or the summation of all others, going against them meant putting God himself (i.e. Meaning fixed as Value) into question. [...] In short, questioning a model of humanity that had absorbed into itself the transcendent ideal (God) and which, from this immanence, was in hot pursuit of ‘values’ and ‘objects’” (ReSS 26). Kristeva, indeed, leaves little doubt that, defined in this manner, the ‘death of

God' entails a constant *return* to religious desires and religious truths concerning the limits of meaning and subjectivity; it is precisely this kind of return that she seeks within her psychoanalytic discourse: "It's in Freud that Judaism and Christianity are taken up again" (ReSS 27); "The genius of psychoanalysis will have been to take the power of desire seriously, as well as the truths of monotheism, and to show that they are inevitable – though variable – conditions for questioning values, and giving human desire its meaning." (ReSS 27)

This 'return' to the religious foundations of Western subjectivity and culture consists in nothing less than a certain "mutation of *homo religiosus*" (ReSS 35), "a radical mutation in the very essence of Humans, insofar as they are religious" (ReSS 88). This mutation could very well take *homo religiosus* beyond the structural, theological and metaphysical limitations of both the Hellenic and the Judeo-Christian heritage (ReSS 35). Kristeva asserts that such a 'mutation' is not only *still ongoing*, but like the larger *crisis* to which it bears witness, it may not lead to any stable resolution (ReSS 40). Rather, the crisis is permanent (ReSS 42) and marks an essential "condition of psychic life. The resurgence of religions and sects reflects this anthropological constant, whatever the perverse manipulations that go with it" (ReSS 40). Like Oedipus's experience in Sophocles' text (SNR 77), the crisis thus marks something like a 'crossroads' (RSS 89; see # 4.1.4), rather than an end. Psychoanalysis attests to the permanence and multidimensionality of this crisis in a more fundamental manner than any other discourse today (ReSS 57 & 102-3). Its 'atheist' stance manifests a humility (a recognition of limits) contemporary *homo religiosus* is mostly unable

to feel, entrenched in the dream of origin and certainty (ReSS 92-3) and defending this dream even to the point of violence.

The dream of an “untranslatable authenticity” (ReSS 60) is not limited to contemporary religious discourses; it also characterizes national and political aspirations (ReSS 107). Indeed, in several instances Kristeva suggests that religious practices remain more open to the urgency of the current crisis and to the necessity of revolt than do political practices that have been mostly reduced to the management of the ‘quality of life’ (ReSS 89) and to the ‘accumulation of data’ (ReSS 101). The modern, political subject is lacking the kinds of *experiences* one finds in the narratives of “the Church Fathers, the mystics and the theologians” (ReSS 91). These experiences are fundamentally *multidimensional*: religious, to be sure, but also physical, epistemological, ethical, political, and literary.

Beyond their fundamentalist and dogmatic tendencies, religious traditions testify to the movement of revolt as “an essential movement in the religious act” (ReSS 106). Kristeva hence declares the need for opening up “a new cultural space [...] that will not become a space for religious dogma, but one that understands the spiritual anxiety driving religious dogma” (ReSS 106). Although she suggests, once again, that psychoanalytic, artistic and literary experiences contribute precisely to the establishment of this kind of cultural space, Kristeva also affirms that religion could well play a significant role in this endeavor: “One wonders if the realization of revolt I am referring to is possible only [...] in certain contexts that are not directly political, but *at the meeting point between different religiosities that question the sacred*” (ReSS 107; emphasis added).

Kristeva's intention is to reconnect these 'different religiosities' with other forms of political-ethical revolt, such as literature and psychoanalysis, while affirming the significance of the concept of 'sacredness' insofar as it endows the 'religious' with a more pregnant meaning, not reducible to its institutional structure. Despite her suspicion vis-à-vis any religious dogmatism that prevents questioning and disrupts the movement of revolt within religious experience and discourse, Kristeva also suggests that the desacralization of the Christian heritage of revolt in the West is at least as destructive in its effect as was Christianity's prior, metaphysical and, to be sure, political triumphalism, accompanied by "its own intrinsic tendencies toward stabilization and reconciliation in the immutability of being [...]" (IRE 6). The return *to* religion, as Kristeva defines it, can only take place insofar as religion reinvents itself as a movement of revolt.

4.2.6 Religious Conflict

Following September 11th, references to religious conflict and religious fundamentalism increase in Kristeva's writings. She does not provide an extensive commentary on 'religious wars'; instead she places them within a larger historical process, which, in her interpretation, involves a certain failure on the part of secular institutions – academic and political – to take into consideration the 'crisis of religion' or, more precisely, their failure to recognize and address the fact that, despite the ongoing democratization and secularization of the Western world, 'religious' questions and needs continue to inform the lives of most individuals (TINB 12-13). These questions and needs manifest themselves quite clearly in the perpetual, public, and mostly unsuccessful attempts to revive some

semblance of the ‘sacred’ by means of media entertainment (ThDT 16 & TINB 27), as well as by techno-scientific and commercial attempts to establish a “secularized paradise” (TINB 18). In her most recent publication, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (French 2007), Kristeva formulates these concerns around the incapacity of Western societies to respond in a new, critical manner, to what she calls the ‘prereligious need to believe’ (more on this in # 4.3):

I am convinced that by taking this prereligious need to believe seriously, we could confront not only religions’ past and present fundamentalist off-course drift but also the dead ends of secularized societies. Particularly the incapacity of these to establish some kind of authority, an incapacity that leaves the way clear for violence on the one hand and the automation of the species on the other.
(TINB 12)

Kristeva’s discussion here echoes one of the central question she addressed in a lecture entitled “Thinking in Dark Times” (2006): “Do today’s religious conflicts discredit humanism, or, if they are accelerating its reconsruction, what would be the role of our disciplines in this possible resurrection?” (ThDT 13)

In both texts Kristeva positions herself against Jürgen Habermas’ and Joseph Ratzinger’s declaration, in their “Prepolitical Foundations of the Democratic State” (2006), of the necessity of a return to faith and to ‘higher authority’ in the face of secular totalitarianisms of the 20th century and the liberal, democratic failure to establish a purely rational, ethical source of moral stability at the turn of the millennium (ThDT 15 & TINB 25). Kristeva suggests that Habermas and Ratzinger’s call remains within the traditional Enlightenment distinction between religion and humanism. In her view, the horrors perpetrated in the context of atheist totalitarianisms had as much to do with the secular

attempt to compensate for the lack of transcendence by positing a ‘transcendental’ authority or principle as they did with ideological manipulation or moral deprivation. For this reason Kristeva cites Hannah Arendt’s words: “Those who conclude from the terrible events of our time that we must go back to religion for political reasons seem to me to show as much lack of faith in God as their opponents” (TINB 72). Religious and technological conflicts and nihilisms must be regarded as two faces of the same phenomenon (TINB 25). Kristeva’s aim is to provide an opening for a critical discourse that avoids the pitfalls of adherence to a unified religious truth and to the sacralization of human reason. As she puts it in a way that summarizes the tensions inherent in her ‘political project’:

It is no longer a matter of conforming to the universal (in the best of cases, everyone aspiring to the same values, human rights, for ex.) or asserting one’s difference (ethnic, religious, sexual) as untouchable and sacred; still less of fighting one of these tendencies with the other or simply and skillfully combining them. It is a matter of pushing the need for the universal *and* the need for singularity to the limit in each individual, making this simultaneous movement the source of both thought and language. ‘There is meaning’: this will be my universal. And ‘I’ use the words of the tribe to inscribe my singularity. *Je est un autre* (‘I is another’): this will be my difference, and ‘I’ will express my specificity by distorting the nevertheless necessary clichés of the codes of communication and by constantly deconstructing ideas/concepts/ideologies/ philosophies that ‘I’ have inherited. (SNR 19)

Kristeva goes on to declare rather provocatively: “Contrary to what some would have us believe, the clash of religions is but a surface phenomenon. The problem of this beginning of the third millennium is not the war of religions but the rift and void that now separates those *who want to know that God is unconscious* and *those* who would rather not know this, the better *to enjoy the show that proclaims He exists*” (TINB 26; see ThDT 16). Despite this assertion,

Kristeva's aim is not to reject the necessity of 'God' or 'religion' but rather to take up the concerns embodied in these terms within a *new humanist* discourse, in order to bring together a kind of mutual contamination of psychoanalytic, literary, religious, ritual, ethical, and political practices (ThDT 16-17) and to insert them into the public domain through dialogue, ethical and political action, and education (ThDT 20; TINB 22 and 24). Kristeva clarifies this endeavor by stating: "Not hostile to religions, and even less indulgent with them, this school of thought that I am part of is perhaps our last chance to deal with the rise of obscurantism and its other face: the management via technology of the human species" (TINB 29; see ThDT 17). This 'humanism' would insert 'transcendence' into 'immanence' (TINB 25) and also recognize that, as with the 'death of God', "putting such a project to work and dealing with its consequences could only be, in the words of Sartre, 'cruel and long-drawn out'." (ThDT 17)

