Female Subjectivity and Religion according to Julia Kristeva

Bonnie de Bruijn

Faculty of Religious Studies
McGill University, Montreal
June, 2006

A thesis submitted to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-28549-7
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-28549-7

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

In the face of an explosion of feminist discourse and an increasingly global, deeply troubled socio-religious climate, the following study explores the role of religion qua Christianity in researching female subjectivity, according to Julia Kristeva. Kristeva's pervasive influence and controversial reception in academic circles grants her the focus of this investigation.

This project familiarizes the reader with Kristeva's theory of subjectivity as a process and situates her among the plethora of feminist theorists. It also examines her view that religion is an illusory therapy for the modern subject in crisis. Finally, these two themes are brought together in a discussion on her theory of a culture of revolt, derived from the psychoanalytic process. Kristeva's vision for the future of feminism is shown to be deeply philosophical, while also socially and politically important. Furthermore, in revolt culture, religion might well leave open the possibility of researching female subjectivity.

RÉSUMÉ

Face à une explosion du discours féminin et d'un climat socio-religieux profondément bouleversé, cette étude explore le rôle de la religion, particulièrement le christianisme, dans la recherche sur la subjectivité féminine selon Julia Kristeva dont l'influence est dominante, et la réception controversée.

Ce projet familiarise le lecteur avec la théorie du « sujet en procès » de Kristeva et situe celle-ci parmi la pléthore de théoriciens féministes. Il examine également sa compréhension de la religion en tant que thérapie illusoire pour le sujet moderne en crise. Ensuite, ces deux thèmes sont rassemblés dans une discussion sur sa théorie d'une culture de révolte dérivée du processus psychoanalytique. La vision de Kristeva pour le futur du féminisme s'avère profondément philosophique, ainsi que socialement et politiquement importante. En outre, dans la culture de révolte, la religion pourrait fort bien permettre une recherche de la subjectivité féminine qui soit importante, voire indispensable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am blessed to have so many remarkable people in my life, all of whom have participated with and/or helped me in some direct or indirect way through the incredible journey this research has been.

First and foremost I thank my supervisor, Dr. Maurice Boutin, who, with his vast knowledge, experience and kindness, was always able to provide clarity and encouragement throughout my research. His guidance was invaluable. In addition, I thank Dr. Kanaris for his instruction and approachability. I must also recognize and thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for its financial support.

I have had the pleasure of sharing this experience with some amazingly gifted scholars in the Faculty of Religious Studies. I could not have done this without the listening ears, the proficiency and the friendship of Erin Rehel, Margaux MacDonald, Jon Sozek and Mark Henderson. Also, my infinite gratitude is extended to my wonderful parents and family who have always had an abundance of faith in me. Finally, to my extended family (including my in-laws and my cousins Esther and Rachael), to my great friends (Ilana, Tracey and many more), and especially to my fiancé, Migüel: thank you for your endless encouragement and moral support.

INTRODUCTION

> Amid much disagreement of how it should be done, there is nevertheless total agreement that there must be a thorough re-questioning of our concept of language, of the role of the unconscious, of various conceptions of the speaking subject, and of the symbolic, ideological, and political assumptions underlying the theorization process itself. [These questions have] the highest priority for feminists, especially for those working in modern theory but who remain wary of its heritages, of even its most radical presuppositions.[1]

Julia Kristeva is among the most prolific, complex and controversial modern European thinkers. Her work spans numerous fields, weaving together linguistics, religion, literary, cultural and feminist theory, and is notably informed by her practice as a psychoanalyst. It is the dense and problematic nature of Kristeva's thinking, particularly (but not exclusively) in Anglo-American feminist circles, that has motivated the following investigation.

The two principal foci of this study are female subjectivity and religion, as discussed by Kristeva; it provides both an exploration of each and of the relationship between the two. In light of various criticisms she has received from her contemporaries, it also offers an analysis of Kristeva's methodology and overarching philosophy.

In recent decades the feminist movement has exploded with centrifugal force, resulting not in one coherent, united front, but rather numerous branches of feminism with different and sometimes conflicting agendas. Linda Alcoff, a scholar and professor of Women's Studies, suggests that central to the dispersion in Western feminism is the way in which different thinkers approach the

---

[1] Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 45.

problematic concept of 'woman,' i.e. the different responses to Simone de Beauvoir's question: Are there 'women'?[2] Out of this inquiry others have evolved: If there are 'women,' what does it *mean* to be *a* woman? Is there an essential nature or experience common to all women? Or is 'woman' exclusively a construction of social and historical factors? Does the term 'woman' need to be redefined? Can 'she' be defined? Do feminists really want and/or need to unite under the title of 'woman' – understood as representing a definable, discernible subject – in order to achieve sociopolitical goals? These questions are at the center of contemporary feminist discourse[3] and are woven prominently into Kristeva's discussion on female subjectivity.

Kristeva's theories regarding women and feminist issues are of noteworthy interest because they have been received – in North America and Europe alike – arguably with as much criticism as praise. Curiously, her attitude toward feminism has been attacked as both too radical and not radical enough. It follows that a familiar censure of Kristeva is that she is ambiguous. The first stage of this study will familiarize the reader with the fundamentals of Kristeva's program and situate hers with respect to the gamut of feminist theories. It will explore the way in which she approaches the concept 'woman' and, by extension, her slant on current feminist strategies. Ultimately, we hope to reveal in this research the important, and indeed visionary, nature of Kristeva's re-conceptualization of feminism.

The second chapter focuses on religious themes in Kristeva's writing in general, but also with particular attention to matters of female subjectivity and notions of the feminine. Once more, it should be noted, a reader may not easily appreciate Kristeva's thoughts on religion because of their perceived ambiguity.

---

[2]L. Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory" (1995), in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 330-31.

[3]For the purpose of this study the terms 'feminism,' 'feminist discourse' and 'feminist theory' are limited to the Euro-American context. Granted, the American feminist movement does not mirror that of Europe, but there are similar trends and, especially in the last 30-40 years, much exchange of ideas in academic circles.

In *French Feminists on Religion* Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon recall that Kristeva was raised in an Orthodox Christian family in Bulgaria and educated by French Dominican nuns in a Catholic school, which, in addition to living in Paris since 1966, place her in close proximity to the Christian tradition. However, despite the fact that "Kristeva's childhood was steeped in Christian images and constructs, [...] she has often stated that she does not believe in God, or have a personal investment in the Catholic or Orthodox traditions generally; rather she seems to echo Freud in calling religion an 'illusion,' albeit 'a glorious one.'"[4] Statements such as this one are potentially misleading because religious themes are unmistakably woven throughout much, if not all, of Kristeva's work. In other words, religion permeates both Kristeva's personal and theoretical framework. Taking this into consideration, the following investigation will address the more precise question: What role, if any, can/does religion qua Christianity play in Kristeva's philosophy of the (female) subject? We aim to show, in due course, that behind its supposed ambiguity lies the most crucial and strategic aspect of Kristeva's program.

In any study of Kristeva it is arguably impossible to avoid a discussion on psychoanalysis. After Freud, psychoanalysis became especially fashionable in theoretical circles and Kristeva, along with many of her – predominantly French – contemporaries in the sixties and seventies, believes that the introduction of the unconscious into language began a revolution of philosophical thought; at any rate, it certainly revolutionized Kristeva's. However, not all intellectuals sing the praises of psychoanalysis – especially the schools of Freud and Lacan, with which Kristeva is associated.

Kristeva is fully aware that the American intellectual consciousness – as she calls it – and the feminist consciousness on the whole have expressed considerable aversion to Freudian psychoanalysis. The "primal scene," the fear of castration, penis envy, and all that is set up by the Freudian paradigm, she argues, is not to be taken as real in the sense that gravity, for example, is real. She states,

---

[4]M. Joy, K. O'Grady & J. L. Poxon, eds., *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 87.

on the contrary, that these are better understood as hypotheses aimed at explaining/understanding observed behaviour. She likens it to the hypothesis of the 'big bang,' something that cannot be proved (to date) or known for sure, and yet, is utilized as a plausible working premise to explicate observed phenomena.[5]

That being said, Kristeva's personal experience of analysis, and as an analyst, has deeply influenced her academic career. In light of this, our concluding instalment takes an in-depth look at the psychoanalytic process and, more specifically, at the way psychoanalysis has shaped her conceptualization of (female) subjectivity, her views on religion and her theories on women and feminism. We explore the premise that Kristeva's vision for the future of feminism is based on the ethical imperatives integral to the psychoanalytical process, which are, in fact, the foundation for an overarching cultural theory and philosophy that she describes as a culture of revolt. Furthermore, in revolt culture, religion might well leave open the possibility of researching female subjectivity.

This study follows the trajectory of Kristeva's career. However, it cannot be an exhaustive investigation since her work is considerably more rich and far-reaching than this research can address. And yet, it is nonetheless noteworthy to examine how these particular themes, i.e. female subjectivity and religion, are introduced in Kristeva's schema, how they have been developed and expanded upon over the last three decades and how they are still very much relevant today.

---

[5]J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia U P, 2002), p. 359. – Originally published as "Le Temps des femmes" in *34/44: Cahiers de recherche de sciences des textes et documents* (Winter 1979 – No 5): 5-19. First translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake; referenced here is the updated translation by Ross Guberman from *Maladies of the Soul* (New York: Columbia U P, 1994).

CHAPTER 1

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING (FEMALE) SUBJECTIVITY

> Despite the multiple variations in Western theories of language, a common conception of the subject has united them: it has always been a question of some kind of organic identity, a homo loquens in history, a subject acquiring its position through cognition. From the Stoics to Descartes and on through even the greater part of the twentieth century, the logic of the subject has based itself upon the practice of the sign, on language as transparent, the neutral agent of representation and communication. This subject has never questioned itself, has never truly doubted itself – it has never had an unconscious in any case. It has been master of its discourse, a Man.[1]

In order to contextualize the following discussion on Kristeva and feminist theory, a brief description of the genealogy of feminism is helpful.[2]

1.1 A Genealogy of Feminism

Feminism emerges alongside other liberal, social reform movements at the turn of the twentieth century. Largely instigated by industrialization, *Liberal feminists* challenge their exclusion from the public realm. They seek equal access to resources and to rights equal to those of men regarding civil participation, suffrage, conditions and wages of working class women, and higher education. Beginning in the fifties and peaking in the sixties, *Radical feminists* confront the

---

[1] A. A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, p. 45.

[2] The branches of feminism identified here are meant to convey the overall evolution of the feminist movement and key issues that have marked various feminist groups. They are not exhaustive of all feminist thought, nor are they mutually exclusive.

problem of woman as 'other' to men, who are the norm, the subject of society. These women fight against oppression based on biological sex. Major issues include: Legalizing birth control and abortion, legal reform for victims of domestic violence, sexual harassment, violence and rape, liberalized divorce laws, rights for lesbian mothers, and improved medical services. Motherhood is viewed as a form of oppression because it reduces a woman's identity to a biological function. Emerging as early as the thirties, *Marxist feminism* focuses on the question of class and *Socialist feminism* combines class issues with those regarding biological sex. Simply put, this movement seeks to subvert both capitalism and patriarchy, which are seen to be mutually reinforcing.

Difference, Psychoanalytic and *Cultural feminisms* emerge in the mid to late seventies. Drawing on universalisms, these branches of feminism reinforce biological and physiological differences between men and women in an effort to reclaim and "revalidate undervalued female attributes."[3] In the eighties, *Multicultural feminism* brings into focus particular communities of women, rather than universal definitions. One could refer to Patricia Hill Collins' "matrix of domination,"[4] which emphasizes various combinations of age, class, race, and sexual orientation, for example, as major elements of feminist discourse.

Relatively recent trends include *Postcolonial* and *Postmodern feminism*. The former is concerned with politics of representation for women in postcolonial settings, including the dangers of imperialism in Western feminism. The latter aims to move beyond traditional, Western, post-Enlightenment notions such as rationalism, universal knowledge and the Cartesian subject; these terms as fixed and absolute are binding and feminists adhering to them are only reinforcing the oppressive structures out of which they are trying to fight their way. Instead, categories of identity are understood as fluid, unstable concepts.

Kristeva's work is most commonly associated with the body of thought known as *French feminism*, along with the works of Hélène Cixous and Luce

---

[3]L. Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism...," p. 332.

[4]P. H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 225-30.

Irigaray.[5] Though their philosophies are fundamentally distinct, these authors share common themes and methods of investigation. Influenced, in large part, by 'post-structuralist' theory, French feminists are deeply concerned with truth, meaning and subjectivity in language. They are known for a highly lyrical style, a special consideration of the body (living experience of language) and, above all, a heavy reliance on psychoanalysis.[6] Their influence began in the seventies and continues to this day, though with wavering support.

First and foremost, it must be noted that Kristeva (along with Cixous and Irigaray, incidentally) does not, in fact, appreciate the label 'feminist.' Thus, seeking to situate hers within the spectrum of feminist theories might seem problematic. However, she is undeniably concerned with the subjectivity of all speaking social beings; she does not wish to align herself with feminism per se because (among other things) her larger social program is not exclusive to the situation of women: "There is no question for Kristeva that women and other minorities are structurally excluded from full citizenship within the borders of most Western nations, to say nothing of the developing world. But for Kristeva the issue is not so much a specifically feminist concern as it is a concern for social justice, a concern for the dignity of the individual."[7] Of course, her aversion to the feminist title does not preclude her from being involved with various feminist movements or contributing to feminist discourse, which she is, has and does regularly; it is whether or not and, if so, how these contributions are valuable to feminist theory that we will now explore.

---

[5]Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous have been dubbed 'the Holy Trinity' of French feminism (curiously, none of them are in fact French. They are born in Bulgaria, Belgium & Algeria respectively), although there are now additional feminist writers who fall into the same grouping such as: Catherine Clément, Monique Wittig, Jacqueline Rose and Christine Delphy.

[6]French feminism should be understood as distinct from the Psychoanalytic feminism outlined earlier in the genealogy because it is unique to the European, and more specifically Parisian, context, which implies, among other things, a loyalty to Freudian and/or Lacanian psychoanalysis.

[7]Samir Dayal, Introduction to J. Kristeva, *Crisis of the European Subject*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: The Other Press, 2000), p. 20. For a deeper investigation into Kristeva's overall sociocultural theory, see #2.1.

While all of the above mentioned characteristics have contributed to Kristeva becoming one of the most widely read contemporary European theorists, she remains controversial. For example, with regard to her views on women and the women's movement, we will address both left-leaning accusations of essentialism and conservatism and right-leaning charges of radicalism (see #1.2).

This being said, Kristeva's high profile is also a reflection of her particularly illuminating, far-reaching and persuasive theories. Through an analysis of her *subject-in-process*, her views on maternity, and an introduction to her critique of the women's movement in light of the arguments posed by her critics, this study aims to reveal the important, and indeed visionary nature of Kristeva's (re)conceptualization of female subjectivity in terms of modern feminist discourse.

1.2 The Critics

Kristeva has been received by such a vast audience that one cannot possibly take into account all of her friends and foes. The following discussion will address two particular criticisms made by her American peers, Linda Alcoff and Nancy Fraser.[8]

1.2.1 Alcoff's Argument

Alcoff's critique can be understood in terms of a larger confrontation with the application of French post-structuralist thought to feminist theory. In *Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory*, Alcoff suggests that not only do feminists influenced by post-structuralism not sufficiently address the problematic concept of 'woman,' but they are contributing to the current "identity crisis" in feminist theory.

The origin of structuralism, the study of language and culture as a system of signs, is credited to Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). The

[8]Alcoff is a scholar and professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at Syracuse University. Fraser is a professor of Political Science at New School University in New York. Her concentrations include: Social and political theory, feminist theory, contemporary French & German thought.

system he developed describes the sign as the basic unit of meaning. The sign, comprised of a signifier (the 'word image') and a signified (the 'mental concept'), is arbitrary, fixed only by social contract. "Once formed, the sign becomes a totality; signifier and signified are inseparable and the sign's form and meaning are self-identical." [9] In other words, the signifier and the signified hold a one-to-one correspondence. As a result, meaning is arbitrary but permanent, and therefore identifiable.

Unlike its precursor, in post-structuralism signifiers do not carry with them well-defined signifieds; meanings are never as graspable or as "present" as structuralism suggests.[10] That is to say, the meaning of a particular signifier is not fixed in the sign but is plural and changing.

Extending and applying this theory to matters of identity is precisely Alcoff's concern. For in doing so, post-structuralism questions the status of the rational subject. Western, intentional subjectivity is replaced by a theory in which subjectivity is split, discursively produced, in process, the effect of unconscious as well as conscious forces, embodied and an effect of power.[11] Alcoff claims that the unstable subject in post-structuralism necessarily destabilizes and destroys the concept of woman as a subject and thereby nullifies the foundation of the feminist movement as a whole:

> Applied to the concept of woman the poststructuralist's view results in what I shall call nominalism: the idea that the category 'woman' is a fiction and that feminist efforts must be directed toward dismantling this fiction. [...] *How can we ground a feminist politics that deconstructs the female subject?* Nominalism threatens to wipe out feminism itself. [...] *What can we demand in the name of women if 'women' do not exist* and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do?[12]

---

[9]Philip Rice & Patricia Waugh, eds., *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: Arnold, a member of the Hodder Headline Group, 1996), pp. 6 & 116.

