

**AESTHETIC PRACTICE AS RELIGIOUS PRACTICE
OR JULIA KRISTEVA'S CELEBRATION OF THE INNER LIFE:
THE IMAGINARY FATHER AND THE ELABORATION
OF PSYCHIC SPACE**

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Julia Kristeva is the modern cultural theorist who has been most concerned to emphasise the importance of the inner life - or of psychic space as she calls it - a contemplative space in which the subject is able to mediate and integrate the conflicting demands of the internal and external worlds. In her view religion, psychoanalysis and art (including writing) have been among the great cultural practices concerned with the preservation and cultivation of internality, of the space necessary for both psychic and social health. It is the establishment and maintenance of psychic space that first enables the process of individuation and subsequently, love, tolerance, compassion and community.

Before turning to Kristeva's articulation of the imaginary Father and the elaboration of psychic space I will briefly contextualise this work. Throughout her career as linguist, semiotician, psychoanalyst and cultural theorist, Kristeva has foregrounded the importance of language and the symbolic to human subjectivity, characterising her project as an attempt 'to try to understand more fully the way the border between language and subjectivity functions.' For this reason she has focused on the liminal occurrences of language, from poetic language to the process of language acquisition by the child to the breakdown of language in psychotic discourse to the borderline experience of language in aesthetic and religious discourse. Her interest has been in what she calls 'intersection topics' (love, melancholy, abjection) which may seem psychological but which are in fact 'intersections of various problems and can be examined by means of linguistics, philosophy, history and religion.'¹ Throughout these studies Kristeva has demonstrated Hegel's conviction that 'Language has penetrated into whatever becomes for man something inner.'² Language is a practice that 'invades the entire field of human activity and fills every second of our lives including the time of our dreams.'³ She points out that 'one of the most striking characteristics of our era' is 'the conception of language as the 'key' to man and to social history and as the means of access to the laws of societal functioning.' At some point it became the privileged object of

science and philosophy, a kind of 'pilot science,' 'a model for all thinking that tackled man':

This was a moment fraught with consequences, of which the first was that it no longer allowed man to think of himself as a sovereign entity that could not be broken down into smaller ones. Man had to analyse himself as a speaking system - as language. Perhaps we could say that while the Renaissance substituted the cult of Man with a capital M for that of the God of the Middle Ages, our era is bringing about a revolution of no less importance by effacing all cults, since it is replacing the latest cult, that of Man, with language, a system amenable to scientific analysis. Considering man as language and putting language in the place of man constitutes the demystifying gesture par excellence. It introduces linguistics into the complex and imprecise zone of human activities where ideologies and religions are usually established.⁴

However, if language has in this context replaced both 'Man' and 'God,' language has also become 'God' granted the importance Kristeva places on the symbolic in the constitution of subjectivity and psychic space. After this introduction it will come as no surprise to learn that for Kristeva the imaginary Father (who sounds so much like the heavenly father) turns out to be the agency of language, the symbolic, and that this worship includes the practice of art and psychoanalysis as well as religion.

KRISTEVA'S 'IMAGINARY FATHER'

In the books *Powers of Horror* and *Tales of Love* Kristeva sets out to make more detailed the archaic stages of infant life, to imagine the processes of early development and to elaborate perhaps the earliest 'moment in the organisation of psychic space.'⁵ In imagining how the infant might come to a sense of itself in its post-uterine, pre-narcissistic stage of development, she imagines the infant's body traversed by the energy of the drives, dimly and sporadically gaining intimations of shadowy glimmerings and figurations, which are archaic occurrences of the symbolic. Developing Freud's suggestion of 'the loving father of pre-history' that precedes the harsh Oedipal father, she postulates 'an imaginary Father' who is not so much a father as a composite of both parents realised as symbolic subjects, a figuration of the symbolic which enables the child to anticipate an existence for itself outside the symbiotic dyad of mother and child. However, the imaginary Father, Kristeva constantly reminds us, is not so much a real person as 'the zero degree of the third,' that is a third term outside the mother child dyad, the possibility of a 'symbolic instance,' a space for some 'symbolic elaboration' (on the part of the child).⁶

Identification with the imaginary father marks 'the foundation of the sublimatory capacities of the subject.'⁷ Kristeva argues that the function of the imaginary Father 'consists in, amongst other things, giving a substitute for the satisfaction of the drive in a constructive interpretation,' that is, in 'sense and meaning.'⁸ The shadowy figure of the imaginary Father enables the development of the speaking being, preparing the way for the ultimate cathexis (connection) of the drives to the symbolic, thus enabling the transition between (the complete self-absorption of) narcissism and socialisation. In Kristeva's words: 'This "imaginary father"... plays the role of the loving third to which "I" in process of constitution identifies; it permits the investing of our drives in the symbolic.'⁹ The imaginary Father, then, is the earliest configuration of the symbolic function even before the subject can properly be said to exist as separate and distinct and capable of discerning objects separate from itself within the symbolic network.