Underlying Kristeva's discussion is her awareness of the politicization and economization of religion in the contemporary global context. The central religious question that defines this context is: Which religious idea offers the best, fastest, and easiest answer to life's problems? "This demand," Kristeva points out, "in itself reduces the divine to the ups and downs of human existence" (TINB 79) and as such constitutes a form of nihilism. Political and religious authorities continue to manipulate religious needs for their own benefit, often with dangerous and even disastrous consequences: "How not also to recall, above all, the various political and religious manipulations the world powers have employed in their desire to dominate globalization, which have fanned the flames of dorman

fundamentalisms?” (TINB 23) Predominantly for this reason, in her brief analysis of the riots and burnings acted out in the Parisian suburbs by disgruntled Algerian youths, Kristeva refuses to recognize these events as inherently religious in character, or as aimed against secular liberalism (ThDT 19 & TINB 21-22). Despite various religious and anti-religious attempts to manipulate these events, Kristeva regards them as revealing “a more radical phase of nihilism, a phase that announces its arrival after and beneath the clash of religions” (ThDT 20). This nihilism concerns the very “foundation of human bonds” in its “prereligious need to believe” (ThDT 20 & TINB 23). It testifies to a more essential sense of alienation and a poverty of ‘ideality’ inscribed into the very heart of contemporary Western culture, along with the experiences of suffering, exclusion, and discrimination that accompany it. (ThDT 19-20 & TINB 22-23)

In two short essays that conclude *This Incredible Need to Believe*, Kristeva explicitly declares that in the face of contemporary nihilism – religious *and* atheist – Christian (especially Catholic) and secular (especially European) humanism must be recognized as constituting two inextricable dimensions of the same cultural and political project. Paying tribute to the ‘Catholic genius’ (TINB 100) of John Paul II, Kristeva draws attention to the late pope’s dedication to human rights and to the both *singular* and *universal* dignity of the human ‘person’ as the “basis of the ‘community’” (TINB 105). This testifies to the intimate relationship between theological and humanist concerns in Western history: “When he [John Paul II] said, to the anguish of the peoples crushed by Stalinian totalitarianism, ‘Don’t be afraid!’ this is the voice of a two-thousand-year-old theology, careful to

recognize each conscience, suddenly transformed into a political act” (TINB 100). John Paul II’s emphasis on liberty as solidarity with the other – particularly with the oppressed, underprivileged, suffering other – offered a crucial alternative to the limitations of democratic liberalism, entrenched in its “cult of performance, of excellence and enjoyment [...]” (TINB 100). Bringing Catholicism into dialogue with certain philosophical and political developments in Western thought, but without abandoning the Catholic tradition’s *difference*, John Paul II succeeded, in Kristeva’s view, in posing a challenge to both humanist ambitions of technological progress and to religious intolerance and abuses around the world (TINB 102). Kristeva appreciates the multidimensional and revolutionary character of John Paul II’s attempt to engage the concerns and crises of the current world through his religious tradition:

Far better than some improbable diplomacy, here is a *recasting* already at work, with Husserl and Wojtyla among others – and many others – in the indefatigable, interminable questioning of the subject, of the person, of the act, of the drives, of the need to believe, of the rights of man [...]. A recasting that opens the way to an endless...recomposition? (TINB 106)

She concludes by affirming the fundamental coincidence between the critical endeavors of the ‘human sciences’ and this Catholic revolt: “‘Don’t be afraid of Christianity, and together we won’t fear religions!’ I find myself wanting to say to my agnostic, humanist, atheist friends. We hail from the same continent of thought, we often rise up ‘against’ each other because we are in reality ‘right against’ one another; let us continue our analyses....”³

³ TINB 106. – For Derrida see above, note 11 of # 3.2.2, p. 227.

4.3 Femininity, the Sacred, and the Impossible Passion of Belief

Why is it that ever since Freud, analytic attention has invariably focused on the sacred, and more specifically on the biblical sacred?

Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*
1995, p. 123

This other logic of the feminine-maternal that defies normative representation and is situated at the antipodes of phallic representation, as well as at the antipodes of the phallic feminine, is my contribution to conceptualizing the feminine, certainly in relation to the political but through the intermediary of the sacred.

Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 2002, p. 259

We like to say that philosophy is a blank theology: it retains the logical armature of theology, while it blanks out the place of God. I would say in counterpoint that psychoanalysis is a vivid Judeo-Christianity, colored by desire and drives, to the point of biology.

Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 2002, p. 234

[I]n these somber times when the nihilist certitude of some encounters the fundamentalist exaltation of others, what worries me is whether the believers, and especially those who believe they don't believe, will be capable of reading into my reflections 'a big question mark', as Nietzsche wrote, at the place of 'greatest gravity'.

Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe* 2009, p. vii

Kristeva has consistently refused to label her work as 'feminist' in character. Yet a fundamental concern with the question of 'woman' is inscribed into many of her writings. This concern led to the publication of the trilogy *Feminine Genius* (2001-2004), in which Kristeva examines the responses of Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), Melanie Klein (1882-1960), and Colette (1873-1954) to the experience of

‘crisis’ in Western culture (see ReSS 94), as well as the singularity of their feminine experience in the face of ‘communitarian’ feminism (see TINB 38). It also led to an elaborate study of feminine religious experience entitled *Thérèse mon amour: Sainte Thérèse d’Avila* (2008). While an extensive treatment of the complexity of the question of woman in Kristeva’s thought is outside the scope of this study, it is necessary to look at some of the religious dimensions of this question, particularly in light of the association Kristeva draws between femininity and what she calls ‘the sacred’ in her later work. This will lead in turn to a critical discussion of the relationship between the notion of the sacred and the notion of belief in Kristeva’s most recent publication, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (French 2007).

4.3.1 Women and Religion

In an important interview published in *Tel Quel* in 1974, “Woman is Never What We Say”, Kristeva establishes two intimately linked motifs that inform much of her thought on women and religion. The term ‘woman’ marks a site within Western discourse that remains inaccessible or impossible to name: “In my view, ‘woman’ is something that cannot be represented or verbalized; ‘woman’ remains outside the realm of classifications and ideologies” (Interviews 98). Kristeva argues that any feminist attempt to attach a fixed, positive definition to this symbolic ‘gap’ “runs the risk of identifying with the principle of power it believes it has surmounted” (Interviews 102; see 105). What is at stake here pertains as much to secular as to religious power and immediately leads to the question: “who plays God in contemporary feminism? Is it Man? Or is it

Woman – his replacement?” (Interviews 102) By 1977 the urgency of this problem becomes more pronounced for Kristeva: “[...] we must stop making feminism into a new religion, undertaking or sect and begin the work of specific and detailed analysis which will take us beyond romantic melodrama and beyond complacency.” (KrR 298)

Kristeva develops these concerns more fully in the influential and controversial text “Women’s Time” (French 1979). The unnamability of the site of ‘woman’ and its association with the maternal *chora* (# 1.4.2) are inserted into the historical process of the current transformations of Western culture’s relationship to ‘meaning’. According to Kristeva, radical feminist discourse has attached itself to the linear, progressive, and teleological understanding of time, and is following a logic that is both spiritual/mystical and rational/scientific in character. The question that emerges within this logic is: “Who is to have power over the origin (the programming) and over the end (the use)?” (NeMS 206)

Kristeva declares her support for a different kind of feminism, one that disrupts the linearity and spiritual aspirations of this movement by bringing into focus the radically plural, fluid, and irreducible identity of ‘woman’ and by linking women’s liberation to socialist politics and psychoanalytic practice. In this way, rather than rejecting the symbolic structure or merely identifying with its sources of power, women’s difference – including their relationship to maternity – fundamentally puts in question its logical, sexual, intersubjective, political, and economic arrangements. “Sexual difference – which is at once biological, physiological, and reproductive – is translated by and translates a difference in the

relationship of subjects to the symbolic contract which is the social contract: a relationship to power, language, and meaning.” (NeMS 210)

Beyond the social and political concerns to which it necessarily testifies, this ‘new’ feminist approach “is situated within the same framework as the religious crisis of our civilization” (NeMS 221). Feminism must affirm the necessity of this crisis, while simultaneously avoiding the temptation to provide a final answer to it. The latter would imply turning feminism into yet another form of secular religion (NeMS 221). What makes this temptation especially difficult to resist, according to Kristeva, is the growing realization among women that their difference revolves fundamentally around their relationship to reproduction/motherhood. This relationship is either ignored by, or slips away from, rational/secular representations; as such, it grants women a certain revolutionary potential within any symbolic structure and has played a vital role in religious discourse and symbolism (NeMS 219). Kristeva’s intention is to remind women that their experience of motherhood must bring into focus the essential incompleteness of human subjectivity, as well as its always prior dependence on the other, rather than serve as a means for ideological self-empowerment or the return to spiritual/theological illusions of completeness, unity, or absolute identity.