[10]Ibid. p. 116.

[11]Lorraine Code, ed., *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 398.

[12] L. Alcoff, pp. 338-40; italics mine.

In this way, Alcoff condemns Kristeva for being too radical.

1.2.2 Fraser's Argument

Nancy Fraser's primary criticism is what she calls Kristeva's "additive approach to theorizing."[13] Interestingly, she recognizes some of the advantages Kristeva's post-structuralist efforts offer to feminist social theory. However, in her article, *Structuralism or Pragmatics? On Discourse Theory and Feminist Politics*, Fraser attacks Kristeva for not having completely broken ties with structuralism, thereby not fully challenging the shortcomings one intends to in post-structuralism. This critique is applied particularly to Kristeva's exposition of the speaking subject in which, Fraser claims, she simply adds an anti-structuralist, pre-symbolic ("semiotic") phase to the structuralist, "symbolic order" in an effort to move beyond the primacy of paternal law:[14] "While the 'semiotic' is a force that momentarily disrupts that symbolic order, it does not constitute an alternative to it."[15] According to Fraser, Kristeva's theory of subjectivity is not radical enough.

Fraser argues that this "additive, dualistic pattern" can also be seen in Kristeva's treatment of femininity and the feminist movement. This review addresses her famous, and often notorious, piece *Women's Time* (1979), which is a reflective analysis of the modern women's movement. There, Kristeva outlines and critiques what she categorizes as first and second generations of feminism, and ultimately proposes the inevitability and necessity of a third generation to come. Among the controversial issues addressed is her stance on maternity. Fraser argues that "despite her criticisms of gynocentrism, there is a strand of

---

[13]N. Fraser, "Structuralism or Pragmatics? On Discourse Theory and Feminist Politics," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, p. 388.

[14]The paternal law is Lacanian terminology referring to the rules and structures governing language to which one must submit in order to become a speaking subject. He calls the rules of language the Law-of-the-Father in order to link the entry into the Symbolic order to Freud's notion of the Oedipus and castration complexes. See Dr. Mary Klages, "Jacques Lacan," http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/lacan.html [cited April 14, 2005].

[15]N. Fraser, p. 389.

[Kristeva's] thought that implicitly partakes of it – [her] quasi-biologistic, essentializing identification of women's femininity with maternity."[16]

Also contentious is the way in which Kristeva speaks of the future of feminism. Fraser maintains that Kristeva's "third generation" is, reiterating Alcoff, a radical kind of nominalism, in which the existence of 'women' or any feminine identity is denied. Thus, she concludes, Kristeva "ends up alternating essentialist gynocentric moments with antiessentialist nominalistic moments, moments that consolidate an ahistorical, undifferentiated, maternal feminine gender identity with moments that repudiate women's identities altogether."[17] According to Fraser, Kristeva wavers between a perspective that is not radical enough and one that is too radical.

One can gather that Kristeva's theories are not undemanding; however they are nonetheless valuable for the construction of a feminist social theory and politics (more on this in #1.3 & #1.4).

1.3 Subjectivity as a Process

> All speaking subjects have within themselves [...] the possibility to explore all sources of signification, that which posits a meaning as well as that which multiplies, pulverizes, and finally revives it.[18]

In response to Alcoff's charges of nominalism, one turns now to Kristeva's theory of subjectivity as a process, derived from her famed theory of the structure and operation of language, which she terms *semanalysis* (a conflation of semiotics and psychoanalysis). Introduced in an early article called *The System and the Speaking Subject* (1975 [1973]) and worked out in greater detail in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984 [1974]), an abridged version of this

---

[16]Ibid. p. 390.

[17]N. Fraser, p. 391.

[18]J. Kristeva, "Oscillation Between Power and Denial" (1974), with Xavière Gauthier, trans. Marilyn A. August, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 165.

theory goes as follows: Every linguistic operation, or *signifying process*, consists of two components: the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*.

The semiotic function[19] is understood as the motivation between the *signifier* and the *signified*. It is the reason one speaks. It is the unconscious aspect of language, the source of which lies in the drives and impulses of the gut and of the erogenous zones – the parts of our body which, in the history of metaphysics, are ungoverned. This component of language is gendered feminine and "is associated with rhythms and tones that are meaningful parts of language and yet do not represent or signify something. [It is important to note that] [r]hythms and tones do not represent bodily drives; rather bodily drives are discharged through rhythms and tones."[20] Kristeva borrows the word *chora* from Plato in order to describe the space out of which the semiotic drives arise.[21] The chora is a space – a receptacle – that is neither definable nor containable. Kristeva connects the semiotic with the chora because it is related to our bodily origins, the maternal space in which life is conceived. It denotes the part of language that is moving, fleeting and rhythmic in the way that maternity is governed by cycles, and driven by impulses that are pre-spatial, pre-temporal, and pre-Oedipal.

The second component, *the symbolic* modality of language, is gendered masculine and refers to the *signifying systems*, the structures that regulate and articulate the semiotic. It is the method by which meaning is communicated in the world. It is the grammar and syntax in language. This ordering system is analogous with social and historical structures that always already exist and which order our semiotic drives and impulses according to rational and logical categories.[22]

---

[19]Distinct from "semiotics" as a general science of signs.

[20]Kelly Oliver, ed., *French Feminism Reader* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 153.

[21]J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in PK, p. 35. – Originally published as *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

[22]Ibid. p. 36.

Kristeva's speaking subject expresses him/herself necessarily in terms of the semiotic and the symbolic. The subject is in constant flux between the unconscious, semiotic impulses and the conscious symbolic order, accepting and rejecting one and the other *ad infinitum*. "These two modalities are inseparable within the *signifying process* [...] and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, meta-language, theory, poetry, etc.) involved."[23] In other words, the nature of language is marked by the essential dialogue between these two registers.

Alcoff writes: "In their defense of a total deconstruction of the subject, post-structuralists deny the subject's ability to reflect on the social discourse and challenge its determinations."[24] Contrary to Alcoff's accusation, the unstable subject in Kristeva's theory does not "destroy" the subject such that one cannot ever say "I" – "I" feel this, or "I" disagree with that (in fact, the 'I' is very important to Kristeva and will resurface later); the implication is that the subject is not *predictable*. The subject-in-process for Kristeva is a way of *reconciling* the unstable nature of identities – identities of linguistic signs, of meaning and, inevitably, the identity of the speaker: "In order to take account of this destabilization of meaning and of the subject I thought the term 'subject-in-process' would be appropriate. 'Process' in the sense of process [progression] but also in the sense of a legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled."[25] This is significant because it means that "I" can change, and "I" can bring about change.

Kristeva's subject-in-process actually presents *more* opportunity for social transformation than the would-be political, "static subject." She explains that in every signifying practice there is an "acceptance of a symbolic law together with the transgression of that law [by the semiotic, primary processes] for the purpose

---

[23]J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in PK, p. 34.

[24]L. Alcoff, pp. 337-38.

[25]J. Kristeva, "A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview" (1986), in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, p. 132. – Originally published in *Women's Review* (1986 – No 12): 19-21.

of renovating it." That is to say, every speaking subject has the capacity to renew and reform the order in which s/he is inevitably caught up.[26] Even Fraser points out that Kristeva's speaking subject could be beneficial for feminist theorizing, admitting that "it is a subject [...] who is capable of innovative practice."[27] Thus, Kristeva might rather ask Alcoff, 'How can a feminist politics effectively and actively change the patriarchal order with a fixed, inactive theory of subjectivity?' In other words: the identity crisis in feminism is welcomed, since our identities are *always* in crisis.

In light of this, one might be tempted to situate Kristeva with feminists such as Judith Butler, who also seek to move beyond the static, Cartesian subject. It can be argued that Butler's theory mirrors Kristeva's in the following respect:[28] Butler's conception of gender identity has been called "a never-ending and unstable performance-in-process."[29] The following statement is useful in further discrediting Alcoff's allegations: "In effect," says Butler, "to understand woman to exist on the metaphysical order of *being* is to understand her as that which is already accomplished, self-identical, static, but to conceive her on the metaphysical order of *becoming*, is to invent possibility into her experience [...]."[30] Thus, in the same way, Kristeva's subject-in-process introduces possibility into every woman's signifying practice, which necessarily involves interacting with cultural and socio-political structures. And where there is possibility, there is possibility for change.

---

[26]J. Kristeva, *The System and the Speaking Subject* (Lisse, NL: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1975 [1973]), p. 7.

[27]N. Fraser, p. 387.

[28]It should be noted that Butler specifically disputes the fact that Kristeva's semiotic mode of language is subversive in *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she also accuses Kristeva of essentializing (more on these issues later in #1.4.1). Despite these conflicts, parallels can indeed be drawn between the two scholars in terms of their goal to challenge the stable subject.

[29]Katleen Van Langendonck, "*En être et ne pas être – About Julia Kristeva*". <http://www.sarma.be/nieuw/taz/..%5Cbvisible%5Clangendonck.htm> [cited March 16, 2005].

[30]J. Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, pp.157-58.

Fraser also finds Kristeva's subject-in-process problematic, but for different reasons. She criticizes Kristeva's efforts to move beyond the Lacanian model[31] of subjectivity, which limits the speaking subject to the paternal, phallic, symbolic order. Fraser argues that adding to it a pre-symbolic, maternal element does not resolve this misogynist system because the masculine symbolic order, in Kristeva's account, still regulates and dominates the semiotic chora: "[...] the contest between the two modes of signification is stacked in favour of the symbolic: the semiotic is by definition transitory and subordinate, always doomed in advance to reabsorption by the symbolic order."[32]

This is an interesting criticism because Kristeva, in fact, attacks other feminists for assigning only the soft, whimsical parts of language to women, while allotting anything logical and univocal to men. While this may seem to resemble her own linguistic model, Kristeva does not intend for the feminine and masculine functions in language to be assigned to women and to men respectively; she recognizes that this would perpetuate current gender hierarchies in language: "[...] if one assigns to women that [feminine] phase alone, this in fact amounts to maintaining women in a position of inferiority [...]."[33] One can presume that Kristeva is addressing 'difference' and 'cultural' feminists and particularly other 'French feminists' whose goal (among others) is to retrieve, reclaim or invent a female vocabulary in an effort to subvert the phallogocentric economy. Kristeva's signifying practice differs from this in that no man can signify without a semiotic impulse, and no woman can speak without the ordering systems of the symbolic order.

---

[31] Although Jacques Lacan is often aligned with post-structuralism, there are still aspects of his thought considered to be structuralist. For example, the subject is split in Lacan's model but the Phallic, symbolic order is a dominating, un-negotiable structure. This is a problem Kristeva seeks to rectify.

[32] N. Fraser, p. 389. – This critique, Fraser points out, is shared by Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[33] J. Kristeva, "Interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch on Feminism in the United States and France" (1980), trans. Brom Anderson, in PK, pp. 373-74.

Why then, one might ask, would Kristeva engender the modalities of language at all? In order to understand the gendered nature of her signifying practice one must be reminded that the foundation for Kristeva's theory is psychoanalysis. Even though she reworks the Lacanian model (an extension of Freud's), much of the terminology remains. In Lacan's construction, at the mirror stage of a child's development s/he recognizes him/herself as a speaking subject and thereby enters into language. When the child enters the Symbolic order, s/he must submit to the Law in order to overcome one's oedipal urges and the fear of castration. Entering the world of the father requires a negation of the mother. Kristeva finds this paradigm problematic. Not only does it subordinate women, but why would one ever wish to leave the maternal chora in order to live in fear of castration and the eternal repression of one's incestuous desires? Thus, she incorporates the semiotic function into the signifying practice in an effort to explain why the child would leave the pre-Oedipal space.[34] Lacan does not give any credit to the contribution of the pre-symbolic moments. For Kristeva, on the other hand, the libidinal drives of the semiotic become the motivation, that is, make it possible for the child to speak. The semiotic phase, thus, becomes crucial to the signifying process, without which no signifying operations could be realized.[35]

This is all to say that the semiotic is not exclusively a female experience, but one that every child goes through. It represents the chora, the space like the mother's womb, which every subject depends upon and rejects simultaneously. The symbolic order is gendered masculine because Kristeva continues to use the classic Oedipal triangle, in which "[t]he father represents the symbolic moment of separation."[36] At this point, to respond to the inevitable concern that the maternal and paternal metaphors are still, nonetheless, reproducing ideologies about men and women, it must be noted that Kristeva grants that these roles do not have to

---

[34]K. Oliver, ed., *French Feminism Reader*, p. 154.

[35]J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in PK, p. 58.

[36]J. Kristeva, "Interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch...," in PK, p. 376.

be carried out by a woman and a man. "It's true that feminism has been very much against these sharp distinctions [...] for me it's not absolutely necessary to call them mother or father – what is necessary is to have three terms, if you prefer call them X and Y, why not?"[37]

To summarize, when the symbolic order is "presiding over" the semiotic function it is not without also depending upon it. Furthermore, these phases are not intended to represent male and female modalities of language, but rather correspond to the dialectic of every subject's discursive operations, regardless of gender. Kristeva explains: "[T]he actual dynamics of language, this recourse to the semiotic, the inscription of the archaic relation to the mother in language – it isn't the monopoly of women. [...] It's a question of subjectivity. [...] Any creator necessarily moves through an identification with the maternal, which is why the resurgence of this semiotic dynamic is important in every act of creation."[38] This would suggest that, contrary to Fraser's claims, Kristeva's speaking subject does indeed go beyond the patriarchal nature of Lacan's theory (and Freud's).

At the same time, Kristeva intentionally does not go so far beyond as to seek out a uniquely feminine vocabulary. For her, *this* is too radical: "It seems to me that what one must try to do is not to deny these two aspects of linguistic communication, the mastering aspect and the aspect which is more of the body and of the impulses, but to try, in every situation and for every woman, to find a proper articulation of these two elements."[39] Finding the "proper articulation" involves each woman, exploring and employing language such that she best expresses herself, her personal story, her particular voice.[40] Kristeva's speaking

---

[37] J. Kristeva, "Julia Kristeva in Conversation," with Rosalind Coward, in PK, p. 337. – Originally published in the *Institute of Contemporary Arts Documents* (1984). The other term in the triangle is of course the child.

[38] J. Kristeva, "A Question of Subjectivity...," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, pp. 135-36.

[39] J. Kristeva, "Interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch...," in PK, p. 373.

[40] Ibid.

subject does not perpetuate gender hierarchies. Rather, hers is a theory of gender *equality (balance/fluidity)*, because it reveals the way in which all speaking subjects go through the same semiotic/symbolic signifying process.

In sum, Kristeva cannot be classified as a 'postmodern' feminist because – contrasting the likes of Butler – she remains loyal to a binary system, orienting language between "feminine" and "masculine" registers. However, instead of a *hierarchical* structure, she presents a binary that is a *dialogue*, a Hegelian dialectic to which every subject is predisposed. This is the revolutionary aspect of Kristeva's theory; she uses the same phallogocentric language that has historically oppressed women, but in order to undermine that oppression.[41] This is indeed valuable for feminist theory.

1.4 Women's Time

Up until this point the focus of this study has been Kristeva's theory of the speaking subject in psychoanalytic and linguistic terms. Fraser is concerned with what she calls Kristeva's oscillation between gynocentric, essentializing moments and moments of nominalism – in her words, "postfeminism."[42] A closer reading of *Women's Time* reveals that Kristeva's views on maternity and on the feminist movement are not as extreme as Fraser suggests.

In *Women's Time*, Kristeva critiques what she delineates as two waves of feminism. She observes that the second generation emerges in part because the first generation is being put into question and criticized. Now, Kristeva says, it is time for the present generation to be self-critical and make way for a third generation. In her account, first-wave feminists – read: *Liberal, Radical, Social & Marxist feminists* – are condemned for being universalistic in their search for identification and equality; Kristeva warns the second-wave activists – read: *Difference, Psychoanalytic & Cultural feminists* – that their philosophy of

---

[41] A rebuttal of this argument is beyond the scope of this study.

[42] N. Fraser, p. 390.

difference also permits a global conception of woman, although different from, rather than equal to man.

1.4.1 Maternity Matters

Fraser claims that "despite her criticisms of gynocentrism, there is a strand of [Kristeva's] thought that implicitly partakes of it."[43] This is a misreading of Kristeva's argument. Shifting from the first-wave position, which claims that motherhood and the wish to be a mother is actually a form of alienation from a woman's true desires, second-wave feminists reclaim maternity as a source of creativity. This is a positive thing, says Kristeva, for in seeking a language that connects with the female body the maternal experience brings about a rich vocabulary equipped with expressions describing immense pain and resentment, but also overwhelming joy and love.[44] She states: "What is needed in the West today is a reevaluation of the 'maternal function,' seeing it not as explosive and repressed but as a source of practices considered to be marginal (such as 'aesthetic' practices) and a source of innovation. Men and women are seeking this and they are turning in particular to the women's movement."[45] However, reclaiming motherhood and the maternal process could, Kristeva warns, involve taking "reclamation" to the extreme: "This trend is illustrated to its fullest extent in lesbian mothers or in certain single mothers who reject the paternal function. [These] cases exemplify one of the most dramatic examples of the rejection of the symbolic order [...] and they also exhibit an ardent deification of maternal power."[46] This is the gynocentricism about which Kristeva is concerned: the tendency to *divide* men and women – to be 'militant with maternity.' The second-

---

[43]N. Fraser, p. 390.

