

CHAPTER 1



The Early View of Psychoanalysis and Art

Introduction

This chapter gives an account of Kristeva's early thought as it appears in her doctoral thesis of 1974.¹ *Revolution in Poetic Language* contains the only lengthy explanation of her fundamental categorial distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. Many commentators therefore make reference to it when explicating her later thought. This is not inappropriate since it remains the case that what Kristeva means by the semiotic and symbolic is two dimensions of meaning and subjectivity. To be precise, the notion of the symbolic or, better, strictly symbolic functioning, encompasses everything to do with communicative discourse, especially utterances with propositional content which *say* something (*to* someone). The conception of the symbolic therefore covers the field of the meaningful object, that is to say, a representation, idea, or thing. Semiotic functioning, on the other hand, is the nondiscursive aspect of meaning and subjectivity, given an expanded conception of language, that is to say, one not restricted to the idea of language as the signifying medium. Semiotic functioning embraces the less visible role of tone, gesture, and rhythm, for example, in meaning and the innovative capacities of subjects. When Kristeva discusses

these she indicates a dimension of subjectivity and meaning, called “semiotic,” that exceeds the field of human capacities and limitations determined by the structure of language. The semiotic is in excess of the “symbolic order.” In other words, it is not fully captured by the structure of language defined by internal relations of difference. The category of the “symbolic” comes from Lacan’s modification of structural linguistics (explained in the next section).

However, this understanding of the semiotic and symbolic only grasps Kristeva’s categorial distinction at the typological level. It is necessary to go beyond this, and understand the distinction at what I will call the philosophico-historical level if the full significance of the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic is not to be missed. For what I aim to show is that the significance of this relationship changes in the 1980s. The account of Kristeva’s thought in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, developed below, first explicates the philosophico-historical significance of the semiotic and symbolic in 1974. It then indicates that there is a problem in the methodology of *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Having abandoned this methodology, Kristeva’s 1980s writings are based on a fundamental but easily missed change in the significance of the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic. In other words, a genuine and deep-rooted departure from the revolutionary standpoint takes place in the later writings at the level of her fundamental categorial distinction itself. In showing this, we gain access to the presence of the nihilism problematic in the 1980s trilogy. It is Kristeva’s later investigation of the semiotic, and its fate in extant symbolic discourses, that develops the thought that unacknowledged suffering is the remnant of freedom in conditions of late modernity.

The project of *Revolution in Poetic Language* is a different one. It is a theory of radical transformations of meaning and the subject that take place when extant symbolic discourses are exposed to the return, in poetic language, of what she calls semiotic functioning. The relationship between the semiotic and symbolic, here, is a matter of “revolution” in meaning and the subject. For Kristeva, it is psychoanalysis that allows the discovery of this revolution to be made, and that permits its specific dynamic and import to be articulated. The 1974 text therefore takes a revolutionary standpoint on the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic. On account of the importance of psychoanalysis for the theoretical articulation of this revolution, Kristeva’s thought develops on the ground of a return to Freud. Unsurprisingly, given the intellectual and cultural *milieu* of her thinking and writing, the return to Freud is made in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis. That is to say, Kristeva’s categories of the semiotic and symbolic develop her own reading of Freud but equally contain a debt to and departure from Lacan. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, like other writings of the period, reformulates the Lacanian categories of the imaginary and symbolic.

Kristeva's reformulation undermines the tight connection between the unconscious and the structure of language that many have found in Lacan's thought. In Lacan the centerpiece of Freud's theory of the unconscious—the oedipal structure—contains aspects that reveal the structure of language. Given the symbolic destiny of “man,” who is the *speaking* being in Lacan, the oedipal structure becomes the fundamental structure of culture itself. The stroke of genius here is that, when Lacan shows that structures of subjectivity depend on the structuration of the subject in *language*, he demonstrates how finitude (lack), and the acceptance of finitude, found and remain the mainstay of human powers and limitations. However, the identification of the unconscious with the structure of language also appears to tie culture, as such, to a founding, paternal law (the Law). Kristeva's idea of revolution both presupposes her acceptance of the Lacanian insight into language and lack (finitude) and chips away at the dominion of paternal law over subjectivity and culture. The idea was received as an “emancipatory” move in the feminist reception of Kristeva, especially, because of the cultural and political implications of the Lacanian notion of the symbolic order. For the transcendentalization of the oedipal structure sets strict limits to the historical variation of social identities, especially gender identities. If the meaning of “revolution” in Kristeva's 1970s thought is to be understood, then, her use of the concepts of semiotic and symbolic at that time must be set in relation to this psychoanalytic background.

The Lacanian Background

Since Kristeva deploys and responds to the Lacanian categories of the imaginary and symbolic without addressing herself to their clarification for an uninitiated readership, this chapter provides an interpretation of the major features of those categories. The interpretation begins with a central essay from what has been called the second phase of Lacan's thought, “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, Or Reason since Freud” (1957), making reference, also, to other of Lacan's essays which illuminate the thought contained there. Following this, the chapter explicates the seminal essay introducing the imaginary order, “The Mirror Stage” (1949).² The objective of this interpretation is limited to illuminating Kristeva's debt to and departure from Lacan, using moments in the explicatory and philosophical literature on Lacan's *Écrits* that are helpful in the task, before turning to Kristeva's revisions of the Lacanian categories.³

The Symbolic, or the Elementary Structure of Culture

The view that there is a second phase in Lacan's thinking refers to the moment when his enlistment of structuralist linguistics to present the psychoanalytic

theory of subjectivity enacts a break with Hegelian dialectic.⁴ According to the psychoanalytic canon the pre-Freudian “subject” is largely identified with self-consciousness, often the *cogito* or Cartesian conscious thinking subject. Lacan’s cultural and philosophical milieu was widely influenced by a course of lectures that introduced Hegel’s expansion of the conception of self-consciousness (in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1806). As is widely known, the lectures were delivered in Paris in the 1930s by the Russian émigré Alexandre Kojève. As a consequence of these lectures, which anthropologized Hegel’s philosophy, the latter generally came to stand for the conception that self-consciousness, constituted in otherness, unfolds a temporally articulated movement whose moments are stages in a historical development. On this view, Hegel’s dialectic presents an objective process in which each stage (for example, the Roman legal person) represents a destruction of the specific shape of the previous one (the subject of Sophoclean tragedy). This destruction involves no loss, however, for it is at once a transition to a higher position (Hegel’s “determinate negation”), preserving the elements of the previous figure. The dialectic comprehends the movement in which self-consciousness comes closer to itself, which means that it comes closer to grasping the truth of its history and freedom. “I would to heaven it were so,” Lacan remarks (1966, 296).

On this view of Hegel’s philosophy the dialectic is read as thought’s development through an immanent movement. The view leads to one conventional critique of the Hegelian system. The final position of the dialectic, “Absolute Knowledge,” cancels the otherness or non-identity that marks and unsettles the consecutive stages of self-consciousness, and this can only be so because the dialectic is guided from the outset by that position. That is to say, the Hegelian—philosophical—subject comes to itself in an interiorizing movement that gathers up the temporally articulated moments of its history, “without remainder.” This understanding of Hegel appears without modification in a lecture given by Lacan at a conference on “*La Dialectique*” in 1960. “This dialectic is convergent and attains the conjuncture defined as absolute knowledge. As such it is deduced, it can only be the conjunction of the symbolic [representation] with a real of which there is nothing more to be expected. What is this real, if not a subject fulfilled in his identity to himself? From which, one can conclude that this subject is already perfect in this regard, and is the fundamental hypothesis of this whole process. He is named, in effect, as being the substratum of this process; he is called the *Selbstbewusstsein*, the being conscious of self, the fully conscious self” (1966, 296).