Kristeva’s exploration of the sacred aspects of femininity and motherhood in her early psychoanalytic studies must therefore be understood in light of its correspondence to an essential *scission*. In “The Father, Love, and Banishment” (1976), Kristeva speaks of a certain ‘unnamable’ that, in Beckett’s *Not I*,

approximates something like the ‘sacred’. Beckett’s work, according to her analysis, presents the dynamics of Christian “love for meaning beyond communication, for the incommunicable” beyond paternal love, which “opens up onto *nothing*” (DL 155). Kristeva compares this dynamic to images of Renaissance Madonnas “[i]lluminated by an absence, nothingness; and nonetheless persistent, obstinate – like *Not I*” (DL 156), and offering “a *remnant*, which cannot be found in the glance soothed by the nothingness underlying ‘God is love’, nor in the serenely positioned, maternal body” (DL 156). “This remnant is precisely what constitutes the enigma of Christian maternity [...] by means of an *unnamable* stance [...],” which is “not *less* but *more* than [the paternal God’s] Word and Meaning.” (DL 156)

In “*Stabat Mater*” (1976), Kristeva proposes the following definition: “Let us call ‘maternal’ the ambivalent principle that is bound to the species, on the one hand, and on the other stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnamable that one imagines as femininity, nonlanguage, or body” (TaL 234-35). Kristeva suggests that the experience of maternity, inscribed into Christian discourse from the very beginning, constitutes at once a *scission* and a *link* between the ‘physical’ and the ‘metaphysical’ nature of the Christ, who “is ‘human’ only through his mother – as if Christly or Christian humanism could only be a maternalism” (TaL 235). Sacralized as the Mother of God, worshipped as Queen of Heaven, and subject to countless representations in art and sculpture, the Virgin Mary is nonetheless excluded from the Holy Trinity. Kristeva’s aim is to draw attention to the fact that beyond the various ideological

and theological appropriation of the Virgin Mary, her sacred maternity marks an unsurmountable discontinuity within Christian discourse: “A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language – and it has always been so” (TaL 254). Her sacredness thus testifies to the fact that “We live on the border, crossroads beings, crucified beings” (TaL 254) emerging from “a strange fold that changes culture into nature, the speaking into biology” (TaL 258). “Those particularities of the maternal body compose woman into a being of folds, a catastrophe of being that dialectics of the trinity and its supplements would be unable to subsume” (TaL 260). Maternal love is caught up within an experience in which the other is not only that which is *impossible* within language, like the divine posited by Christian theology, but also *inevitable* in its biological immediacy which violates subjective borders:

The love of God and for God resides in a gap: the broken space made explicit by sin on the one side, and beyond on the other. Discontinuity, lack, and arbitrariness: topography of the sign, of the symbolic relation that posits my otherness as impossible. Love, here, is only for the impossible. For a mother, on the other hand, strangely so, the other [...] is inevitable [...]. The other goes without my saying that, at the limit, it does not exist for itself. (TaL 262)

Kristeva’s analysis of the figure of the Virgin Mary positions itself in the direction of a sacred that, at the heart of the Christian tradition, suspends a proper distinction between immanence and transcendence or the physical and the metaphysical and, in the process, resists theological *and* negative theological efforts to posit a unified, identifiable, transcendental signifier.

4.3.2 The Feminine and the Sacred

More than two decades after the publication of “Stabat Mater” in 1976, Kristeva reaffirms and elaborates the *difference* of the Virgin Mary in her correspondence with Catherine Clément, published under the title *The Feminine and the Sacred* (French 1998). In a number of instances Kristeva declares her attachment to the figure of the *Stabat Mater* (FeS 62) and the *Virgin Mother* (FeS 73) whose sacredness, along with the celebration of both maternal and erotic femininity it inspired in Christian thought and art (FeS 114), continues to constitute a challenge to secular discourses. The feminine difference of the Virgin Mary diffuses the experience of the unnamable throughout the Christian tradition (FeS 60). If this difference can never be fully appropriated by patriarchal Christian discourses, it can no more represent a ‘pure’ sacralization of ‘woman’, since it escapes the traditional male/female opposition and names the “unthinkable side of femininity” (FeS 73). Beyond theological explanations and linguistic debates, Mary’s ‘virginity’ marks something like the maternal *chora* (# 1.4.2) prior to any Word/Logos: “Before the Beginning: a non-imprint, a nonplace, beyond the grip of the original *techne*, of the primordial furrow?” (FeS 72) Kristeva adds, in a provocative reinterpretation of negative theology, and in a possible allusion to both Derrida’s and Blanchot’s effort to speak to the impossible: “When Meister Eckhart asks God to leave him ‘quit of God (could I say ‘virgin of God’?), does he not envision as well that nonplace, that unthinkable outside?” (FeS 73) In a curious manner, Kristeva observes, the Christian Word as such – together with the Trinity – revolves precisely and from the very beginning

around the ‘emptiness’ or ‘hole’ that the Virgin opens up and that binds it to “*extralinguistic figures*: silence, music, painting” (FeS 78). This motif becomes even more explicit in *The Incredible Need to Believe* (French 2007): “Woman is both a ‘hole’ (this is the meaning of the word *woman* in Hebrew: *nekeva*) and queen in the Bible; the Virgin is a ‘hole’ in the Christian trinity father/son/holy spirit and queen of the church.” (TINB 46-47)

Beyond these reflections on the figure of the Virgin Mary, the essential aim of the exchange between Kristeva and Clément pertains to the question of the ‘sacred’, of its possible or impossible meanings and whereabouts in contemporary Western culture, as well as of its relationship to feminine experience in the context of the historical development of religion and its institutions (see ReSS 112). Although the term ‘sacred’ becomes increasingly significant for Kristeva from the late 1990s on, she asserts that one cannot expect fixed formulations to emerge from it: “*Where* is the sacred? I propose no definition to you [...]” (FeS 14). Although she seemingly forgets this declaration and proceeds to offer a variety of definitions throughout her correspondence, these definitions remain restrained, incomplete, uncertain; they bring the reader to the very edge of a definition, as it were, only to retreat and displace themselves in favor of another ‘non-definition’. The only constant amidst these displacements is the intimate correspondence between the sacred and what Kristeva calls, after Barthes, the ‘zero degree of meaning’, or the mystery of the emergence of meaning (FeS 13). Arriving as though from beyond language and nevertheless always in its midst the ‘sacred’ marks an unnamable origin, a bond prior to language that has always

been already lost, a presence-absence that constitutes the absolute groundlessness of all human experience. Thus, the ‘sacred’ constitutes scission, cut, gap, cleavage or fissure, and simultaneously fold, link, bond, relation.⁴ Although it remains intimately bound up with the ‘religious’, the sacred nonetheless escapes its claims. In response to Clément’s suggestion that “the sacred is a no-man’s-land” (FeS 121), Kristeva asserts: “What do we agree on, other than the urgency of examining the feminine way of approaching that obscure territory called sacred: not ‘religion’, not ‘sacrifice’, not even ‘value’, but, certainly, and through all that, a borderline [...]” (FeS 134). Feminine experience plays a central role in this respect: “[...] what comes back to us as ‘sacred’ in the experience of a woman is the impossible and nevertheless sustained connection between life [or biology] and meaning” (FeS 14). This is all the more significant for Kristeva insofar as women’s essential positioning on the borderline between life and meaning finds itself rather degraded in late modernity which, in its aspirations to techno-scientific and economic progress at all cost and “after the famous ‘loss of values’, erects life as the ‘supreme value’, but life for itself [life as *zoê* rather than *bios*], life without questions, with wives-and-mothers supposed to be the natural executors of that ‘zoology’.” (FeS 13-14)

⁴ FeS 14-16, 27, 134 & 137. – Although Kristeva rarely employs the term ‘sacred’ throughout her earlier work, she alludes to its borderline character, dividing the ‘paternal’ and ‘maternal’ dimensions of subjective emergence, already in *Powers of Horror* (1982): “Could the sacred be, whatever its variants, a two-sided formation? One aspect founded by murder and the social bond made up of murder’s guilt-ridden atonement, with all the projective mechanisms and obsessive rituals that accompany it, and another aspect, like a lining, more secret still and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward fragility – both threatening and fusional – of the archaic dyad, toward the non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion?” (PH 57-58)