Identification with the symbolic enables the elaboration of psychic space, providing the nascent subject with a space in which to constitute itself, between the abjection of symbiosis with the mother and the prohibitive law of the full blown social order. Without the imaginary Father, that is without identification with the symbolic, there is neither meaning nor freedom from blind servitude to the needs of the body or the Superego. In this context I will not follow any further Kristeva's detailed psychoanalytic elaboration of this early moment of subjectivity, and I am skirting around the other pole in the constitution of subjectivity (abjection) altogether or there will be insufficient time to suggest the connections between Kristeva's imaginary Father as the harbinger and emblem of the symbolic (or language) and the Christian God who is at once loving father and the word. Kristeva's imaginary Father is a psychoanalytic/linguistic refiguring of the Christian God and she gives this figure a central role in the constitution of human subjectivity.

For Kristeva the imaginary father is the key to language and to love. Identification with the imaginary Father is an identification with the symbolic; it allows a space in which the nascent subject can elaborate itself in relation to the other. Kristeva's poetic rendition of this early identification with the symbolic has overtly religious overtones. Identification with the imaginary father enables speech and evokes a 'state of abandon, to which the term passivity is not strictly applicable, but which has neither the dynamism nor the initiative of activity: a state where the amorous subject proves itself completely abolished before the other' - an other who has 'no qualities, no attributes, he is, and I am for him, through him.' She continues:

The 'I', then... forgets itself and surges; it abolishes itself, but in order to exist fully, to the infinite, in the service of this... same or other. Suspension of narcissism, and delegation of its grandeur to a state of servitude, where I am only a beneficiary of the other who is All, and by that very fact, assures me of my infinity... it has to do with a dazzling, where the limits me/other are effaced, and with my annihilation, through the intermediary of my adoration, I is raised to a height where loss is impossible... 'if I love like this, nothing can happen to me'¹⁰

Identification with the imaginary father (who is actually a manifestation of the symbolic function, of language and the word) enables the opening of psychic space within the subject. Here Kristeva advances an almost mystical view of the symbolic, of language and the word. In the beginning (that is, of Kristeva's work) language was a pilot science for the study of man; here it is elevated to the divine.

In a book entitled *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, Kristeva emphasises that psychoanalysis, like faith, depends on the Word and on Love and she compares the loving fathers of psychoanalysis and faith, describing faith as a primary identification with a loving and protective agency who turns out to be that archaic occurrence of the symbolic which she has designated the imaginary father, a conglomerate of both parents in a fusion that is nourishing, loving and protective but transposed from the mother's body to an invisible agency, which is none other than the realm of signs - language and the word. In her words:

At the dawn of psychic experience Freud saw a primary identification, a 'direct and immediate transference' of the nascent ego to the 'father of individual prehistory,' who, according to Freud, possessed the sexual characteristics and functions of both parents.

This 'direct and immediate transference' to a form, a structure, or an agency (rather than a person) helps to bring about primary stabilisation of the subject through its enduring character; because it is a gift of the self, it both encourages and hinders the disintegrative and aggressive agitation of the instincts. This is perhaps what Christianity celebrates in divine love. God was the first to love you, God is love... This fusion with God ...repairs our wounds... Once our narcissistic needs are met, we can find images of our desires in stories recounting the experience of faith...¹¹

'More than any other religion,' she writes:

Christianity has unravelled the symbolic *and* physical importance of the paternal function in human life. Identification with this third party separates the child from its jubilant but destructive physical relationship with its mother and subjects it to another dimension, that of symbolisation, where, beyond frustration and absence, language unfolds.

However, for Kristeva, the 'Great Other' remains language and the symbolic; in identifying with the imaginary Father the child identifies with

'a model,' 'the enigmatic apprehending of a *pattern*' which is none other than 'the logic of discourse.'¹²

When the object that I incorporate is the speech of the other - precisely a nonobject, a pattern, a model - I bind myself to him in a primary fusion, communion, communication. An identification. In being able to receive the other's words, to assimilate, represent and reproduce them, I become like him: One. A subject of enunciation.¹³

Her insistently reiterated point in the works that follow is that without this loving identification with the symbolic, the space of the subject collapses in on itself and the subject without psychic space is prey to aggressive drives and paranoid projections of the kind exhibited in misogyny, nationalism, racism and war. These are the subjects of her more recent books - *Black Sun*, *Strangers to Ourselves*, *Nations Without Nationalism*, *The Old Man and The Wolves*, *New Maladies of the Soul*. In these works Kristeva articulates contemporary malaise in terms of the denial of the symbolic and the abolition of psychic space which is in effect the annihilation of the subject. In the absence of identification with the symbolic, people resort to violence and intoxication.