Something of this convergent movement of the dialectic, made explicit by Lacan in 1960, had been retained in the early phase of his presentation of psy-

choanalytic experience. "Analysis can have for its goal only the advent of a true speech and the realization by the subject of his history in his relation to a future" (1966, 88). What marks the difference from the Hegelian subject, here, is the idea that the realization of a subject's history emerges "in his relation to a future" and not as the fulfilment of identity to self. Lacan's second phase comes to stress the contrast between the temporality pertaining to the experience of psychoanalysis and that pertaining to Hegelian determinate negation. The former presents a retroactive movement rather than a convergent one. This concept of temporality rests on the "turn to language" in psychoanalysis, for Lacan claims that the retroactive movement is *essentially* the movement of the process of signification. The point is clarified in Weber's *Return to Freud* (1978). "As a signifying medium, language *is* the articulation of non-identity and this is what allows the unconscious to be described as the discourse of the Other" (4–5). In Weber's summary, "what it [the signifier] designates and points toward—a configuration of differences—engenders meaning only retroactively, as the result of the 'pointing,' as it were" (1978, 63). *Return to Freud* aims to specify the negativity of *Entstellung*, "dislocation," which animates this retroactive movement. *Entstellung* is "radically distinct" from determinate negation understood as the movement in which a series of positions are engendered. It is a distortion or "transposition" with no determinate place. The articulation of a temporality introducing a non-Hegelian negativity into the "subject," in and through a return to Freud, amounts to a claim that psychoanalysis reintroduces otherness into self-consciousness. *Entstellung* preempts the arrival of a self-identity, dislodging the "whole" temporality of the Hegelian dialectic, taken to be the temporality of self-consciousness, the conscious subject. In the movement of *Entstellung* the positions of self-consciousness cannot converge on the fully conscious subject, for they are set astray in a radicalization of differences, an utter alterity that is "nowhere and everywhere." Rather than presenting a temporality that belongs from the beginning to an achieved self-consciousness, Lacan presents a subject that belongs to the split temporality pertaining to the structure of language, the signifying medium: "the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming" (1966, 86). The Freudian unconscious is rendered neither as an object, nor as an identity, nor as a presence, but as a disjunctive immediacy (Weber 1978, 11).

The presentation of the subject of psychoanalysis in terms of this mode of temporality works to support the claim that Lacan's "return to Freud" is at no point the return to and repetition of an origin. Thus, in one move, the radicality of the Freudian unconscious is recovered and the deployment in this recovery of a science unavailable to Freud at the period of his work is justified.

Lacan's modifications of structuralist linguistics engender a return to Freud because they specify the significance of the unconscious retroactively. Its significance lies, not in unconscious contents or agencies, but in its disjunctive immediacy.

The emphasis on structuralist linguistics in this phase of Lacan's thought is explained by the fact that Saussure's thought represents for him the elevation of the study of language to a science permitting the precise study of the structure of the sign. Linguistics becomes modern at the moment when the study of language becomes the study of the system of signs, which is to say, when Saussure finds that signs take on their value from their relations to each other and not from their referent or the relations between referents. The science of linguistics dismisses the logical positivist view of language as the reconstruction of a given world order. Moreover, the discovery that the value of the sign is determined by relations between signs subverts the claim that a meaning is determined within the contextuality of meanings. Instead, Saussure demonstrated that the sign is comprised of the two orders of the signifier and the signified. What Lacan takes from this is that the principle of the linguistic sign is not contextuality but *articulation*: every signification refers to another signification. The Lacanian theory of subjectivity asserts that the "subject" is constituted in this structure. While this stands as a challenge to the idea of the priority of the self-conscious subject in thought and volition, it does not claim that the subject is at the mercy of an external system. Indeed, Lacan regards Saussure as having resubmitted the articulation he discovered at the core of the functioning of the sign to the notion of a closed order of signs, and so as having abandoned the principle that radical difference determines the value of signs. Moreover, this failing is said to be coextensive with structuralist linguistics' incapacity to address the question of the "subject" (Weber 1978, 38). Language is not a closed order from which the subject is omitted but a structure that preexists the being who enters into it. It is the primary element in the constitution of "the speaking subject." The psychoanalytic recovery of the subject modifies structuralist linguistics and generates a *transindividual* conception of language. "The passion of the signifier now becomes a new dimension of the human condition in that it is not only man who speaks, but that in man and through man *it* speaks (*ça parle*), that his nature is woven by effects in which is to be found the structure of language, of which he becomes the material, and that therefore there resounds in him, beyond what could be conceived of by a psychology of ideas, the relation of speech" (Lacan 1966, 284). The relation of speech is said to be at the center of Freud's discovery of the unconscious: "what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language" (147).

The most radical moment of Lacan's modification of structuralist linguistics appears where he intensifies the investigation into the principle of the linguistic sign—radical difference—by demonstrating that the process of signification follows the path of the *signifier*. Only if the path of the signifier takes precedence is signification a matter of articulation and not representation. The differential order of the signified—of meanings—is secondary in relation to and brought about by the differential order of the signifier. That is to say, meaning issues from the chain of signifiers. "It is by referring to other signifieds, that is by means of the signifier, that the signified first becomes self-identical, that is, a signified. Its identity thus must be conceived as an effect of the signifier, insofar as the signifier embodies the process of signification in terms of the play of differential relations" (Weber 1978, 41). The order of the signified is not an order of meanings that preexists the signifier but an effective field constituted by the process of signification. Thus "the signified" in Lacan is never equivalent to meaning but is instead "the diachronic set of the concretely pronounced discourses" (1966, 126).

In wresting the analysis of the *structure* of the sign from Saussure's conception of language as a *system* of signs, Lacan introduces an inversion of the foundational algorithm of structuralist linguistics: S/s, "the signifier over the signified." The inversion is true to the logical and temporal precedence accorded the signifier, for it specifies the relative positions of the orders of signifier and signified in the process of signification: "we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning 'insists' but that none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable" (1966, 153). The process of signification issues in a meaning thanks to a chain structure in which the signifier both unfolds before it, and so anticipates, the dimension of meaning ("All the same it is . . ."), and outreaches the signification that the chain structure brings about. The assumption on the part of Saussure that linearity constitutes the chain of discourse ("Peter hits Paul") is therefore overturned by the attention to the polyphony without which the dimension of meaning cannot unfold. Polyphony is rooted in "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier," which corresponds to the negativity of *Entstellung* (154).

Lacan drew on resources in the development of structuralist linguistics in order to specify this mechanism. He acknowledges Jakobson and Halle for bringing greater precision into the analysis of the structure of the sign in and through their identification of metaphor and metonymy as two fundamental mechanisms of signification (Lacan 1966, 176–177, n. 6, 20; Weber 1978, 60). In Lacan metonymy and metaphor are distinguished by the relationship they

have to the bar separating signifier and signified in the foundational algorithm, S/s. The bar, resisting signification, is central to what the algorithm expresses: the principle of radical difference. It denotes infinity. Metonymy, the mechanism of the connection of signifier and signified, maintains the resistance to signification. In metaphor, the mechanism of the substitution of signifier for signifier, the signifier crosses the bar and so transfers to the position of the signified. Thus S/s expresses, not two parallel orders, but two stages of the process of signification (1966, 149). In becoming self-identical the signifier produces an effect of meaning. Conventionally, metaphor and metonymy are taken to be figures of style dependent on a prior meaning, a view which preserves the illusion that the ambiguity of meaning in language is secondary. The error derives from prioritizing the concept of language as communication, where it is assumed that the subject can intentionally avail itself of the very *medium* of language as the site of inter-subjectivity. The illusion that “the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified” corresponds to the presumption of a “subject of representation” (150). This wrongly situates *the subject* at the point of the emergence of meaning. Once the privilege traditionally assigned to meaning collapses, on account of the evidence that the laws of the signifier guide the process of signification, the view of language as a medium or tool at the disposal of a subject is displaced: “we accede to meaning only through the double twist of metaphor when we have the one and only key: the S and s of the Saussurian algorithm are not on the same level, and man only deludes himself when he believes his true place is at their axis, which is nowhere” (166). Metaphor and metonymy together make up the process of localization, or “sense” (*le sens*). It is metaphor, not the subject, which is situated at the point of emergence of meaning. “Metaphor occurs at the precise point at which sense emerges from non-sense” (158).

