

The Sacred and Revolt in the Poetry of Wislawa Szymborska: An Interdisciplinary Reading

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Julia Kristeva has argued that beyond the socio-political level the women's movement is situated within the framework of the religious crisis of our civilization. By this she refers to the whole post-modern, post-structuralist enterprise that questions the way we represent and define ourselves. This involves not only language but all its preconditions and is directly engaged in the search for meaning and value. Consequently she has argued we should put aside the idea of identity and ask instead, what is our place in the symbolic contract or linguistic community. This paper seeks to explore Kristeva's question through the poetry of the Polish Nobel Laureate, Wislawa Szymborska. I will argue that Szymborska mediates experience through poetry in a way that resacrilises the ordinary and transforms the Sacred.

Feminist theology seeks to understand women's marginality in relation to religious institutions and practices as part of the broader debate about women's position in the patriarchal discourses and monolithic power structures that shape Western society. Julia Kristeva has argued that beyond the socio-political level the women's movement is situated within the framework of the religious crisis of our civilization. By this she refers to the whole post-modern, post-structuralist enterprise that questions the way we represent and define ourselves. This involves not only language but all its preconditions and is directly engaged in the search for meaning and value. Consequently she has argued we should put aside the idea of identity and ask instead, "What can be our place in the symbolic contract?" (Kristeva in Moi, 1986:199).

The history of Poland offers a specific example of a country whose poets have been engaged in a search for meaning and equilibrium "amid the chaos and fluidity of all values" (Milosz, 1983:89). Consequently this paper seeks to explore Kristeva's question through the poetry of the Polish Nobel Laureate, Wislawa Szymborska and her dialogue with the poet-sage of Ecclesiastes.¹

Kristeva transforms Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic Order² into a distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. She argues that they are processes rather than static entities and that the interaction between these two constitutes the signifying process. Kristeva rejects the notion of a transcendent Other since this posits language as a homogenous, monolithic structure but she

insists on a place for the subject because it allows us to account for the various heterogeneous forces which disrupt language. Thus her subject is 'in-process' as the site of the interaction between the symbolic and those heterogeneous forces which she calls the semiotic. Because literature or art relies on the idea of the subject she privileges it with psychoanalysis as the 'place for transformation or change.'

Kristeva articulates the contemporary malaise in terms of the denial of the symbolic and the abolition of psychic space. She insists that language is a heterogeneous signifying process and that the real appears when the semiotic is transposed into the symbolic. The symbolic is essential for the creation of psychic space. This dialectic of the symbolic/semiotic transposed to the social becomes the dialectic of the sacred and 'revolt.' Thus she argues the dialectic law/transgression has become vulnerable and risks hardening in several areas of repression. The implications of its failure take the form of fundamentalism or nihilism. What is required is a 'culture of revolt' to smash the existing order so that new equilibriums can be reconstituted.

For Kristeva the sacred is the instance that embodies the collectivity. The imaginary construction of language is a separation from a presumed state of nature and union with the world. This separation is essentially sacrificial and it is significant not only at the level of the family but also at the level of society. Like the infinite the sacred cannot be represented but is to be grasped as the enactment of social origin.

Kristeva suggests women are in a privileged position to lead a 'culture of revolt' and bring about new symbolic forms, to "nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community" (Kristeva in Moi, 1986:207). She warns against anthropomorphic identity as that which most limits the intellectual adventures of our species. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that women are more vulnerable in the existing Symbolic Order and what she does advocate for women is identification with the potency of the imaginary to create an inner life or psychic space where the sacred may erupt.

The poetry of the Polish poet *Waslawa Szymborska* offers an ideal place to explore Kristeva's question. Polish poetry has had to bear witness to circumstances non-Polish readers can only guess at. Nevertheless, borrowing from Kristeva one might understand the history of Poland as a totalitarian expression of the Symbolic Order. Polish poetry has needed to remain immune to the historical disasters, to find strength from belief in the basic goodness of the world and be a home for incorrigible hope. It has been the only place where the semiotic has been able to find some quasi-legitimate expression. *Szymborska's* poetry offers a specific example of poetry as a tool of 'revolt' which transforms the symbolic in its search for meaning and equilibrium.

