Key Contemporary Thinkers

KRISTEVA

s. k. keltner

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Kristeva

Thresholds

S. K. Keltner

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for Jay and Brando

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Abbreviations

AR	*L'avenir d'une révolte*
B	"Beauvoir aux risques de la liberté"
BRF	"Beauvoir and the Risks of Freedom"
BS	*Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*
C	*Crisis of the European Subject*
CDN	*Contra la depression nationale*
D	"Dialogue with Julia Kristeva"
DL	*Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*
ENM	*Étrangers à nous-mêmes*
FeS	*Le féminin et le sacré*
FGA	*Hannah Arendt* (volume 1 of *Female Genius – Life, Madness, Words*)
FGC	*Colette* (volume 2 of *Female Genius – Life, Madness, Words*)
FGK	*Melanie Klein* (volume 3 of *Female Genius – Life, Madness, Words*)
FS	*The Feminine and the Sacred*
GFA	*Le génie féminin: Hannah Arendt*
GFC	*Le génie féminin: Colette*
GFK	*Le génie féminin: Melanie Klein*
HA	*Histoires d'amour*
HP	*La haine et le pardon: pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse III*
I	'Intimité voilée, intimité violée'
IR	*Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*
JKI	*Julia Kristeva Interviews*
LI	*Le langage, cet inconnu*
LU	*Language, the Unknown: An Initiation into Linguistics*
M	"Mémoires"
MB	*Murder in Byzantium*
MBR	*Meurtre à Byzance: Roman*
MH	"My Memory's Hyperbole"
ND	" 'Nous Deux' or a (Hi)story of Intertextuality"
NMA	*Les nouvelles maladies de l'âme*
NMS	*New Maladies of the Soul*
NN	*Nations without Nationalism*
NV	"La Nation et le Verbe"
OMW	*The Old Man and the Wolves*
P	*Possessions*
Ps	*Possessions* (French)
PH	*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*
PdH	*Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection*

PST	*Proust and the Sense of Time*
RI	*La révolte intime: pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse II*
RLP	*La revolution du language poétique*
RPL	*Revolution in Poetic Language*
SeNS	*Sens et non-sens de la révolte: pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse I*
SN	*Soleil noir, depression et mélancolie*
SNS	*The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*
SO	*Strangers to Ourselves*
TL	*Tales of Love*
TS	*Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature*
TSe	*Le temps sensible: Proust et l'expérience littéraire*
VHL	*Le vieil homme et les loups*

Introduction: Thresholds

A quick tour through the themes of Julia Kristeva's works reveals an overarching intention to interrogate the personal trials of singular psychic life. Experiences of horror, fear, rejection, crime, love, loss, despair, grief, suffering, violence, alienation, banality, strangeness, foreignness, migrancy, and intimacy, for example, fill the titles and pages of her corpus. Her style of approach may be heard as equally intimate, drawing as she does from her experiences as an analyst, a reader of literature, a writer, a foreigner, a woman, a mother, a daughter. Descriptions of personal experience, autobiographical reflections, the personal stories of her patients, and biographical accounts of philosophers, artists, writers, saints, and psychoanalysts all punctuate Kristeva's critical, as well as her fictional works. Even her descriptions of psychoanalytic structures and dynamics are overwhelmed by the narrative of a personal "I." Kristeva's works are intent on returning her reader to the animating experiences of everyday life, in all of its joys and failures.