[44]J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in PK, p. 365. – Kristeva's personal experience as a mother is said to have influenced much of her writing on maternity, motherhood and love.

[45]J. Kristeva, "'unes femmes' [sic]: The Woman Effect," with Elaine Boucquey, trans. Ross Guberman in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, ed. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 108.

[46]Ibid. – This discussion implicitly refutes Simone de Beauvoir's discourse on motherhood in *The Second Sex* (1949).

wave's philosophy of difference can be dangerous, says Kristeva, when it is implemented in a reactionary way to the first wave's philosophy of identification. Instead of an effort to assimilate into the patriarchy the current trend in feminism[47] is to reject the patriarchy altogether, which, with an apparent reversal of sexism, could result in a countersociety, outside the patriarchal structure altogether.[48] This creates boundaries; boundaries need to be defended and can therefore bring about violent behaviour. *This* is too radical for Kristeva.

Kristeva wants to address the question of maternity on an ontological level – an investigation into why there exists a desire to have a child, for those women who have this desire. Kristeva explores this experience in great detail in *Desire in Language* (1980) and *Tales of Love* (1987 [1983]); but in *Women's Time* (1982 [1979]) she simply leaves the reader with an imperative to reconsider maternity as part of the female creative experience; while some women might have a longing for artistic or literary creation for example, women should not have to feel guilty about choosing motherhood.[49] One sees this thought emerging in an interview published two years before *Women's Time*:

> I have the impression that the movement thrives too much – certain groups of the movement in any case – on an existentialist idea of woman, an idea that makes a woman resent her maternal function: either she has children, but that means she is not good at anything else, or she does not have children and then it becomes possible to devote herself to serious things. For me, maternity as such never appeared contradictory in terms of a cultural activity, and that is what I am trying to develop in the face of feminist movements.[50]

---

[47]This was written in 1979; what was current then is not necessarily current now.

[48]J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in PK, p. 363.

[49]Ibid. p. 366.

[50]Translated from the original text : « J'ai l'impression que le mouvement vit trop – certains groupes du mouvement en tout cas - sur une idée existentialiste de la femme, idée qui culpabilise la fonction maternelle: soit on fait des enfants mais cela veut dire qu'on n'est bonne à rien d'autre, soit on n'en fait pas et alors il devient possible de se consacrer à des choses sérieuses. Pour ma part, la maternité en tant que telle ne m'a jamais semblé contradictoire par rapport à une activité culturelle, et c'est cela que j'essaie de développer devant les mouvements féministes » ("À quoi servent les intellectuels?": Magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* (June 20-26, 1977 – No 658): 108).

What Kristeva is trying to impart is that women should not have to reject maternity altogether simply because they have been socially restricted by their reproductive capacities in the past. While she grants that women are not born to be mothers, they can (have the right to) still choose to be mothers: "Motherhood is not necessarily a matter of fate, for it can also be a free choice and a source of personal and social fulfillment for the woman [...]."[51] Contrary to Fraser's claim, this is not a gynocentric attitude. Kristeva does not exclusively identify a woman's femininity with maternity, but neither does she wish to deny women that experience. Indeed, she believes that the maternal body is a rich site for ontological investigation, one to which women have privileged access.[52] But this does not *confine* the female experience to motherhood; it is rather an opportunity, a possibility in a woman's life. After all, the fact that all women are identifiable through a singular experience does not coincide with Kristeva's overarching philosophy, as one can see typified in her vision of the future of feminism.

1.4.2 A Third Generation

Fraser asserts that Kristeva's "self-proclaimed brand of feminism" is too radical, so much so that she calls it "postfeminism."[53] However, this is not the case. Kristeva's conception of a third wave of feminism does not replace or sever ties with previous generations. It is important for Kristeva that the movement acknowledges from where it comes, what it has inherited. The theme of temporality in *Women's Time* emphasizes the responsibility of recognizing the historical and present situation of feminism for the purpose of future modification. In other words, the emancipation of women requires a new space out of which to speak, but one which simultaneously preserves the past.

---

[51] J. Kristeva, "On The Samurai," trans. Ross Guberman in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, p. 252. – Originally published in *L'Infini* (1990).

[52] See K. Oliver, ed., *French Feminism Reader*, p. 155.

[53] N. Fraser, p. 390.

For example, *Women's Time* alludes to the fact that the women's movement has a place in history and materializes at identifiable moments in (linear) time. Thus, Kristeva sets the stage for her discussion by speaking in broad terms of the socio-political times in Europe. She outlines the events in national and international relations in order to draw a parallel with the events of feminism, which inevitably reflect the times out of which they emerged. She mirrors the nation's collapse and the rise of the supranational after World War II with the collapse of the first generation of feminists and the rise of the second.

Concepts that characterized the Nation state, such as "economic homogeneity," "historical tradition" and "linguistic unity," are transferable to the first generation of feminists who were fighting the socialist egalitarian fight, in order to be homogenized into the socio-economic scheme, to be a part of the historical tradition, to be united with men. But the nation falls and internationalism takes its place, moulded by themes of "interdependence" and especially by what Kristeva calls the *symbolic denominator*, "a cultural and religious memory shaped by a combination of historical and geographical influences."[54] In the same way, the second generation of feminism as the "new social ensemble" takes the place of the first and the focus shifts from unification to differentiation. But the much-vaunted phrase of *sexual difference* is a product of the aforementioned "common symbolic denominator," and this memory connects the second wave, through an interweaving of time and space, with the first. A new generation emerges, but it has a past and it coexists with that past, in the one event of feminism. Thus, Kristeva's position challenges Fraser's claim of a "post-feminism."

Yet, the question remains: what exactly does the new generation of feminism look like for Kristeva? Echoing Alcoff, Fraser does not understand how there can be a *women's* movement if Kristeva insists "that women don't exist [and] that feminine identity is fictitious."[55] It has already been shown through the

---

[54]J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in PK, p. 351.

[55]N. Fraser, p. 391.

above discussion on subjectivity as a process (see #1.3) how one is to interpret the idea that woman and/or a feminine identity 'do not exist.' That is, these notions as *fixed* and *determinable* do not exist. Rather, Women's Time (with an e) indicates that time belongs to women – plural – not Woman in the all-encompassing singular. An important aspect of the new generation is that feminism "rid itself of its belief in Woman, Her power, and Her writing and support instead the singularity of each woman, her complexities, her many languages [...]."[56] In this way, Kristeva hopes to transform the women's movement such that it will be a collective of women – made of individual stories, individual voices, individual subjectivities – a group of voices, *not* the voice of one group:

> I am in favour of a femininity which would take as many forms as there are women. That does not at all produce a 'group' effect, and I am convinced that those who engage in issues concerning women not in order to engage their own singularity but in order to be reunited with 'all women' do so primarily in order to avoid looking at their own particular situation and end up feeling disillusioned or becoming dogmatic.[57]

The first generation of feminism, Kristeva claims, is too universal in its assertion that all women can be like men, and the second generation is too universal in its claim that all women are different from men. In an interview, Kristeva summarizes: "I think the time has come when we must no longer speak of 'all women'. [...] one of the gravest dangers that now presents itself in feminism is the impulse to practice feminism in a herd. [...] There have to be 'I's."[58]

Similar to her approach to maternity, the question of femininity and feminism becomes an auto-ontological program – for every woman. Is this radical? Yes, in the sense that it is provocative. Is it *too* radical? No. Kristeva is not denying the need for women to campaign; she is suggesting that women's

---

[56] J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in PK, p. 368.

[57] J. Kristeva, "Talking About Polylogue," in *French Feminist Thought*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987), p. 114.

[58] J. Kristeva, "Interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch...," in PK, pp. 373-74.

issues have evolved, that they exist more importantly on private level and therefore the approach taken to address these issues needs also to evolve, to be redefined and re-conceptualized, to be addressed on a personal level first: "Women's protest is situated at an altogether different [new] level. It is not first of all a social protest, although it is also that. It is a protest that consists in demanding that attention be paid to the subjective particularity which an individual represents, in the social order [...]."[59] It can, therefore, be concluded that Kristeva's "brand of feminism" is in fact quite visionary (more on this in #3).

1.5 Closing Discussion

Kristeva is indeed a controversial writer but this study shows that she is not ambiguous in the undecided sense of the word. Her contribution to feminist theory should now be clear. She has not destroyed the female subject, only the static subject. She has not essentialized women through motherhood, rather she has re-introduced maternity to women as a way to experience and discover their femininities. Finally, her conceptualization of feminism is clearly not 'post-feminism.' After all, the title of her essay is *Women's Time*. The difficulty Alcoff and Fraser have with Kristeva is that she does not fit easily into an already carved out feminist box. Similar to her theories of the subject, Kristeva's feminist theory resists categorization. She is not an essentialist or a social-constructivist, nor can she be labelled solely a post-structuralist or a structuralist; she is not a gyno-feminist, a cultural feminist, a 'postmodern' feminist or even...a feminist. But feminists can indeed benefit from her program, which is perhaps just radical enough.

---

[59]Ibid. p. 372.

CHAPTER 2
RELIGION, REPRESENTATION AND SYMBOLIZATION

> Question: if the need for idealization is undying, since it consoles us of our frustrations, of our hardships, or our sacrifices, if it can concern the father, and even more secretly, more slyly, the mother, does that mean that religion cannot be transcended? [...] Religious consolation does not resolve the question but conserves the utility – illusory, of course, but no less healing – of allowing us to 'rely on someone.'

Kristeva's views on religion are not conflated into a single piece; rather, they are integrated into her work, both directly and indirectly, with respect to a number of different themes. Therefore, it is impracticable to attempt an exhaustive presentation of her religious commentary. This study takes as its starting point the political and intellectual climates into which Kristeva enters when she moves from her native Bulgaria to Paris, and which undoubtedly influences her observations on religion. On one hand, 'isms,' such as socialism, communism, Marxism, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, humanism and, of course, feminism all infuse social discourse. On the other hand, formalism, structuralism and phenomenology clash with deconstruction and modernism, and literary theory merges with clinical analysis. In other words, in academic circles rationalism is put on trial, as is the Cartesian subject. Thus, in the following investigation, Kristeva's slant on religion is approached with regard to two major discourses: socio-political structures and theories of subjectivity, although it must be noted that these two threads in her work are very much intertwined, in fact, they are inextricably linked.

In her 1979 publication *Women's Time*, Kristeva defines religion as "our phantasmatic necessity to procure a *representation* [...] that replaces the element

---

[1]J. Kristeva & Catherine Clément, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia U P, 2001), p. 25. – Originally published as *Le féminin et le sacré* (Paris: Stock, 1998).

that makes us what we are – our capacity to form symbols."[2] Through an investigation of religion with respect to the aforesaid discourses, the following analysis explores and elucidates the above definition. A case shall be made that religion, according to Kristeva, too easily relies on a representation that translates into a loss of the individual, particularly the female subject, and that symbolization is the way to overcome this loss. She recognizes the subject's apparent need for, and even the partial effectiveness of, religion. But at the same time, she emphasizes the need to move through and beyond past and current apprehensions of religion, which she regards as being in a state of crisis, to more transparent ways of addressing one's psychic and social needs.

2.1 Socio-Political Structures

2.1.1 Losing Sight of the Particular

> All these forms share an interest in equalization, stability, and conformity, though this comes at a cost: the eradication of each individual's uniqueness, of personal experiences, and of the vagaries of life.[3]

In her famous and often notorious piece *Women's Time* – a reflective analysis of the modern women's movement – Kristeva outlines and critiques what she categorizes as first and second generations of feminism, and she proposes the inevitability and necessity of a third generation to come. In the opening segment of her essay, she juxtaposes the fall of nationalism and the rise of the supranational with the fall of liberal feminism and the rise of a second-wave feminism. In doing so, she sets the stage for a commentary on "sociocultural groupings," which, as she says, brings to the fore "two major issues: that of *identity* [...] and second, the *loss of identity* [...]."[4] With respect to the women's

---

[2]J. Kristeva, in "Women's Time," in PK, p. 367.

[3]Ibid. pp. 362-63.

[4]Ibid. p. 352.

movement, Kristeva condemns first-wave feminists for being universalistic in their search for equality and warns the second-wave activists that their philosophy of difference also permits a global conception of woman, although now different from, rather than equal to man. With respect to the former Kristeva explains: "This current of feminism, which is universalist in scope, *globalizes* the problems of women of various social categories, ages, civilizations, or simply psychic structures under the banner Universal Woman."[5] Her concern is that in banding together under the title 'Woman' – capital W – for whatever socio-political agenda, women with an e lose sight of the important particularities that each individual female subject has to offer. The method and motivation of each generation may change, from identification with the dominant 'masculine' scheme or a united negation of that scheme, but the result remains the same: the sacrifice of individual identities for a collective one.

According to Kristeva, this phenomenon is associated with any mass identification, a fault epitomized in religion. She draws the comparison: "As it stands today, is feminism not about to become a sort of religion? Or will it manage to rid itself of its belief in Woman, Her power, and Her writing and support instead the singularity of each woman, her complexities, her many languages, at the cost of a single horizon, of a single perspective, of faith?"[6]

Kristeva is critical of religion for exploiting the split subject's need for stability, identification and conformity. In her book, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (1987 [1985]) Kristeva states that the icons in Christianity represent fantasies, "which reveal fundamental desires or traumas but not dogmas."[7] Indeed, Kristeva's interpretation of Christianity is reminiscent of Freud's:

---

[5]J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in PK, p. 356.

[6]Ibid. p. 368.

[7]J. Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 43. – Originally published as *Au commencement était l'amour* (Paris: Hachette, 1985).

> The displacement of the oedipal conflict into the religious embrace of the Almighty can occur because religion has knowingly and subtly elaborated an account that makes room for and justifies the hallucination [...]. When hallucination encounters religion the result is not always an attenuation of the hallucination to the level of socially acceptable fantasy. Yet even the paroxysm of hallucination can provide temporary resolution. Less crushing a burden than the suffering due to burning desire or abandonment, hallucination can help the subject re-establish a kind of coherence, eccentric or aberrant though it may be. The resulting imaginary identity can sustain the individual and temporarily help him go on living.[8]

In other words, one might identify with these images that represent one's conflicts and fantasies; but neither their true source nor their resolution are addressed. Furthermore, in order to have faith a believer is, by definition, unaware of the illusory nature of the representations (religion) in which s/he believes.[9]

For Kristeva, "the speaking being's life begins and ends with psychic life"[10] and a healthy psychic life is achieved through consideration of a subject's personal story – his/her own personal relationships with his/her parents and/or children – his/her own oedipal resolution. She admits that identification with religious images can serve as a healing refuge but maintains that, along with any ideological system, moral, social, political or otherwise, religion nevertheless falls short:

> How does the malaise of failing oedipal subjectivity manifest itself? Through the serious difficulty – or even impossibility – of representing feelings-sensations-drives-passions and the conflicts that give rise to them. At best, if one can put it that way, *individuals make use of collective schemas*, [...] *that*, when they do not exacerbate people's dramas in some ill-timed fashion, lull them

---

[8]J. Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, pp. 12-13.

[9]"In order for faith to be possible, this 'semiotic' leap toward the other, [...] must not be either repressed or displaced in the construction of a knowledge which, by understanding the mechanism of faith, would bury it" (Ibid. p. 26).

[10]J. Kristeva, "In Times Like These, Who Needs Psychoanalysts?" in PK, p. 223. – Originally published in *Les Nouvelles Maladies de l'âme* (1993), trans. Ross Guberman as *New Maladies of the Soul* (1994).

> to sleep or *robotize them*. [...] many of us are in the process of losing the capacity to elaborate an inner life and communicate it.[11]

For Kristeva, aesthetics are a means by which one can become more in touch with, and through which one is able to authentically convey, one's inner life (more on this in #2.4).

In summary, according to Kristeva, any given collective may share a socio-political context, but every individual experiences a personal story and a unique psychic life in relation to that context. By setting up "a single horizon" and "a single perspective," only the needs of a particular group are addressed; a subject's specific psychic needs are ignored, repressed, or undervalued. Kristeva's criticism of religion is analogous to her critique of feminism: they both operate under a collective identity at the expense of the subject's individuality. "I'm not interested in groups," she says, "I am interested in individuals."[12]

2.1.2 Exclusion of the Other

> The covenant with God turned the Jewish people into a chosen people [...] and, if it established the basis of a sacred nationalism, it nonetheless harbours in its very essence an inherent inscription of foreignness.[13]

To be sure, Kristeva is especially sensitive to matters of identity – in terms of gender, state, religion and otherwise – due to her personal experiences. As a Bulgarian woman in male-dominated Parisian academia, Kristeva is an outsider, a foreigner on more than one account, and this undoubtedly inspires her passionate interest in the exclusion of the 'other.' Kristeva's critique of group identification addresses the loss of an individual's particularities, specific stories and

---

[11]J. Kristeva, *Crisis of the European Subject*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: The Other Press, 2000), p. 128; italics mine.