In *Szymborska's* poetry Kristeva's question "What can be our place in the symbolic contract?" becomes "How should we live?" Since the sacred is unspeakable and unrepresentable the instance that embodies the collectivity is enacted through the eternal ethical question. The extraordinary capacity of *Szymborska's* poetry is that it illustrates the naivety of the question but never

gives up on it. She constantly raises questions and challenges established truths. Her poetry addresses this question from a variety of perspectives. It explores different discourses of knowledge, different phenomena — from friendship to world history, art, science and writing — she reflects on the past and the future, mortality and eternity. Ultimately her response is ‘I don’t know’ but not as an expression of apathy or despair. Rather, her poetry challenges received forms of the symbolic and its ability to deal with new instances of the semiotic. It expresses not only a need to remember but an ethical responsibility to look forward.

In her Nobel acceptance lecture, Wislawa Szymborska (1996) expresses admiration for the poet-sage Ecclesiastes, “the author of that moving lament on the vanity of all human endeavours.” Like Ecclesiastes, Szymborska’s search for meaning and the ‘good’ in living is *carpe diem*. However, she challenges his view that “there is nothing new under the sun.”

Ecclesiastes belongs to the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. This body of literature focuses on the creation of cosmos and humanity and differs theologically from the patriarchal narratives and histories which focus on salvation and covenant. Scholars have interpreted the notion of wisdom differently as either an expression of optimism and belief in divine blessing or as the revelation of God as order in the created world (Murphy, 1985:5).

The wisdom tradition was nurtured principally by the monarchy and belongs to the court and temple schools. Subsequently wisdom is associated with education and a belief that the socio-political and religious institutions were part of a righteous order which God originated and sustained. The sages argued that to ‘fear the Lord’ was to recognise him as the creator and sustainer of the world and trust in divine providence and justice. Ecclesiastes critiques this tradition but he speaks from within it. His association of the ‘words of the Teacher’ with the ‘Son of David’ undergirds his assault on wisdom with its most authoritative voice but while he dissents from traditional wisdom he never ceases to be a sage.

Traditionally Israelite faith affirms divine justice (Perdue, 1994: 47). The sages believed justice was the most important divine attribute, that it permeated creation and was the basis for communal existence. Ecclesiastes questions this belief. Although he does not doubt the existence and power of ‘the God’ he does not envision a world in which justice and well-being prevail and he finds no connection between the moral life and cosmology.

For Ecclesiastes the tragedy for humans is that God does not reveal to them the direction of cosmos and history. The sage argues that human action and knowledge are based on the desire to master and perpetuate life but this desire cannot be fulfilled. He questions the value of wisdom since even the sages are denied understanding of the meaning and purpose of the cosmos. Consequently, he finds no evidence for the intervention of the creator in human history and he concludes that human beings are alone responsible for the corruption of the created world:

*See, this alone I found, that God made
human beings straightforward, but they
have devised many schemes. (Eccl. 7:29)*

Ecclesiastes does not engage in the debates found in *Job* but his teaching is a critique of faith based on reason. Since he can find no evidence of divine justice and purpose he seeks to find a social ethics based on human action and knowledge. Thus his quest is to determine the 'good' in human living and the 'good' he discovers is *carpe diem*:

This is what I have seen to be good: It is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. (Eccl.5:18)

For Ecclesiastes this 'good' is the organising virtue for all other human values and the basis of the moral life. Nevertheless it is based on a scepticism which understands human beings as victims of divine capriciousness.

It is easy to see the attraction of Ecclesiastes's teaching to Szyborska's imagination given her Polish context. She cannot reconcile Polish history and the horrors of Nazi occupation with notions of divine justice. Like Ecclesiastes she uses the language of poetry to search for meaning in the face of suffering and injustice. However she is engaged not in a critique of faith *by* reason but in a critique of faith *and* reason. She subverts received opinion and argues that rational discourse cannot answer 'the most pressing questions':

Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others.

It will never prove it now,
now that its years are numbered,
its gait is shaky,
its breath is short.

A couple of problems weren't going
to come up any more:
hunger, for example,
and war, and so forth.

There was going to be respect
for helpless people's helplessness,
trust, that kind of stuff.

God was finally going to believe
in a man both good and strong,
but good and strong
are still two different men.

"How should we Live?" someone asked me in a letter.
I had meant to ask him
the same question.

