The Pathos and Ethos of Thought in Julia Kristeva

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Abstract: This essay constitutes an attempt to situate Kristeva within the long dialectical tradition (from Hegel to Sartre) that not only opposes thought to any form of dualism but, more importantly, has systematically defined the event of thinking in terms of the "historical, loveful violence" that characterizes any mediating process (Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* 241). Comparing her approach to language and being with those of Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, my aim is to argue that thought in Kristeva is the life-enhancing encounter between *the pathos of the negative* (*qua* revolt, questioning, irony, critique, displacement, de-stabilization) and *the ethos of sublimation* (understood as the "patience" of knowing, the infinity of meaning, "the dignity of Beauty"[Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 251 and *Sense and Non-Sense* 7]). As I shall demonstrate, it is through this encounter that a *passage,* an enabling economy of relations, can open up between the suffering of the immanent (flesh or bare life), the transcendence of every singular "I," and the community held together by the sharing of the sign.

Résumé: Cet essai tente de situer Kristeva dans la longue tradition dialectique (de Hegel à Sartre) qui non seulement oppose la pensée à toute forme de dualisme mais, de façon plus importante, définit systématiquement l'acte de penser en relation avec la "violence historique, aimante" qui caractérise tout processus de mediation (Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* 241). En comparant son approche du langage et de l'être avec celles de Jacques Derrida et de Giorgio Agamben, mon objectif est d'arguer que la pensée chez Kristeva est l'expérience enrichissante d'une rencontre, d'un face-à face, entre *le pathos du négatif* (*qua* révolte, interrogation, ironie, critique, déplacement, déstabilisation) et *l'ethos de sublimation* (compris comme la "patience" du savoir, l'infini du sens, "la dignité de la Beauté" [Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 251 et *Sense and Non-Sense* 7]). Comme je le démontre, c'est à travers ce face-à-face qu'un *passage*, qu'une économie favorable de relations, peut s'ouvrir entre la souffrance de l'immanence (chair ou "vie nue"), la transcendance de tout "Je" singulier et la communauté liée par le partage du signe.

Keywords: pathos of the negative – ethos of sublimation – thought – *signifiance* – experience – nobility of thought – Hegel – Derrida – Agamben –*Desire in Language* – *Sense and Non-Sense* – *Intimate Revolt* – *New Maladies of the Soul* – *La haine et le pardon*

Thought, Mediation and the Hegelian Legacy

Even a cursory reading of Kristeva's early work will disclose her commitment to a rethinking of Hegelian dialectics, a framework that she obviously considers significant for her project, as she begins to formulate it in the late sixties and early seventies. Indeed, Hegel's non-metaphysical, non-dualistic understanding of consciousness as well as the world, his concern with intersubjectivity and his insistence on thinking the relationship between the Infinite and the Finite, transcendence and immanence have had a determining influence on her theorization of the interplay between semiotic/symbolic and her introduction or re-investment of such concepts as dialogism, *signifiance*, genotext, *chora*, intertextuality, the subject-in-process/on trial and *metaphorein* (to mention the most familiar of these concepts). In "The System and the Speaking Subject" (1973) she openly admits that what she calls "*semanalysis*" "can be thought of as the direct successor of the dialectical method" (*Kristeva Reader* 31).[1] In opposition to semiology (as it develops from Saussure and Peirce to the Prague School and structuralism), semanalysis "conceives of meaning not as a sign-system but as a *signifying process*" (*Kristeva Reader* 27, 28) and seeks to account for the production of "this very unrest" that Hegel calls "self" (12) and that Kristeva renames "the subject of the [signifying] practice" (*Kristeva Reader* 29). In drawing attention to the conflictual articulation of biological and signifying operations, semanalysis emerges as a metalanguage whose object is neither the language system nor the biological code but *rhythm*, as Hegel defines it : i.e., as "the result of what hovers between" (Kristeva talks about the "'remainder,' the 'waste'," *Desire in Language* 31) "and unites both" (Hegel 36). In "How Does One Speak to Literature?" (1971) Kristeva discusses the Barthean concept of writing in similar terms: "The practice of writing," she argues, "becomes the edge separating and uniting the subjectivity to which style attests… with the objectivity represented by social history. . . . [I]t brings one back to the other, neither subjective individuality nor exterior objectivity, it is the very principle of Hegel's 'self-movement'" (*Desire in Language* 110). This essay is, in fact, most representative of her early concerns, both a tribute to her mentor, Roland Barthes, and a re-reading/re-inscription of his "dialectical conception of writing" in the interests of the avant-garde (*Desire in Language* 105). In her account of Barthes's contribution to the introduction of a "new field" (i.e., literature as the "missing link of human science," 98), Kristeva credits Hegelian dialectics with first pointing to "the masterly lines of this interplay between limit and infinity, rationale and objectivity – a stumbling block for contemporary sciences" (98). As she goes on to explain, Hegelian dialectics "succeeded in this by imposing at its foundations the *knots,* invisible without it, where the opposites – *subject* and *history* are interwoven" (99). If, according to Kristeva, Barthes is the

[1] I have made some preliminary remarks on Kristeva's relation with Hegel in "Towards an Iconomy of Violence: Julia Kristeva in the Between of Ethics and Politics."