[12]J. Kristeva, "Julia Kristeva in Conversation," with Rosalind Coward, in PK, p. 339.

[13]J. Kristeva, "The Chosen People and the Choice of Foreignness," in *French Feminists on Religion*, p. 152. – Originally published in *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (1988) and translated by Leon. S. Roudiez as *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991).

relationships; but an extension of this concern is the necessary designation and rejection of an 'other' on which the formation of a collective identity depends.

Highlighted in *Women's Time* are some potential dangers that arise in the creation of what she calls a *countersociety*. The countersociety, a phenomenon of the second generation of feminism, is a result of the efforts made by more radical feminists to dismember the current currency that exploits them and to create a 'female society' in order to somehow offset the legitimate 'male society.' Kristeva has reservations about this; is not a group of people whose aim is to break a contract of sorts, outside the jurisdiction of that contract? In other words, a female society would thus be outside the law, supposedly untouchable by the system from which it is defecting. In this way, Kristeva says, the mindset of terrorism is created. The countersociety is formulated not just out of protest against the social contract, but out of frustration and anger. Terrorism sets in when that violence one feels within the symbolic structure is transferred and translated into violence *toward* the symbolic structure itself.

She also wonders about the intended results of forming such a countersociety. Is it to start a new, separate community free of men? Is it merely to make a point? And if the point is that we live in a sexist, patriarchal society, and that women are marginalized, a countersociety, Kristeva claims, would necessarily entail a reversal of roles: "Modern protest movements have often reproduced this model by designating a guilty party that shields them from criticism, whether it be the foreigner, money, another religion, or the other sex. If we take this logic at face value, does feminism not become a sort of reverse sexism?"[14] This 'pointing-the-finger' logic is hypocritical and in the socio-political sphere, she argues, it too easily results in conflict.

Kristeva's aversion to collective protest, we reiterate, has its roots in her upbringing in Communist Bulgaria, her living through the 'fall' of Marxism (a disillusionment she experiences after the riots in Paris, May 1968), and her concerns with the feminist movement. Thus "it is not surprising to find that

---

[14]J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in PK, p. 363.

Kristeva indicates here a firm refusal to adopt any meta-narrative [...] as the necessary response to the conditions of oppressed groups in society."[15] Instead, she seeks to promote a more subjective, more individualized socio-political theory, equally incorporative of religion as of other interest groups.

Religious groups may not all materialize out of protest per se, but they are nonetheless "counter" to mainstream society[16] and partake visibly in 'othering' non-members. In *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991 [1988]) Kristeva draws attention to how religions, Judaism in this case, are communities constituted necessarily with reference to the other, the foreigner. The Jews are the 'chosen people' only if there are those who are *not* chosen. Kristeva outlines the selection process of those who are and are not included in the covenant with Yahweh, the particulars of which are quite extensive:

> '[...] No Ammonite or Moabite is to be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh, not even their descendants to the tenth generation may be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh, and this is for all time; because they did not come to meet you with bread and water when you were on your way out of Egypt. [However] 'You are not to regard Edomite as detestable, for he is your brother; nor the Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land. The third generation of children born to these may be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh.[17]

These details are important because they impress upon the reader how members of a group are designated *only with* the simultaneous designation of the non-members.

Kristeva acknowledges that several texts in the Hebrew Bible allude to a kind of Judaism that might be extended beyond the Israelites to all of humankind.

---

[15]M. Joy et al. eds., *French Feminists on Religion*, pp. 86-87.

[16]Kristeva acknowledges a historically religious majority in Europe. However, she repeatedly refers to a modern religious crisis. See "Throes of Love," in *Tales of Love*, trans. L. Roudiez (Columbia U P, 1987), p. 267. Originally published in *Histoires d'amour* (Paris: Denoël, 1983); "Cultural Strangeness and the Subject in Crisis," in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, p.41; "Women's Time," in PK, p. 367; "From One Identity to Another," in PK, 108; and "Talking About Polylogue," in *French Feminist Thought*, p. 112.

[17]Deuteronomy 23:3-4a & 7-8, quoted in J. Kristeva, "The Chosen People and the Choice of Foreignness," in *French Feminists on Religion*, p. 152.

However, she points out that the "pagan can claim the same rights as the Jew [only] if he espouses monotheism."[18] In other words, all neighbours – all foreigners – have the same opportunity as the Israelites to become Jewish on the condition that they convert, conform, and obey the Torah. As such, the effort to include everyone nevertheless excludes all those who do not convert and conform to believe in the Torah. It is this negation – the rejection – of the other with which Kristeva is concerned regarding religion and other sociocultural groupings.

Kristeva suggests a renegotiation of the relationship between subjects (individuals and groups) and the other; the foreigner must be understood not as distinct from, but as *united with*, the native. Despite her apprehension towards religion, she finds an example of this contradiction in the biblical story of Ruth. Ruth is from the land of Moab and Moabites, as we have just seen, are excluded from the covenant because they did not aid the Jews in their escape from Egypt. As the story goes, Ruth, despite all odds against the possibility, marries a Jew whose father emigrated from the land of Judah. After her husband's death, she accompanies her mother, Naomi, back to Bethlehem in Judea, where she is, unmistakably and before anything else, a foreigner. But as per her duty, Naomi finds the closest relative to the dead husband, his cousin Boaz who is of course also Jewish, to marry her widowed daughter. The climax of the tale is that the new, unlikely couple has a son, Obed, and he becomes the father of Jesse, the father of David, the father of Solomon. And thus, Ruth the Moabite, the foreigner, is inserted into the lineage of Jewish royalty and into Biblical history.

King David's ancestor Ruth "is there to remind those unable to read that the divine revelation often requires a lapse, the acceptance of radical otherness, the recognition of a foreignness that one might have tended at the very first to consider the most degraded."[19] Kristeva sees this religious passage as a lesson on how one should perceive and treat the foreigner, and she uses it to propose/promote a new approach to social relations: "The story of Ruth the

---

[18]J. Kristeva, "The Chosen People and the Choice of Foreignness," in *French Feminists on Religion*, p. 152.

[19]Ibid. pp. 158-59.

Moabite shows that unity can be achieved only if an exterior, and 'outside of,' is joined to the 'same.'"[20] In other words, Kristeva wants to embrace the paradox of the subject's simultaneous estrangement of the other and his/her intrinsic strangeness.

According to Kristeva, Ruth and her offspring typify our contradictory state of being; for this reason she sees the Judeo-Christian texts as a possible source of ontological investigation. However, she feels that characters such as Ruth are paid little attention in the history of Western religions, and thus "acceptance of radical otherness" is rare; rather, religion is most often exclusionary of, and aims to eradicate everything 'other than.' As Kristeva articulates, "the faithful devour the foreigner, assimilate him and integrate him under protection of their religion's moral code."[21] Whereas she believes that in order for an individual to authentically exist in the social order s/he must recognize, accept and welcome the foreigner within. A brief recapitulation of Kristeva's theory of subjectivity will aid this discussion.

2.2 Language and Subjectivity

2.2.1 Semanalysis

Since Kristeva's subject is a speaking being (see #1.3), her philosophy of subjectivity begins with linguistic analysis. She terms her theory of the structure and operation of language *semanalysis*. In semanalysis, the *signifying process* (the process by which a subject conveys meaning) is described as an oscillation between the unconscious *semiotic*[22] drives and impulses, which motivate one to speak, and the conscious *symbolic* organization and ordering of those drives. She summarizes:

---

[20]J. Kristeva, "The Chosen People and the Choice of Foreignness," in *French Feminists on Religion*, p. 155.

[21]Ibid. p. 159.

[22]Kristeva explains that she employs the word *semiotic* as derived from the Greek, σημειον, which means "distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint" (J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in PK, p. 35).

> By symbolic, I mean the tributary signification of language, all the effects of meaning that appear from the moment linguistic signs are articulated in grammar, not only chronologically by logically as well. [...] By semiotic, on the other hand, I mean the effects of meaning that are not reducible to language or that can operate outside language, even if language is necessary as an immediate context or as a final referent.[23]

Every mode of communication necessarily consists of these two registers, varying only in proportion. Avant-garde music, poetry and modern art, for instance, are chiefly expressions of semiotic impulses (read: ungoverned and unlegislated), while math and grammar are discourses most notably dominated by the symbolic register.[24] Kristeva's speaking subject is in constant flux between these two modalities of language. As such, the subject is always destabilized – a subject-in-process.

2.2.2 Abjection and the Other

> [...] the other is neither an evil being foreign to me nor a scapegoat from the outside, that is, of another sex, class, race, or nation. I am at once the attacker and the victim, the same and the other, identical and foreign. I simply have to analyze incessantly the fundamental separation of my own untenable identity.[25]

Kristeva's dynamic theory of subjectivity initiates a pointed move away from conventional Freudian psychoanalysis and that of Jacques Lacan,[26] even though her symbolic mode in language is reminiscent of Freud's symbolic "law of

---

[23]J. Kristeva, "A Conversation with Julia Kristeva," (1985) with Ina Lipkowitz and Andrea Loselle in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, p. 21.

[24]Ibid. – Also J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in PK, p. 34.

[25]J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in PK, p. 369.

[26]Although Lacan insists that he is continuing the work of Freud, some of the latter's adherents have argued otherwise. See "Jacques Lacan" (New York, 1997), from The European Graduate School website: http://www.egs.edu/resources/lacan.html [Cited June 20, 2005].

the father" and Lacan's notion of the Symbolic. Where the latter "argue[s] that the Symbolic order, the order of signs, representations, significations and images, is the place where the individual is formed as a subject,"[27] Kristeva insists that the subject is equally shaped by the pre-symbolic (pre-mirror stage), semiotic processes; thus, this "prior" stage of signification is an extremely important and under-emphasized aspect of linguistic representation.[28] Her theory preserves the classical Freudian negation of the mother – the maternal *chora* in her construction – which accepts and submits to the "paternal" symbolic order, but simultaneously there is a transgression of that symbolic law by the primary processes, "*for the purpose of renovating it.*"[29] In this way, meaning and identity are constantly being renewed and put "on trial." Kristeva deliberately evokes this double 'entendre' in the expression *subject-in-process* (process in terms both of progression and of court proceedings) in order to describe and account for the unstable nature of subjectivity.[30]

In addition to the resurgence of the semiotic and the contravention of the symbolic, Kristeva further alters the traditional paradigm of the child's move to signification. Rather than rejecting the mother and entering language solely out of fear of castration and with the eternal repression of his/her incestuous desires, a child is equally motivated to speak through the drives and impulses of the unconscious. Moreover, countering Lacan (as Kelly Oliver notes), in Kristeva's construction the "stern father of the law" is also a *loving* father: "It is the child's feeling that it is loved that allows the child to separate from the safe haven of the maternal body. [...] She insists that the child enters the social and language not only because of paternal threats but also owing to paternal love."[31]

---

[27]Ibid.

[28]J. Kristeva, "A Conversation with Julia Kristeva," in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, p. 22.

[29]J. Kristeva, *The System and the Speaking Subject* (Lisse, NL: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1975 [1973]), p. 7; emphasis mine.

[30]Kristeva summarizes this model in, "A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, p. 132.

[31]K. Oliver, ed., *The Portable Kristeva*, pp. 133 & 134.

As well as introducing what Kristeva calls "the imaginary father" with whom to identify, she asserts that individuation involves a separation from the mother that is not simply a matter of rejection and objectification but of *abjection*: in order for an infant to deny the mother and enter into the social sphere, the maternal body must be felt by the child as repulsive, disgusting – *abject*. Thus, the child abjects and separates from his/her mother, identifies with and relies on for support a stern, yet loving father, and thus enters into language. However, the signifying process in language involves a simultaneous transgression of the paternal law and a return to the semiotic, archaic mother at which point the repressed abject returns. "The process of abjection is never completed. Rather, like everything repressed it is bound to return."[32] Kristeva elucidates this term and this process in the following segment of an interview:

> *L'abjection* is something that disgusts you. For example, you see something rotting and you want to vomit. It's 'abject' on the level of matter. It can also be a notion that concerns moral matters – an *abjection* in the face of crime, for example. But it is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so [...].[33]

The tension that accompanies abjection is that which holds together – and constitutes – the thinking, speaking subject. That is to say, it is only through the process of abjection that signification, i.e. symbolization is possible. *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* is a lyrical composition in which Kristeva captivates and engulfs the reader with her personalized description of the experience of abjection:

---

[32]M. Joy et al. eds., p.154.

[33]J. Kristeva, "Interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch...," in PK, p. 374.

> There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being [...] ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. [...] And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. [...] I endure it, for I imagine that such is the desire of the other. A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, [which] harries me as radically separate, loathsome. [...] "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in the symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects. [...] If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than the abject.[34]

This description illustrates the transgression that is fundamental to every subject's existence. It is upon this theory of the divided, *alien*ated subject that Kristeva builds her socio-political theory. If we come to acknowledge our inherent foreignness we might treat those who are foreign to us better in some way: "the Freudian message [...] consists in saying that the other is in me. It is my unconscious. And instead of searching for a scapegoat in the foreigner, I must try to tame the demons that are in me."[35]

Why is Christianity not the ideal socio-political ambassador of Kristeva's subjective program? Indeed, abjection is a theme Kristeva inextricably links to religion. However, in this case, the abject is not embraced as part of our humanity; rather, it is seen as a parasite, a flaw, an illness of which one needs to be cured. In the Christian tradition (for one) there is a very clear line drawn between good and evil, pure and impure, life and death. Evil, impurity and death are overcome in Christianity; through faith in Jesus Christ one can achieve

---

[34]J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, in PK, pp. 229-32. – Originally published as *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

[35]J. Kristeva, "Cultural Strangeness and the Subject in Crisis" (1989-90) with Suzanne Clark and Kathleen Hulley, in *Julia Kristeva Interviews*, p. 41.

goodness, purity and life eternal. Thus, religion serves as a way to purge the believer of that which is wretched: "Abjection accompanies all religious structurings [...]. The various means of *purifying* the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions [...]."[36]

Of particular concern for Kristeva is the way in which the Christian is "purified" of the abject through the sacrifice of Jesus, the world's scapegoat. By placing all the sins of all the people upon the head of Christ, in order to be washed of them, Christians symbolically place the abject outside of themselves; transgression in the Christian paradigm is a consequence of having *fallen* from our natural, graceful state. Kristeva argues that the eradication of the abject in fact "cleanses" the believer of an essential element of his/her constitution – the element which makes it possible for a subject to create, to signify, to *symbolize*. This is most germane in the case of the female subject (more on this in #2.3). Thus, religious representations of sin and purification result in a loss of the individual in the sense that the true complexity of every speaking subject's design is deliberately obscured. Instead, the individual – a conflicted, volatile subject – is 'simplified' and 'normalized.' As Kristeva declares: in "religion [...] a destabilized subject constantly searches for stabilization."[37]

2.3 (Loss of) the Female Subject

> [In Christianity] a woman will only have the choice to live her life either hyperabstractly [...] in order thus to earn divine grace and homologation with symbolic order; or merely different, other, fallen [...]. But she will not be able to accede to the complexity of being divided, of heterogeneity, of the catastrophic fold-of-'being' [...].[38]

---

[36]J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, in PK, pp. 242 & 243.

[37]J. Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, p. 19.

[38]J. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, pp. 248-49. – Originally published as "Hérétique de l'amour," in *Tel Quel* (Winter 1977).

If stabilization results in the loss of the individual, then the female subject has perhaps the most to lose. Kristeva's discussion of female subjectivity and religion is quite extensive but she has a particular fondness for reflection on this subject with regards to the maternal body. This is appropriate because her theory of subjectivity connects signification with primary bodily functions and the maternal chora in particular. Still a large body of work to cover, this segment of our research uses for reference two primary texts: the first section of *Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini* (1980 [1975]) and *Stabat Mater* (1987 [1977]). They both examine maternity in her typical poetic and deeply personal style. The latter essay (which is among her most popular) addresses the discourse of maternity in Christianity in particular.

Kristeva's extensive treatment of motherhood has given rise to accusations of essentialism. However, in addition to the defence outlined in chapter one, we would like to highlight here that part of her concentration on maternity is not necessarily an instigation of, but a reaction against the reductionist discourses surrounding "becoming-a-mother" that is currently available, primarily in Science and in Christian Theology.[39] Ultimately, in terms of our discussion, Kristeva argues that the depth and complexity of female subjectivity is lost in the Christian construct of the Virgin Mary.

2.3.1 M/Otherhood

In Christianity a believer fails to confront his/her abject nature. Kristeva asserts that this is most evident in the instance of the female subject. Such is the case because women have the capacity to manifest abjection in its most crude and obvious form: the maternal body.