Again, and as ever,
as may be seen above,
the most pressing questions
are naïve ones. (Szyborska, 1993:147-148)

Szyborska does not ignore her political context, on the contrary, her poetry expresses empathy and commitment. However, she repeatedly aims for the bigger picture. Like Ecclesiastes she seeks a perspective from outside time and history. The result is a poetry that is more personal and metaphysical than political. Similarly, she addresses a collective experience. Although personal, her poetry is neither confessional nor autobiographical. In this regard it is significantly different from much poetry in English which carries the legacy of the Romantics in its focus on the response of the creative mind. Szyborska's poetry expresses 'despair' without angst, and 'rapture' without sentimentality.

The search for the 'good' by Ecclesiastes is mirrored by Szyborska as the inevitable question, "How are we to live et cetera/since 'we can't avoid the void,'" and she argues that the question is naïve. She subverts the androcentric construction of God which assumes an answer and challenges the scepticism which results in a world-weary view that there is "nothing new under the sun." For Szyborska joy is possible precisely because "nothing is ordinary":

Granted in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases like "the ordinary world," "ordinary life," "the ordinary course of events"...But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world. (Szyborska, 1996)

Szyborska's engagement with *Ecclesiastes* is in effect an engagement with creation theology and Western epistemology. When Szyborska challenges Ecclesiastes' scepticism she questions all received notions of the Symbolic Order that rest on the assumption of ultimate presence or Being. Such a philosophical debate is beyond the scope of this study. However, one might understand it in terms of Kristeva's argument that the law governing, or major constraint affecting any social practice lies in the fact that it signifies; i.e. that it is articulated like a language (Kristeva in Moi, 1986: 25). In Western thought language is conceived of as an **act** carried out by a **subject**. This subject turns out to be the transcendental ego which has broken away from its body, its unconscious and also its history. For Kristeva, a more appropriate theory of meaning would posit the speaking subject as a divided subject (conscious/unconscious) and "attempt to specify the types of operation characteristic of the two sides of this split" (Kristeva in Moi, 1986:28). Thus she argues for language as a signifying **process** or interaction between the symbolic and semiotic located in the speaking subject.

Similarly, monotheism creates an abstract symbolic community beyond individuals and their beliefs by isolating the principle of One Law — "the One, Sublimating, Transcendent Guarantor of the ideal interests of the community" (Kristeva in Moi, 1986:141) in the symbolic realm. This transcendent principle, represented by God, is sustained by separating and locating desire which threatens and maintains it in the Other sex. 'Woman' then "ensures the permanence of the divine paternal function for all humans; that is the desire to continue the species" (Kristeva in Moi, 1986:141). Kristeva points out that it is naïve to consider our

modern societies as simply patrilinear, or class-structured, or capitalist and omit that they are governed by monotheism, the 'paternal Word.' Even when disguised as humanism, monotheistic ideology absolutely depends upon a "radical separation of the sexes" (Kristeva in Moi, 1986:141).

It is important then for women neither to refuse to insert ourselves into the symbolic nor to embrace a masculine model for femininity as the 'unconscious' (semiotic) within monotheism. The result is a difficult paradox, the speaking (female) subject like semiotics itself is in a position both subversive of and dependent on the Law.

Szyborska's poetry recognises this paradox. Her language questions the ability of language to express the totality of experience. She uses neologisms, "authoritorture" and memorable images, "unshattered head" to transgress and transform the Symbolic Order. Thus, when Ecclesiastes argues that joy is the only thing that gives human life value and meaning, he focuses on its absence. His argument rests on the separation of humanity from the knowledge and presence of God. So, while he acknowledges the materiality of life as the source of pleasure, his construction of the Transcendent cuts off access to it. For Szyborska this separation does not exist since there is no transcendent Other. For her, the value and meaning of life is life itself. Everything, even suffering and injustice are part of the mystery of "unfathomable life." Her focus on *carpe diem* as the basis of a social ethics expresses a passionate concern for continuity and community. She expresses affirmation and a desire for positive human integration and transformation. Her poetry strives to disturb the androcentric construction of the Symbolic in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

"Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem" (1995:116) gives some indication of her dialogue with Ecclesiastes. The reference to and identification with Pascal, (whose birthdate, 1623 echoes her own, 1923), alludes to the poem as a critique of theology and knowledge. The title and narration of this poem illustrate the way Szyborska plays with dualities. The voice of the poem is a first person narrator who comments on and quotes directly from an unwritten poem, a poem that does not exist. Immediately it is situated at the junction of the semiotic and the symbolic. Like Ecclesiastes who devalues traditional wisdom, Szyborska subverts reason to challenge received perceptions of reality. In particular she challenges the absence/presence dichotomy which rests on the assumption of Being by examining an "objective existence" which is "Beyond the reach/ of our presence" (Szyborska, 1995:41).