"founder of modern literary studies" this is because he located literary practice at the site of these invisible knots between subject and history (93). In doing so, he opened a path towards the appreciation of the materiality of writing, its immersion in history and its sexual overdetermination (100). Writing, then, as Barthes (this "rational empiricist") has bequeathed it to us, is the product of the *transposition* of dialectics in the field of language (100).

However, as Kristeva does not tire to point out throughout her analysis, this transposition far from leaves dialectics intact. So Barthes's way is a "*transformed* dialectics" (104; my emphasis) because he re-inscribes its transcendence-bound movement "in a fragmented space that transforms the idealistic matrix" (113). In opposition to dialectical law, scriptural law "is upheld not by the subject of understanding, but by a divided subject" (111) and, though the negative mode crosses and is absorbed into the affirmative, this affirmation (Kristeva insists) is "only a semblance, because what is inscribed is always already broken up within the ungraspable, impersonal, transsubjective, anonymous, musical plurality of the paragrammatized text" (104).

Thus, it is clear that (contra Juliet Flower MacCannell's view) Kristeva's is not "the official undeconstructed Hegel" (Lechte and Zournazi 89). Despite her allegiance to the Hegelian framework as a *tool of critique* (*Desire in Language* vii-viii), she has evidently taken on board post-Heideggerian philosophical engagements with "the speculative labyrinth of absolute mind" (*Desire in Language* 100).[2] This can be easily demonstrated through a close study of *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). The affinity between Kristeva's project, as she frames it in her Prolegomenon to this book, and Hegel's philosophical agenda is striking. Like Hegel in his own Preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind,* she foregrounds metaphors of movement, life, process and change.[3] She shares with him a concern with concreteness (i.e., embodiment as well as embeddedness in the world)[4] and with a negativity that is neither subordinate to affirmation nor exterior to reflective thought. What is more, the targets of the critical impetus that shapes her interrogation into the revolutionary potential of poetic language are no other than the transcendental, disembodied, a-historical subject that Hegel sought to de-center and the "degradation" (as Hegel puts it) "of what is self-moving to the level of mere matter" (Hegel 26). As she goes on to demonstrate, however, Hegel's dialectical thinking is

[2] Examples of Kristeva's critical reading of Hegel abound and are dispersed throughout her work. In their analyses of *Revolution in Poetic Language* and Kristeva's appropriation of Hegelian negativity, a number of Kristevan scholars have pointed to her departures from "the purity of the source" (Kristeva, "Preface" viii). See Oliver, Coole, Beardsworth, Lechte and Margaroni, Sjöholm, Bové. In this context, Anna Smith's discussion of Kristeva's feminine strategy of miming (and thus displacing) Hegel is particularly interesting.

[3] See, for example, Hegel 12, 25-26, 28, 30-31 and Kristeva, *Revolution* 13-17.

[4] For attention to these aspects of Hegel's thought see Russon.

limited by what Otto Poggeler describes as a kind of "forgetting,"[5] the forgetting precisely of the *force* of the negative, which is reclaimed under the category of the Notion and absorbed into the teleological movement of Hegelian "Becoming," i.e., "the immediate disappearance of the one into the other" (*Revolution* 112). In addition, as she contends, Hegel divorces this force from its concrete base in the self-organization of matter; hence her decision in *Revolution* to re-read "Hegel through Freud" and his dialectical, materialist theory of the drives (118).

In seeking to reinvest the force of Hegelian negativity by throwing light on its materiality and heterogeneity, which "Hegel was unable to see" (*Kristeva Reader* 31), Kristeva seems, interestingly, to reiterate the question Jacques Derrida raises in *Glas* (a book published in the same year as *Revolution in Poetic Language*): "what, after all, of the remain(s), today, for us, here, now, of a Hegel?" (1). What needs to be noted, however, is that, unlike Derrida, Kristeva insists on using the Hegelian remainders (namely, negativity and materiality) in her attempt to rethink the nature of mediation and to open up dialectical passageways beyond the limits of the Hegelian legacy. It is in light of this attempt, I believe, that we need to understand Kristeva's ambiguous commitment to Hegelian dialectics, a commitment that remains unwavering in her '90s and post-'90s work. Though the prevalent interpretation in Kristevan scholarship at present[6] is that her shift from a concern with revolution in 1974 to an exploration in the '90s of what she calls a "revolt culture" marks her decisive departure from "an old-fashioned form of a materialist dialectics" and the open acknowledgement of what, according to Cecilia Sjöholm, has always haunted her aesthetic, psychoanalytic or political ventures (namely, "an unease with dialectical thought as such," 125), my contention here is that Hegel has not ceased to be an important interlocutor for Kristeva. In my reading, Kristeva's most recent work continues to be an exploration (a mapping and re-mapping) of what in 1971 she saw as "the common ground" between psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics: i.e., the realization that "the being-in-itself-and-for-itself of the 'objective' other that negates and determines the 'subjective' is active within *language* and adheres to certain *laws*" (*Desire in Language* 119). The key in this context, as Sara Beardsworth suspects in her very insightful analysis of Kristeva's '80s trilogy, is precisely "the problem of mediation" (169). Yet, Kristeva's thought on mediation is not limited (as Beardsworth suggests) by "her outright dread and rejection of Hegel, a position that leaves the resources in his thought for thinking through modern social and political experience

[5] Poggeler writes : "In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, before he calls attention to Aristotelian teleology, Hegel warns us not to forget the seriousness, the pain, the patience and the labor of the negative, in considering the life of God as a play of love with itself. But doesn't Hegel himself forget this seriousness when he later says 'God is love, i.e., the making of distinctions and the nullifying of such distinctions, a play of distinctions which is not serious; distinctions which are annulled as soon as they are posited, the eternal simple Idea'?" (Quoted by Williams 235).