Metaphor and metonymy are therefore the essential mechanisms of the differential movement (articulation) that constitutes signification. The conventional understanding of metonymy as a figure of style, the substitution “part for whole,” is contradicted by the utterly classical example “thirty sails”: “for each ship to have just one sail is in fact the least likely possibility. By which we see that the connexion between ship and sail is nowhere but in the signifier, and that it is in the *word-to-word* connexion that metonymy is based” (1966, 156). Metaphor, the other aspect of the properly signifying function of language, is to be found in the production of the “poetic spark.” Taking as exemplary a line from Victor Hugo, *His sheaf was neither miserly nor spiteful* . . . , Lacan comments:

The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the

signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonymic) connexion with the rest of the chain.

One word for another: that is the formula for the metaphor and if you are a poet you will produce for your own delight a continuous stream, a dazzling tissue of metaphors. (157)

No poetic spark emerges from the simultaneous presence of the “sheaf” and the two attributes “miserly” and “spiteful.” Rather, metaphor resides in a substitution in which one signifier (“his sheaf”) has taken the place of another (the purported owner). “If, however, his sheaf does refer us to Booz, and this is indeed the case, it is because it has replaced him in the signifying chain at the very place where he was to be exalted by the sweeping away of greed and spite. But now Booz himself has been swept away by the sheaf, and hurled into the outer darkness where greed and spite harbour him in the hollow of their negation” (157).

Lacan’s passages on Hugo’s Booz express the claim that the subject is constituted in the symbolic function. That claim revolves on an interpretation, developed elsewhere, of Freud’s renowned formulation of the dialectic of the subject, *Wo es war, soll Ich werden*, and especially the imperfect tense of the first phrase. “There where it was just now, there where it was for a while, between an extinction that is still glowing and a birth that is retarded, ‘I’ can come into being and disappear from what I say” (1966, 300). The subject is constituted as absent from the signifier. “Being of non-being, that is how *I* as subject comes on the scene, conjugated with the double aporia of a true survival that is abolished by knowledge of itself, and by a discourse in which it is death that sustains existence” (300). Thus the “entrance into language” or entrance into the symbolic order corresponds to the constitution of the subject as absent from the signifier. Lacan therefore makes the thought of human finitude central to the concept of the subject, who is a subject of lack (being of nonbeing).

It is also important to see how the symbolic aspect of lack is tied to the paternal law (and so to castration). Lacan’s selection of the Victor Hugo poem for his account of the production of the poetic spark equally works to underline the discovery that the symbolic function is the symbolic, *paternal* function: “It is in this case all the more effective in realizing the signification of paternity in that it reproduces the mythical event in terms of which Freud reconstructed the progress, in the unconscious of all men, of the paternal mystery” (1966, 158). The subject is constituted under the symbolic Law. That is to say, the coming-into-being of the subject as a “being of nonbeing” is owed to the constituting and empowering instance of the *dead* father, absent from the signifier: Lacan’s “Name-of-the-Father.”

A major concern in Lacan's claim for the centrality of the symbolic function in the psychoanalytic treatment of the subject is the explicit challenge it makes to the development of the psychoanalytic tradition which treats the subject of psychoanalysis as the *ego*, a treatment which corresponds with understanding the Freudian unconscious in terms of unconscious contents or psychic agencies: an object or a presence. For Lacan, ego psychology has lost the *radical* alterity of the unconscious, which is a movement of alterity without origin, just as—in Hugo's poetic line—the subject is an effect of metaphor, produced retroactively in the movement of substitution that pertains to the signifier. The suppression of this radical alterity, which amounts to a suppression of “the discourse of the Other,” severs psychoanalytic theory from analytic practice. Freud, in contrast, provides “a dialectical apprehension of experience, the proportion of analysis of language increasing to the extent that the unconscious is directly concerned” (1966, 159) That is to say, Lacan's thesis is that the unconscious is increasingly involved where Freud follows the path of the signifier. Freud does so most evidently and precisely in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), when he comes to disclose the essence of dreaming by interrogating the disparity between the manifest dream-content (what is commonly referred to as the dream) and the latent dream-content, or dream-thoughts (*die Traumgedanke*), uncovered in the dream's interpretation. Given Freud's attention to the disparity between the dream-content and the dream-thoughts, the significance of the dream (*die Traumdeutung*) comes to the fore in Freud's analysis of the dream-work (*die Traumarbeit*). Lacan cites Freud in support of his reminder that the dream-work is “the linguistic structure that *enables us to read dreams*,” and that this is “the very principle of the ‘significance of the dream,’” (159, emphasis added). “At bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the *dream-work* which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming—the explanation of its peculiar nature” (Freud 1900).

The insistence on the dream-work as the creation of a form of thinking comes, in Lacan, to demonstrate that Freud's thought is primarily guided, not by any conception of unconscious contents or psychic agencies, but by the idea of the primary processes, the laws governing the unconscious. Thus the “analysis of language” intensifies when the analysis of the dream-work approaches a specification of these laws. The dream-work is defined in terms of four operations: the work of condensation (*die Verdichtungsarbeit*), the work of displacement (*die Verschiebungsarbeit*), considerations of representability (*die Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*), and secondary revision (*die sekundäre Bearbeitung*). The center of the discussion for Lacan is the presentation of condensation and displace-

ment. He turns up a correspondence between the laws governing the unconscious and the laws of the signifier (metaphor and metonymy), following how Freud's analysis of the disparity between the dream-content and the dream-thoughts ventures the conclusion that:

in the dream-work a psychical force is operating which on the one hand strips the elements which have a high psychical value of their intensity, and on the other hand, *by means of overdetermination*, creates from elements of low psychical value new values, which afterwards find their way into the dream-content. If that is so, *a transference and displacement of psychical intensities* occurs in the process of dream-formation, and it is as a result of these that the difference between the text of the dream-content and that of the dream-thoughts comes about. . . . The consequence of the displacement is that the dream-content no longer resembles the core of the dream-thoughts and that the dream gives no more than a distortion of the dream-wish which exists in the unconscious. (Freud 1900, 307–308)

“Displacement” functions like metonymy, word-to-word connection. As a law of the unconscious, it embraces the transfer of psychical intensities from elements which have that intensity to elements which are, in respect of the dream-wish, close to indifferent. Thus displacement gives the dream-wish an outlet by giving censorship the slip. Lacan therefore aligns the laws of the unconscious with those of the signifier.

Verdichtung, or “condensation,” is the structure of the superimposition of the signifiers, which metaphor takes as its field, and whose name, condensing in itself the word *Dichtung*, shows how the mechanism is connatural with poetry to the point that it envelops the traditional function proper to poetry.