The distinction between what exists and what does not is confused and distance is achieved by the gap between the 'I' and the 'authoress,' emphasised by the irony that the poem opens with the 'opening words' of the unwritten poem:

In the poem's opening words
the authoress asserts that while the Earth is small,
the sky is excessively large and
in it there are, I quote, "too many stars for our own good."

The poem uses the language of science to question the value of scientific language and methodology to address contemporary existential and ethical issues.

Thus, Ecclesiastes' eternal cosmos "under the sun" becomes for Szyborska scientific space-time under "all suns that ever shone." This is experienced as "excessively large," a "terrifying expanse" in which "one detects a certain helplessness." The physical description is a metaphor for the psychological experience. The very size of the universe undermines its significance, "there are... 'too many stars for our own good'."

Szyborska implies that rational discourse cannot account for our whole experience, or answer our "most pressing questions." The poetry argues that it is the language of poetry rather than science — "the laws of probability," "universally accepted assumptions" and "irrefutable evidence" — that can address the implications raised by the question "whether we are, in the end, alone/under the sun, all suns that ever shone." It suggests that only poetry can represent the needs and drives of the semiotic necessary to renew the symbolic contract.

Ecclesiastes structures his argument by balancing cosmology and anthropology, the created cosmos with human doing and knowing; meaning cannot be found in wisdom or belief in divine justice (Perdue, 1994:208). Szyborska imitates this structure and juxtaposes contemplation of the universe with human perceptions. Thus the "Lady Bard ...returns to Earth" and human action and knowledge. For her, the despair inherent in the existential experience, or sacrificial cost of the symbolic contract, is not alleviated by belief in a Transcendent Other. She identifies God as a projection of the male ego. Thus, in calling to God, "man calls out to Himself." The futility of this action is expressed by the broken syntax;

show me the way...

The use of the masculine noun and pronoun emphasises the masculine symbolism and contrasts with the feminine identity of the Lady Bard.

The poetry contrasts androcentric science and theology with a broader concern for an ethics based on the symbolic contract. The construction of the naïve 'authoress' emphasises the significance of the question raised by the poetry, 'i.e. "How are we to live et cetera'." Paradoxically it subverts the gender stereotype and gives authority to the Lady Bard's "moralistic intention" to insist that "our solitary existence exacerbates our sense of obligation." The poem proceeds from an apparently simple statement to reveal its complexity. This is paralleled by the simultaneous move from a consideration of "whether we are...alone" to the more emphatic statement "that we well may be...alone."

The irony is that the poem being evaluated is 'unwritten' because the questions it raises cannot be answered. An answer depends upon an omniscient Other. Ecclesiastes presumes such an answer, albeit known only to God. For him, the lack of confidence in divine providence and failure of God to provide guidelines for a moral existence strengthen the counsel to 'fear the Lord.'

It would be simplistic to suggest Szyborska expresses an existentialist philosophy. She subverts the dichotomy Being/non-Being. There is no monolithic, transcendent, absolute. Thus she illustrates Kristeva's thesis that the Law of the Father is language — sign and time (Kristeva in Moi, 1986: 153). Ecclesiastes may be questioning the traditional relationship of the sages toward the

Symbolic, but he does so within the Symbolic Order. By contrast, Szyborska seeks to subvert the isolation of the symbolic as One Law.

However, both poets share a need to use language to shape a world view which can accommodate the existence of injustice and suffering and at the same time find a moral order. This amounts to a crisis of the imagination. Kristeva argues that entry into language is an essentially sacrificial separation from a presumed state of nature and identification with the world. Importantly, it is the common destination for both sexes, essential for the production of meaning. However, Ecclesiastes' scepticism results from the fact that a dichotomy exists. He cannot re-negotiate the socio-symbolic contract but can only question and argue for ways to live within it. Similarly, Szyborska cannot deny the symbolic. However, by recognising the symbolic as language or sign, she can challenge the existing Symbolic Order and through the imagination and poetry insist the symbolic contract be re-negotiated.