Kristeva then draws a curious distinction between religion/belief and the sacred: she associates religion/belief with symbolic constructions that can be as much ‘religious’ as ‘secular’ in nature (imaginary, ideological, or even scientific); the sacred, on the other hand, points in the direction of a certain ‘irreligiosity’ characterized by Freud in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) as consisting of a humble recognition of humanity’s radical limitations within the vastness of the universe (FeS 26). Kristeva nevertheless resists positing a *final* identity between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘irreligious’, even as she suggests that the sacred be regarded as the name for the human being’s ‘erotic’ experience of his/her fundamental ‘untenability’ or ‘incompleteness’, of his/her ‘exquisite’ positioning upon an essential, incommensurable margin or cleavage (FeS 27), beyond the “religious need for protection and omnipotence that institutions exploit.” (FeS 27)

In another letter, Kristeva observes that the experience of such ‘erotic untenability’ has been seriously depleted in modern Western culture. In this sense, her ‘non-definition’ of the sacred coincides with her emphasis on ‘experience’ in her two texts on revolt (# 4.1.3) and in *Revolt, She Said* (2002). She points to the sacred experiences of Teresa of Avila, “always guided by love, and knowing that the journey is possible but that ‘comprehension’ or ‘representation’ remain forever imperfect. [...] A journey to the end of the night, a scansion of the unknowable unknown” (FeS 34). Kristeva finds a similar capacity for the impossible experience of the sacred that mostly escapes the modern subject in other Christian mystics:

The Middle Ages lent themselves even better to that confession of unrepresentable experiences. Hildegard of Bingen, Angela of Foligno, to

mention them alone at this point, say nothing less: our lives are blazing with *sense*, but that fire has no direct *meaning* and is not directly communicable. So they create poetry, they submerge us in metaphors, images, plastic words, they paint and embroider in the very substance of the words. They do not know they are ‘authors,’ they simply auscultate what is not said from the outset. (FeS 35)

The sacred manifests itself for Hildegard as “decidedly unnamable – and for that very reason to be named endlessly; and Angela experiences the divine as “an ‘abyss’, ‘a *thing that has no name*...and defies the desire to ask beyond it’” (FeS). What especially interests Kristeva in this context is the peculiar manner in which this “thing without a name” (FeS 37) that she calls ‘the sacred’ demands a certain suspension of belief and carries the saints/mystics to the brink of an experience where radical certainty and radical doubt coalesce:

The latencies of a mystic atheism (perhaps the only one, which has nothing to do with the atheistic religion of the so-called materialist intellectuals [...]), and, I think, of a subtle, specifically feminine atheism, take root, it seems to me, in that suspicion borne aloft on the powers of the Word, in that retreat to the unfathomable continent, concealed from the sensible body. (FeS 37)

Kristeva affirms her allegiance to this eccentric atheism that traverses religious experience and, at a meeting point between body and word, parallels it in its encounter with a certain *nothingness*: “I am convinced that the conjunction of thought and of the nothing can and ought to be celebrated as ‘sacred’. But it could in no way lay itself open to the sort of faith [...] that is potentially fanatical” (FeS 49).

Kristeva rejects Clément’s attempt to identify her notion of ‘the sacred’ as Buddhist in character, leading toward the refusal of “every position with a radical ‘neither-nor’: neither joy nor suffering nor happiness nor unhappiness [...]”(FeS

65), only to find rest within a radical atheism utterly deprived of God. “In fact, the ‘nothing’ I spoke of is part of the meaning of life – its appeasement and its limit, not its nullification; it has nothing to do with modern nihilism, the effacement of differences (especially sexual ones) and of acts of questioning (particularly revolt) that, in the West, is taken to be a ‘modern-style’ Buddhism” (FeS 81). Kristeva emphasizes that her reflections on the sacred remain fundamentally within Judeo-Christian discourse and experience (FeS 81) and acknowledges the importance of its ‘paternal function’ while simultaneously drawing attention to the irreducibility and the revolutionary potential of feminine experience in this tradition (FeS 102-3). Regarding the absence of ‘God’ in this schema, Kristeva aligns herself with Meister Eckhart’s prayer which asks God to allow him to be rid of God (FeS 72-73), thus suggesting that the atheism she seeks is both *necessary* and *impossible*. Responding affirmatively to Clément’s suggestion that she is a ‘Christian atheist’, Kristeva asserts:

If atheism did exist – which is not certain – it would belong not to religion, but rather to the depletion of all religions, in full knowledge of the facts, as old Hegel wanted it, without forgetting the Universal, the Christian. Yet the tendency to forget Christianity, which sometimes puts on the airs of a liberating blasphemy, characterizes a number of modern ‘atheists’. A forgetting, a denial, which, naturally, makes them squirm a little. Could you be one of them? (FeS 113)

Kristeva draws a connection between the sacred and the ‘imaginary’ (FeS 117) only to remind Clément of her conviction that the subject’s entry into the imaginary – into language – cannot take place without sacrifice, prohibition, symbolic castration (FeS 120 & 135). Once again, Kristeva admits the insufficiency of definitions or the impoverishment of meaning one experiences

when approaching the sacred, this ‘beyond’ (FeS 136). Religions can be regarded to a large extent as the symptoms of this impoverishment, as well as individual and collective attempts to domesticate it (FeS 115). Nevertheless, Kristeva argues that this ‘poverty of religion’ may well be impossible to eradicate; secular attempts to do so inevitably lead to a dangerous replacement of religion with politics, albeit one deprived of the ‘unnamability’ of the sacred: “It seems to me that political religion is the most pernicious culmination of religion in the most illusionist sense of the term, and it has nothing to do with the sacred” (FeS 136). For this reason, Kristeva adds: “I have an infinite appreciation for the biblical and Christian idea that it is only from a ‘poorly squared stone’, a ‘stumbling block’ that the Light of Yahweh shines forth, and from which Christ and his Church arise. [...] In addition, [...] I know that the modern world easily plays to the gap, but doesn’t care to know what rectitude is made of.” (FeS 140)

Kristeva’s argument attempts to rehabilitate the ‘sacred’ as a certain experience of ‘secrecy’ understood as the experience of ‘non-knowledge’ or ‘limit’, in order to counterbalance Western culture’s epistemological, spiritual, scientific and political obsession with ‘truth as unveiling’:

It is well known that the sacred and secrecy have journeyed side by side throughout history. But the Greeks defined truth as an unveiling, and the Catholic Church made the mystery universal, available to all. Far be it for me to argue the present-day scientific and democratic benefits of that procession of ‘phenomena,’ ‘insights,’ and ‘openings’. Let me say, nevertheless and simply, that it entails the risk of the spectacular and of the artificial. And I maintain that the rehabilitation of secrecy can be a salutary counterpoint to such tendencies, to such dangers. Not a secrecy that would revel in itself, that would be content with itself, or that would degenerate into corruption [...]. But a secrecy that, like the plumb line, can be measured in the dignity of its focus, which, like the plumb line,

does not forget that it functions so that rectitude shall become visible [...]. (FeS 141)

Kristeva recognizes in the tension of this 'line' a profound nostalgia for religious symbols, narratives, and experiences that afflicts modern subjects and societies. She identifies herself as an 'advocate' of that nostalgia, though only to the extent that it becomes a kind of process of mourning that "turns itself inside out into 'something to come'" (FeS 142), rather than a fixed fascination, religious, political or otherwise. Kristeva emphasizes the essential uncertainty that must characterize the 'truth' of this process:

What if the truth were only that? Not 'a meaning' but a 'tension toward'. Let us confine ourselves to remaining upright and sound. Let us work toward meaning, but let us leave it...indefinite, always 'to come'. In the face of religions and ideologies, I would say that our attention to the sacred is 'transitory' (rather than 'nostalgic') and that, paradoxically, that transitory quality is its [...] nondescript but true strength. (FeS 142)

The sacred in this regard becomes the name for an impossible experience that points to the future while allowing itself to be haunted by the past: "Catherine of Siena [...] hangs over us with her superhuman experience, we who were born after humanism but have, nonetheless, not forgotten the sacred." (FeS 142)

It is necessary to remember that there can be no final word in the midst of this experience. It must be accompanied by "the permanent questioning of everything, of oneself, and of secrecy itself" (FeS 151), a questioning conscious of the fact that it takes place over an irreducible fissure: "Creation comes out of a cut, the gap that opens within the signifier, and there is no Word there. Not yet. I would go so far as to remind you [...] that it is even from that separation that the Bible proceeds: in the beginning, God *separates* [...]" (FeS 152). One should not

make out of this experience a devotional practice: “If I accord any interest to the sacred, through and beyond the religious, it [...] stems precisely from the cut, *bereshit*, that opens representation without becoming confused with it: heaven and earth, man and woman, and other divisions as well, each on its own side” (FeS 152). The sacred as the ‘cut’ is precisely what modern, secular subjects have grown impatient with, even as they continue to be caught up in the search for new religious experiences:

No more sacred, they pay off the account, long live reason, everything will be ‘managed’ quite properly! A little diplomacy [...], a little computer, a little central bank...But then, one fine day, our management diplomats find there’s another attack in the heart of downtown [...]. And that democrats are swarming with mystics, founders of sects who want them recognized as religions by the courts. (FeS 152)