How does the maternal body epitomize abjection? A pregnant woman embodies, literally, something foreign, an 'other' person. The placenta simultaneously connects and separates mother and child. The navel reminds us of

---

[39]J. Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," in PK, p. 303. – Originally published in *Peinture* (December 1975), trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine, & L. Roudiez in *Desire in Language* (1980).

this coincident dependence and rejection – a dialectic relationship that allows for signification and symbolization. The womb is the physical boundary between the semiotic heart beat shared with the mother and the symbolic order of the father, the border that all speaking beings will constantly pass – violate – in order to exist in the social sphere. The following passage from *Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini* reiterates the abjection inherent in the maternal body: "Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. 'It happens, but I'm not there.' 'I cannot realize it, but it goes on.' Motherhood's impossible syllogism."[40]

Stabat Mater stands out among other theoretical texts because of its unique presentation. Dividing the page intermittently into two columns, Kristeva discusses motherhood through two lenses. On one side she traces the trajectory of the discourse of maternity in the Christian West and critiques it as insufficient, particularly the role of the Virgin. On the other, in bold print, Kristeva describes her own physical and emotional experience of pregnancy and giving birth to her son in 1976.

The division of the text visually reminds the reader of the maternal body's naturally divided state. Kristeva's narrative also illuminates the emotional counterpart of the abjected body. Not only is there a foreign being inside, there are foreign feelings, hormones, a conflicted psychic state. She takes the reader on a journey through her encounter with both unimaginable love and 'unconscionable' hate, through joy and pain, through terror and delight, deprivation and benefit, life and death. Abjection is essentialized in the maternal experience for Kristeva because of its inherent paradoxes.

2.3.2 Mary: *Aeiparthenos* and *Theotokos*

At this point we must address the following questions: Does not Mary represent the conflict Kristeva describes? Is she not a mother? Does she not

---

[40]J. Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," in PK, p. 303.

physically give birth to Jesus? One might think that she is in fact the perfect symbol of contradiction; after all, she is a human being who gives birth to the Divine. How, then, does the Virgin fall short for Kristeva?

Among the main elements of the Virgin Mary construct discussed in *Stabat Mater*, deification is of primary importance to our inquiry. Although the result might gratify some "phantasmatic necessity," as Kristeva explains it could, it reveals upon examination that there is "something in [the virginal, Christian] Maternal notion that *ignores* what a woman might say or want."[41]

In addition to her virginal status – which Kristeva describes as the result of a "translation error"[42] – Mary's eminence is reinforced in the history of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions with the introduction of her immaculate conception. If she is to be the mother of Jesus who conquers death, then she cannot be a product of sexuality, which the Fathers of the Church (in the fourth century) understood as intertwined with death: "Since they are mutually implicated with each other, one cannot avoid the one without fleeing the other.[43] This of course brings about the eventual conclusion that Mary remains a virgin after giving birth to Jesus and for the rest of her life married to Joseph. The establishment of her status as *Aeiparthenos* (ever virgin) at the second council of Constantinople (381) allows for Mary's new title: *Theotokos* (Mother of God).

If the Mother of God is denied her sexuality in order to assure Jesus' asceticism, then must she not also be stripped of her sins, such that Jesus is not born of sin? This concept is difficult to establish temporally speaking, but it is quickly solved by the "innovative" Duns Scotus who claims: "If it be true that Christ alone saves us through his redemption on the cross, the Virgin who bore him can but be preserved from sin in 'recursive' fashion, from the time of her own

---

[41]J. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, p. 236; italics mine.

[42]She writes that the original Semitic term indicating "the sociolegal status of a young unmarried woman" was replaced by the Greek word *parthenos*, which implies virginity in the way we understand the term today (Ibid. pp. 236-37).

[43]Ibid. p. 239.

conception up to that redemption."[44] Thus, one can now assert that, indeed, Mary embodies purity.

Finally, the Virgin's deification involves her triumph over death. As Kristeva explains, Mary's life story, from beginning to end, becomes a parallel of her son's. Thus, she too overcomes death. In the Western Church Mary rises to heaven in an *Assumption*, and in the East her transition is a *Dormition*.

The culmination of these traits donned upon Mary is a consequence, says Kristeva, of the fact that "western Christianity has organized [this] 'translation error,' projected its own fantasies into it, and produced one of the most powerful imaginary constructs known in the history of civilizations,"[45] that is, the male fantasy of the pure and holy virgin mother. For women, on the other hand, Kristeva suggests that "this maternal representation [...] was able to attract women's wishes for identification [and to serve as] a way of dealing with feminine paranoia."[46] But she ultimately claims that modern women cannot identify with a representation of motherhood that does not include sexuality, sin, or death. The maternal experience, for Kristeva, is the epitome of abjection (see #2.2.2), whereas the Virgin (body and soul) is the epitome of purity. Thus the Mother of God lacks the essential tension between light and dark, pure and impure, life and death, that which is requisite for being and communicating in the world, for creating symbols. This involvedness and perversion of the maternal experience are missing from recent discourses on motherhood, says Kristeva – left unmentioned by Mary, to be sure:

> The unspoken doubtless weighs first on the maternal body: as no signifier can uplift it without leaving a remainder, for the signifier is always meaning, communication, or structure, whereas a woman as mother would be, instead, a strange fold that changes culture into nature, the speaking into biology. Although it concerns every woman's body, the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child's arrival [...]. Those

---

[44]J. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, p. 241.

[45]Ibid. p. 237.

[46]Ibid. pp. 256-57.

> particularities of the maternal body compose woman into a being of folds, a catastrophe of being that the dialectics of the trinity and its supplements would be unable to subsume.[47]

As one of the most temporally and spatially pervasive symbols of motherhood, the Christian symbol of maternity might indulge, to a certain extent, the psychic needs of a woman and the desires of a man. However, it neglects the divided and 'abjected' existence, both physically and emotionally, of a woman with child. As such, in Mary, the female subject cannot embrace a conflicted consciousness or express the full capacity of her inner creativity, to which she has privileged access through maternity. In place of religious representation, Kristeva proposes other means by which to address and express the psyche (more on this in #2.4 & #3).

2.4 Symbolization: Aesthetics

Thus far it has been examined how religion qua Christianity provides stability for the subject: through identification with a group, a loving Father, an Other, a pure and holy mother, and through the scapegoat of Jesus Christ. According to Kristeva, religious constructs may alleviate individuals of their primal repressions manifested in various psychic and/or social conflicts; but they are ultimately deceptive solutions. She suggests that symbolization, rather than representation, is essential in order to overcome the loss of the individual. Symbolization is a process carried out as a tension between the semiotic and the symbolic, a journey to and through abjection. Representation is an unconscious strategy for instant gratification via an already-there, communal symbol. Where the latter soothes the unsettled psychic needs and desires of the subject through universalized constructs, which are beyond him/herself, the former expresses and encounters those fantasies personally and honestly, and thereby more authentically.

As an alternative to religion, Kristeva strongly believes in, and supports aesthetic practices such as modern art, avant-garde literature and poetry. With respect to the themes already discussed, these avenues of symbolization facilitate

---

[47] J. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, pp. 259-60.

the expression of individual particularities; they also embrace and manifest the complex and abject nature of subjectivity.

One major criticism of religion Kristeva puts forth is its role as a collective identity, which, in effect, serves to smooth over and regulate differences (see #2.1). Instead, "[...] the role of aesthetic practices needs to be augmented, [in order to] demystify the idea that community of language is a universal, all-inclusive, and equalizing tool. Each artistic experience can also highlight the diversity of our identifications and the relativity of our symbolic and biological existence."[48] This is one of Kristeva's primary efforts in promoting symbolization: to emphasize individual experiences.

Kristeva also acclaims artists, writers and poets because they do not necessarily purport to hold the key to any absolute truth, as in the case of religion; rather, they tell *individual* stories. Kristeva observes that in artistic symbolization, the artist (writer/musician etc.) is, in fact, the narrator of his/her personal psychotic experiences, comparable to the death and resurrection of the abject-ed ego.[49] To this extent, every artistic expression is a combination of individual realities continually threatened and regenerated. In this way, symbolization via aesthetic practices as honest, unique manifestations of the unstable, abject subject is integral to a healthy social/psychic existence.

One is referred again at this time to Kristeva's doctoral dissertation, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), in which her theory of subjectivity is developed in detail. We did discuss the speaking subject's constant flux between semiotic and symbolic registers and recall also that the signifying process depends upon the subject's separation from the semiotic chora and fusion with the symbolic order and by the transgression of the symbolic by the semiotic (see #1.3 & #2.2). Kristeva calls this process that sets up the dialectic between these modalities in language *the thetic phase*: "The thetic phase marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic. The second

---

[48]J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in PK, p. 369.

[49]J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, in PK, p. 241.

includes part of the first and their scission is thereafter marked by the break between signifier and signified."[50]

The completion, destruction and re-articulation of the thetic phase are requisites for symbolization, and in effect, necessary in order to avoid psychosis and phantasms. In religion, says Kristeva, "the thetic is made into a belief from which the quest for truth departs; but the path thus programmed is circular and merely returns to its thetic point of departure."[51] In other words theology is a self-proclaimed fixed dogma – a truth that is posited and can never be overturned. In this sense, religious reification prevents the expression and/or healing of a subject's desires and/or madness. Preferably, as with art and literature, truths are constantly being questioned and overturned. Ideally, "the drive attacks against the thetic will not give way to fantasy or to psychosis but will instead lead to a 'second-degree thetic,' that is, a resumption of the functioning characteristic of the semiotic chora within the signifying device of language. This is precisely what artistic practices [...] demonstrate."[52]

The role of Jesus Christ as Christianity's scapegoat further clarifies Kristeva's position. With "the saviour" taking on sin and death in the place of the believer, the latter's subjectivity is absorbed, assumed – conflated into one moment in history: the passion at Calvary. In this way, the Christian representation of sin and murder on the cross *replaces* the transgression and murder required in the symbolizing process. Rather than Jesus absolving the individual of his/her deathly sins, the artist is forced to confront death and sin:

> Opposite religion or alongside it, 'art' takes on murder and moves through it. It assumes murder insofar as artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of the signifying process. Crossing that boundary is precisely what constitutes 'art.' In other words, it is as if death becomes interiorized by the subject of such a practice; in order to function, he must make himself the bearer of death. In this

---

[50]J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in PK, p. 43.

[51]Ibid. p. 47.

[52]Ibid. pp. 44-45.

> sense, the artist is comparable to all of the figures of the 'scapegoat.'[53]

The artist confronts death and the thetic boundary over and over again. Therefore, an observable pattern in Kristeva's argument for aesthetic practices is her preference for process. While art is a creative process, religion is steadfast. In other words, while religious constructs are unchanging and universalized, through the act of symbolization, an individual can express his/her particular, abject experience as a subject-in-process. Furthermore, because of their unique organic proximity to abjection, symbolization is perhaps of special importance for women.

2.5 Closing Discussion

For Kristeva, a speaking subject is constituted not in the symbolic world alone but in the dialectic between the symbolic and semiotic registers of language. The instability of the subject-in-process calls for the need of stabilizing images. There are a number of ideologies in which names the subject contrives "imagery, representations, identifications, and projections"[54] as a way of controlling or hiding from, and ignoring his/her psychic life. Religion is one such ideology. Kristeva's concern, however, is that though we may be "subjects of representation,"[55] commitment to religious representation results in the loss of the individual's capacity to symbolize.

On a socio-political level, religion conflicts with Kristeva's agenda for a social theory that focuses not on the collective but rather on individual identities (see #2.1). Furthermore, from a theoretical basis, Kristeva argues that each individual depends upon an acknowledgement of and a recurring movement through his/her own experience of abjection (see #2.2.2), which is manifested and explored through the act of symbolization.

---

[53]J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in PK, p. 56.

[54]J. Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 42.

[55]Ibid.

Focusing on aesthetic practices should not prevent one from acknowledging Kristeva's faith in the clinical tradition. While she undoubtedly advocates the 'freeing' capacity of artistic endeavours, she also points out that art is an ally to an even more successful and healing process of symbolization, i.e. the analytic process. This is of interest especially to those who have wondered about the men and women who may not be privy to any artistic inclination. This calls for a deeper investigation of psychoanalysis and its therapeutic faculty.

CHAPTER 3
PSYCHOANALYSIS AND REVOLT CULTURE

> [The analyst] is perhaps the only one to allow [a person] to glimpse an abeyance of [his/her] narcissistic wounds. Without ideological, moral, or biased suggestions, but through a simple listening, lovingly absent-minded...[1]

The ultimate purpose of this study is to discern the implications of Kristeva's thinking in terms of female subjectivity and also religious discourse. In order to do this, an investigation of the process underlying and foundational to our two previous analyses of feminism and religion – and to all of Kristeva's writing for that matter – is in order, i.e. the psychoanalytical process.

According to Kristeva, both the female subject in feminist discourse and the religious subject are in a state of crisis. These crises, she argues, are in fact a symptom of a larger state of psycho-social emergency, which concerns the modern European subject in general, and which she attributes to the lack of a culture of revolt. She believes that psychoanalysis can rejuvenate the art and culture of revolt in Western society, and in turn, we submit, 'dynamize' the female subject and the approach to female subjectivity.[2] A case shall be made that while her vision for the future of feminism is not a project necessarily independent of other social goals, psychoanalysis, and its articulation of intimate

---

[1] J. Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 382. – "Note in passing that the current use of the term 'narcissism' is naïve and erroneous, because it refers to a person who is full of himself, sure of himself, and triumphant, whereas the Freudian Narcissus does not know who he is at all and only invests in his image because he is not sure of his identity. In reality then, narcissism is a borderline state between identity security and insecurity" (J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, vol. I of *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia U P, 2000), p. 46. – Originally published as *Sens et non-sens de la révolte*, vol. I of *Pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse* (Paris : Fayard, 1996)).

[2] Kristeva notes in an autobiographical reflection that it was the goal of some members of *Tel Quel*, including herself, to "dynamize" the structuralist and phenomenological discourses dominant at the time 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" (J. Kristeva, "My Memory's Hyperbole," trans. Athena Viscusi, in PK, p. 9. – Originally published as "Mémoires" in 1983 in *L'infini*, the journal that replaced *Tel Quel*).

revolt inevitably reinvents the feminist movement, revisits religion and reevaluates the role of Christianity in researching female subjectivity.

In order to consider psychoanalysis per se in Kristeva's program, it is important to first examine why she calls for, and what she means by a 'revolt.'

3.1 The Need for (a New Kind of) Revolt

> Still, I would underscore that an essential aspect of the European culture of revolt and art is in peril, that the very notion of culture as revolt and of art as revolt is in peril, submerged as we are in the culture of entertainment, the culture of performance, the culture of the show.[3]

In her early works *The System and the Speaking Subject* (1975 [1973]), *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984 [1974]), *Women's Time* (1982 [1979]), and *Desire in Language* (1980), Kristeva focuses on (female) subjectivity with regards to semiotics and symbolism in language. Twenty years later, in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991 [1989]), *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995 [1993]) and *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000), her literary and feminist theories are extended to a more comprehensive cultural theory, in which she exposes the modern European subject as being in a state of anxiety and/or restlessness. This is the backdrop of our discussion today.

What has caused this state of unrest? According to Kristeva, Europe was once a deeply religious civilization. Europe also had a rich aesthetic culture, producing masters of contemporary philosophy, literature, and art. Citizens expressed their suffering throughout the ages via creative and/or spiritual channels. Now, she argues, religion – particularly the 'sacred' aspect of religion – art and literature are fading practices.[4] Rather, modern society in Europe but also, to be sure, in the greater Western world is a product of the spectacle. Celebrity magazines, the internet and television, for example, provide images that 'resolve'

---

[3]J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, p. 6.

[4]Kristeva does not define the 'sacred' but she implies an un-nameable dimension of religious experience that once served as a site of revolt but is now lost in modern Western culture.

our needs in half-hour segments. This shift in lifestyle results in a complacent culture. We do not *participate* in the world; we exist as a series of fabricated, superficial, normalizing identities.[5] In turn, relationships with our inner/psychic selves and with others are often shallow or non-existent; the feeling that something is missing ensues – an empty or unsettled state of being (as discussed at the end of *Tales of Love* and in *New Maladies of the Soul*) – which can lead to a variety of neuroses.

Kristeva's response to the dissatisfaction of the European subject is laid out in the two-volume series *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, vol. I: *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt* (2000 [1996]), and vol. II: *Intimate Revolt* (2001 [1997-8]). In these works she explores the following claim: "[...] in listening to human experience, psychoanalysis ultimately communicates this: happiness exists only at the price of a revolt."[6] She adds: "None of us has pleasure without confronting an obstacle, prohibition, authority, or law that allows us to realize ourselves as autonomous and free. The revolt revealed to accompany the private experience of happiness is an integral part of the pleasure principle." Historically subjects confronted their pain and sorrow through religion and the arts. With the move away from religious and aesthetic practices we have lost a very important source of revolt and, by extension, of happiness. In Kristeva's understanding, we must revive and reinvent the culture of revolt because revolt is necessary for the well-being not only of the individual but of society at large as well. There will always be an estrangement between the needs of an individual and the needs of a nation; without art as revolt, without a revolt culture, the various sufferings of a person and/or a group of persons are simply manifested in more violent ways: "When the excluded have no culture of revolt and must content themselves with regressive ideologies, with shows and entertainments that far from satisfy the demand of pleasure, they become rioters."[7] Thus, she later states: "When one

---

[5]See "The Culture of Revolt," in J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, pp. 6-9.