The answer to the question raised by the Lady Bard's 'unwritten' poem resides in the interaction between the speaking subject and the symbolic. That is, in the unrepresentable instance of collectivity, the foundational moment of the symbolic contract. Thus, the answer to the question 'How should we live et cetera' can only be suggested in the authoress' distress "by the thought of life squandered freely/ as if our supplies were boundless." This points to *carpe diem*, a theme that recurs throughout Szyborska's poetry.

In the poem "The End and the Beginning" (1995:178), *carpe diem* is expressed as the only basis for meaning in the aftermath of war. The poem focuses on the need for continuity and survival:

After every war
someone has to tidy up.
Things won't pick
themselves up, after all.

The tone of the poem evokes a practical, female response to housekeeping: "someone has to tidy up." Against this language of daily living activity are contrasted the appalling images of war: "carts loaded with corpses;" "sludge and ashes;" "shards of glass" and "bloody rags;" "bridges" and "railroad stations" that "need to be rebuilt." The language ironically conveys the images as vividly as might the cameras that have "gone/to other wars." That the consequences of war are borne privately by individuals is conveyed by this absence of cameras and public attention and the image of a conversation between two people, the one who remembers with "broom in hand" and the "Someone else [who] listens, nodding/his unshattered head" — significantly the one who does and the one who knows. Szyborska borrows the structure of her examination of experience from *Ecclesiastes*, but she insists it is the collective memory of individuals that shapes history (Perdue, 1994:211).

She subverts Ecclesiastes' lament that "The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them" (Eccl. 1:11). She argues that the only way forward is to live in the present and make way for those who do not share the memory. Or put in

Kristevan terms, the survival of the symbolic contract depends upon the symbolic being able to accommodate new instances of the semiotic. Eventually:

Someone has to lie there
in the grass that covers up
the causes and effects
with a cornstalk in his teeth
gawking at clouds.

To know the joy of the present moment, free from ‘causes and effects’ becomes a moral imperative and the only sustainable basis for a social ethics. Szyborska’s *carpe diem* is not an expression of egocentric stoicism. It does not contradict ‘despair’ by focusing on ‘rapture’ but insists on both as part of the experience of entering into signification. Similarly, it is not an affirmation of ‘something’ over nothing. She acknowledges the abyss but argues “the abyss does not divide us/The abyss surrounds us” (1995: 83). To be divided suggests an internalisation of ‘the abyss’ and a masculine perception of alienation and separation from a transcendent Other. Szyborska’s perception argues for community and inclusiveness and is consistent with her appeal for an ethics based on a response to others.

The title of the poem, and the collection from which it comes, suggests Ecclesiastes:

Better is the end of a thing
than its beginning;
the patient in spirit are
better than the proud in spirit. (Eccl.7:8)

Ecclesiastes uses a cosmological myth of reversal to argue that the world is in disorder. His list of ‘better than’ sayings are subversive aphorisms used to overturn the traditional teaching of the wisdom sages (Perdue, 1994: 235). Szyborska’s appropriation of these words has a similar purpose but she brings to her explorations and critique of contemporary values a belief that “what has been is [*not necessarily*] what will be” (Eccl.1:9). Her poetry subverts received perceptions of reality and makes conscious the fact that the symbolic contract is sacrificial. It also offers the possibility for ‘jouissance,’³ *carpe diem*, and raises awareness of our concomitant responsibilities.

Szyborska’s avoidance of an overtly political poetics is consistent with a desire to question and unsettle received notions of the symbolic, not to replace them: any knowledge that doesn’t lead to new questions quickly dies out: it fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life. In the most extreme cases, cases well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a lethal threat to society.

This is why I value that little phrase “I don’t know” so highly. It’s small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as the outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended. (1996)

For Szyborska, “I don’t know” subverts all forms of oppression and fetishised versions of the symbolic in all its manifestations, political, cultural,

linguistic, internal and external and it is also 'continuous.' Her poetry is consistent with Kristeva's thesis that any version of the symbolic can only be temporary and must give way to new expressions of the semiotic in the constant interaction between these two processes.

Both Szymborska and Kristeva suggest that language is the key to a 'culture of revolt' as the dynamic which makes the symbolic contract possible. The theory and the poetry argue that since the Law is language it can be transformed, perceptions can be changed and the sacrificial cost of the socio-symbolic contract re-negotiated. However, it is important to note that while both women reject a metaphysical signified they insist on a truth in experience.