Kristeva continues: “Why that commotion? Purely and simply because, on the other side of the prohibition, the abyss remains. It does not allow itself to be mopped up by the administration of signification and signifiers. It waits, or, rather, does not wait for its due.” (FeS 153)

At this point Kristeva returns to the fundamental connection between the experience of ‘thought’ and the experience of the ‘nothing’. Beyond thinking-as-calculation, the coincidence between these two experiences remains the only alternative to the ‘new religions’ and their inseparable counterparts, ‘religious atheisms’: “To visit, the best we can, that cut, that prohibition, that reversal of meaning, where meaning is born [...] on the edge of nothingness” (FeS 153). The nature of Kristeva’s ‘atheism’ becomes clearer in this context: “I call atheism the meaning of that labor of meaning, its delivery into the world, its long life. The depletion of transcendence in transcendence itself” (FeS 153). This ‘labor of

meaning' is equated with "the most feminine of the 'fundamentals' of the sacred [...]" (FeS 154). Another 'name' Kristeva offers for this movement is "atheistic mysticism of meaning" (FeS 154), at least insofar as the term 'mysticism' resonates with its etymological senses of 'mystery' and 'initiation' and does not become detached from 'reason'. Kristeva's purpose is to dispel illusions of an atheism that thinks itself capable of living without the sacred, and to express concerns with religious attempts to domesticate the impossible other:

Some believe they have exhausted the religious by demonstrating that secular thinking concerns itself just as much, if not more, with the 'other' than does the charity of men of faith. But, so long as we have not recognized another *other* – which is not the other person, my neighbor, my brother, but *the other logic in me*, my strangeness, my heterogeneity [...] – then the cult of the 'origin,' of the inaccessible foundation, of the unnameable paradise will embrace its 'return of the repressed' in the form of a 'faith' or, more brutally, in the form of fratricidal wars that claim to reconstitute the lost foundation. (FeS 163)

Be that as it may, Kristeva's declares her comfort with the Catholic 'revival' manifest during World Youth Day celebrations. As she puts it, "I am persuaded that it is by traversing Christianity that the free subjectivity of men and women flourishes [today]," before adding: "By traversing, that is, by knowing and analyzing: not by becoming imprisoned within it" (FeS 164-65). This echoes Kristeva's analyses of the sacred in *Revolt, She Said* (French 1998), in which she insists on the necessity of experiencing the sacred as an 'opening' that escapes "the stability of religion" and cuts across "the institution that inhibits it to some degree" (ReSS 34) by passing through one's particular religious inheritance (ReSS 111). Similarly, Kristeva insists on the central role psychoanalysis,

literature, and art play in this search for the sacred (FeS 164 & ReSS 115) insofar as they embody the movement of revolt. (ReSS 38)

Beyond the obscure abyss to which it points, Kristeva seeks an atheism “capable of federating a humanity that wants to be ‘free of God’” (FeS 165) in the sense of Meister Eckhart’s prayer (see TINB 95). Her treatment of the sacred leaves no doubt that she considers the ‘death of God’ and the ‘labor of meaning’ to be two fundamentally coextensive events pointing to a common task (FeS 165) that is both personal and collective (FeS 178). Kristeva’s thought on the sacred testifies to her growing realization that in a secular context permeated by religious aspirations one *cannot* avoid speaking *religiously*, even if one believes one is speaking merely psychoanalytically, politically, scientifically, or poetically. As she observes in *Revolt, She Said*, the events of May 68, like many other seemingly political or economic demonstrations today, can be regarded as nothing less than a “search for other forms of the sacred” (ReSS 36; see 37 & 75-76). Kristeva’s notion of the ‘sacred’ at once subsumes the experience of *homo religiosus* and sublimates, transforms, or displaces this experience in order to arrive at a no-place whose meaning remains uncertain and that resists *both* religion-as-calculation *and* thought-as-calculation. Within this scheme, the notion of the sacred marks the limits of both ‘religion’ and ‘atheism’; or, to be more precise, it constitutes Kristeva’s name for the impasses, caesuras, and aporias of the ‘relation without relation’ between religion and atheism, for their mutual and inexhaustible displacement which is also the mutual displacement of the physical and the metaphysical, immanence and transcendence, biology and meaning.

4.3.3 The Passion of Belief

In the preface to her most recent publication, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (French 2007), Kristeva explicitly affirms the essential correspondence between the revival of the question of ‘the sacred’ and the interminability of the ‘death of God’ in Western culture irrevocably permeated by Judeo-Christian concerns:

It seems to me henceforth agreed that Christianity opened the vast field of the sacred to figuration and to literature: to the inner experience that goes from the quest of convulsive communion to the necessity I feel of questioning everything – from the abysses of childhood up to the unknown. This is the consequence – sublime or destructive? – of a ‘disjunction’, says Georges Bataille, that Christianity sanctioned: on the one hand, the putting to death of God, who represented and still represents the only opposable limit to irresistible desire, and, on the other hand, the resurrection of the divine in ‘perfect moments,’ ‘privileged situations,’ ‘scalding communions’. Paint, make music, tell stories: if your possession of the Holy Grail cannot be mistaken for God, it is its inheritance, its return – a sort of return – even if it grows drunk on profaning him. (TINB viii)

The complexity of this religious experience must be preserved and continually renewed in the context of psychoanalytic practice, not in order “to disposses theology of its ‘thing’” or “to constitute a new ‘absolute knowledge’, but so that no data, confirmation, or model comes along to put a halt to the questioning, this endless prolongation of the *access to the sacred* that Christianity made possible – in a unique way because infinitely renewable” (TINB ix). The question of ‘belief’ emerges in this context as the subjective-psychological dimension of this experience.

At the ‘zero-degree of meaning’, the speaking being is a being who *necessarily* believes. The experience of belief must be regarded as necessarily

prereligious (TINB 1) and coextensive with the history of humanity as such.

Along with the question of the sacred, the problem of belief is at the center of the current crisis of meaning in both its religious and secular features, leading to the question of the nature of human knowledge and of truth. The speaking being who is capable of belief is also capable of calling everything into question, including him/herself: “It is in this spirit that I hear [...] Saint Paul’s well-known statement in 2 Corinthians 4:13 – ‘I believed, and so I spoke’ [...]” (TINB ix). In this sense, belief constitutes an *experience* rather than a ‘supposition’, ‘idea’, or ‘illusion’ (TINB 3-4). As such, belief permeates all knowledge and all encounters; it also accompanies every successful analytic process (TINB 4-5), at least to the extent that this process, in Freud’s interpretation, revolves around faith in “Our God Logos” (quoted in TINB 6). Thus, the analytic subject (both analyst *and* analysand) and *homo religiosus* constitute two irreducible aspects of the same subjective experience. These two aspects of subjectivity must be continually interrogated, and it is impossible to extrapolate one without immediately undermining the other: “From the knowing to the believing, and vice versa, the eternal turnstile of *parlêtre* [speakbeing]. Take the possibility of knowing back to the need to believe, without renouncing the interrogating of the historical contents of belief, their truths: [...] Endlessly” (TINB xiii). The permanence of questioning demanded by the experience of belief, like the permanence of questioning necessitated by the unnamability of the sacred, leads Kristeva to affirm the immanence of transcendence at the heart of subjectivity always already constituted within otherness (TINB xv). Kristeva’s argument in this instance

echoes her analysis of transcendence in *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*:

“Sartre [...] put this brilliantly in *Being and Nothingness*: in order to accede to the other, to absolute immanence, ‘we must ask absolute immanence to throw us into absolute transcendence’.” (SNR 66)

Two fundamental experiences inscribe belief at the very heart of all subjectivity. The first of these is what Freud defined as the ‘oceanic feeling’ in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929): “This would relate to the intimate union of the ego with the surrounding world, felt as an absolute certainty of satisfaction, security, as well as the loss of our self to what surrounds and contains us, to a container, and that goes back to the experience of the infant who has not yet established borders between the ego and the maternal body” (TINB 7). The second experience has to do with the fact that the subject cannot enter into language without a prior belief in the Other (TINB x). This is the situation that, in Kristeva’s interpretation, Freud appreciated in positing a primary identification with the ‘father of individual prehistory’ (TINB x): “‘I’ am only if a beloved authority acknowledges me” (TINB 8). These two experiences – ‘maternal’ bond and ‘paternal’ Logos – constantly inform the life of every speaking subject and, by extension, every communal structure: “‘I’ does not stop seeking these primary constituents of his identity in his incredible need to believe” (TINB 11). Kristeva argues that these two ‘functions’ are not simply reducible to a ‘mother’ or ‘father’ figure; without them no human relationship, no discourse, no thought, no freedom, and no revolt can take place. For this reason, the primary concern behind Kristeva’s discussions of ‘feminine genius’, mystical experience, the

Virgin Mary, the Passion of Christ, the death of God, and religious suffering revolves around the relationship between the ‘passion of belief’ in late modernity on the one hand, and the dissolution of discourses on maternity/femininity and of the paternal function or authority on the other.