In the case of *Verschiebung*, “displacement,” the German term is closer to the idea of that veering off of signification that we see in metonymy, and which from its first appearance in Freud is represented as the most appropriate means used by the unconscious to foil censorship. (1966, 160)

That such an alignment is warranted is further indicated by Freud's discussion of a dream image, the boat on the roof. Since the latent dream-thoughts have nothing to do with the signification “the boat on the roof” it is evident that the image is a *signifier*, the connections proper to it and hence its value being quite distinct from those presented in the dream content. Turning to Freud's much discussed claim that the dream is a rebus, Lacan derives this character of dreams from “the agency in the dream of the same literal (or phonematic) structure in which the signifier is articulated and analysed in discourse” (1966, 159). In sum, if the dream is a rebus the relationship of the dream-content to the dream-thoughts is not one of representation. There is no direct relationship

between the two. That is to say, dream images are not symbols. The dream-thoughts reside in an articulation that is radically other than the organization of the elements that form the dream-content, and cannot be found within that organization. Dream interpretation is comparable to discovering in a picture elements that have another articulation than the one of the picture's apparent composition. Dream interpretation, the analysis of a rebus, is therefore a technique that follows the path of the signifier, which leads Lacan to call it a deciphering as distinct from decoding. Moreover, the technique is not the external application of an analysis, for following the path of the signifier relies on free association, the dreamer's speech.

In sum, however much Freud's publication of the *Interpretation of Dreams* flew in the face of skepticism about dreams having significance, or the nature of the significance they have, the book's argument is not restricted to the argument for latent dream-thoughts. The center of the project is the analysis of the dream-work, which delivers the laws of the unconscious. And these laws are to be recognized as applying beyond the state of dreaming. "For in the analysis of dreams, Freud intends only to give us the laws of the unconscious in their most general extension. One of the reasons why dreams were most propitious for this demonstration is exactly, Freud tells us, that they reveal the same laws whether in the normal person or the neurotic. But in either case, the efficacy of the unconscious does not cease in the waking state. The psychoanalytic experience does nothing other than establish that the unconscious leaves none of our actions outside its field" (Lacan 1966, 163). When Lacan claims, in a further step, that the psychoanalytic experience discovers the whole structure of language, he explicitly makes the unconscious a cultural category and, at the same time, makes the structure of language *transcendental*. His portrayal of "the psychoanalytic experience" is distinguished by the effort to convey the symbolic *fact* of man, which structures the human being's limitations and powers. One consequence of this "symbolic fact" is the modified significance of the more visible features of volition and cognition, such as "choice" or "reflection." They are altered by the "always already there" of language, more specifically by the negativity and temporality pertaining to the field of the signifier, or more properly by "the discourse of the Other." The conception of the symbolic does not, however, exhaust the categorial edifice of Lacan's thought, since the symbolic is erected on the basis of the prior appearance of lack, which involves, in its broadest implication, a failure to take on finitude, and so a moment that must be corrected by the institution of the symbolic if there is to be adequate separation and connections with others. Here we turn to Lacan's discussion of imaginary relations.

The Imaginary: Lacan's Mirror Stage

Since Kristeva's thought, too, must be seen as an enquiry into conditions for adequate human separateness and connectedness, it is important to underline that Lacan's thought places those conditions within the field of the signifier and desire, that is to say, in the symbolic order or order of language. What distinguishes the imaginary order, then, is the absence or inadequate development of conditions for self-relation and otherness. Lacan's imaginary order comprises relations of similarity, mirroring, or homeomorphism. These relations are the fundamental features in the ego's formation and settle at its core the structure of narcissism and its correlate, aggressivity. The specific dyadic form of these imaginary relations appears as a condition for the maturation of the human being, prior to the entrance into language, and provides the oedipal structure with a coherence it would otherwise lack. That is to say, the "mirror stage" elucidates the appearance of spatiality and the potentiation of the subject-object positionality required if oedipal identification is to be intelligible. In imaginary relations no other or object is as yet distinguished. Rather, imaginary relations are played out at the level of an inner/outer matrix. In his essay on "The Mirror Stage" (1949), Lacan states: "I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*" (1966, 4). The distinction between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt* is the appearance of lack. Moreover, the imaginary relations pertaining to the mirror stage are a special case of the function of establishing a relation between them, one that diverges from the acceptance of lack.

In the mirroring *imago* what appears is the "similar," generating the ego homeomorphically, that is to say, through the attraction of a similar morphology. Before there is an other for the ego, the ego is "the similar," the direct counterpart to, and set up by, the mirror image. Lacan's introduction of the mirror image was central to his polemic with New World ego psychology, for which the analytic treatment is directed to securing and strengthening the ego. In his essay "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis" (1948) Lacan asserts that "the ego represents the center of all the *resistances* to the treatment of symptoms" (1966, 23). Moreover, his objection to ego psychology aimed broadly at a culture of which the New World represented the most advanced example: "It is clear that the promotion of the ego today culminates, in conformity with the utilitarian conception of man that reinforces it, in an ever more advanced realization of man as individual, that is to say, in an isolation of the soul ever more akin to its original dereliction" (27).⁵

Lacan's polemic with ego psychology insists that "the human ego establishes itself on the basis of the imaginary relation" (cited in Kristeva 1983, 22). Thus in the seminal essay on the mirror stage he claims: "We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan 1966, 2). The nucleus of the ego is formed in an identification which presumes no subjective or objective position. Observations of the infant's activity before a mirror at a period roughly between six and eighteen months illuminate this identification, for that activity is exemplary in exhibiting the *structure* of the mirror stage. Identification, here, means the infant's captation by its mirror image, a "total body form" that is at odds with the direct experience of motor incapacity and nursling dependence. The phenomenon of recognition that Lacan locates in this experience is not an epistemological one, not recognition of self, but an ontological one. The infant undergoes an anticipation of its powers, and of the mental permanence of the I, in and through an image. Moreover, the feelings of identity occur only by virtue of their contrast with the immediate experience of corporeal fragmentation (*le corps morcelé*). "What I have called the *mirror stage* is interesting in that it manifests the affective dynamism by which the subject originally identifies himself with the visual *Gestalt* of his own body: in relation to the still very profound lack of co-ordination of his own motility, it represents an ideal unity, a salutary *imago*" (18–19). The *imago* is a captivation of the subject, transforming it. In the case of the mirror image the transformation introduces distorting features which are central to Lacan's polemic against ego psychology. The primordial form of the I is established by an external, inverted, virtual reality which settles a fictional direction and alienating destination at the core of the ego: "the human individual fixes upon himself an image that alienates him from himself" (19). Where it is a matter of identification, the ego—far from accommodating the subject to reality, or having an integrative power in the face of conflictual demands imposed by id, superego, and reality—always involves the subject in the confusion of self and otherness. If imaginary relations based in the mirror stage are fundamental to the ego, the latter's relationship to others and reality is ensnared in self-deception and the aggressivity instituted by the alienating function of the specular I (19).