[6]Ibid. p. 7.

[7]Ibid.

recognizes that the contradictions of thought and society are not soluble, then revolt [...] appears as a continuous necessity for keeping alive the psyche, thought, and the social link itself."[8] Incidentally, this is the *sense* of revolt.

We have already discussed Kristeva's disapproval of mass movements and protest (see #2.1). Indeed, she does not propose a revolt in any militant sense, i.e. for her – the *non-sense* of revolt. Rather, the revolution she calls for is to take place on an individual, private level: "Of course, the political landscape is not necessarily the place to raise the question of revolt [...]. Our question here is rather one of psychical revolt, personal revolt [...]."[9] In fact, *Intimate Revolt* – the title of volume two of *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis* – is quite telling: on the one hand, the individual rather than an assemblage, and on the other, psychoanalysis as a key site of revolt.

3.2 Temporality of Revolt

> Provided we understand the word 'revolt' as it is etymologically accepted: as return, displacement, plasticity of the proper, movement toward the infinite and the indefinite [...].[10]

In *Women's Time*, Kristeva makes an appeal for a future generation of feminism that examines and reinvents its current strategies while simultaneously preserving them and those of past generations alike: three distinct yet coincident events of feminism (see #1.4.2). Similarly, Kristeva calls for a "moving beyond" and a "moving through" Christianity but she maintains a (scrutinized) commitment to exploring religious language, imagery and constructs. This seemingly ambiguous attitude is in fact a deliberate move that calls into question the illusion of stability (recall: subjectivity as a process, #1.3). In addition, her schema intentionally challenges the primacy of linear time. The unique

---

[8]J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, p. 144.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid. p. 29.

temporality in Kristeva's philosophy is of primary interest to our discussion on revolt and psychoanalysis and equally to feminism and Christianity.

The paradoxical, 'monumental' time Kristeva outlines with regard to the women's movement in 1979 is in fact revisited and expanded upon in *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, which she writes almost two decades later. In the latter, the theme of temporality is introduced with a discussion of the etymology of the word 'revolt.' Interestingly, her specific designation/definition of revolt alludes back to her vision for the "future" of feminism as outlined in *Women's Time*: "Revolt, then, as *return/turning back/displacement/change*, constitutes the profound logic of a certain culture that I would like to revive here and whose acuity seems quite threatened these days. What makes sense today is not the future [...] but revolt: that is *the questioning and displacement of the past*. The future, if it exists, depends on it."[11] This particular kind of revolt is not to be understood as in the typical, contemporary definition of the word, such as a collective uprising or a rebellion. Rather, it is an "intimate revolt" – a repetitive, retrospective, and introspective questioning (more on this in #3.4). Psychoanalysis, Kristeva argues, is an ideal place for this kind of revolt.

The 'future perfect' time of *Women's Time* mirrors what Kristeva calls 'the scandal of the timeless' in Freudian psychoanalysis. An investigation of the timelessness of the unconscious and of three figures of temporality in the analytical process as put forward by Kristeva: the *memory-trace*, *working-through* and *interminable analysis* outlines the importance of the culture of intimate revolt in connection to what we have analyzed so far. Kristeva's use of psychoanalysis allows for a most visionary exploration of the concept 'woman,' one that is dynamic and broad in scope, i.e. an exploration that is deeply philosophical while at the same time socially and politically important. Kristeva's culture of revolt is relevant particularly for the future of feminism, in which Christianity may indeed be left open to the possibility of researching female subjectivity.

---

[11] J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, vol. II of *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), p. 5; emphasis mine. – Originally published as *La révolte intime*, vol. II of *Pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Fayard, 1997-8).

3.3 Subversion of Temporality in Psychoanalysis

> The temporality of revolt is complex and inscribed in the linearity of time. Yet it starts by breaking it, and it is this time outside time that I would like to investigate today.[12]

Here, Kristeva alludes to the 'time outside time' posited in Freudian theory. According to Freud, 'timeless' (*zeitlos*) denotes the temporality of the unconscious. *Zeitlos* inscribes a rupture in the linear time of consciousness, and Kristeva refers to this rift in time as 'the scandal of the timeless.'[13] Furthermore, since psychoanalysis is a combination of theory and practice, analytical practice is placed necessarily within the framework of timelessness. In light of this, following a discussion of the 'time outside time' in Freudian theory, we shall discuss the subversion of temporality in analytical practice.

Kristeva believes the timelessness of Freudian theory and practice to be revolutionary. We posit that her translation of the timeless – the analytical revolt – into a social and cultural theory (revolt) is equally revolutionary for researching female subjectivity.

3.3.1 Timelessness of the Unconscious

At the outset, the timelessness in Freud is understood in contrast to the standard philosophical premise that consciousness (along with the soul and the mind) is an extension of time. Kristeva identifies two other thinkers in addition to Freud who confront this tradition in some respect, namely: Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger: "In the beginning was not the Word, they said, but an extrasubjective and extraexistential temporality that is the true challenge to thought."[14] For Freud, it is the unconscious structure of the psyche that will interrupt conscious time. The unconscious is the source of all our desires; it links

---

[12]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 25.

[13]Ibid. p. 30.

[14]Ibid. p. 29.

us to our archaic past, our 'individual father of prehistory' and 'the primal scene.'[15] It is the source of the oedipal conflict, the *pleasure principle* or the life/erotic drive (libido, *Eros*) and the overarching death drive (*Thanatos*).

Freud teaches us that our desires are most effectively revealed to us and understood via the interpretation of our dreams. For the dream, Kristeva explains, is said to be "an exemplary actualization of the unconscious, its 'royal path.'"[16] Of interest to our discussion is that although dreams are a gateway to our desires, they are difficult to decipher because the language in dreams (and thereby the unconscious) is not coherent as is the symbolic mode of language of the conscious being; nor do the events in dreams occur in any consecutive order. Freud describes this as "the nonexistence of contradiction or the absence of negation in the language of the dream and the unconscious."[17] Kristeva goes on to explain that "just as there is no negation in the unconscious, there is no duration, or time." But what exactly does this mean? What does it mean for there to be no 'duration' or 'time' in the unconscious? How is one to comprehend the 'time outside time'?

The timelessness of the unconscious can be understood, for example, in the sense that the aforementioned drives are consolidated in the event of the 'primal scene' which does not take place in our lifetime. Rather, we are connected to our 'individual father of prehistory' and the social pact (of the brothers) in an event – a time – beyond our conscious/lived existence. Accordingly, the unconscious generates desires that are simultaneously and inevitably linked to the events of a pre-conscious/pre-psychic existence. In this way, Freud parallels the unconscious to a kind of phylogenetic memory. And the unconscious exists and

---

[15]In *Totem and Taboo* (1912), Freud describes the primal ("original") scene on which all civilization is based. A band of brothers conspire to murder their father as punishment for taking away their women (keeping them for his sexual pleasure alone), which they do, followed by a ceremonial meal wherein the main course is the meat of their dead father. Their triumph served as both a metaphoric and physical identification with (the absorption of) the law and authority embodied by their father and they built a totem in his image, symbolic of the power he had and will always have over them. "From then on, guilt and repentance cemented the bond, the social pact, among the sons, among the brothers [...]" (J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, p. 12).

[16]Ibid. p. 39.

[17]Ibid. p. 40.

functions in a kind of 'atemporality' associated with memories: events of the past relived in the present, crystallized for the future – a breach of linear time. Kristeva summarizes this concept in the following passage:

> There is a postulate of Western consciousness: time is a fact of consciousness [...], and memory can only be inscribed in it. Freud takes up this postulate, situating time in the perceptual-consciousness system; however, he adds that the lasting traces of excitation remain unconscious. It is Breuer who expresses this distinction for the first time in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895): 'It is impossible for one and the same organ to fulfill these two contradictory conditions [time/memory]. The mirror of a reflecting telescope cannot at the same time be a photographic plate.' Here we are, placed before the time/memory paradox that in fact reformulates the conscious/unconscious distinction. What do we do with time, by definition conscious, if we postulate an unconscious psyche? Its time – which is a memory – is part of another logic (or another apparatus) and can only be ... timeless.[18]

Perhaps a more precise example of *zeitlos* in Freudian theory is the death drive (the most instinctual of the drives).[19] Roughly twenty years after the discussion of *Eros* – the life drive – in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud observes that there are "resistances to the optimal evolution of the subject and to analysis,"[20] that is, a force acting contrary to the pleasure principle. Thus, we are introduced to the notion of the death drive (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 1920).[21] Freud describes *Thanatos* as a natural instinct to "re-establish a state of

---

[18]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 33.

[19]J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in PK, p. 37; Also *Time and Sense: Proust and Literary Experience*, in PK, p. 129. – Originally published as *Le temps sensible: Proust et l'expérience littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). Translated by Ross Guberman and published by Columbia U P in 1996.

[20]J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, p. 47.

[21]The concept of *thanatos* helps Freud explain the phenomena of masochistic tendencies, which he suggests affects a large number of people in varying degrees (S. Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," *Standard Edition* 23:243), taken from *Black Sun* (1989), trans. L. Roudiez, in PK, p. 190. – Originally published as *Soleil Noir: Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

things that was disturbed by the emergence of life."[22] It is the part of the psyche that seeks access and return to the quiet of non-existence. Kristeva calls it an instinct to return to homeostasis, to the inorganic state.[23] In other words, the death drive works in opposition to the temporality of life and consciousness, which "temporalizes" (in Heidegger's sense of the word), and can therefore be understood as a force against time, an interruption of time, a frustration of time.[24]

Kristeva describes this as a "scandalous temporality" in order to evoke the etymology of the word 'scandal,' which means "detainment."[25] The death drive is heterogeneous to the teleology inscribed in linear time – it impedes linear time – and in this way the 'temporality' of the death drive (and the unconscious) is in fact time-*less* or time *lost* (*zeit-los*).

It must be noted that the instinct to return to the archaic, to lost time, that is, the opposing, unbinding, detaining death drive, is also the force that excites, provokes and reinforces the life drive. In fact, Kristeva speaks at length of the inherent paradox of the psyche: the atemporality of the unconscious contradictory to, yet inseparable from, the temporality of consciousness. This should call to mind Kristeva's theory of the production of language called *semanalysis*, in which the semiotic and symbolic registers are distinct, yet nonetheless dependent on each other – continually meeting in a scission, a thetic moment, in the maternal chora. While the drives produced/discharged in the semiotic *chora* are assimilated and ordered by the mother's body (which serves as the mediator between the semiotic functions and the symbolic law, the connection to the social order and the speaking world), the semiotic drives are also destructive (the death drive) and

---

[22]S. Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 709. Taken from Dino Felluga, "Modules on Freud: Transference and Trauma," *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* [November 28, 2003], Purdue U <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/freud5.html> [Cited February 2, 2006].

[23]J. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, in PK, 189.

[24]Kristeva uses the term: 'temporalize' (the translation of Heidegger's verb *zeitigen*, which means to bring about, to bring to maturity) in order to show that Freud goes beyond Heidegger who 'ontologizes' time but whose 'being-toward-death' still 'temporalizes' (*Intimate Revolt*, pp. 29 & 31).

[25]Ibid. p. 31.

'revolt' against the mother's body. In this way, the "semiotic chora is not more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him."[26] In this way, the paradoxical temporality in the Freudian unconscious provides the necessary framework for the intimate revolt Kristeva is advocating, which is a recurring revolt that allows for re-generation and rebirth: "Although it is destructive – a 'death drive' – rejection is the very mechanism of reactivation, tension, life; aiming toward the equalization of tension, toward a state of inertia and death, it *perpetuates* tension and life."[27]

3.3.2 Timelessness in Analysis

> [...] while human experience is linked to time, the analytical experience reconciles us with this timelessness.[28]

We stated that the paradoxical temporality of the unconscious provides the necessary framework for Kristeva's intimate revolt. This is because revolt in this context is a confrontation of linear time with timelessness – painful yet simultaneously pleasurable and cathartic (a complex notion termed *jouissance*). According to Kristeva, this therapeutic encounter is visibly carried out in psychoanalysis: in the analytical experience, the *zeitlos* dimension of the unconscious is observed in a variety of scenarios. Referring to the Freudian text *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through*, Kristeva outlines what she calls: "Three Figures of the Analytical Timeless."[29] Let us summarize this.

---

[26]J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in PK, p. 37.

[27]Ibid. p. 77.

[28]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 12.

[29]This is the title of a section in chapter three of *Intimate Revolt*, pp. 34-42.

Memory-Trace

The timelessness of the unconscious is understood in part as the instinct of the death drive to return to the archaic, to the inorganic state (see #3.3.1). It also indicates pre-psychical memories, such as the primal scene. Kristeva first delineates the atemporality in analysis as exhibited in the symptoms of somatization and addiction, which, on one hand, threaten a patient (physically) to return to the pre-psychical, "unsymbolizable" state (the death drive) and, at the same time, are generated by the repetition of a permanent, yet displaceable pre-psychic memory. This is the *memory-trace*.[30]

The memory-trace describes a patient with recurring somatic manifestations of traumatic memories (pre-psychical, or from a forgotten lived event). Although the patient may not *consciously* remember the occurrence, the body is "reminded" of the experience, which could be triggered by a number of things, and s/he may endure physical pain or suffering of various kinds throughout his/her lifetime without an identifiable medical problem. According to Kristeva, the memory-trace can also explain the presence of addictions in a patient, in which case the patient repeatedly tries to escape the suffering through the use of drugs, for example. The memory-trace is a "psychical debt [which] can only be canceled out by the 'gift' of the body [...] or by the abolition of consciousness."[31]

The two features Kristeva associates with the memory-trace are remembering and repeating. The former, i.e. remembering the atemporal memory, indicates timelessness inserted into linear time (unconsciousness entering into consciousness); the latter points to the permanence of the unconscious drives (death or pleasure). Kristeva describes a case from her own experience as an analyst to exemplify these characteristics of the timeless in analysis. On and off for the majority of her adult life, a particular woman exhibited symptoms related

---

[30]The memory-trace is Kristeva's translation of Freud's term *Erinnerungsspur* or *Errinnerungsrest*: she refers to S. Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (1914); see *Intimate Revolt*, pp. 34-36.

[31]Ibid. p. 35.

to a traumatic experience she had in the womb of her mother. While she clearly showed signs of "progression," in the sense that her symptoms were continually overcome, Kristeva notes that the memory-trace, not knowing time (being "extratemporal," or outside time) was ultimately indestructible (read: the death drive): despite the "success" of the analysand in question, the memory-trace was destined to resurface (revolt) repeatedly throughout the patient's lifetime. These features of the memory-trace are central to intimate revolt: "The permanence of contradiction, the temporariness of reconciliation, the bringing to the fore of everything that puts the very possibility of unitary meaning to the test [such as the death drive]: these are what the culture of revolt explores."[32] This is what psychoanalysis explores.

Working-Through[33]

The next stage Kristeva describes is very much linked to the first. In analysis, *Working-through* facilitates naming, mastering, and traversing one's demons, desires and traumas. In analytical terms this stage is referred to as transference, in which unconscious desires are redirected onto the analyst. Kristeva explains that transference in fact removes these feelings or events from linear time. Thus, the memory-trace inserts the past into linear time via remembrance and is then disconnected from it in transference – a kind of suspension of time in order to "work-through" the past/the memory. In Kristeva's words: "working-through removes the psychical process from flow [...] [it] involves an insertion of nonlife into life."[34]

The working-through is an important stage/process because ideally it culminates in a *jouissance* or 'rebirth.' Rebirth takes place when there is recognition and vocalization of the feelings/suffering toward the new object (the analyst) leading to acceptance and healing. When this sublimation in

---

[32]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 10.

[33]This is a translation of Freud's *Durcharbeitung*.

[34]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 36.

symbolization occurs, it does so in a kind of 'hallucination' (Freud) or a 'moment of grace' (Kristeva) that signals an intersection of lived suffering with unconscious suffering. At the point of 'rebirth,' the stagnation or suspension of time in the analytical process ceases and the unconscious suffering is confronted with the lived suffering of conscious linear time. "This state of grace, this conjunction of the linear and the indestructible [memory-trace], is an inflection of the timeless specific to the analytical process."[35]

Interestingly, this 'rebirth' is ultimately only temporary and thus, intimate revolt is in fact a *recurring* revolt. Does this mean that a subject remains in psychoanalysis for his/her lifetime? Is there no end to analytical treatment? These questions are addressed in the following discussion of Kristeva's final element of analytical timelessness.