Kristeva bemoans the manner in which the ‘human sciences’ fragment human experience, reduce knowledge to a ‘product’, and dismiss the complexity of the Judeo-Christian ‘genius’ in both its ‘maternal’ and its ‘paternal’ forms as the consequence of ‘superstition’, ‘illusion’, or ontotheological error, and as such are incapable of addressing the fundamental questions of language, meaning, and knowledge: “The uncertainties of secularization in our time reopen this recurring problematic in a new way. The remains of the ontotheological continent, too rapidly decreed sunk, seem less and less like ‘dead letters’ and more and more like laboratories of living cells whose exploration might allow us to clarify present aporias and impasses” (TINB 32). The hasty abandonment of the passion of Judeo-Christian belief deprives contemporary humanities – and ‘humanism’ as such – of the ‘marginal’, ‘inner’ experiences (TINB 56) of the speaking being to which this belief bears witness, and hence is unable to respond to the necessity of a fundamental transformation in humanity’s experience of itself and its Other. In contradistinction to modernity,

Judeo-Christianity does not do away with the vastness of Greek being. It bends it inward, it hollows out ‘inwardness,’ never ceasing to link it to the Great Other, right to the unnameable, which must be named again and again, because in the beginning was the Word, which is Love, and Logos prides itself on embracing love up until the point of death itself... (TINB 55-56)

By the same token, the Judeo-Christian tradition carries within itself and perpetually engages certain ‘constants’ of the history of humanity and social bonds (love, desire, faith, suffering, authority, birth, death, or the sacred) the modern subject increasingly rejects as incompatible with the experience of a self-determining entity. “However partial this revelation may be, however illusory or dogmatic its promises and consolations, precisely because it offers interpretations affecting the basis of the social pact, it gives breathing space to social constraints. It seduces *homo oeconomicus* and *homo politicus*, doubled from time immemorial by *homo religiosus*.” (TINB 57)

Kristeva’s own psychoanalytic response to this crisis is once again clear: the passion of *homo religiosus* and the symbolic productions that accompany him or her must be *sublimated*, not dismissed (TINB 62), in order to open up in the midst of modern humanity new experiences of ‘belief’ and of ‘the sacred’ beyond fundamentalist and dogmatic nihilisms. This task requires the acknowledgment that *homo religiosus* constitutes an integral part of *homo sapiens*, and that sublimation as such remains possible today only through the great sublimatory accomplishments of religious traditions. Kristeva considers the Passion of Christ as exemplary in this regard, insofar as it enacts at once the death and resurrection of God through the Son: “No other religion, even that of the Greek gods, encourages the experience of sublimation quite so effectively as the Son-Father beaten to death” (TINB 60). This double experience permeates the entire development of Western culture’s symbolic capacities and revolts, and it enables

a fundamental transformation of the believing subject into a subject who becomes a question to him or herself.

From this [Son-Father death], Christianity, and Catholicism, especially after the Counter-Reformation, brought about a deep mutation in the universal need to believe. It absorbed the Greco-Roman body: it reabsorbed the antique body rediscovered by the humanists, pushing it to its limits in an unbridled representation of the Passion of Man. Painting, music, literature, caught up in this, had to develop the perceptions of men and women, as explored by mysticism, glorified by Baroque art. And radically change the subject of monotheism. (TINB 61)

Psychoanalytic discourse continues to put these ‘paternal’ deaths and resurrections into practice; along with the ‘maternal’ versions of this process it testifies to their inevitability beyond religious appropriations, and therefore becomes the place of the most significant encounter between the secular humanist and *homo religiosus*:

By developing his theo-logy, by forcing it to confront the plural interpretations of his need to believe, the multiple variants of his need to believe. Is this not what Freud did when he claimed it is possible to tell the love of the other, infinitely; to analyze oneself in analyzing it, infinitely? Might psychoanalysis be one of the variations of theology? Its ultimate variation, *hic et nunc*?” (TINB 70)

Kristeva adds: “Clinicians in dialogue with religious specialists and theologians. What if this were the eternal return of Freud?” (TINB 63)

Such encounter between religion and humanism constitutes nothing less than a key political project that calls “not for a return *to* but a refoundation *of* the authority of the Greco-Judeo-Christianity that gave the world the desire for a ‘common world’, constituted by a plurality of ‘who’s’” (TINB 76). This ‘refoundation’ applies equally to humanism and the human sciences: “Even

humanism will only avoid the dead ends of its rationalism if it allows itself to interpret such antecedents in depth” (TINB 84):

The time has come to recognize, without being afraid of ‘scaring off’ either the faithful or the agnostics, that the history of Christianity is a preparation for humanism. Of course, humanism is in a state of rupture with Christianity, but it starts from it: a ‘rupture’ that Christianity heralded in being the only religion that comes within a hair’s breadth of exiting from the domain of the religious, notably – but not only – when it makes God himself suffer to death. Does this ‘hiatus’ (Urs von Balthasar) of the divine take suffering as sacred or, on the contrary, does it deconsecrate it? (TINB 83)

The question of the essential intersection of the suffering of God, the suffering of Jesus the man, the suffering of the *Stabat mater* (Mary) the woman, and the suffering of humanity is of particular importance as it points directly to what Kristeva calls the ‘Christian difference’. This difference continues to constitute a powerful and necessary *scandal* for humanity that “Christians themselves do not dare recognize or make recognizable [...] in today’s conflict of religions” (TINB 88). In her Lenten lecture on suffering, presented before a Christian audience on March 19, 2006, Kristeva charts out three aspects of the contemporary significance of this scandal.

In the first place, the centrality of physical and moral suffering that characterizes the Christian experience continues to disrupt the utopian search for absolute happiness that has emerged in Western secular culture in the wake of the Enlightenment’s attempt to free itself of Christian logic (TINB 90). More importantly, beyond its ‘eroticization’ of suffering, Christianity presents an experience of *com-passion* as a communal and metaphysical solidarity:

Christian suffering is *sharable*: this is the first way in which Christianity has effected a revolution in the approach to suffering. Sharable, first of

all, between humans and Christ, who, in assuming it, confers upon it extraordinary dignity, at the interface of the human and the divine; sharable, next, and consequently, among human beings themselves, who only allow themselves to look for a way to relieve it on the condition that they can look it in the face, give it a name, and interpret it. (TINB 90-91)

In the second place, Kristeva admires the manner in which “God himself is ‘in sufferance’ in Christian suffering” (TINB 94) and in which Christianity establishes the experience of the death of God “not just as a nihilistic catastrophe but also a condition *sine qua non* of his ‘eternal return’” (TINB 89). The complexity of this problem must be recognized and affirmed in all of its theological *and* atheological contemporaneity, because it pertains to two crucial and intimately related questions: Does the death-resurrection at the heart of Christianity necessarily lead to an eternal return of ‘the religious’ or to the return of ‘the sacred’? (TINB 89) What is the nature of the divine ‘limit’ or divine ‘emptiness’ to which Christ’s death bears witness: “[...] is the suffering to *death* only due to Christ’s humanity, or does it affect the very nature of his divinity? And thus of Divinity?” (TINB 93) Kristeva draws attention to the Greek designation for divine descent through Christ’s death, *kénosis*, which signifies ‘not-being’, ‘nothing’, ‘inanity’, or ‘nullity’, and which, employed as an adjective, can also mean ‘empty’, ‘useless’, ‘vain’, or as a verb, *kenoun*: ‘empty’ ‘cut’, ‘annihilate’ (TINB 93-94). Kristeva argues that, insofar as *kénosis* is the name for an eccentric coincidence of human and divine death, it testifies to the essential manner in which ‘rupture’ or the ‘work of the negative’ (TINB 94) is inscribed into the experience of every subject and his or her Other. Here, “the absolute necessity for the human spirit to aspire to the Other, desire the divine, want to

seize meaning, is suddenly revealed to be empty, vain, useless, absurd. It is even through this co-presence of the absolute-and-the-nothingness of desire that Christianity reaches the limits of the religious” (TINB 95). Kristeva’s central aim is to emphasize the crucial role that the emptying out of the divine through *kénosis* plays in establishing the possibility of a new experience of belief, one that, through its Christian and humanist transformations and against belief as mastery and calculation, paves the way for a new experience of the sacred in contemporary Western culture.