With Lacan, the modification of the imaginary, mitigating its hazards, appears only with the dialectic of desire and the entrance into language. The entrance into language works against the centrifugal/centripetal force that dominates the ego and introduces the tendency toward absorption of or absorption into otherness, for the discourse of the Other is a fundamental, ineluctable, and

permanent exposure to exteriority. The symbolic order, preexisting the subject constituted through entrance into it, imposes on the human being both his or her “lack of being” (*manque-à-être*) and the requirement that the speaking subject take up a relationship to lack, to “castration.” Thus, although Lacan endorsed the activation of egoic reactions in psychoanalysis, the *subject* of psychoanalysis is the subject of language, whose “nature is woven by effects in which is to be found the structure of language, of which he becomes the material” (1966, 284). Moreover, a subject shot through by such effects is a subject of *desire*. The meaning of desire in the Lacanian corpus lies in its differentiation from “demand,” the demand for complete gratification aimed at the mother’s body. Fulfilment of the demand is impossible, an impossibility that is posited when the object of *desire* is posited in the field of the signifier. Desire consists in a transposition of the demand for complete gratification into object-relation. It is marked by the absolute gap between demand and its fulfilment, that is to say, by the impossibility of satisfying the demand for complete gratification. This gap turns into the “infinity” of desire, in the sense that no object satisfies desire. Desire overreaches any object of desire. In Lacan’s words, the object of desire is receding, “metonymic.” In sum, the Lacanian subject is a subject of desire in the field of symbolic relations. On the one hand, it is the subject divided by desire and language (finite). On the other hand, desiring metonymy (infinite) sustains the subject in object-relation. That is to say, with Lacan, desire sustains symbolic capacities and, thereby, the social dialectic. On this view of the subject of psychoanalysis, analysis is directed to the passion of the signifier.

Revolution in Poetic Language

To briefly recapitulate the two reasons for beginning the discussion of Kristeva’s thought with *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974): first, it is the only place where her fundamental categorial distinction between the semiotic and symbolic, with its debt to and departure from Lacan, is fully elaborated; second, the claim that her thought contains an analysis of modernity is brought out and substantiated by comparing the status of psychoanalysis and literature in those writings with their status in the earlier work. I will consider the debt to and departure from Lacan in the context of a discussion of the philosophicohistorical meaning of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic thought in her doctoral thesis.

In 1974 psychoanalysis has a largely theoretical role and literature is a practice. The respective roles of psychoanalysis and literature are framed by a reflection on the emergence and fate of the modern political world in the shape of,

first, the bourgeois revolution, and second, Marxism. In respect of the bourgeois revolution, the meaning of literature for Kristeva rests on an argument that the late nineteenth century displays the decline of the “negativity” of the political revolution, and the removal of negativity from social and political practice to avant-garde literature, or more precisely “poetic language.” In respect of Marxism, Kristeva attempts a reformulation of historical materialism, arguing that the one-sided, objectivist view of social and historical transformation, which is owed to the emphasis in dialectical materialism on the history of modes of production, represents a loss of the dialectic, which can only be recovered through a reintroduction of the process of the “subject” known to psychoanalysis. The individual and language are only returned to their sociohistorical imbrication by way of a return to Freud’s “discovery” of the unconscious. In 1974 the return to Freud provides the *theory* of the process that poetic language performs. “The theory of the unconscious seeks the very thing that poetic language practices within and against the social order: the ultimate means of its transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution” (Kristeva 1974, 81).

This ultimate means of transformation, and precondition, of the social order is developed in Kristeva’s conception of “*signifiance*.” *Signifiance*, the “signifying process,” encompasses the formation of the subject and meaning that symbolic functioning, strictly speaking, depends on and refuses, the refusal being more or less inflexible depending on the rationality of the social symbolic order. In Kristeva’s view, the bourgeois social order is particularly inflexible with respect to the suppression of its dependence on *signifiance*, for it dispenses with the social tensions and dissatisfactions that express that dependence, absorbing them into the unity of the subject or the state. Psychoanalytic theory provides a reconstruction of both the nature of the signifying process, for which the theory of the drives is the key, and the process of absorption, thanks to the theory of narcissism. In the latter case, the process of narcissistic fixation stands as the paradigm for the attachment of the signifying process to the unity of the subject (the bourgeois individual), and for its attachment to a position masking as mere legal neutrality (the bourgeois state). At this point in Kristeva’s thought, psychoanalysis stands apart from the problem it diagnoses, the rigidity of the modern social order, as well as from the practice that is needed if any subversion of that order is to be possible: poetic language. “Theory” is set apart. Kristeva’s reconstruction of the formation and deformation of modern secular discourses and institutions therefore rests on a recapitulation of the Marxist arrangement of theory, the problem, and “work.” Psychoanalysis occupies the first position, *theory*, since it permits *the problem*, the inflexibility of the bourgeois world, to be grasped in terms of narcissistic

fixation. Moreover, the discovery of the unconscious allows the operations that counter this rigidity to be theoretically articulated, showing how poetic language carries out the transformation of meaning and the subject, the moment of “work” (*practice*). Because the thought of *Revolution in Poetic Language* rests on this classical arrangement of theory, the problem, and work—and not because it is a thought about literature rather than social struggle—the problem of social transformation is conceived in terms of how the negativity of the signifying process is to have a historical impact. The way in which theory, the problem, and work stand in relation to each other equally affects the articulation of social transformation, as I will suggest.

The rest of this chapter clarifies how the revolutionary standpoint of 1974 develops through Kristeva’s departure from Lacan, which is a return to the crossroads of idealism and materialism. Kristeva’s “return to Freud” argues that the psychoanalytic theory of the drives is the key to elucidating the negativity repressed by the bourgeois social-symbolic system: “those positions of mastery that conceal their violence and pretend to be mere legal neutrality” (1974, 83). Given that elucidation, Kristeva argues that art and literature have the capacity to inscribe this negativity in and through the very process of the production of the artwork, once social dissatisfactions—erupting in the revolutions of the second half of the nineteenth century—can be dispersed or absorbed owing to the connection between the mechanisms of capitalism and the maintenance of modern, secular institutions. “Capitalism leaves the subject the right to revolt, preserving for itself the right to suppress that revolt. The ideological systems capitalism proposes, however, subdue, unify, and consolidate that revolt, bringing it back within the field of unity (that of the subject and the State). When objective conditions were not such that this state of tension could be resolved through revolution, rejection became symbolized in the avant-garde texts of the nineteenth century where the repressed truth of a shattered subject was then confined” (210–211). Insofar as art and literature inscribe negativity in the formation of the artwork they can provide a site of confrontation with the repression through which bourgeois ideology sustains itself. Kristeva’s focus on the functioning of repression rather than the specific meanings and values of bourgeois ideology is supported by the argument that a direct attack on the latter is no longer feasible given the ramification of capitalist society. “Revolution in poetic language” refers to the capacity of poetic language to bring strictly symbolic functioning into an encounter with its process of production, *signifiance*, for *signifiance* involves a functioning other than strictly symbolic functioning: semiotic functioning. The key to the “semiotic,” and so to Kristeva’s clarification of the negativity of poetic language, is the Freudian theory of the drive.

In Freud the drive is a boundary concept of soma and psyche, indicating that the biological dimensions of the human being are always taken up, or at the point of being taken up, into another register. With Kristeva, this register is neither the symbolic one nor is it destined to be encompassed by the latter. This is where she differs from Lacan. The drive, for her, is a corporeal inscription of the symbolic that is not only prior to the appearance of linguistic capacities or object-relation. It is also distinct from the effects of language that, on the Lacanian view, make the subject the *material* of the *structure* of language. Kristeva is attempting to describe the elements of something outside the realm of symbolic functioning, and so outside the realm of given structures of meaning and values. It might be called natural so long as this is understood, not as the Other of the symbolic field, but as the “not yet symbolized.” From the developmental perspective, the semiotic is logically and chronologically prior to the symbolic order. Assuming the entrance into language, semiotic functioning is in excess of symbolic functioning, and heterogeneous to it, so that neither the semiotic nor the symbolic can fully overcome or subsume the other.