Kristeva's characteristic style is undoubtedly one of the aspects of her work that makes her so attractive, but it is also the controversial source of a set of social, historical, and political questions. These questions may be framed around two central themes: the role, status, and significance of the individual and her/his experience, on the one hand, and the role, status, and significance of psychoanalysis, on the other. From the perspective of traditional and contemporary social and political thought, Kristeva's object domain falls outside the proper standards of debate insofar as her focus seems to attend to the private individual at the expense of the public space. Moreover, Kristeva's reliance on psychoanalytic theory may initially appear as a radical

withdrawal from social and political concerns or to blindly support hegemonic structures of power. Importantly, however, such conclusions prematurely delineate the framework of interpretation by restricting meaning to a governing set of inherited philosophical binaries, including matter/form, soma/psyche, affect/word, subject/object, self/other, individual/society, personal history/social history, private/public, and space/time. The "object" of Kristeva's work cannot be located on one side of an opposition. Rather, Kristeva critically occupies their permeable thresholds to expose dynamic processes of subjectivity and meaning resistant to these basic presuppositions.

Likewise, neither can Kristeva's choice of psychoanalysis be settled by a logic isolating psychoanalysis from social history and other discursive systems. Kristeva does not simply adopt a predetermined field of study, nor simply obey the rules of a theoretical approach that would limit her analyses according to its devotees. Psychoanalysis is neither the *sine qua non* of Kristeva's approach, nor accepted as a scientific discourse of metaphysical truth. One of the central arguments of this book is that Kristeva's psychoanalytic must be contextualized within social history and its intersections with other theoretical approaches, including aesthetics and phenomenology. Kristeva's interdisciplinary approach and revaluation of psychoanalysis circumscribes an altogether different dimension of meaning that challenges and transforms the logical oppositions that regulate our understanding of experience, subjectivity, and language. She delineates a subjective-symbolic dimension of meaning that avoids turning one side of an opposition into the mirror image of the other. That is to say, she foregrounds a mode of thinking that refuses any myth of origins. If she privileges psychoanalysis, it is because she understands it to be among the only discourses preoccupied

with a dynamic of meaning and subjectivity irreducible to philosophical binaries.

According to Kristeva, and in her own words, “the only concrete universal is the signifying process itself” (PH 67; PdH 82). Kristeva’s *concrete universal* establishes a dynamic site of meaning and subjectivity that may be articulated within, but is ultimately resistant to, the fixed oppositions of binary thinking. By focusing on signification as a *dynamic* constitutive of subjectivity and meaning, Kristeva draws upon the inherited oppositions of philosophical thought (e.g., soma/psyche, matter/sign, self/other, subjectivity/sociality), but the processes of meaning production that underlie them resist both the traditional logic of noncontradiction, on the one hand, and the dialectical logic of reconciliation, on the other. For Kristeva, the signifying process denotes a logic of relation between two poles in which each represents a term of the relation and the movement or process of relating. Relation presupposes separation and vice versus. Kristeva thus often refers to her central object of concern as a *frontier*, a *border*, a *limit*, a *crossroads*, or a *threshold*. It indicates a material process of differentiation and nondifferentiation that refuses any unity of subjectivity or meaning and instead thrives on the transitive tensions and passions of concrete life. *Kristeva: Thresholds* follows Kristeva’s foregrounding of the signifying process as the concrete universal motivating her development. The central thesis is that the “threshold” clarifies the central thought of Kristeva’s work, but more specifically, it offers an account of how her work coheres as social, historical reflection. Two of Kristeva’s autobiographical reflections may serve to bring more concrete precision to the complexity of what this book argues is Kristeva’s central thought: “My Memory’s Hyperbole,” originally published in 1983, and “Nous Deux: A History of Intertextuality,” originally presented in 2002.

Taken together, they provide a good overview to the newcomer to Kristeva's work of the formative experiences (personal, social, and intellectual) influencing her development, as well as an anchor in the central arguments of the present study.