Kristeva is critical of deconstruction because it also deconstructs every other thesis in order to free itself from the Logos. Thus she argues deconstruction is unable to account for that which is heterogeneous to language and the symbolic space because they are outside the signifier, which is the 'scene of *differance*.' (Moi, 1986:16). The result is that deconstruction relativises all notions of truth and cannot account for the truth of experience. This truth is not absolute, it is constructed in the here and now, it may change and it is dependent upon its context but this does not mean it does not exist. This notion of truth is the experience of the subject and a dimension of reality, not only of the signifier. Kristeva would argue that language does not so much construct us as translate us. Thus we have seen in Szymborska's poetry an insistence on experience. Her poetry juxtaposes the experiences of trauma in post-war Poland with the ordinary experiences and contingencies of daily living. This insistence on experience acknowledges the subject and affirms the notion of truth as a context-dependent aspect of reality in the here and now.

The comparison with *Ecclesiastes* shows that this concern with experience is a matter of ethics. Kristeva argues and Szymborska shows that the isolation of the One, Transcendent Law in the symbolic realm denies the truth in experience. It establishes an absolute truth and Presence, which rationally must result in the scepticism of *Ecclesiastes* who cannot find meaning and value in human living. Szymborska's poetry engages with the Law not only as 'the God' but also as language and time to re-imagine the relationship with the symbolic. Specifically she subverts received notions of Truth to argue that the meaning and value of life is life itself.

Such a focus on the truth in experience insists on a transformation of the Symbolic Order to allow new instances of the semiotic. Szymborska's poetry functions as an aesthetic practice, which demystifies the symbolic contract as the community of language, which universalises and totalises. Such demystification exposes the sacrificial cost of the socio-symbolic contract and invites its re-negotiation. Szymborska affirms the place of the human subject and addresses the question "How should we live" or as Kristeva frames it "What is our place in the symbolic contract?" The question cannot be answered since that could only be done within the symbolic but the poetry and theory both locate truth in the interaction of language and experience. This acknowledges language as a dynamic process

located in the embodied 'subject-in-process' and demands an ethics grounded in the human subject rather than a transcendent Ideal.

Szyborska's poetry transforms the Sacred of monotheistic ideology into the unrepresentable origin of the collective instance. She mediates experience through poetry in a way that not only rehabilitates but also resacralises the ordinary. As a result her poetry revitalises the dialectic of the sacred and revolt to create a continuous present that is not subject to cultural determinism and the delimiting expectations imposed by history and memory. It expresses a profound concern for community and survival through a re-enactment of the sacred.

Endnotes

1. Italics are used to refer to the text of the Hebrew Scriptures, elsewhere standard script is used to refer to its author.

2. The Imaginary and Symbolic Order are fundamental related terms in Lacanian theory. Lacan posits the Imaginary as the pre-Oedipal phase when the child believes itself part of the mother and perceives no separation between itself and the world. The Oedipal crisis represents entry into the Symbolic Order and is linked to the acquisition of language. It occurs when the father splits the unity between mother and child and forbids the child further access to the mother and her body. The phallus represents the Law of the Father and signifies separation and loss. This loss is the loss of the maternal body and from now on desire for the mother or imaginary unity with her is repressed. Lacan calls this primary repression and it opens up the unconscious. This primary repression is evident in the acquisition of language. When the child learns to say "I am" and distinguishes this from "you are" it is equivalent to taking its place in the Symbolic Order. The speaking subject who says "I am" is he or she who has lost the imaginary identity with the mother and with the world. Entry into the Symbolic Order means to accept the phallus as representation of the Law of the Father and that it dominates all human life. The subject may not like this but has no choice; to remain in the Imaginary is equivalent to becoming psychotic and incapable of living in society (Moi, 1985: 99).

'S/symbolic' has been capitalised where it is used in Lacan's sense of a unitary, masculine order and appears in lower case to denote Kristeva's sense of it as a process.

3. Kristeva argues that in Christian ideology motherhood is perceived as a conspicuous sign of the 'jouissance' of the female (or maternal) body, a pleasure that must at all costs be repressed: the function of procreation must be ...subordinated to the rule of the Father's Name. Thus she argues the Judaeo-Christian culture constructs woman as the unconscious of the symbolic order, as a timeless, drive-related jouissance, which through its marginality threatens to break the symbolic chain. It is not to be confused as the prerogative of one biological sex (Moi, 1986:138-139).

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