Kristeva’s thought on the drive insists on the biological, corporeal elements in the constitution of the subject, elements that do not make embodiment a mechanical, naturalized dimension of subjectivity, however. For they are dependent on an exposure to otherness that brings about nonsignifying *alterations* in subjectivity at the level of the body. The alterations are constitutive of embodiment itself, so that the speaking subject is, first, a highly altered “human animal.” In Kristeva’s writings of the 1980s, where these corporeal elements are elaborated in more detail, what happens to them in the symbolic order is highly consequential for possibilities of self-relation, connections with others, and world-relation. More generally, Kristeva’s thought on the drive can be seen as a rejection of the Lacanian tendency to make the subject fully a subject “of language.” That there is nothing corporeal that does not centrally involve the structure of language appears to be the consequence of Lacan’s insistence that there is nothing about the body that is not detached from its natural foundations. Even the Lacanian drive, then, would be noncorporeal, and so subject to representation.⁶

In “The Gift of Love and the Debt of Desire” (1998) Shepherdson has made a compelling argument that Lacan’s thought does not submit the corporeality of the subject to the structure of language, *in toto*. As he acknowledges, on the traditional reading, Lacanian theory would be “plagued by an excessively linguistic or disembodied perspective” (46). He rejects this reading, arguing that what the drive means in Lacan is the residue in subjectivity of prelinguistic moments in the constitution of the subject. The residue is the effect of the

repression of those moments on the entrance into language. The argument is particularly clear in Shepherdson's discussion of Lacan's reading of Freud on the loss of the real breast and the emergence of the "hallucinated breast." The latter "is the gift of a hallucinated object in which satisfaction can be taken apart from the satisfaction of need—an object that serves, unlike the natural thing, to give a place to lack, a local habitation, thereby providing the tentative beginning of a limit to this lack, a protosymbolic limit, in relation to which the body will be organized" (39). Here we find the detachment of the body from its natural foundations (from the register of need to that of demand, in Lacan's terminology). However, we do not find that this detachment is, immediately, an inscription in the structure of language defined by internal relations of difference. Rather, the object-relation that pertains to the hallucinated breast is "the corporeal registration of loss," "an oral inscription of lack . . . in its concrete bodily localization" (39). This means that, in respect of symbolic lack, the drive is the *residue* of the *mark* of presymbolic loss. The concept of the drive in Lacan therefore indicates that there are different modalities of lack in his theory. The drive itself is an incompleteness in the subject's structuration in language: "the circuit of the drive is established at the place where the symbolic cut is incomplete" (62). Moreover, the circuit of the drive points to, or calls up—in a manner that is different from but still in a sense tied to—a prelinguistic, ineliminably corporeal alteration in subjectivity: a "cut" prior to the symbolic cut that is so often taken to fulfil the meaning of "lack" in Lacan. Finally, the drive lends a certain autonomy to desire in respect of desire's relation to the mediation of the Law.

On Shepherdson's reading, what prevents readers from understanding the complexity of Lacan's thought on lack is insufficient attention to his thought on "object *a*." For it is this thought that follows through the different divisions in the subject that are brought about in different modes of object-relation—where the latter does not imply an outside object that a subject takes up a relationship to, but the exposure to otherness that Kristeva tracks at different levels as well, above all in the 1980s trilogy. In sum, the Lacanian "speaking subject" is one divided by drives as well as by language and desiring metonymy. All this flies quite in the face of traditional readings of Lacan's conception of the unconscious. It brings his thought very close to Kristeva's departure from it. Indeed, it may be that Kristeva's thought on the "semiotic" only presents a significant departure from Lacan once the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic changes in the later writings. We will find that there is such a departure there, even given Shepherdson's underlining of the discovery of embodiment in Lacan.⁷ For the present, this chapter continues to elucidate how the concept of the drive appears in Kristeva's thinking in 1974.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* the psychoanalytic concept of the drive is the key to explicating the nature of semiotic functioning. With Kristeva, the early life of the drive is predominantly an instinctual motion, and the most primitive registering of a confrontation with the symbolic on the part of a pre-verbal being that is dependent, from the beginning and for a long period, on another (paradigmatically the mother). The centrality of this dependence in Kristeva's thought is consistent with Lacan's assertion of the "prematurity" of the newborn infant, following Freud's discovery that a "biological" factor is prominent in the causation of neuroses: "the long period of time during which the young of the human species is in a condition of helplessness and dependence" (Freud 1926, 154). Kristeva builds up her conception of the semiotic out of this combination of features: corporeal life before the appearance of linguistic capacities, which, since it is a life dependent on and thereby exposed to the symbolic being of another, is never "mere" corporeal life. Strictly speaking, this combination of features describes Kristeva's "semiotic *chora*," the term *chora* being adopted from Plato's *Timaeus* and used to denote "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" that does not lend itself to phenomenological, spatial intuitions (1974, 25–26). For Kristeva, all discourse, that is to say, everything within the field supported by the distinction symbolic/real, depends on and refuses this realm of the "not yet symbolized" in which the inside/outside boundary, and so subject- and object-positions—which is to say "separation"—are not yet established. The semiotic *chora* can be presented either by analogy with vocal or kinetic rhythm or by theoretical description, but never demonstrated. Here we run up against the theoretical status of psychoanalysis in 1974. Kristeva proposes that psychoanalysis has permitted the description of the *chora* to be made thanks to its specification of unconscious processes.

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged [*se disposent*] according to the various constraints imposed on this body—always already involved in a semiotic process—by family and social structures. In this way the drives, which are "energy" charges as well as "psychical" marks, articulate what we call a *chora*: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated. (1974, 25)

From one point of view, then, the semiotic is an ordering of the drives in relation to the mother's body. The mother's body is a mediator of the symbolic, for the whole corporeal exchange between mother and child conveys familial and social imperatives to the body of a subject, where neither the body nor the

subject is constituted as such. From this it is clear that insofar as the semiotic centrally concerns the *mother's* body, this is no presymbolic body. Moreover, Kristeva's insistence that the semiotic involves preverbal capacities on the part of the *infans* challenges a tendency in the critical reception of her thought to identify the semiotic *chora* too closely with "the mother's body."⁸ The identification can only be made if the theory of the drive at the center of Kristeva's description of the *chora* is ignored. The source of the drive is neither the naturalized mother's body nor the naturalized organs of the infant. Drive theory works to articulate *preverbal capacities* to struggle with an absolutely unmasterable otherness that is not (yet) "outside." These semiotic capacities consist in a struggle with the impact of the symbolic on the part of a being that is not inscribed in the symbolic register. (Chapters 2–4 below, show how they acquire further determination in Kristeva's later thought as specific dimensions of the narcissistic structure.) The aim of *Revolution in Poetic Language* is to show that semiotic capacities rest on a feature of the drive introduced by Freud and repeatedly emphasized by Kristeva: its dominant destructive wave, isolated terminologically as "the death drive." On the one hand, the death drive is necessary if any psychic configuration is to emerge from the bodily exchange between mother and child. On the other hand, the very nature of the *chora* as a motility whose regulation cannot lead to the establishment of positions is owed to the destructive wave of the drive. Finally, the drive's destructive wave makes the mapping of the body through the ordering of the drives ambiguous in a way that is not captured by the thought that primal mapping is, as such, an imposition of imperatives deriving from the social realm and internalized in the constitution of the subject (a common reading in the feminist reception of Kristeva's notion of primal mapping). The following discussion of Kristeva's return to Freud's theory of the drive in *Revolution in Poetic Language* aims to illuminate this claim.