The Dissolution of Transference

According to Kristeva, what ensues after the termination of treatment is an under-emphasized, under-explored part of the analytic process. Only one possibility seems to have been posited. With the moment of grace or rebirth comes the dissolution of transference and the end of the analytical relationship relatable to feelings of strong friendship and, more often than not, of love, which, not surprisingly, can bring about a certain amount of sadness, or melancholy. Kristeva explains that the analytical tradition recognizes this as a difficult stage, with possible regression to a demoralized state or otherwise ill conditions. But it also maintains that analysis should provide the analysand with appropriate tools to cope on his/her own with the initial trauma of dissolution, to adapt, and to integrate independently. The post-transference stage is thus constructive and confirmational of the patient's successful treatment. Kristeva wants to examine a different view on the post-analytic experience and uses as a premise for her alternate approach Freud's claim that analysis is essentially 'interminable.'[36] The

---

[35]Ibid. p. 38.

[36] Interminable is translated from *Unendliche*: Kristeva refers to S. Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937); see *Intimate Revolt*, p. 39.

designation 'interminable' refers for Kristeva to the third figure of the timeless in analysis.

Above and beyond an ended love affair, Kristeva points out that – on a psychical level – with the end of transference the patient is confronted with the death of the analyst and, perhaps more interestingly, in light of the identification that has taken place with the analyst, the analysand in fact faces the possibility of his/her own death:

> The analyst is no longer the guarantor of meaning in my story, my desires, and my drives; the illusion of inter-subjectivity is over; quite simply, he or she no longer is, either the subject supposed to know or the agent of the timeless of my memory-traces or my hallucinatory states of working-through. I am alone, but since he/she no longer is and since I was him/her, in him/her and through him/her *I no longer am*.[37]

Such death is very real, says Kristeva, and connects the analysand with the timelessness of the death drive, of the pre-psychical and the inorganic. In this way, the dissolution of transference is a subversion of temporality, not a final obstacle to overcome in order to move forward, as some analysts stress; it is rather the epitome of *Thanatos*, the finale of "my conscious, living being."[38] This vision is obviously not as cheerful as the former and explains why Freud believed analysis to be 'interminable.' However, Kristeva suggests a more nuanced interpretation and application of the 'interminable analysis,' which sets the stage for her cultural revolt and emphasizes the visionary nature of her program.

The death drive awakens us to the revelation that ultimate resolution is impossible. However, over and above this, Kristeva posits a more optimistic reading of Freud's interminable analysis in that the death of the analyst and of the analysand actually *opens* the subject to creating new, healthy, social links. After leaving the couch, the revolt takes place on behalf of the individual openly and honestly seeking to confront his/her inevitable internal conflict. This process is

---

[37]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 39.

[38]Ibid.

facilitated by new transferential relationships with other objects/others, with whom the subject can identify. Moreover it is a repetitive process. Acknowledging one's internal conflict means also recognizing the non-existence of resolution to this conflict. At the moment of jouissance, at the moment of rebirth, one must *continue* to question, search and evaluate one's individual being, even the solutions or resolutions one has already made. Such is the nature of the interminable revolt: "Having put my analyst (the other) to death, I nevertheless assure his [and my] survival through the re-creation of the transferential dynamic with other others. This interminability, no longer inexorable but open, is a sort of numerical, countable infinity that will continue in the future of a life and generations to come."[39] Thus, the paradoxical temporality (the timelessness) of analysis is reiterated: alongside eternal impossibility of resolution is infinite openness and hope. Kristeva does not see this as a pessimistic view, but as a "taming of death," and "gravity without despair."[40] This is the scandal of the timeless: life and death in permanent tension. And in the workings of this intimate scandal, is a cultural revolt.

3.4 The Future of Revolt

> Ideally, those who have been analyzed should be able to connect with others and create communities. [...] I want to create new connections, not to isolate myself but to explore with other people.[41]

It should be pointed out that the term 'intimate' in Kristeva's intimate revolt is far more complex than perhaps first meets the eye. Intimacy goes beyond what is private and personal; it implies more than unique thoughts and/or feelings, although it is all of the above things. It simultaneously encompasses all that *being*

---

[39]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 40.

[40]Ibid.

[41]J. Kristeva, "Julia Kristeva in Person" (1988), trans. Ross Guberman, in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, p. 11.

is, including – but going beyond – the biological. For "psychoanalysis restores to men and women the heterogeneous continuity between body-soul-mind, and the experience of this heterogeneous continuity now appears to us as the essence of the intimate."[42] In light of this, the paradoxical temporality of psychoanalysis translates as an epitomized experience of intimate revolt.

The following questions must be posed: How does the intimate revolt of psychoanalysis pertain to those outside of the analytic relationship? And how does revolt relate back to feminism, Christianity and researching female subjectivity?

Extending the model of revolt to the social sphere is crucial for Kristeva. While the imperative is for the individual to revolt on an intimate level, the intended effect is a cultural revolt, which necessarily goes beyond the analytic community. However, at times, when reading Kristeva's work, one might wonder how someone who does not have the privilege of undergoing psychoanalysis, or someone who is not an analyst, might be able to carry out this intimate revolt. As this is a concern of some scholars, particularly those worried about the potentially esoteric nature of Kristeva's program, it is important to address this issue. While Kristeva inevitably has a relatively elite audience, her program aims to reach beyond those boundaries by working through the people with whom she *does* have contact and influence. That being said, her theory of revolt can indeed be translated beyond the psychoanalytical realm. We present here two ethical imperatives reiterated throughout Kristeva's works and exemplified in the analytical experience, which facilitate her cultural revolt: 'retrospective return' and 'analytic listening.'

Retrospective Return

Kristeva is concerned with what she calls the crisis of the modern European subject, which is a product of a crisis in Western culture (see #3.1). Keeping in mind Kristeva's loaded definition of revolt, a cultural revolt would

[42]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 51; see also pp. 43-50.

translate into the re-consideration of this crisis: "This is where we are: we can either renounce revolt by withdrawing into old values or indeed new ones that do not look back on themselves and do not question themselves or, on the contrary, relentlessly repeat retrospective return so as to lead it to the limits of the representable/thinkable/tenable (to the point of possession) [...]."[43] For only at the 'point of possession' is symbolization and rebirth possible, even if only temporarily.

In sum, the future of revolt rests upon a recurring return to the past, and this is not limited to analysands and analysts. Kristeva's use of the transferential relationship to develop a social ethic calls for a deeply philosophical imperative for every individual, which is then translated into the socio-political sphere. True revolt involves repeated questioning, which is in effect an acceptance of, and insistence on instability, rather than a search for stability. "The pseudo-rebellious 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 amounts to a suspension of thought."[44]

Analytic Listening

The second component of the ethics in psychoanalysis is a translation of the analyst's role in the transferential link: analytic listening. Inherent to the analytic process of working-through is the suspension of time (see #3.3.2). And within the suspension of time, Kristeva explains, is the suspension of judgment. Furthermore, psychoanalysis is also a discourse of love and forgiveness.[45] She reiterates this in *Intimate Revolt*: "[...] analytical interpretation emerges as a

---

[43]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 7.

[44]Ibid. p. 6.

[45]As examined in detail in Kristeva's earlier works, *Tales of Love*, and *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*. See also "Can Forgiveness Heal?" in *Intimate Revolt*, pp. 14-24.

secular version of forgiveness, in which I see not just a suspension of judgment but a giving of meaning, beyond judgment, within transference/countertransference."[46] This is the kind of listening Kristeva is advocating in her cultural revolt. This kind of open and non-judgmental listening creates a space (outside time) for a distressed person to develop love for a listening other such that s/he can forgive him/herself in light of the guilt intrinsic to 'being' that causes him/her to suffer.[47]

Kristeva may repeatedly promote the supremacy of psychoanalytic treatment; yet she recognizes and addresses its limited scope, evidenced in the following extract of a 1992 interview:

> Psychoanalysis is indeed a privileged listening post, but one should invent and diversify listening posts in order to compensate for the general deficiency of the symbolic markers we are talking about. Consequently, the analyses we are able to produce, that I produce for my part on the basis of my clinical experience, could be put to practical use, doubtless not by media intellectuals, the stars of the system, but by those I might call 'basic intellectuals,' those who play their parts in educational centers, schools, mayors' offices, and new microspaces that need to be opened, to be invented. It is in that direction that one should give a concrete extension to the ethics of listening [...].[48]

Thus, while the ethics of retrospective return and analytic listening are products of the recurring conflictuality and the openness inherent in Freud's scandal of the timeless, Kristeva's revolt is not confined to the psychoanalytical sphere. In fact, revolt as articulated in psychoanalysis is a revolt that turns out to be particularly relevant for her vision for the future of feminism.

---

[46]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 12.

[47]J. Kristeva, "The Consciousness of Fault (Heidegger and Freud)," in *Intimate Revolt*, pp. 17-19.

[48]J. Kristeva, "The Old Man and the Wolves," (1992) with Bernard Sichère, trans. Léon Roudiez, in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, pp. 172-73.

3.4.1. Revolt Culture & Feminism

How does the intimate revolt relate to Kristeva's discussion on feminism? In order to address this inquiry we revisit *Women's Time*, because there one can see that Kristeva's conception of the future of feminism is particularly reminiscent of Freud's scandal of the timeless. Although written some twenty five years ago, Kristeva's vision of a third generation of feminism in *Women's Time* is closely linked to her vision of a cultural revolt. The specific temporality she designates both implicitly and explicitly for her vision of feminism mirrors the temporality we have seen in our discussion of psychoanalysis and revolt.

Referring back to our first chapter, Kristeva compares the waves of the women's movement with the fall of the nation and the rise of the supranational. The temporality Kristeva invokes in the following passage is an allusion to the temporality of a new, future wave of feminism – her vision for a third "generation" of feminism: "A new social ensemble superior to the nation has thus been constituted, within which the nation, far from losing its own traits, rediscovers and accentuates them in a strange temporality, in a kind of 'future perfect,' where the most deeply repressed past gives a distinctive character to a logical and sociological distribution of the most modern type."[49]

'Future perfect' is a linguistic term referring to the meaning of 'will have been.' It is a mode of language that refers to the past as if one were in the future. In addition to intimating that feminism indeed has a past, using this terminology also implies that the future is at stake. According to Kristeva, modern feminism must begin to question itself (to revolt!). It is time to be self-critical as a movement and introspective as individuals, to employ 'retrospective return.'

Furthermore, Kristeva is alluding here to the necessary relationship between first, second *and* third generation feminists. Although a second wave of feminism has been established it does not mean that the first disappears, loses its traits. Rather its characteristics are rediscovered, giving a distinctive character to

---

[49]J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*, pp. 31-32. – While the translation in *The Portable Kristeva* is perfectly valid, I have chosen this particular translation for this quote and the next because I feel the slightly different wording better expresses what I am trying to portray in Kristeva's text.

the new ensemble, akin to the insertion of unconscious timelessness into conscious time. A new generation emerges (a rebirth), but it coexists with that past (the memory-trace). In other words, only in "returning" to the past interminably is the future guaranteed. Kristeva proposes a third generation resulting in (for the moment) three waves, three "times" coming together in a strange atemporality, as one event of feminism.

By extension, the connection between the scandal of the timeless in psychoanalysis and *Women's Time* also has interesting implications concerning female subjectivity, for the title emphasizes a time that is specific to women. Kristeva highlights that in classical thought female subjectivity is most often referred to as spatial, not temporal. This suggestion, among many other stereotypes, is largely associated with femininity because of the maternal space in which life is conceived. She goes on to say that biological characteristics also connect women with certain modalities of time: *repetition* and *eternity*. One can remark the obvious correlation between the cyclical functions of a woman's body and the cycles of 'mother nature' that signify the passing of time. And these cycles are repeated eternally, for the perpetuation of the species and of the cosmos.

This temporality is also to be understood as *monumental* time, which Kristeva describes as "all-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space."[50] She refers to mythology, from Greek to Christian, to typify this conception of women's time. For instance, the everlasting body of the Virgin Mary, whose presence permeates both time and space, illustrates the way in which monumental time – women's time – defies the notion of temporality; it is a collapse, an accord, a co-existence of space eternal and time that passes.

On one hand, the description of women's time thus articulated reiterates that the women's movement and the generations that constitute it should be understood not as separate times in progression, chronologically speaking, but as times collapsing into one another, co-existing as a *moment* in history. On the other

---

[50]Ibid. p. 34.

hand, Kristeva indicates here that women have privileged access to the *jouissance* or rebirth that occurs at the intersection of timelessness and time. In this way, the concept of female subjectivity is opened up to incorporate an infinite number of possible experiences of the 'feminine.' Kristeva highlights this temporality specific to women because she wants "to celebrate women's singularity and uniqueness without reducing them to a generic category of 'women' [...]."[51] This is indeed a dynamized conception of female subjectivity.

The 'future perfect,' 'monumental time' of *Women's Time* is indeed an ideal example of the revolt Kristeva writes about twenty years later in *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*. In *Women's Time*, Kristeva states her fear that feminism is in danger of becoming "religious,"[52] and of playing the role of an antidepressant – that is: utilized primarily as a remedy for the symptom of a problem, not for the problem itself.[53] In other words, Kristeva is concerned that modern feminists are not confronting their individual psychic suffering, that they identify instead with the universalized struggles of the women's movement grounded in a faith that political advancements will relieve them of their afflictions. On the contrary, Kristeva believes that the remedy to the problem begins with recognizing the permanence of the problem – the permanence of internal conflict. Only after working through on an intimate level one's own memory-traces to the point when they are nameable and ultimately symbolizeable, is that moment of grace possible – of rebirth – the true remedy to suffering. This is what the temporality of psychoanalysis reveals to us.

What we saw preliminarily in chapter one regarding Kristeva's conception of feminism has thus been elaborated upon and, hopefully, facilitated a more profound understanding of her call to each woman to explore her personal story, her personal experiences of the feminine and of *jouissance* and therefore her privileged role in the reconstitution of social bonds. We can now appreciate more fully her vision for the future of feminism as consisting of individual,

---

[51] J. Kristeva, "Julia Kristeva in Person," in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, p. 8.

[52] J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in PK, p. 367.

[53] J. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, in PK, p. 195.

retrospective, introspective (read: intimate) reflection, such that female subjectivity and feminist discourse alike are continually regenerated and reinvented – part of a larger cultural revolt.

3.4.2 Revolt Culture & Christianity

> We live in a society, and we will continue to live with illusions. Still, I am not fooled by them. I am going to analyze them.[54]

How does revolt relate back to Kristeva's discourse on Christianity? Above all, the subject in revolt is a decisive testimony to the championing of psychoanalysis over religion. At the same time, Kristeva's revolt culture allows one to revisit Christianity and its role with regard to female subjectivity. And yet, Kristeva is often criticized for being a Christian apologetic in the guise of an atheist, hence for being unclear of where her loyalties lie.[55]

Akin to her criticism of feminism, Kristeva believes religion qua Christianity is a remedy to the symptoms of one's suffering rather than the remedy for the suffering itself. She grants that "[a]s a system of protective and consoling values, religions ensure certain human freedoms [...]."[56] But she also argues that these freedoms come at a cost, such as exclusion of others, sexual repression and, most importantly, "the inhibition of critical thought, which is to say thought, period." Moreover, ignoring/denying such aspects of the unconscious (the other, sexuality and thought) which are essential to a healthy psychic life, goes on to produce further neuroses, from which religious constructs in turn provide solace. Ultimately, religious consolation (through universalized representations) and purification prevents the believer from confronting his/her

---

[54]J. Kristeva, "Julia Kristeva in Person," in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, p. 11.

[55]To my knowledge, Kristeva has never openly labeled herself an atheist, which is not surprising for a woman who avoids labels. She has, on the other hand, referred to psychoanalysis as an atheistic tradition (the meaning of which should not be assumed) and she has also claimed on a number of occasions not to believe in God/a god, although this is not necessarily synonymous with atheism for her.

[56]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 235.

personal, individual, psychical dissonance (state of abjection) – psychic life – thus impeding his/her capacity to symbolize.[57] Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, particularly as exemplified today in the analyzed subject in revolt (the memory-trace, the 'moment of grace' or rebirth and the interminable transferential link), opens up the subject to "his irreconcilable conflictuality" and "offers man the chance to restart his psychical life and thus, quite simply, life itself, opening up choices that guarantee the plurality of an individual's capacity for connection."[58] In this way, intimate revolt reiterates what Kristeva considers to be a superior alternative to religion. Thus, in light of her persistent faith in the ethics and process of analysis, the prevalence of Christian constructs in Kristeva's work may seem puzzling. However, our discussion on revolt culture should shed some light on what might at first seem obscure.

"Revolt here is not an advance toward 'singing tomorrows' but," says Kristeva, "on the contrary, a return and a process."[59] *A return and a process.* Implicit in her description of intimate revolt is that it is not only reasonable but *necessary* to return to religion. It is an imperative linked to the death drive, which seeks to return to the archaic, to one's origins, and religion is in part a discourse of origins. Revolt culture is also a process, which means that there is no determinable, absolute truth to be found in religion. Rather, Kristeva's writing on religion qua Christianity implies a never-ending investigation comparable to the infinitely rejected and regenerated subject-in-process. In other words, in spite of the fact that according to Kristeva Christianity is an illusory therapy, she nonetheless recognizes its prevalence in European history and considers it to be like an unconscious memory-trace inscribed into the consciousness of Western subjectivity. It is important for the realization of a culture of revolt to acknowledge and confront the insertion of our religious past into our present psychic and social lives. After all, for Kristeva, illusions such as Christian

---

[57]J. Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, in PK, p. 367; see also #2 of this study.