I would therefore say that with *kénosis* we are no longer confronted with the religious but with the *sacred*, understood as a traversal, via thought, of the unthinkable: nothingness, the useless, the vain, the absurd. To [*sic*] the *sacred*, which it is modern knowledge’s ambition to approach – fully aware of what is at stake. Mysticism already took the risk of getting close to these realms; in the voice of Meister Eckhart: ‘I ask God to leave me free of God’. But it may be John of the Cross who best announced this presence of the impossible in the tension of desire and thought, this nothingness that stresses the ‘vain pursuit’ that goes along with the need to believe. (TINB 95)

In the third place, Kristeva points to the coincidence between suffering and resurrection in the Christian tradition. Christian suffering is never merely ‘empty’ or ‘vain’ because it is necessarily accompanied by what, in psychoanalytical terms, constitutes the process of ‘working through’ within a loving bond between the subject and the other: “‘I’, suffering because desiring/thinking, loving/loved, am able to *represent* my passion to myself, and this *representation* is my resurrection” (TINB 96). Christianity gives language and meaning to this process and fertilizes the soil from which humanism can emerge as “itself a kind of suffering” (TINB 98) capable of living with the impossibility of transcending suffering. To be more precise, Christianity gives birth to a subjectivity that is

capable of experiencing thought and belief as liberty and creativity – in a word: as an *affirmation* – in the face of incurable suffering and despite the radical limits of human speech and knowledge.

The the notion of ‘the sacred’ – suspended somewhere between the void of the ‘maternal’ bond and the nothingness or annihilation of the ‘paternal’ *kénosis* – and the passion of belief that accompanies it emerges in Kristeva’s late work precisely as the “big question mark at the place of ‘greatest gravity’” (TINB vii). While to some extent the ‘sacred’ takes precedence over ‘religion’, just as ‘belief’ implies a *prereligious* experience that cannot be reduced to ‘religious faith’, the term must be seen as constituting a certain *displacement*, rather than a *replacement*, of traditional ‘religion’, as if the questions today would be: *Where* is ‘religion’? From *where* does it speak to us? *How* is it possible as a discursive practice, a form of belief, or as an experience of ‘God’ or ‘gods’? And *where* is it leading us? Toward what truth or what impossibility does it enable us to speak?

The term ‘sacred’ as Kristeva understands it is meant to follow a fundamental incertitude – the impasses, caesuras, and aporias – that characterizes late modernity and its language, religious and secular alike. Hovering on the brink of a radical atheism that names *the unnamable*, thinks the *unthought*, and believes in *nothing*, the sacred bears witness to the fact that, with or without God, the speaking being remains a *religious* being at its core, and that perhaps it can be nothing if it is not that. Is the sacred Kristeva’s name for ‘religion without religion’? Not necessarily. It would be more accurate to say that it marks

religion's encounter with its own limits: religion *in spite* of religion, as it were,
religion as the exile of the 'religious', religion as the permanence of crisis.

Conclusion

The Margins and Inquietudes of Kristeva's Critique

[T]ruth cannot be completely told – at least, that is what psychoanalysis has taught us [...].

Julia Kristeva, "Concerning *The Samurai*", in *NwN* 1993, p. 78

One wants to publish 'everything,' one wants to say 'everything,' as if one were anxious about only one thing: that everything be said; as if the 'everything is said' would finally allow us to stop a dead voice [...].

Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship* 1997, p. 289

Religion is about what is always slipping away. It is, therefore, impossible to grasp what religion is about – unless, perhaps, what we grasp is the impossibility of grasping.

Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion* 1999, p. 1

The aim of this inquiry has been twofold: 1) to bring into focus Julia Kristeva's thought on religion by carefully and critically accompanying the development of this thought along with the nuances, ambiguities, shifts of emphasis, tensions and impasses that characterize it; 2) to place Kristeva's work within the larger context of the poststructuralist critique of modernity, particularly the work of Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, in order to draw attention to the consistent and explicit manner in which Kristeva asserts the necessity of transforming this critique into a response to the 'crisis of meaning' that characterizes contemporary Western language, thought, and institutions.

Like Blanchot and Derrida, and in spite of the psychoanalytic orientation of many of her inquiries into religion, Kristeva's work does not offer a fixed

definition of ‘religion’ and does not formulate a comprehensive, final ‘theory of religion’. And yet her writings are permeated with references to, and readings of, religious ‘texts’ – especially Judeo-Christian discourses, practices, terms, narratives, images, symbolic motifs, ideas and experiences. Although since the early 1990s a growing number of critical and literary theorists, feminist scholars, and religious scholars have recognized the importance of religion in Kristeva’s thought and have addressed various aspects of her engagement with religion in their work, no attempt has been made to bring these various aspects together in the course of a single study. More importantly, virtually all of the available studies focus on explicating Kristeva’s interpretations of religious texts, and neglect to take into account the intriguing manner in which, beginning already in her early essays, Kristeva situates her concern with the ‘crisis of religion’ at the very heart of her entire intellectual endeavor. The centrality of this concern is indeed so pervasive that it is difficult to point to an essay, study, or interview by Kristeva that does not testify to it in one way or another. Sara Beardsworth’s excellent work, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (2004), offers one of the rare instances when the essential role of the crisis of religion in Kristeva’s thought is acknowledged and considered in relation to modern nihilism. Nevertheless, Beardsworth’s discussion of religion is mostly confined to a single chapter and remains insufficient insofar as its emphasis on the ‘failure’ of religion in Kristeva’s critique of modernity does not consider Kristeva’s ongoing attempt to draw attention to the failure of secularism in Western culture and to the

necessity of a ‘refoundation’ of the resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition through its encounter with humanist discourses.

As the present study indicates, Kristeva is well aware from the very beginning that this problematic is anything but simple and that the ‘crisis of meaning’ she seeks to address in her work is irreducibly multidimensional in character. For this reason, her writing situates itself fundamentally at the intersection of subjective, religious, linguistic, epistemological, literary, social, political, ethical, and psychoanalytic concerns, continually speaking in several directions at once and preventing the reader from treating any question in isolation from others. In this manner, Kristeva’s textual practice bears witness to her belief that the current crisis of meaning has as much to do with the positivist and metaphysical attempts to fix language and meaning within one Truth, as it does with a certain fragmentation of human discourses, signifying practices, and experiences through their superficial relegation to ‘separate’ spheres of thought and action. Kristeva is careful to emphasize that the crisis in question is permanent and, indeed, necessary. The central task of her theory of the text is to find ways to *preserve* the necessity of this crisis beyond the denials that accompany it, while simultaneously *avoiding* the threat of subjective and social disintegration. Central aspects of this complex project have been discussed in the first chapter of this study, with special attention paid to the manner in which notions such as productivity, negativity, intertextuality, transposition or *chora* mark Kristeva’s attempt to remain in close proximity to the critical significance of Blanchot’s *neuter* and Derrida’s *différance*, while remedying what she considers

to be certain shortcomings in their textual critique – especially their ‘neglect’ of the embodied, speaking subject and his or her socio-historical experience.

Kristeva’s focus on poetic language, particularly in avant-garde literary practice, constitutes an extension of her textual theory and testifies to her effort to draw attention to the revolutionary possibilities – both subjective and socio-historical – contained within a certain experience with language. Poetic language, according to Kristeva, is neither neutral nor destructive with respect to meaning; it rather embodies within itself a critical capacity to transform social and subjective experience through a reconstitution of the relationship between its semiotic and symbolic dimensions. By the same token, literature and art emerge in Kristeva’s thought as types of signifying practice best equipped to respond to the social, psychological, and spiritual impoverishment of modernity in the wake of the dissolution of religious discourses and institutions. One of the central aims of chapter two was to point out the limitations of Kristeva’s literary theory insofar as it treats the disappearance of religion as inevitable, and insofar as it tends to associate all religious discourse with the ‘monological’ model of language and knowledge. As the analysis of Blanchot’s literary approach indicates, Kristeva’s concerns can be addressed in a more productive way through a mutual encounter-translation between certain aspects of literary and religious language. While the two authors’ concerns are intimately related and united in their ‘atheism’, Blanchot remains more sensitive to the ‘negative’ and ‘productive’ dimensions of religious language, and more aware of their continuing capacity to bring ‘crisis’ to the self-assured ‘secular humanism’ of modern thought.

Kristeva herself becomes increasingly aware of the impasses entailed in her literary critique of religion. Although literature never ceases to play a key role in her work, her 'psychoanalytic turn' marks an important transformation in her approach. When the question of subjective formation and the subject's 'well-being' becomes central in Kristeva's work, religious and literary practices acquire equal significance: she gradually recognizes that the modern subject is the product of an intricate history of signifying practices whose origins are religious in character and remains an inherently *religious* subject. The purpose of chapter three was to draw attention to three 'orientations' that emerge in the wake of Kristeva's efforts to respond to her own ambiguities vis-à-vis this recognition throughout the 1980s. Initially, Kristeva continues to seek a replacement for religious formations by exploring the psychological significance of the 'literature of abjection'. This approach is mostly abandoned when she begins to explore the complex ways in which religious practices and discourses anticipate psychoanalytic insights. Toward the end of the decade, Kristeva's analytic discourse admits its own limitations and acknowledges the continuing importance of certain kinds of religious experience, language, and art in the speaking being's encounter with the 'impossible' or 'unnamable' core of meaning. At this point, the chapter examined the differences and similarities between Derrida's attempt to clarify the relationship between deconstruction and negative theology and Kristeva's attempt to explore the relationship between psychoanalytic and religious encounters with the inaccessible Other.