Revolution in Poetic Language presents a minute logic of the drives that attempts to articulate the transitions from the most elementary moment of symbolic impact to the emergence of the sign itself. First, the destructive portion of the drive is central to what makes instinctual motion a wave motion. The repeated wave motion involves a building up of tension—"excitation"—which, owing to nonsatisfaction (frustration), includes a moment of constraint, thanks to which the wave breaks, leaving a *mark*. "Repeated drives or the shocks from energy discharges create a state of [unsatisfied] excitation . . . [that] produces, through a qualitative leap, a repercussion that delays, momentarily absorbs, and posits that excitation" (1974, 171). The "mark" in Kristeva combines those features of delay, momentary absorption, and the positing of unsatisfied excitation. It makes possible, in turn, a reactivation of the motion, a return of the

destructive wave to divide, displace, or consolidate the mark. This most archaic moment in Kristeva's logic of the drives can be captured in an image. The whole movement is like the formation, division, and displacement of wave patterns on a shoreline. The image fails insofar as, although it is the organs where the drives are applied, the mark is not "made" in some distinct matter. Rather, drives and their stases are inextricably corporeal and psychic inscriptions. Kristeva therefore stresses the meaning of the drive as an articulation (*charnière*), in her words a "rhythmic totality," which orients and connects the infant's body to the mother's body. The concept of the drive, then, is the concept of a presymbolic orientation and connection between the *infans* and an "artificial" extension, tied to the condition of infantile helplessness and dependence. Whenever the mother's body, as mediator of familial and social imperatives, is viewed as the very origin of, and not only necessary for, the motility and genesis of the *chora* the *charnière* is abstracted from.

Kristeva's deploys the term "drive re-jection" to designate the motility and genesis of the *chora*. Although the logic of the drives is at once abstract and mysterious, its purpose is to convey a kind of repetition on the border of soma and psyche that is sparked by the symbolic but not equivalent to its modes of operation, the articulated network of differences expounded by Lacan. Nor, on the other hand, is drive re-jection the Other of those modes of operation. It is not "a merely mechanical repetition of an undifferentiated 'identity'" (1974, 171). Semiotic capacities, which are neither symbolic nor merely mechanical, precede symbolic capacities as their necessary precondition. The whole process, from mark to unstable engram to sign, involves a transition from "the agitated body," where drives hold sway, to "the speaking body."

Kristeva is explicit, nonetheless, that this prelinguistic isolation of the semiotic is no more than a "theoretical supposition justified by the need for description" (1974, 68). The semiotic only *exists* within the symbolic field where it is articulated as heterogeneous to the sign. Freudian theory, or psychoanalysis as theory, has enabled Kristeva to articulate a motility of the semiotic, a mode of repetition, which implies the potential destruction of any symbolic arrangement the semiotic is submitted to. This conception of repetition is therefore the key to the thought on negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and so to its view of the possibility of symbolic renewal, the transformation of meaning and the subject.

Kristeva sees her return to Freud's theory of the drives as setting her conception of negativity off from both the negativity presented by idealist thought, centered on consciousness (Hegel), and negativity centered on language

(Lacan). Thanks to the theoretical isolation of the prelinguistic semiotic *chora*, ultimately Freud's "unconscious," a conception of negativity is expounded which belongs neither to the volitional or cognitive abilities of the subject nor to the Lacanian operations of language, which decentered that subject. Even so, semiotic functioning in the symbolic field does not imply some kind of return to the semiotic "as such." Although the rhythmic space of the *chora* is isolated as preliminary it is found only at the symbolic level, presupposing the "break" which posits the signifier/signified articulation, as well as the positions of object (outside) and subject (absent from the signifier). Semiotic functioning in the symbolic field is an activation, in Kristeva's terms, of the heterogeneous contradiction of semiotic and symbolic: her *signifiance* or signifying process. The affirmation of art, more specifically a certain literature, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* rests on the claim that the heterogeneous contradiction of the semiotic and symbolic is recovered when significations—the meanings that compose prevailing discourses—are dismantled and thereby returned to their nonsignifying, drive-invested elements, which are then amenable to a reconfiguration. This thought makes up Kristeva's psychoanalytic version of the project in which modern literature departs from its role as representation (of an outside object) and seeks out the conditions of its own appearance as a work. In her version what is paramount is the thesis that certain material supports—voice, gesture, color, for example—are susceptible to the imprint of semiotic motility (drive rejection). In the words of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, the semiotic network is "more or less integrated as a *signifier*," and this is what permits the semiotic combinatorial system to obtain "the complex articulation we associate with it in musical and poetic practices" (1974, 47, 68). Poetic language brings semiotic motility to bear on symbolic functioning that is immobilized in a deracinated and mastering signification. Dismantling the meaningful object (representation, idea, thing), it deprives the object of the unity which obtains in the specular captivation (optical, as in the mirror stage, and/or conceptual), substituting signifying elements for the meaningful object. The signifying elements—"signifiers"—are drive-invested fragments, notably rhythm, tone, color, or words, which tend to return to nonsymbolic negativity, which is to say, semiotic functioning. Although the return to the signifying elements brings the subject and meaning to the threshold of drive rejection, in poetic language the fragments are equally subject to a combinatory moment—"fitting together, detaching, including, and building up 'parts' into some kind of 'totality'"—which preempts symbolic collapse (102). In sum, with Kristeva, literature is rhythm made intelligible by a symbolic barrier. Moreover, given that the semiotic network is

“more or less” integrated in the signifier, non-symbolic functioning is always in excess of intelligible translation, an excess that represents the possibility of the return and renewal of poetic subversion.

On the one hand, then, the heterogeneous contradiction of the semiotic and symbolic never goes so far as the complete loss of symbolic functioning. On the other hand, conversely, symbolic functioning can never fulfill the abstraction from semiotic functioning. Nevertheless, symbolic functioning as such involves a refusal of the semiotic and a social symbolic order may be especially inflexible with respect to that refusal. This is Kristeva’s thought when she characterizes the bourgeois social symbolic system as what brings everything back within the field of unity. That is to say, the bourgeois social symbolic system suppresses the recognition that symbolic functioning involves a refusal of the semiotic. In these conditions *poetic language* recovers the relationship of the semiotic and symbolic dimensions of language.

In sum, Kristeva’s particular rendering of the thesis that modern literature reaches into the conditions of its own appearance as a work is one that insists that the signifying elements freed from a deracinated signification are themselves trajectories of the agitated body, semiotic-and-symbolic. There are moments in Kristeva’s writings where it looks as though this is a transhistorical capacity of the artwork. However, her assertion that the negativity of poetic language becomes self-conscious in nineteenth-century avant-garde literature provides some acknowledgment that what distinguishes modern art is art’s autonomy. Only art freed from doing duty to the ritual, religious, or political realms (which thereby define art’s meaning) can represent *signifiance*, and so the semiotic-symbolic relationship. Thus the political meaning of Kristeva’s thesis on revolution in poetic language is that the bourgeois social symbolic system both divorces aesthetic practice from social relations and may be subject to critique thanks to the autonomous signifying practice of modern literature.

However, the major objective in this account of Kristeva’s return to the theory of the drives has been to show that in 1974 psychoanalysis stands to art as theory to practice. Psychoanalysis is of course included with artistic practice amongst the phenomena that manifest both semiotic and symbolic functioning, for it is defined in part by the destabilization of a subject exposed to an other in the transference-relation, a destabilization which centrally involves the reactivation of nonsymbolized drives, Kristeva’s “semiotic motility.” On this view, psychoanalytic experience reaches the repressed of the dominant ideological system, accessing the shattered subject of that ideology, and putting the subject in process/on trial (*le sujet-en-procès*). If destabilization is not to lead to the collapse of the subject, a boundary moment must be restored to it. This happens

through the realization in language of the activation of nonsymbolized drives, so that the subject is not isolated in a process that goes from unity to destabilization, but is, rather, brought into connection with the signifying process.