Kristeva's Autobiographical Reflections

In "My Memory's Hyperbole" (1983) – an autobiographical essay appearing in a special issue of the *New York Literary Forum* on "The Female Autograph" (1984), one year after its original publication in *L'Infini*, the journal that replaced *Tel Quel*[1] – Kristeva recounts the formative political, intellectual, and personal circumstances that animated her development from the mid-1960s, when she arrived in Paris, to the early 1980s and the publication of *Powers of Horror* (1980). Kristeva arrived in Paris at the age of 25 to encounter an intellectual climate underwritten by the political mood of 1960s Paris and world politics. Any account of the "intellectual path of this period," she says, "should primarily be an account of change – and for some it was an explosion – of bodies, of discourses, of ways of being" (MH 5; M 40-1). According to Kristeva, a revolution in thought was transforming the centuries old relationship between the speaking being and language. In *Language, the Unknown: An Initiation into Linguistics* (1969), she describes this transformation as a new ear in which the "cult of Man" was being demystified and replaced by "language" as the primary tool of philosophical and social analysis (LU 4; LI 10). In her autobiographical essay, she characterizes the event in grammatical terms. She says, "[w]hen thought admits its indebtedness to language ... the speaking being is thrown into the infinite conceived as the power and

cunning of the verb" (MH 7; M 42). For Kristeva, the insight into the functioning of language fundamentally alters our assumptions about who and what we are. No longer could subjectivity be understood as a substantive ("Man") that stood alone, independent of its primary activity, i.e., speaking. Rather, subjectivity would have to be theorized as an activity, event, or process of signification. This insight into the *speak-ing being* challenged the most seemingly basic metaphysical distinctions – including the distinction of the subject from materiality, others, society, history, language, and so on – and led Kristeva to an analysis of what had hitherto remained obscure to social understanding: "The labyrinths of the *speaking subject* – the microcosm of a complex logic whose effects had only partially surfaced in society – led us directly toward regions that were obscure but crucial, specific but universal, particular but transhistorical, far from society's policed scenarios" (MH 7; M 42-3). Henceforth, phenomena that had once seemed extraneous to philosophical and social analysis – "modern art, madness, subjective experience, various marginal phenomenal" – made possible "an oblique grappling with 'the social' " (ibid.).

Kristeva's concern to analyze the social *obliquely* (i.e., through what she takes to be its hidden background, revealed in seemingly extrinsic and superfluous phenomena) helped to shape her more general methodological technique. Whereas for some, she insists, the task was to deconstruct more popular methods of approach (i.e., phenomenology and structuralism) in order to show their hidden metaphysical assumptions, her own task, she claims, was "to 'dynamize' the structure by taking into consideration the speaking subject and its unconscious experience on the one hand and, on the other, the pressures of other social structures" (MH 9; M 44). This methodologically unique task persists throughout Kristeva's

oeuvre. For example, in one of her later works, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Power and Limits of Psychoanalysis* (1996), Kristeva outlines her aim in similar terms, this time emphasizing the implications for philosophical and political claims to universality. She clarifies the "source of thought and language" as a double movement between the universal (i.e., the inherited meanings of communal life) and the singularity of personal life. Singularity is inscribed in the universal through the transformation of the ideas, concepts, and frameworks of inherited meanings. Kristeva seeks to reveal the process of meaning production and the speaking being concealed by and within common codes of communication by drawing the latter to its limits. – " 'There is meaning': this will be my universal. And 'I' use the words of the tribe to inscribe my singularity" (SNS 19; SeNS 32-3). Kristeva's intent to expose the obscure yet formative processes inherent in social, as well as theoretical, structures was simultaneously stimulated by her confrontation with modern literary texts. Her experience, she claims, conditioned her development of a semiotic approach to literature, as well as her eventual turn to psychoanalysis, the latter of which, she claims, is the logical consequence of her initial interrogations (MH 10; M 45). Literature and psychoanalysis subsequently became Kristeva's privileged sites for examining and exposing the fundamental processes through which meaning and the subject are both made and unmade within specific social-historical contexts.