[6] See, for example, Chanter and Ziarek, especially the editors' introduction and the essays included in Part I of the volume, entitled: "Femininity, Race, and Revolt."

preemptively suppressed" (213-14). Far from being "slight," Kristeva's contribution as a thinker of mediation is valuable and is yet to be appreciated.

Her three-volume meditation on "the Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis" (published between 1996 and 2005) seems to me to be most important in this respect. The first two volumes set out to investigate the possibilities of revolt in contemporary spectacle-inundated society and are in reality the product of Kristeva's determination to engage with what in the '70s she called "the [persistent] illusion that the negative – death, violence – does not concern" us ("The Novel as Polylogue" 161). For all the irregularities of its landscape, "the tremendous Hegelian continent" (*Strangers to Ourselves* 169) remains the background against which she attempts to assess (via the equally rough pathways of Heidegger) the legacy of three twentieth-century authors: namely Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Aragon, and Roland Barthes, who constitute the primary focus of both volumes. What is particularly interesting in this context is Kristeva's revisiting of her 1970s appraisal of Barthes which, in my view, demonstrates the persistence of a dialectical edge in her conceptual voyage from a revolution eventalized in poetic language to culture *qua* revolt. She writes :

> What Barthes asks us to ponder is complex: it is not a matter of fleeing a secret or obeying the universal legality of an inert praxis and subjecting oneself to the collective imperative; it is a matter of making a crossing, which must indeed be described as dialectical and leads from the secret to freedom. . . . I still see no other way of grasping this dynamic of writing-as-freedom according to Barthes except to think of it in light of the Hegelian dialectic, at the crossroads of Force and Law, as I proposed in 1971. (*Sense and Non-Sense* 195)

It is true, as a number of scholars have already pointed out, that in her revolt volumes Kristeva expresses a certain disillusionment with regard to "the old dialectical model of the law and its transgression" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 27). With reference to the contemporary reality in Western secular democracies, she argues: "[i]f one considers law obsolete, prohibition weak, and values empty or flimsy, a certain dialectical link between law and transgression is impossible" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 27). This is why at the heart of her agenda in both volumes lies a desire to address the contemporary resistances to psychoanalysis (*Intimate Revolt* 10-12) by situating the Freudian "Copernican revolution" (*Intimate Revolt* 11) within the philosophical problematic of negativity that she traces back to Hegel and by demonstrating how this revolution complements (indeed, "goes beyond," *Sense and Non-Sense* 28) the prohibition/transgression dialectic. However, it needs to be made clear that Kristeva never wholly abandons what she acknowledges are "dated dialectical forms" which, she insists, are "still possible in certain contexts" (namely, in the context of religion and in "places invested by the arts") (*Sense and Non-Sense* 27, 29).

What I consider an important departure from her early concerns as a theorist relates, instead, to how she has come to understand the *stakes* of her reclamation and reinvestment of Hegelian negativity. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* the goal was social revolution that was seen as inextricable from the destabilization of the transcendental ego and a crisis in signification. Now, I would argue, the stakes are no more (and no less) than thought itself as the ground of human freedom, since thinking, according to Kristeva, entails both the ability to interrogate/question/engage in critique *and* the power to *trans*form or, as she puts it in her discussion of Sartre, the power to create unreality (*Intimate Revolt* 139). This is, indeed, where she proves to be more faithful to Hegel than she is credited to be, for (as only the best interpreters of Hegel have pointed out) what is at issue in his work is neither totalization nor "the 'closed economy' where every loss is in advance recompensed" (Žižek 25). Such an interpretation, Slavoj Žižek rightly emphasizes, "results from a misreading" (25). As both Theodor Adorno and Gillian Rose have also insisted,[7] the Hegelian saga of *Geist* tells the story of an *aporetic* reason, one suspended between its powers and limits.[8]

It is in this Hegelian tradition of aporetic reason that I would like to situate Kristeva, a thinker whose primary concern has been the co-presence of sense and non-sense, reason and its vicissitudes, thought and sexuality or, as she comes to re-articulate this in *Intimate Revolt,* thought and a-thought. It is interesting that, in the third Volume of *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis* entitled *La haine et le pardon*, Kristeva redefines psychoanalysis as a theory that is today not "simply an exploration of desire, but the care of thought" (448; my translation). In a true Hegelian spirit, this practice of care involves attention to the negative that Hegel places at the heart of the mediating activity of thought, as well as a much-needed fidelity to what seems to be the most misunderstood of Hegel's aims, as he discusses them in his Preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind* : namely, "the strenuous effort . . . to raise men's eyes to the stars; as if men had quite forgotten the divine, and were on the verge of finding satisfaction, like worms, in mud and water" (5). This relates, of course, to the vexed issue of Hegel's idealism and