During the 1990s, Kristeva's psychoanalytic experience becomes the foundation for her critique of contemporary Western culture as well as for her political inquiries into the limits and possibilities of freedom, revolt, democracy, and nationalism. In this context, Kristeva's concern with the crisis of secularism, evident already in her textual and literary theory, moves increasingly into the foreground, accompanied by her interest in the 'return of religion' into public discourse and in the revival of both religious and political fundamentalism. Kristeva associates these developments with secular modernity's failure to respond to the complexity of the speaking subject's search for meaning. At the same time, she remains highly critical of Western culture's effort to fill the spiritual void with techno-scientific progress, consumerism, entertainment, and hasty appeals to national identity. She considers ways in which religious and literary experiences of the margins of meaning can play a role in social, political, ethical, and subjective transformation. Through her explorations of what she considers the impasses and caesuras of secular culture, Kristeva increasingly affirms the irreducibility of belief and seeks new ways of addressing the question of the necessity of 'the sacred' in human life as well as its impossible positioning at the border of religion and atheism, meaning and nonmeaning, or maternal and paternal 'function'. These issues were discussed in chapter four.

From the very beginning, Kristeva's thought on religion is characterized by a multiplicity of tensions which are not only *not* resolved in her recent work, but are also inherently *irresolvable*. Such *irresolvability* permeates all of Kristeva's work and brings it into close proximity to Blanchot's and Derrida's writings. One

may describe this proximity by suggesting that, while Blanchot places himself within a certain radical neutrality or passivity of meaning, and Derrida within the movement of a perpetual difference/deferring, dissemination, or shifting of meaning, Kristeva the psychoanalyst prefers to remain within the inquietude of an essential tension: its impossible but productive repetitions, obsessions, and impasses. Kristeva occasionally betrays the tensions demanded by her approach in favor of a resolution – almost invariably a psychoanalytic one; arguably, her ‘logic’ is at its weakest precisely on those occasions. More importantly, however, Kristeva never completely loses sight of her own conviction that the crisis of meaning around which her work revolves is *not curable*, even by psychoanalysis; in one of her more lucid ‘analytical’ moments, she does not shy away from asserting that “Psychoanalysis [...] produces its own particular chapels and dead ends” (KrR 279). If Kristeva’s thought is accompanied by certain failures, she nonetheless continues to think in spite of these failures; indeed, her thought bears witness to the necessity of a certain failure for the very life of language and thought. In this manner, she invites the reader to the experience of an interminable re-reading of texts, ideas, and narratives that remains sensitive to their fundamental complexity, singularity, inexhaustibility, and indeed impossibility. Along with Derrida, Kristeva aligns herself intimately with Blanchot’s affirmation in his discussion of Simone Weil that “impossibility is nothing other than the mark of what we so readily call experience, for there is experience in the strict sense only where something radically *other* is in play”

(InC 46). Which is also to say that the possibility of knowledge can only be preserved where one remains uncertain.

What makes the aporias, impasses, caesuras and uncertainties inscribed into Kristeva's, Blanchot's, and Derrida's thought *bearable* is their absolute allegiance to the experience of a certain 'relation without relation' at the heart of all meaning.¹ All three authors recognize that language is structured like a conversation and that meaning is always already a translation, hence always open to the other. This does not simply imply the erasure of boundaries between, say, philosophy, literature, religion, politics, and science, but rather an ongoing reconsideration of what constitutes a philosophical, literary, religious, political, or scientific 'meaning', of what is entailed in thinking and discussing these 'disciplines', or in drawing a line between them. Nihilism in this context constitutes the refusal of meaning, but also the refusal of the inevitability of contamination and translation that constitutes meaning, the insistent and unforgiving search for a *pure* meaning, a meaning without difference and hence also *without relation*. Kristeva's, Blanchot's, and Derrida's writings proclaim the necessity, urgency, and risk of living on the margins and borders of meaning, committed to exploring the *incommensurable relation* between texts, discourses, signifying practices, logics, or experiences: the relation without relation between the subject and the other, experience and meaning, language and silence, singularity and universality, body and society, man and woman, religion and

¹ The expression 'relation without relation' is first employed by Blanchot in order to call attention to the necessity of a dialogical yet non-appropriative, non-dialectical encounter (see especially InC 66-74). For a further discussion of this and the 'incommensurability' or 'lack of common measure' that characterizes it, see Badiou and Žižek, 2009, pp. 11 & 14-19.

secularism, theism and atheism, belief and reason, immanence and transcendence, the impossible and the inevitable or, for that matter ‘Humanity’ and ‘God’. Like the contemporary poet in Zbigniew Herbert’s poem “Voice” (Herbert, 2008, 67-68), who no longer hears Nature or declares Truth but, humbled by the realization of the frailty of language, remains open toward its “incomprehensible mumbling”, the psychoanalytic, literary, philosophical, ethical or religious subject in Kristeva’s, Blanchot’s, and Derrida’s work assume a similar position. No discourse can claim a comfortable position within language from which it can displace other discourses: their relation without relation, like meaning itself, must remain at once uncertain, unthought, unsaid *and* necessary, insoluble, undeniable. Does this imply that ‘religion’ remains at least a *possibility*, albeit not a *necessity*, for the future of the speaking being?

As far as Kristeva is concerned, this question must continue to be explored primarily at a point of almost absolute proximity between religious, literary, and psychoanalytic practice – a point at which religion, literature, and psychoanalysis encounter one another within their common experience of a certain *nothingness* beyond which *everything* is at stake. The peculiarity of Kristeva’s critical thought has much to do with the determination with which she explores the margins of these three kinds of signifying practice and the inquietude that characterizes their relation without relation. Although she never ceases to declare her atheism, Kristeva’s discourse remains closer to religion – closer to its hopes, doubts, desires, anxieties, reassurances, neuroses, pleasures, denials, obsessions, aspirations, revolts, and, above all, closer to its words and its silences – than many

religious discourses do. While Kristeva's work increasingly bears witness to the singularity of the 'religious idiom' – its irreducibility to any other kind of discourse or practice – it simultaneously poses the critical question: why is religion so rarely *religious*, and so often moral, psychological, philosophical, literary, political, or economic in character? This question pertains as much to Kristeva's critique of the humanist instrumentalization of religious concerns and of the multiplicity of ways in which secular modernity seeks to manufacture its own versions of 'the sacred' by erasing the very notion of 'limit', as it does to her critique of religion and of its continuing attempts to fill in the crisis of meaning by offering religious meaning as an accessible 'product', secure in its grasp on 'God' and able to say everything in a transparent manner in order to maintain its own legitimacy.

Kristeva's eccentric atheism therefore situates itself *within* the discourse of the 'death of God', while simultaneously declaring that, when it comes to 'meaning', one is never done with anything – including 'God'. To some extent, Kristeva's psychoanalytic obsession with religion has to do with her suspicion that 'God' is, as it were, the name for a certain wound in human speech that can never be properly 'healed'. 'Religion', in this sense, constitutes the name for a certain drama of naming that brings the subject to the brink of this unspeakable wound, bearing witness to that to which we cannot bear witness – precisely because it bears witness *to us*. Who is this 'we'? This question, which Derrida himself poses in the final sentence of *The Ends of Man* in 1968 (MP 136) permeates Kristeva's thought since the late 1990s and appears in intimate

connection to another question: is *homo sapiens* inherently *homo religiosus*? Kristeva suggests that in her most recent work (TINB 62); yet the question of *homo religiosus* persists and is raised in a number of her recent texts (TINB 57, 62; PK 426; SNR 13 & 24; ReSS 35 & 40), and it disseminates itself in a multiplicity of directions: *Where is homo religiosus* going today in both spatial and temporal terms? Can *homo religiosus* be avoided or sublimated by contemporary *homo politicus* or *homo economicus*? If so, in what manner and to what end? Must the modern subject be reinvented as *homo perplexus* assuming the task of an interminable translation of the ‘death of God’ beyond religious assurances and aspirations? Or, on the contrary, must s/he affirm an inherent religiosity precisely by assuming this task and by becoming a constant question to him or herself?

Kristeva’s late work suggests that a new experience of ‘humanity’ can only emerge from the no-place of this multilayered question – which is also a crossroads for a multiplicity of discourses to which no simple answer appears today. In the midst of this no-place that constitutes late modernity, the incommensurable relation without relation between religion and atheism is not a problem to be solved, but a passion to be endured: to the point of nonmeaning.

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