[58]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, pp. 237 & 234.

[59]J. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, p. 50.

reconciliation and absolution, when left unexamined and unexposed, are at the core of suffering: "I feel that it is harmful, even criminal, to keep illusions going, for this amounts to encouraging new pitfalls."[60] This is why the intimate revolt at the heart of psychoanalysis is essential, for it helps individuals to recognize and name the illusions that obscure and suppress their true pleasures, desires and suffering:

> Psychoanalysis explores the anxieties and psychosomatics of [the religious] man, precisely – the man who, from the totem to the taboo, consecrates the father, love, and prohibitions. And psychoanalysis, in unveiling that man's desires to him, *does not suppress his hopes: it restores them to him, but in lucidity*. A morality and a sacredness now appear possible, finally disengaged from the need to hallucinate a maternal or paternal appearance.[61]

This is not Christian apologetics or nostalgia, but neither is it atheism. In fact, Kristeva has expressed doubt that atheism even exists. Modern "atheists," as she calls them, are those who have a tendency to forget, ignore and deny the (unconscious) presence of Christianity.[62] Revolt, on the other hand, involves remembering, working-through and accepting religion, in order to traverse it. She explains that the critical thought inherent in revolt enables one "to encounter the religious imaginary [...]: not to condemn it, not to ignore it, but to reveal its logic, its benefits and its impasses."[63]

While intimate revolt helps the individual to confront and traverse Christianity and its illusory representations, it remains also an interminable process, which means that once traversed, there is an inevitable return. This is perhaps best exemplified in the case of Kristeva's personal affinity to Christianity. It is known that Kristeva is highly invested in her writing and that her work reflects much of her life experience. In particular, being a child of practicing Orthodox parents in Communist Bulgaria (named after a saint!) and spending her

---

[60]J. Kristeva, "The Old Man and the Wolves," in Julia Kristeva: Interviews, p. 172.

[61]J. Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, p. 164; italics mine.

[62]Ibid. p. 113.

[63]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 267.

adult life in close proximity to the Catholic tradition of Western Europe has undeniably influenced her writing. However, rather than being construed as inconsistent with her views on Christianity, might not the following excerpt serve as evidence to reinforce Kristeva's theory of intimate revolt? This retrospective introspection is, after all, suggestive of working-through a resurfacing memory-trace:

> Those who understand analytical experience – in any case, with me – are rarely believers. Some have been, most are not at all, or, almost not at all. So I rarely hear people talk about God, and, when it happens, as you can imagine, my 'free-floating attention' momentarily fastens, even crystallizes, on that word. I experience a hint of shame at the idea of that curiosity; might it prove that God has not completely abandoned me, as I have a tendency to believe ordinarily?[64]

Questions such as this lead critics to wonder about her 'real' attitude toward Christianity. However, it should now be apparent that this is the kind of questioning that is fundamental to intimate revolt and, by extension, a healthy psychic life. Similar to her theories on feminism, when juxtaposed with her theory of revolt Kristeva's position towards religion is not ambiguous. It is clear that she does not wholly advocate or deny the presence of religion per se; there are no absolutes in revolt. Rather, consistent with her conception of a culture of revolt, she continues to question it, interminably: "I am persuaded that it is by traversing Christianity that the free subjectivity of men and women flourishes. By traversing, that is, by knowing and analyzing: not by becoming imprisoned within it."[65]

---

[64]J. Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, p. 23. See also pages 46-47 where she talks specifically about the development of her feelings on God and faith.

[65]Ibid. p. 165.

3.5 Closing Remarks

> I am seeking experiences in which this work of revolt, which opens psychical life to infinite re-creation, continues and recurs [...].[66]

While her commitment to psychoanalysis may appear outdated and/or elite, Kristeva is above all concerned about the social link between all individuals, and she believes that a healthy psychic life is the necessary foundation for a healthy social contract. In light of an age of new maladies and various subjective crises, psychoanalysis can provide the tools to develop a culture of revolt that recognizes and rejuvenates our intra and extra-psychic lives. Revolt allows an individual to address his/her personal desires, values and his/her relationship to power and meaning, and by extension the desires, values, power and meaning of a culture are revised, perhaps rejected or renewed. The future, according to Kristeva, depends on revolt.

While revolt is not specifically a feminist revolt in Kristeva's construction, the future of the women's movement also depends upon it. In the same way the future of society depends on revolt on behalf of every person, the future of feminism depends on the intimate revolt of every woman. With the ethics of retrospective return and analytic listening, Kristeva hopes to challenge the universalistic and exclusive tendencies she has observed in past generations of feminism. Moreover, intimate revolt allows for a constantly regenerated (dynamized!) vision of femininity.

As a constant questioning, a displacement of the past, a search for and confrontation of memory (of lost time), a culture of revolt invites new possibilities into old discourses. Kristeva's approach to Christianity is acutely shaped by her commitment to revolt in that her persistent reading of religious texts and constructs is in fact a memory-trace, a working-through and an interminable analysis. For Kristeva, analyzing Christianity is a means by which to confront the unconscious, repressed pleasures and drives that have contributed to

---

[66]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 6.

the crisis of the European subject. Furthermore, it is especially significant that Kristeva's retrospective return to Christianity leaves open the discourse for researching female subjectivity. The concept of femininity in the West has undoubtedly been shaped by the Christian tradition and, therefore, as Christianity is analyzed and questioned – the illusory yet pacifying mechanisms at its core exposed – the concept of femininity borne of this discourse is in turn questioned. In fact, Kristeva suggests that what has been repressed and mysterious in Christianity could be connected to the un-definable nature of the feminine.

While Kristeva admits that "the analytical cure" consists of a number of "paradoxical logics,"[67] such a paradoxical temporality is the revolutionary aspect of her philosophy and of revolt culture. The moment of grace, when the past, present and future meet, is a moment of lucidity; it is the moment that invents possibility and rebirth, which is crucial for the future of feminism and for future research of female subjectivity. Intimate revolt teaches us that without rebirth, there is only self-denial and/or self-destruction by the death drive. Therefore, without revolt, both the feminist subject and the religious subject commit themselves to death. And in revolt, these discourses are brought back to life.

---

[67]J. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, p. 12.

CONCLUSION

> Kristeva changes the place of things: she always destroys the *latest preconception*, the one we thought we could be comforted by, the one of which we could be proud; what she displaces is the illusion that it has all been said already, that is, she removes the pressure of the signified – in a word, stupidity; what she subverts is authority – that of monological science, of filiation.[1]

Kristeva's is an emphatically 'dynamized,' if not radical approach both to feminism and to Christianity, one that carries with it important ramifications in terms of researching female subjectivity. If religion is susceptible to a working-through and a re-birth, then the way women have been cast in, and the concept of femininity that has been shaped by Christianity in the West, is also brought to the fore and analyzed. In other words, while it may be a patriarchal tradition by convention, psychoanalytic interpretation uncovers latent unconscious suffering, needs and desires, which, upon confrontation and acceptance of them, can give new meaning to matters of identity, including – perhaps especially – notions of the feminine. Kristeva observes that re-thinking and returning to Christianity (and, she speculates, religion in general) in fact reveals a narrative with which women have a lot in common, namely the narrative of the 'sacred.' This is an explicit way in which Kristeva proposes, contrary to some feminists, that Christianity can indeed play an important role in researching the female subject.

The sacred is an admittedly difficult, if not impossible, term to define, but Kristeva notes that it surfaces over and over again, like a memory-trace, in every religious tradition; as such, it repeatedly resurfaces in her analysis of Christianity. While she attributes the crisis of the religious subject to a loss of a culture of revolt, she also accredits the crisis in religion to a loss of the sacred. The parallel

---

[1]Roland Barthes wrote this acclaim of Kristeva for her book *Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*.

is not a coincidence; Kristeva's conceptualization of the sacred resembles very much the elements of revolt, and in turn, her conceptualization of the feminine.

These two concepts (the feminine and the sacred) are brought together in a published correspondence between Kristeva and Catherine Clément, aptly titled: *The Feminine and the Sacred* (2001 [1998]). The premise of the book is to exchange ideas about the relationship between these two highly precarious concepts – precarious, yet also particularly relevant in the wake of feminism and at the turn of the millennium. Interestingly, although the question is explicitly asked "Does a specifically feminine sacred exist?" neither she nor Clément answer it concretely. The imperative of the book is, consistent with Kristeva's call for a culture of revolt, a "permanent questioning."[2]

Her exploration of the sacred in this book is remarkably evocative of her previous discussions of femininity. She begins by positing a vision of the sacred as life; perhaps it is the giving of life, or maybe it is the giving of meaning. She suggests that feminist discourse often places women firmly between the two, and considers the significance of this 'in-between-ness'. She goes on to note that the sacred is often celebrated as a sacrifice, and so perhaps the abject-ed (sacrificed) mother has a special participation in the sacred. Kristeva also reflects that the sacred is critically situated between the pure and the impure, between life and death. This tension, she suggests, is mirrored in the torturous yet rapturous love of a mother. She wonders, then, if the sacred is in fact an absence, a momentary schism:

> What if the sacred were the unconscious perception the human being has of its untenable eroticism: always on the borderline between nature and culture, the animalistic and the verbal, the sensible and the nameable? What if the sacred were not the religious *need* for protection and omnipotence that institutions exploit but the jouissance of the *cleavage* – of that power/powerlessness – of that exquisite lapse?[3]

---

[2]J. Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, pp. 1 & 178.

[3]Ibid. p. 27.

Let us posit this: is not the sacred an example of revolt? The sacred lapse brings to mind the suspension of time within time of the working-through that precedes a subject's rebirth. If we grant then for a moment that the sacred is a kind of jouissance, then Kristeva's hypothesis that a specifically feminine sacred exists becomes a very interesting one. After all, Kristeva has put forward that women have privileged access to revolt.

In the end, it is not important to *name* a link between the feminine and the sacred. Of interest to us is that in revolt and its subversion of temporality (the memory-trace, the working-through, and the interminable analysis), the *possibility* of that link is left open:

> The sacred is, of course, experienced in private; it even seemed to us to be what gives meaning to the most intimate of singularities, at the intersection of the body and thought, biology and memory, life and meaning – among men and women. Women, *perhaps*, stand at that intersection in a more dramatic, more symptomatic manner, in a more unknown manner in the future that is upon us.[4]

Kristeva emphasizes 'perhaps' because she insists upon leaving the question open to further questioning. The open, analytic listening and retrospective return that facilitates Kristeva's theory of intimate revolt is significant and valuable in terms of researching female subjectivity because Christianity, in effect, becomes a possible intermediary path for conceptualizing the feminine.

---

[4]J. Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, p. 178.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Primary Sources: Works by Julia Kristeva

The System and the Speaking Subject. Lisse, NL: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1975 (1973).

Revolution in Poetic Language. Trans. Margaret Waller (1984). In *The Portable Kristeva*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Columbia UP, 2002, pp. 27-92. – Originally published as *La Révolution du langage poétique*. Paris: Seuil, 1974.

"Oscillation Between Power and Denial," interview with Xavière Gauthier. Trans. Marilyn A. August. In *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Eds. Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron. Amherst: The U. of Massachusetts Press, 1980, pp. 165-67. – Originally published as "Oscillation du 'pouvoir' au 'refus':" Journal *Tel Quel* (Summer, 1974).

"Women's Time," updated version, trans. Ross Guberman (1994). In *The Portable Kristeva*, 2002, pp. 351-71; also original trans. Alice Jardine & Harry Blake (1981). In *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*. Eds. Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, & Barbara C. Gelpi. Chicago, IL: The U. of Chicago Press, 1982. – Originally published as "Le Temps des femmes" in *34/44: Cahiers de recherche de sciences des textes et documents* (Winter 1979 – No 5): 5-19.

Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. Trans. Leon. S. Roudiez (1982). In *The Portable Kristeva*, 2002, pp. 229-63. – Originally published as *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Paris: Seuil, 1980.

Tales of Love. Trans. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1987. Originally published as *Histoires d'amour*. Paris: Denoël, 1983.

In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Columbia UP, 1988. – Originally published as *Au commencement était l'amour*. Paris: Hachette, 1985.

"A Question of Subjectivity – An Interview," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Philip Rice & Patricia Waugh. New York: Arnold, 1996. – Originally published in *Women's Review* (1986 – No 12): 19-21.

Julia Kristeva: Interviews. Ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.

The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt: The Power and Limits of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 1. Trans. Jeanine Herman. New York: Columbia UP, 2000. – Originally published as *Sens et non-sens de la révolte*. Paris: Fayard, 1996.

Intimate Revolt: The Power and Limits of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 2. Trans. Jeanine Herman. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. Originally published in two parts: *La révolte intime*. Paris: Fayard, 1997; "L'Avenir d'une révolte." Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1998.

_____ & Catherine Clément. *The Feminine and the Sacred.* Trans. Jane Marie Todd. New York: Columbia UP, 2001. Originally published as *Le féminin et le sacré*. Paris: Stock, 1998.

Crisis of the European Subject. Trans. Susan Fairfield. New York: The Other Press, 2000.

The Portable Kristeva. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Columbia UP, 2002; Abbreviation: PK.

2. Secondary Sources

2.1 Other Writings by Julia Kristeva

Recherches pour une semanalyse. Paris: Seuil, 1969.

About Chinese Women. Trans. Anita Barrows. London : Marion Boyars, 1977. – Originally published as *Des Chinoises*. Éditions des Femmes, 1974.

La traversée des signes. Paris: Seuil, 1974.

Polylogue. Paris: Seuil, 1977.

"À quoi servent les intellectuels?" Interview with Jean-Paul Enthoven : Magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* (June 20-26, 1977 – No 658): 98-134.

"Le sujet en procès: Le langage poétique." In Jean-Marie Benoist, ed. *L'identité: Séminaire interdisciplinaire dirigé par Claude Lévi-Strauss professeur au Collège de France*, 1974-1975. Paris: Grasset, 1977, 348 p.; pp. 223-56.

"Talking about *Polylogue*," interview with Françoise van Rossum-Guyon. Trans. Seán Hand. In *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987, pp.110-117. – Originally published in *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 1977.

Desire in Language. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, & Leon Roudiez and edited by Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.

Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia. Trans. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1989. – Originally published as *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987.

Strangers to Ourselves. Trans. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. – Originally published as *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*. Paris: Fayard, 1989.

New Maladies of the Soul. Trans. Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia UP, 1995. – Originally published as *Les Nouvelles maladies de l'âme*. Paris: Fayard, 1993.

Time and Sense : Proust and Literary Experience. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. – Originally published as *Le temps sensible: Proust et l'expérience littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

Le génie féminin. Paris : Gallimard.
– vol. 1: *Hannah Arendt* [series « Folio Essais », 432], 1999.
– vol. 2: *Mélanie Klein* [series « Folio Essais », 433], 2000.
– vol. 3: *Colette* [series « Folio Essais »], 2002.

"Aux frontières du vivant": *Magazine Littéraire* (February 2004 – No 428): 33-36.

Meurtre à Byzance. Paris: Fayard, 2004.

2.2 Writings on Julia Kristeva

Alcoff, Linda. "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory" (1995), in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Chow, Rey. *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*. Minneapolis, MN: U. of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Crownfield, David, ed. *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women and Pyschoanalysis*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992.

Fraser, Nancy. "Structuralism or Pragmatics?: On Discourse Theory and Feminist Politics," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Joy, Morny, Kathleen O'Grady & Judith L. Poxon, eds. *French Feminists On Religion: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Hendricks, Christina & Kelly Oliver, eds. "At the Limits of Discourse: Heterogeneity, Alterity, and the Maternal Body in Kristeva's Thought," in *Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy and Language*. New York: State University of New York, 1999.

Oliver, Kelly, ed. *French Feminism Reader*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Inc., 2000.

Van Langendonck, Katleen. "*En être et ne pas être – About Julia Kristeva.*" http://www.sarma.be/nieuw/taz/..%5Cbvisible%5Clangendonck.htm. – Cited March 16, 2005.

3. Other Sources

Butler, Judith. "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Philip Rice & Patricia Waugh. New York: Arnold, 1996. – Originally published in *Feminism as Critique*. Eds. Seyla Benhabib & Drucilla Cornell, 1987, pp.128-42.

_____. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

_____. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1996), in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Code, Lorraine, ed. *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Jardine, Alice A. *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*. Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 1985.

Klages, Mary. "Jacques Lacan," http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/lacan.html. – Cited April 14, 2005.

Lipovetsky, Gilles. *La troisième femme: Permanence et révolution du féminin.* Paris: Gallimard, 1997.

Rabouin, David. "Les gender studies en question": *Magazine Littéraire* (April 2005 – No 441): 24-26.

Saguaro, Shelley, *Psychoanalysis and Woman: A Reader*. New York: New York UP, 2000.

"Jacques Lacan." New York, 1997. From The European Graduate School website http://www.egs.edu/resources/lacan.html. – Cited June 20, 2005.