[7] Rose writes: "The aim of both 'authorships' – that of Kierkegaard and that of Hegel – . . . is how, contra Kant, to bring Revelation into philosophy: aesthetically, as the incursion of the incomprehensible; philosophically, as triune or aporetic reason – universal, particular and singular. Against the Christian tradition, Revelation does not mean that redemption is realized; against the tradition of Hegel interpretation, revelation makes it impossible to attribute the equation of thought and being to the System. In both of these authorships Revelation serves to leave the ethical open and unresolved. This is why their work – even their logic – is obsessed with beginning, and why the tradition which reads philosophy aesthetically, sees only the absurdity of 'receiving everything back' or 'reconciliation' or even 'totalization'" (18).

[8] In *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling* Christopher Lauer throws into relief the connotations of "suspension" (i.e., postponement, taking out of action but also preserving to a higher level) behind the controversial term *Aufhebung* (3-6) and argues that Hegel is concerned to "explore the manifold ways that reason proves to be inadequate to the task it gives itself" (5). What is at stake, then, in Hegel is "when and how reason should be suspended" (9). He adds : "The suspension of reason only becomes meaningful when we grant it the freedom to define and redefine itself" (10).

his theological bend. As Brian O'Connor has spelled out, thought *qua* mediation in Hegel is "*an elevation*, not a lateral implication" (my emphasis) and needs to be understood in light of his concern with "knowledge of the absolute," in other words, God. In the context of psychoanalysis within which Kristeva is working, this elevating move signified by what remains a controversial term (i.e., *Aufhebung*) translates into the equally vexed issue of sublimation which, as Joel Whitebook rightly complains, has come to be discredited due to the privileging of its utilitarian ends (that is, its function in producing the socially useful) and its reliance on a hierarchical opposition between the "higher" realm of cultural achievement and the "lower" realm of earthly sexuality. In his account, "a coherent theory of sublimation remains one of the lacunae in psychoanalytic thought" (219), a problem which, I want to argue, Kristeva (especially in her latest work) helps us to redress.

Indeed, in her reading of Sartre in *Intimate Revolt* Kristeva points to "two phases – and two metaphors – that describe" what she calls Sartre's "expansion of *Nichtung*: repulsion, in its physical and physiological sense, and transcendence, with its sublimatory sense of surpassing and elevation" (154-55). "This dynamic," she adds, "will not be foreign to those familiar with my work" (155). In fact, as she makes clear, it is precisely this dynamic that she wishes to foreground in her own theorization and practice of psychoanalysis. She writes: "What I am saying here is not aimed at reconciling Sartre with psychoanalysis. . . . I am simply urging you to contemplate, by putting them face to face, two ultimately complicitous attempts that aimed to promote what is perhaps humanity's most sovereign venture: *questioning transcendence in transcendence itself,* to the point of atheism" (139; my emphasis). One of my main aims in this essay is to invite readers to rethink Kristeva's project in these terms, which resuscitate Hegel (for whom the absolute was "love disporting with itself" 10), though perhaps, as she would put it, "in a strange [profoundly atheist] costume" (*Kristeva Reader* 31). As I shall demonstrate, at issue here is our understanding of language (which, Kristeva insists on reminding us, is for Freud the "higher side of man;" *Sense and Non-Sense* 30) as a Last Supper scene and, hence, as one of the (uncomfortable) remainders of a certain infamous Christian Hegel.

Language as a Last Supper Scene

As we know, this Hegel lies at the heart of Derrida's deconstructive critique in *Glas*. In this context, Hegel's interpretation of the Last Supper scene in "The Spirit of Christianity" serves as the background for Derrida's demonstration of the ultimately auto-affective economy of the Hegelian *Geist*. As Derrida shows, what sustains this economy is a thought of language as a form of *Aufhebung*, that is, as a relief not only of the material thing (the referent) but also of the sensible, exterior signifier and, hence, as a foreclosure of writing and its distinctly differantial, disseminating movement. For Derrida, the Hegelian dialectic of language is essentially "a dialectophagy," i.e., a

dialectic of *the tongue* that gulps down its material body and vomits any remains (9). As such, its function in Hegel's cannibalistic economy is analogous to that of love in his account of the Last Supper scene. Like Christian love (that transubstantiates bread and wine into Jesus' body and raises the latter to the paternal spirit), language accomplishes (consummates) itself as "ideality, … [the] thought of the universal" (25) through the consumption of finite, particular being: "To think being as life in the mouth, that is the *logos,*" Derrida writes (72).