It is important to note Kristeva's emphasis on her relationship to the social, cultural, and political context of her work because the autobiographical essay could be received as a confession of her abandonment of politics for a region of concern that is socially and politically irrelevant. The tenor of the Parisian scene in the 1960s and 1970s; world politics and the clash between capitalism and

communism; her own nomadic, cosmopolitan status as an Eastern European in France; and her travels with her new Parisian friends from America to China – all eventually led to Kristeva's revelation of what may seem to the reader of "My Memory's Hyperbole" to be her own political naivety. Kristeva's trip to China in particular exposed what she foresaw as the inevitable transformation of the Cultural Revolution into a nationalist and Soviet-socialist variation.[2] This, she says, marked her "farewell to politics, including feminism," on the one hand, and "definitively inaugurated" her return to the most intimate of continents, "internal experience," on the other (MH 19; M 52). If Kristeva became disaffected with the political activism of her youth and decided to devote herself to the intimacy of internal experience, it would be remiss to interpret the meaning of her comment divorced from the essential, animating insight of her memory's hyperbole. For Kristeva, social and political analysis, action, and discourse must be understood against the background of its most intimate manifestations – love, hate, violence, conflict, despair, madness, alienation, etc. – and vice versus. To dichotomize and exclude subjective experience, as well as their signifiers (i.e., literature and psychoanalysis), from social forces eclipses a key region of social understanding. A more generous evaluation of Kristeva's comment, situated in the context of the essay as a whole, might be that her "farewell to politics, including feminism" marked the consolidation of an approach to politics, including feminism (though Kristeva rejects this term), from the perspective of the sphere of concern of concrete experience at the threshold of internal and external forces. For Kristeva, psychoanalysis, as well as the literary text, and its concern for subjective experience exposes the most basic and yet most obscure enigmas of social and historical life.

Kristeva's emphasis in "My Memory's Hyperbole" concerning her object, approach, and relationship to social and political issues remains constant in her more recent autobiographical reflections. In a lecture delivered to Columbia University in 2002, subsequently published by the *The Romanic Review* as " 'Nous Deux' or a (Hi)story of Intertextuality" – the essay from which the current book, *Kristeva: Thresholds*, happens to derive its title – Kristeva identifies one of her earliest concepts from the 1960s, "intertextuality," as an exemplary instance of her methodological approach and general concern. Kristeva here defines "intertextuality" as "mostly a way of making *history* go down in us" (ND 8). For Kristeva, the literary text (or any meaningful "text") is not a closed system of self-referential meaning. Rather, its meaning lies in its dependence on other texts or the "several texts within a text" (ibid.). To grasp the meaning of a literary text, it must be put back into its social and historical context, i.e., the other texts constitutive of the intertextual system of which it forms a part. Intertextual analysis is thus a way of introducing diachrony or history to an otherwise seemingly static, synchronic, independent structure of meaning. What is significant about Kristeva's more recent commentary on her early work is her attempt to tie this concept from the 1960s to subsequent concepts and concerns – from her work in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., the subject in process / on trial, abjection, melancholic crisis, migrancy, strangeness) to her more recent work of the 1990s and beyond (e.g., revolt). Kristeva invokes the term "threshold" (Fr. *le seuil*) to indicate "the common point" at which her major concepts converge (ND 9). To signal the complexity of her choice of the term, Kristeva references several figures and traditions of influence: Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin and the literary tradition, political phenomenologist Hannah Arendt, and psychoanalysis. Immediately following the introduction of the term, she says: "Here I want to

remind you of the short episode in the Bakhtin story in which he talks about the '*chronotope du seuil*' [chronotope of the threshold], taken as an emblematic figure for the whole literary tradition. Now, within the psychoanalytical story, the threshold, that in-between zone Hannah Arendt spoke of, is able to render not only a temporal connection or a spatial point of contact, but also a social melting spot, a political openness and most of all a mental plasticity" (ibid.; my emphasis).