AESTHETIC PRACTICE AS RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Kristeva's remedy to crisis is always to be found in the symbolic, in language and writing, in art. As an analyst of the symbolic in psyches and texts, her concern is to help others to build their own psychic spaces and to cease being mere extras in their lives:

Help them, then, to speak and write themselves in unstable, open, undecidable spaces ... trigger a discourse where his own 'emptiness' and her own 'out-of-placeness' becomes essential elements, indispensable 'characters if you will, of a *work in progress*. What is at stake is turning the crisis into a *work in progress*.¹⁴

Writing is a practice that facilitates 'a renewed organisation of psychic space' without 'the dangers of reality testing.'¹⁵ Unlike animals whose only recourse is behaviour the human subject can find a 'solution in psychic representation and in language.'¹⁶ Language is 'a powerful factor that, through unknown mediations, has an activating... effect on neurobiological networks' and can actually enable redemption.¹⁷ The psyche is above all 'a discourse that acts,' 'a structure of meaning' which enables a bond between the speaking being and others: 'this psychic life - which combines different

systems of representation that involve language - allows you access to your body and other people.¹⁸

Kristeva is consistently interested in aesthetic practice as a form of religious practice/devotion. Crucial to both is the creation of the subject in relation to an idealised other. She examines Biblical narrative for its annunciation of the great crises of human subjectivity in relation to the symbolic.¹⁹ She focuses on writers like 'the disagreeable' Madame de Stael in whose 'lacklustre' work writing is nonetheless advanced as 'sacred object' and 'a form of glory'²⁰ and Proust who is 'concerned to establish a world in which his readers can come and communicate as if they were in a sacred place,' offering the book as 'the place of sacred communion'²¹. In her recent novel *The Old Man and the Wolves*, an allegory of the modern world in which the inner life has been annihilated, only the young journalist Stephanie Delacour survives the ravages of the wolves and the destruction of psychic space, realising that she has survived because her father 'had passed on to me his God... in the logical form of an infinity of languages' - 'He opened up that galaxy to me as if foreign words were going to play the part of seraphim for me, flocks of angels helping me soar through secret skies.' (166)

In the essay on Dostoyevsky ('Dostoyevsky, the Writing of Suffering, and Forgiveness') in *Black Sun* Kristeva articulates another connection between religion and art. Asking whether 'religion or mania' are 'the only counterbalances to despair' she postulates that 'Artistic creation integrates and expends them' both and that 'Works of art thus lead us to establish relations with ourselves and others that are less destructive, more soothing.'²² In this essay Kristeva also suggests that whoever creates a text or an interpretation participates in the agency of mercy and renewal: 'between suffering and acting out, aesthetic activity constitutes forgiveness.'²³ Writing is a form of forgiveness because writing and speaking are performed in the presence of an ideal - the imaginary Father and the symbolic. Forgiveness, she argues, 'raises the unconscious from beneath actions and has it meet a loving other - an other who does not judge but hears my truth in the availability of love, and for that very reason allows me to be reborn.'²⁴

Forgiveness is aesthetic and the discourses (religions, philosophies, ideologies) that adhere to the dynamics of forgiving precondition the birth of aesthetics within their orbit.

Forgiveness at the outset constitutes a will, postulate, or scheme: *meaning* exists... *Forgiveness emerges first as the setting up of a form.* It has the effect of an acting out, a doing, a *poesis*...

Whoever is in the realm of forgiveness - who forgives and who accepts forgiveness - is capable of identifying with a loving father, an imaginary father, with whom, consequently, he is ready to be reconciled, with a new symbolic law in mind.²⁵

Thus, in Kristeva's work, the notion of forgiveness 'which Christian thought has elaborated upon for centuries' is inextricably wed to aesthetic practice.²⁶ She goes on to suggest that aesthetic performance/forgiveness is an act of 'transpersonal creation' that addresses itself 'to the suffering and affection of the other for the stranger.'²⁷ 'I give myself to you, you welcome me, I am within you.' It is a form of forgiveness that 'assumes a potential identification with that effective and efficient merciful divinity of which the theologian speaks.'²⁸ 'It conveys affects and does not repress them, it suggests for them a sublimatory outcome, it transposes them for an other in a threefold, imaginary, and symbolic bond. Because it is forgiveness, writing is transformation, transposition, translation.'²⁹

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- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ⁷ 'Say Nothing', *On the Beach* 3/4 (1984), p. 11.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ⁹ *ICA Documents*, p. 21.
- ¹⁰ 'Say Nothing', p. 10.
- ¹¹ *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*. New York: Columbia UP, 1987, p. 25.
- ¹² *Tales of Love*, New York: Columbia UP, 1987, p. 25.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- ¹⁵ *New Maladies of the Soul*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995, p. 137.
- ¹⁶ *Black Sun*. New York and Oxford: Columbia UP, 1989, p. 36.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- ¹⁸ *New Maladies*, pp. 4, 6.
- ¹⁹ See 'Reading the Bible' and 'From Signs to the Subject' in *New Maladies of the Soul*.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- ²¹ *Proust and the Sense of Time*. London: Faber & Faber, 1993, pp. 6-7.
- ²² *Black Sun*, p. 188.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 206-7.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ²⁸ *Black Sun*, p. 216.