That Derrida, in his engagement with Hegel's idealism, chooses to focus on the scene of language is not surprising given Alexandre Kojève's emphasis on discourse in his own interpretation of Hegel and the impact this interpretation has had on French Hegelianism. As Stuart Barnett points out, "[w]hat was initially attractive about Kojève's reading was his detranscendentalization of speculative idealism. The discomforting notions of the Absolute and spirit were transformed into more concrete material notions" (19). Thus, Derrida seems to take up Kojève's suggestion that the task of philosophy is "the elucidation of the character of discourse," understood as the "power to negate given being" (18-19). For Derrida, however, this sublating/sublimating power remains interior (to the System) and ultimately interiorizing. By contrast, Kristeva seems committed to continuing Kojève's project of detranscendentalizing Hegel's elevating quest. Unlike Derrida, she takes the Hegelian staircase to the stars and then uncannily demonstrates that what truly matters is their reflection in a mud pool on the pavement. In *La haine et le pardon* (a collection of essays focusing precisely on thought as the par*don* of sublimation) she writes: "the *divine* seems to us more and more … to be a metaphor for *the very ability to represent* which defines to the utmost degree human beings: our capacity to hallucinate/imagine/speak/symbolize" (305; my translation). God, then, she emphasizes, is not "a political, social, or media value, but an interrogation of meaning and language" (89) – and, indeed, an interrogation *through the sharing* of meaning and language. This is, in fact, what in her account renders the scene of language a "love-feast," that is, a space where "a plurality of connections" is possible in "communities that can change and can be questioned" (*Intimate Revolt* 234).

It is this understanding of language as the ever-renewed capacity for connection and, hence, as the ground of human freedom that constitutes, according to Kristeva, "the most precious and most serious gift [*don*]… psychoanalysis has given mankind" (*Intimate Revolt* 234). Significantly, in *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* she sets out to demonstrate how the Freudian scene of language differs from Lacan's familiar version of it. In a chapter entitled "The Metamorphoses of 'Language' in the Freudian Discovery (Freudian Models of Language)," the importance of which has not yet been addressed, she moves on to trace Freud's shift from a layered conception of language based on the heterogeneity of different registers (neuronic excitation, word-presentation/thing-presentation) to an "optimistic" model positing language as "an

intermediate zone, an interface between the unconscious and the conscious" (38-39)[9] and, finally (after 1912), to a more complex model of a "vaster process of symbolization in which language had its place but was not the common denominator" (50). Kristeva calls this alternative "process, dynamic, and movement of meaning" *signifiance* (37). Because it involves an *anamnetic* return to "[w]here it (*id*) was" ("a perilous place," Kristeva reminds us, "a difficult position for subjectivity," 50) the "process of *signifiance* is founded on the negative" (52). As a result, it represents for Kristeva "a profound integration of the Hegelian dialectic into Freudian thought" (56).

Interestingly, Kristeva attempts to elucidate what is at stake in Freudian *signifiance* by revisiting his legendary narrative of the totemic meal that followed the murder of the father, a feast that seeks to transfer the unrepresentable, traumatic act into sacred (i.e., shareable) space and thus constitutes "a symbolic link" (45). As she emphasizes, devouring in this context needs to be understood as a complex mixture of revolt (it is an act of defiance against the tyranny of the dead father) and devotion (it is a celebration and loving assimilation of the father's authority). If there is a relief in the Freudian version of the Last Supper scene, this refers to the process of forgiveness [*pardon*] that is inextricable from the representation of the murder that establishes community. And if a process of transubstantiation *is* activated, this does not take the form of the "holocaust" that Derrida exposes in his analysis of Hegel, in other words, the sacrifice of the particular for the ideality of the universal. Instead, it takes the form of "a qualitative leap," Kristeva argues, by means of which the excluded, traumatized "I" is carried *across* in its "becoming power," that is, in its identification with paternal authority and the symbolic contract resulting from it (*Sense and Non-Sense* 45).

What needs to be noted here is that in her account of Freud's version of the Last Supper scene Kristeva draws attention to both Freud's concern with the "alchemy of sublimation, which [he] placed at the heart of the ability to think" (56) and his "troubling" insistence on "asserting the real" or, as she comes to qualify this, "the unavoidable insistence of *being* (outside-subject, outside-language) at the heart of the human speech as it unfolds its negativity" (58). Freudian *signifiance*, then, entails a process of desexualization (i.e., a re-direction of the subject's libidinal energy to his/her "own aptitude to imagine, to signify, to speak, to think," *Sense and Non-Sense* 55) as much as a process of resexualization, that is, the opening up of the sublimatory activity to what in her introduction to *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* she calls "experience" (8-11). This, as a matter of fact, constitutes a significant departure from Kristeva's early concerns. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, *signifiance* is defined as a *practice*, a term she takes pains to distinguish from that of "experience" (193-234). Though she is attentive to Mao Tse-Tung's insistence that "*personal and direct experience* is the essential materialist feature of practice" (200), she at the same time never ceases to warn her readers against

[9] As Kristeva points out, it "is on this second model that Lacan will later rely to construct his own theory" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 38).

the danger of reducing the "moment of struggle exploding the subject toward heterogeneous materiality" to *subjective* experience (211). The problem, she emphasizes, is to introduce "the struggle of signifiance … no longer just into 'individual experience' … but also into the objective process of contemporary science, technology, and social relations" (213). This is why the main paradigm of *signifiance* for her in the 1970s is the text, a mode of signification that is "rooted in social practice, or even its revolutionary phase" (196). By contrast, in *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* Kristeva defines her task as "going beyond the notion of text" (8), favoring instead a concept of experience which she goes on to define as "something unknown, surprise, pain, or delight, and *then* comprehension of this impact" (11; my emphasis).