Kristeva's first reference recalls Bakhtin's sense of the threshold in the context of what he called "the chronotope of the threshold" – one of the major chronotopes of the literary tradition. According to Bakhtin, a "chronotope" (Gr. *chronos* for time; Gr. *topos* for space/place) is a formal category of literature that represents the inseparability of space (geographical, cultural, material, corporeal) and time (historical, biographical). Bakhtin describes the chronotope thus: "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history."[3] The chronotope is the primary means by which the novel's most abstract elements (ideas, philosophical generalizations, etc.) "take on flesh and blood."[4] Within the multiple and varied chronotopes of which Bakhtin speaks, the chronotope of the threshold represents a break, a crisis, or a moment of change: "The word 'threshold' itself already has a metaphorical meaning in everyday usage (together with its literal meaning), and is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold). In literature, the chronotope of the threshold is always metaphorical and symbolic, sometimes openly but more often implicitly."[5]

According to Bakhtin, the novels of Fyodor Dostoyevsky offer exemplary representations of the chronotope of the threshold. In the works of Dostoyevsky, staircases, hallways, and corridors, as well as streets and squares are, Bakhtin says, “the main places of action … places where crisis events occur, the falls, resurrections, renewals, epiphanies, decisions that determine the whole life of a man. In this chronotope, time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time.”[6] Because the chronotope is a tool of literary analysis that interprets the literary text as a representation of the spatio-temporal context in which it is written, the chronotope of the threshold indicates a crisis that extends beyond the pages of the novel. Dostoyevsky’s chronotopes of the threshold thus indicate larger social and historical crises. In *The Idiot*,[7] for example, Prince Myshkin confronts the growing sense of nihilism in a secular world that has undergone the devaluation of religious mores. One of the central references in that book is Holbein the Younger’s *Painting of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*[8] – a painting that Kristeva herself examines in *Black Sun*.[9] Fittingly, a reproduction of the painting hangs above a doorway in the home of Myshkin’s would-be murderer, Rogozhin: “Over the door to the next room hung a painting rather strange in form, around six feet wide and no more than ten inches high. It portrayed the Savior just taken down from the cross. The prince glanced fleetingly at it, as if recalling something, not stopping, however, wanting to go on through the door. He felt very oppressed and wanted to be out of this house quickly.”[10] When Prince Myshkin tries to speak of it, he claims that “looking at that picture” could cause one to “lose their very faith.”[11] Kristeva’s reference to Bakhtin’s chronotope of the threshold to clarify her own object of concern indicates that her work confronts the

unsettling processes of meaning and the subject as a more general socio-historical crisis, which may be witnessed in the literary text. Kristeva's persistent emphasis on modern literature – Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, Ferdinand Celine, Marguerite Duras, James Joyce, Stéphane Mallarmé, to name a few – as exemplary of the crises she examines in psychoanalysis attests to this meaning of the threshold.

After citing Bakhtin to indicate the significance of the term "threshold," Kristeva next references the "psychoanalytic story" (ND 9). Significantly, however, she equates the threshold that psychoanalysis approaches (i.e., psychic space) with what she calls "that in-between zone Hannah Arendt spoke of" (ibid.). Kristeva's reference to psychoanalysis extends the concept theorized by Bakhtin to an intrapsychic domain; yet, her reference to the 20th century phenomenologist and political theorist indicates that, for Kristeva, the psyche presented by psychoanalysis is not simply the closed, pre-social individual that it is generally thought to be. Rather, as a threshold, the psyche, she says, "is able to render not only a temporal connection or a spatial point of contact, but also a social melting spot, a political openness and most of all a mental plasticity." The psyche is the spatio-temporal site at which (traditional) contraries meet: space and time, word and flesh, mind and body, self and other, individual and society, and so on. By referencing Arendt, Kristeva situates her understanding of the Freudian psyche squarely within the phenomenological critique of the modern liberal subject.

In *New Maladies of the Soul* (1993), Kristeva calls the psyche "an implacable enigma" (NMS 4; NMA 10), which cannot be reduced to any single origin, be it biological, personal, or social. The psyche is not locatable on one or the other side of a binary but crosses the boundary by occupying its very limits. Irreducible to biology, irreducible to the symbolic, the psyche cannot be located. It is a