In the remainder of this essay I would like to take the cue Kristeva offers us in her return to and reclamation of experience in order to illuminate *the pathos and ethos of thought* that I want to situate at the heart of her philosophical-cum-psychoanalytic project. Allow me first a brief detour to yet another Last Supper scene: In the opening chapter of the *Phenomenology* Hegel is concerned with the problem that immediate experience (the experience of the "this" and the "now") constitutes for consciousness. In contrast to empiricism's assumption of the "givenness" of sensible things, he insists on their truth as negativity. He writes :

> … we may answer those who thus insist on the truth and certainty of the reality of objects of sense, by saying that they had better be sent back to the most elementary school of wisdom, the ancient Eleusinian mysteries of Ceres and Bacchus; they have not yet learnt the inner secret of the eating of bread and the drinking of wine. For one who is initiated into these mysteries not only comes to doubt the being of things of sense, but gets into a state of despair about it altogether; . . . Even animals are not shut off from this wisdom, but show they are deeply initiated into it. For they do not stand stock still before things of sense as if these were things *per se,* with being in themselves: they despair of this reality altogether, and in complete assurance of the nothingness of things they fall-to without more ado and eat them up. And all nature proclaims, as animals do, these open secrets, these mysteries revealed to all, which teach what the truth of things of sense is. (61)

If, as John Russon astutely reminds us, Hegel's "ladder to the absolute" is the "way of despair" (21), this is because what appears "given" is lost in the abyss opening between "now" and "no longer now," between the indexicality of "this" (as a material pointer to the particular) and its simultaneous taking on in language of the universality of a signifier. Despair, then, (which Hegel foregrounds in the extract above) seems to be the product of what he calls "wisdom," namely, the realization that, in Russon's words, "we cannot evade the complex problems of meaning – of power, love, communication,

or any other aspects of human meaningfulness – even in our attempt to grasp the sense of a single moment" (21-22). At the same time, this wisdom is the most "elementary" one and takes the form of a concrete, material experience (i.e., the animals' devouring of sensual things). This is why for Hegel the dialectical process of mediation cum negation that he associates with thought is ultimately a *mysterium*, not a holocaust – as it ends up being in Derrida's *Glas*. As we see in the extract from the *Phenomenology*, *mysterium* in Hegel is an event in the context of which the suffering of being in its nothingness turns into an intimate suffering that opens consciousness to its own embodied, enfleshed existence. As Russon emphasizes, in Hegel's dialectic of the now the borders between subject/object, self/other, consciousness and life get blurred (18, 20, 22) in an experience that involves as much violence as it does piety. What we cannot fail to miss here is that life is not the inassimilable morsel stuck in the digestive track of the Hegelian system, but the *open secret* that the system itself (through its tender dialectic of the mouth) guards.

It is significant that in his attempt to trace the reliance of Western metaphysical thought on an originary nothingness, Giorgio Agamben takes as his starting point the Hegelian *mysterium* of the tongue. In his reading, Hegel's account of "taking-the-This" constitutes an important stage in the development of philosophy as *ontotheology*, that is, as the thinking of its own negative foundation. Metaphysics, he argues, continues to dominate the history of philosophy that has not ceased to unfold around a groundless and unspeakable ground; namely, nothingness as that which "we must abandon to the violence of history and language in order to tear away from it the appearance of a beginning and immediacy" (106).[10] The task for philosophy today, according to Agamben, is to think beyond this nothingness "whose nullity serves as the basis for the arbitrariness and violence of social action" (106). Interestingly and despite his much-debated utopianism, in his re-visiting of the place of negativity in the context of Western metaphysics Agamben appears committed to reclaiming a radically immanent and positive thinking, one grounded precisely no longer on the *having-been* of a long-forgotten foundation[11] but on "now" as a Benjamin-inspired interruptive temporal immediacy: "As you *now* speak, that is ethics," he tells his reader in the Epilogue to *Language and Death* (108; my emphasis). In doing so, he posits the *now* of human discourse as a rupture in the assumed continuum between "Man" as a speaking and "Man" as a living (and, hence, mortal) being, nature and culture, the linguistic and the

[10] In *Homo Sacer* (a book published thirteen years after the original publication of *Language and Death* in 1982) Agamben returns to the Aristotelian concept of *zoe* as precisely the negative site that grounds the Western understanding of politics.

[11] The main thrust of Agamben's argument in *Language and Death* (which is too complex to fully expound here) is that the place of negativity that serves as the groundless ground of Western metaphysics is the having-been of a Voice.

human. In his view, the halting of the continuum is necessary if we ("Now")[12] are to move beyond Metaphysics, understood as the sacrificial philosophical tradition that can think of its relation to the nonrelational (i.e., *zoe*, the animal, the inhuman, *phonē*) only negatively, in other words, only in terms of abandonment, separation, and exclusion.[13] At the same time, the temporality of "now" Agamben is eager to re-invest carries some of the implications of Benjamin's concept of "the fragment" which is both the interruption of the continuum of history *qua* chronology *and* the messianic completion/fulfillment of history. Similarly, the "now" of human discourse erupts as a hiatus within the metaphysical definition of Man (as *zōon logon ēxon*) and constitutes simultaneously the fulfillment of Man as precisely nothing, that is, as a being of pure potentiality and, hence, as essentially poor : "Perhaps man – the animal who seems not to be encumbered by any specific nature or any specific identity – must experience his poverty even more radically," Agamben suggests. What Agamben calls "infancy" is this radical experience of Man's poverty (for we are *by nature* deprived of logos) that can return thought to its quotidian, banal life,[14] one no longer based on a transcendent origin (i.e., being and its negative correlative) but on the immanence of human *ethos* (*qua* habit and habitation): "Is it possible that *being* (ontotheology with its component negativity) is not up to the level of the simple mystery of humans' *having,* of their *habitations* or their *habits*? And what if the dwelling to which we return beyond being were . . . simply the *trite* words that we *have*?" (*Language and Death* 94). To the Hegelian understanding of thought as the way of despair, Agamben opposes thought as the untroubled experience of a missed encounter and the serene return to what is properly humanity's ethos: namely, "social praxis *itself*, human speech *itself*, which have become transparent to themselves" (*Language and Death* 106, my emphasis). In his Epilogue to *Language and Death* he writes, "We walk through the woods: suddenly we hear the flapping of wings or the wind in the grass. A pheasant lifts off and then disappears instantly among the trees. . . . *Not the encounter but this flight of invisible animals is thought* (108).

Agamben's insistence on conceptualizing thought as an immanent, mundane practice (such as walking) and a missed encounter with the sensory world, is consistent with his desire to articulate a politics *beyond relation* (*Homo Sacer* 29); a politics, in other words, that lets life (*zoe*) be, unsaved, irredeemable by human logos. In Agamben's account of the philosophical experience, thought ventures into the open where being lies in its unconcealment but remains intact. Reluctant to commit violence against life, it

[12] Agamben writes : "*Now* we must ask if there is another experience of language within this culture that does not rest on an unspeakable foundation" (*Language and Death* 66; my emphasis).

[13] See Agamben's discussion of the ban as a form of relation to the nonrelational in *Homo Sacer* 28-29.

[14] In his discussion of the question of the animal in Agamben, Adrian Mackenzie writes: "… thinking leads a quotidian, not a transcendent life. This means that it must involve, as Agamben says, 'everyday zones, a very banal, quotidian mysticism'" (Ross 161).

remains inviolable. Though it registers an outside, it does so only as that which "is always in the process of being lost" (*Profanations* 27). His, then, is a profoundly undialectical thought which, in its attempt to "jam" what he calls "the anthropological machine"[15] (i.e., the ruthless logic that binds the non-human to the human), redefines itself as the serenity of humanity's homecoming, leaving life blissfully abandoned in the open: "… and now we turn back," he concludes, "untroubled toward home" (108).

Kristeva and the Nobility of Thought

The reason why I have devoted so much space to Agamben's reclamation of a banal, radically immanent thought is because it will allow me to throw into relief the value of Kristeva's (quaintly old-fashioned) insistence on the *nobility* of thought. As I propose to argue, the *dignitas* of thought in Kristeva lies as much in its *pathos*, its experience of a suffering resulting from "a monstrous intimacy" with Being and its *ethos*, which goes beyond Agamben's understanding of the social praxis of human discourse and has more to do with the qualitative leap from Man's infantile dwelling in language to "the most elaborate spheres of my culture"[16] and from the "now" of the pure mediality of a discourse transparent to itself to the *then* of knowledge and understanding.[17] It is in this context, I believe, that Kristeva's rethinking of experience deserves our attention. In "The Love of Another Language," an essay on writing as a translation of the sensory world, Kristeva unpacks the understanding of experience that she introduced in *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*.[18] Drawing on Heidegger, she sets out to discuss literature as an *experience* by bringing together and re-investing the two terms that denote "experience" in German. To start with, *Erlebnis* carries connotations of an affect-charged event that de-subjectivizes the human through the opening up of the destinal horizon that links the human with Being. Given her earlier concern over the danger of reducing the negative force of *signifiance* to a subjective crisis, Kristeva's remembering (indeed, her *un/forgetting*) of Being in her current involvement with literature and psychoanalysis (two of the remaining sites of thought, according to her, that need reviving)[19] is most important. What is at stake in the invocation of what she

[15] See Matthew Calarco's "Jamming the Anthropological Machine" in Calarco and DeCaroli 163-179.

[16] Experience, writes Kristeva, "leads my infantilism to the most elaborate spheres of my culture" (*Intimate Revolt* 251).

[17] It is worth returning to Kristeva's definition of experience in *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*: "But I think we all need an experience, by which I mean something unknown, surprise, pain, or delight, and *then* comprehension of this impact" (11; my emphasis).

[18] The French edition of *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* was published in 1996, the year when the essay itself was presented at Barnard College, New York. An English translation of the essay was included in *Intimate Revolt* (2002).

[19] See her speech in the context of the Holberg Prize award ceremony, published in *La haine et le pardon* as "Penser la liberté en temps de détresse" (18).

calls "the transsubjective appeal of a ray of light in what Heidegger calls Being" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 57) is precisely the destabilization of the "Now" of human discourse through the eruption within it of the timeless temporality of a lost foundation. Though this foundation is the place of negativity where both language and thought are destined to return, it is not inscribed in the metaphysical logic Agamben exposes. Rather than erase Man's infantile dwelling in language in order to preserve the continuity between nature and culture, *physis* and *logos,* it constitutes instead the site where "the namable and the unnamable, the instinctual and the symbolic, language and what is not language, are dissociated" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 50). Because, as Kristeva points out, this "there" is "an anamnesis, a memory buried in the unconscious" (50), it is, at the same time, a "fragile, painful and jubilant" link with "the other that exalts or destabilizes me" and a reclamation of the subject's "narcissistic sense of inadequacy," that is, his/her inherent poverty as an *infans* (*Intimate Revolt* 251-52). Experience for Kristeva is precisely this fragile, painful and jubilant link that "extracts thought from the yoke of the rational" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 19) and opens it to a "monstrous Eucharist" with Being.[20]

Kristeva describes such a monstrous Eucharist in her discussion of St. John's radical semiology in *New Maladies of the Soul*. As she explains in her careful analysis of John's understanding of signification, "according to the Evangelist, a sign does not formally indicate something for the person who receives it. A sign only has a value for its addressee if it responds to the sensory needs of the receiver" (128). In other words, the open secret of life turns into a sign-gift for us (its addressees) only if we approach it from the site of a lack which is inextricable from our own enfleshed existence: "you are hungry and thirsty," the Evangelist reminds us (quoted by Kristeva, *New Maladies* 128). Thought (as well as language) in Kristeva begins with the acknowledgement of this need that, however, "signs-foods" are not adequate to satisfy (*New Maladies* 129). As Kristeva emphasizes in her subsequent analysis of St. John's Gospel, a shift is necessary from the sign *qua* object/gift to the sign as *metaphor*; i.e., to the sign as a transfer (a leap, crossing, passage) to the infinite or indeed, the divine which in Kristeva, as we have seen, is synonymous with what she calls "the architecture of the idea in the human mind" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 19) and our infinite capacity for signification. It is in this light, I argue, that we need to read Kristeva's insistence on the transcendence of "then" denoted by experience as *Erfahrung*. In "The Love of Another Language" she writes: "Experience makes a new object spring forth: immediate seizure, outpouring, blaze (*Erlebnis*). It *subsequently* ["then"] becomes a knowledge of this surging forth, a *patient* knowing (*Erfahrung*)" (*Intimate Revolt* 251; my emphasis). If what is achieved through the qualitative temporal leap entailed in experience is a "patient knowing" this is because for Kristeva (as for Hegel) the immanent ethos of "Now" needs to "take upon itself the

[20] Kristeva uses the term "monstrous Eucharist" in her analysis of Annette Messager's *Casino* in *La haine et le pardon* 536.

prodigious labour of the world's history" (Hegel 17);[21] in other words, it needs to open to the responsibility of history as the destiny of both subject and meaning: "subjectivity is coextensive to time – an individual's time, history's time, being's time […]. *We are subjects and there is time*," Kristeva writes (*Sense and Non-Sense* 9; emphasis in the original). As I understand it, thought in Kristeva is this *patience* that carries with it both the labour of the negative (as the timeless time of Being) and the promise of a *surplus* of time gained through the infinity of meaning.

To conclude, though (contra Agamben) Kristeva remains faithful to the negative, her understanding of thought retains nothing of the Hegelian pathos in the face of the open secret of life. Her response to the suffering of embodiment that destabilizes consciousness is neither despair nor serene in/difference but an *Exultate, Jubilate* that is inseparable from what for her is "humanity's most sovereign venture: questioning transcendence in transcendence itself" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 10; *Intimate Revolt* 139). This is, indeed, what she underscores in her analysis of Hans Haacke's 1993 installation that forces the viewer to experience the collapse of a foundation: "… there is an exquisite ambiguity to this moment," she writes, "harrowing though it is, for it is not solely negative. The simple fact that an installation has been created in a place where the foundations are disintegrating gives rise to a question as well as to anxiety" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 10). If this question is "a sign of life," this is because it points to the ethos of thought as revolt (i.e., as subversion, critique, return, displacement) (10). It also points, however, to the sublimatory power of thought, the "then" "likely to give" this revolt "the dignity of Beauty" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 7). As she admits, this sign of life "isn't quite jubilation or exultation, as the response being formulated is minute" (10). Yet, I think she would agree with Hegel who (with his gaze fixed to the stars) concedes: "By the little which can thus satisfy the needs of the human spirit we can measure the extent of its loss" (5).

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[21] Hegel writes: "Impatience asks for the impossible, wants to reach the goal without the means of getting there. The length of the journey has to be borne with, for every moment is necessary; . . . Because the substance of individual mind, nay, more, because the universal mind at work in the world, has had the patience to go through these forms in the *long stretch of time's extent*, and to take upon itself the prodigious labour of the world's history…" (16-17; my emphasis).

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