Despite this view of the power of psychoanalysis, the import of psychoanalytic experience is assessed, in the last instance, in terms of a revolutionary criterion, the potential it has for a historical impact. In other words, psychoanalytic experience is assessed for its potential for subjective and social transformation. How psychoanalytic experience fares in this assessment rests on the view that this potential is lost where a practice confines the signifying process within a "subjective enclosure," following the path of narcissistic fixation in the formation of the ego. In Kristeva's view, psychoanalysis fails the revolutionary criterion by definition, not because of its setting, but because the realization in language of the subject-in-process takes place in and through an identification ultimately defined by prevailing family and social structures. Kristeva here shares the view that the talking cure is normative, not in any independent fashion, but within the bounds of dominant normativity. Her particular rendering of the normativity of the talking cure lies in her claim that the transference-relation is personified: "transference permits the analysand to take over the (power of) discourse the analyst is presumed to hold. Although it thereby reconstructs the signifying process, this renewal of power locks it up within a discourse that tests intrafamilial relations" (1974, 208).

Although Kristeva does not suggest that every recovery of the signifying process in literature is on the way to having a historical impact, poetic language fares better with respect to the revolutionary criterion. For a historical impact to be possible the realization of the signifying process must embrace social forms. The ambiguity of art's autonomy as a critical practice is paramount here, for the failing of artistic representation lies in its tendency to define itself in opposition to social and political practices, thereby becoming complicit with the marginalization through which the bourgeois system accommodates and avails itself of the negativity it abuts against. In short, art becomes complicit with the system's capacities to use dissent for its own continuation. This is the case with the artistic phenomenon that is the object of Kristeva's *doctorat d'état*, the nineteenth-century avant-garde, even though it is this literature in which the inscription of negativity becomes fully self-conscious. "Expending thought through the signifying process, the text inscribes the negativity that (capitalist) society and its official ideology repress. Although it thus dissents from the dominant economic and ideological system, the text also plays into its hands: through the text, the system provides itself with what it lacks—rejection—but keeps it in a domain apart, confining it to the ego, to the 'inner

experience' of an elite, and to esoterism. The text becomes the agent of a new religion that is no longer universal but elitist and esoteric" (1974, 186).

Art's confinement to a subjective enclosure amounts to an attachment of the most unstable moments of the signifying process, drive re-jection, to the unity of the subject. Kristeva goes to psychoanalytic thought again for the articulation of the "unity" of the subject, which, in her early view, is to be found in the account of ego formation. The confinement of art to esoterism follows the path that protects an ego in the process of formation against the destructive force of the drives: the path of narcissistic fixation. Thus it appears that psychoanalysis is irredeemably captured by the structure it discovers—narcissism—because of the need of identification in the transference-relation. The restoration of a boundary moment to the subject-in-process is impossible without the personification of that boundary moment, an addressee ultimately caught in familial and social structures. Poetic language, in contrast, can overcome this limitation because of the absence of any addressee in the restoration of the boundary moment. For the always absent "addressee" of poetic language "is the *site of language itself* or, more precisely, its thetic moment, which the text appropriates by introducing within it, as we have said, semiotic motility. In so doing, the text takes up strictly individual experience and invests it directly in a signification (*Bedeutung*), in other words, in an enunciation and denotation that stem from the socio-symbolic whole. In this way, significations (ideologies) that preoccupy the social group—the ones implied in its acts of controlling them—are put into play by the process of the subject they wanted to ignore" (1974, 208–209)

Poetic language is a practice played out in relation to the boundary moment of language in which the symbolic/real distinction is posited along with subject-object positionality. Kristeva calls this the "thetic moment." From the perspective of subjective diachrony the thetic moment is the moment of entrance into the symbolic field in and through which the semiotic network comes to be more or less integrated in the signifier. Kristeva has therefore extended Lacan's "entrance into the order of language" into a thetic *phase* that embraces semiotic capacities giving access to symbolic capacities. Poetic language is a practice played out in relation to this boundary moment of language, which usually appears in the work as a syntactical constraint. The thought is that semiotic motility "bound" by a symbolic barrier, rather than bound in relation to a personified addressee, is withdrawn from attachment to the unity of the subject. If the path of narcissistic fixation is held off, the subject-in-process invades representation. In sum, "revolution in poetic language" means that the negativity of semiotic functioning is sustained within the objective arena and so counters the prevailing organization of negativity, dismantling the significations

which preoccupy the social groups. "Poetic language" is the site of transformation of meaning and the subject.

In 1974 this practice comes to define the only mode of intersubjectivity worthy of the name, the only intersubjectivity that remains once social and political relations serve and are reproduced by the mechanisms of capitalism. Poetic language is then equivalent to, if not more than, ethics. "Ethics' should be understood here to mean the negativizing of narcissism within a *practice*; in other words, a practice is ethical when it dissolves those narcissistic fixations (ones that are narrowly confined to the subject) to which the signifying process succumbs in its sociosymbolic realization. Practice, such as we have defined it, positing and dissolving meaning and the unity of the subject, therefore encompasses the ethical. The text, in its signifying disposition and its signification, is a practice assuming all positivity in order to negativize it and thereby make visible the *process* underlying it. It can thus be considered, precisely, as that which carries the ethical imperative" (1974, 233). Kristeva's argument for the significance of art and literature in *Revolution in Poetic Language* is therefore bound to focus on the realization of semiotic motility in artistic representation.

If a greater emphasis on symbolic functioning is detectable in her writings of the 1980s this is because Kristeva has been led to consider art and literature from a different viewpoint. Her thought on psychoanalysis and art is now situated within a different, broader, problematic: not the repression through which a social-symbolic system maintains itself, but the dearth of a site of engagement of the semiotic and symbolic within the modern social-symbolic system. The background presumption of Kristeva's thought is now the failure of modern secular discourses and institutions to provide a site of engagement of the semiotic and symbolic: the problem of nihilistic modernity. Religions, in contrast, had provided a site of this kind. The question of the demise of historical religions, by which she appears to mean religions constituting social symbolic systems which bind and individuate their members in ways that accommodate the semiotic in a manner specific to each system, is of major import in Kristeva's thought (see chapter 5, below). It provides a crucial point of access to her analysis of the absence of symbolic forms that accommodate the semiotic at the everyday level in secular modernity. Once modern secular institutions and discourses provide no site for the engagement of symbolic and semiotic, the task of engagement gets confined to individual experience, leading to the modern "isolation of the soul." Although religions are a possible recourse for the individual in such conditions, resorting to religion brings on a dispersion of individuals into various temporal and spatial moments. The individual may choose Eastern or Western religiousness, or affiliate him- or herself with a body of beliefs

selected from the history of Western monotheism. In an interview she remarks: "Today's religious discourses are remnants or archaeological excavations of a lover's discourse from the past that some individuals still use in our plural, non-homogeneous history, an era in which each person lives in his own time. We may all *be* citizens of the twentieth century, but we do not all *live* in the twentieth century. Some of us live in the thirteenth century, others in the fifteenth, and still others are Buddhists, nihilists, and so on" (Guberman 1996, 69). One may alight on one of the peaks of Western monotheism or abruptly bear oneself away from that tradition. This temporal isolation implies that religions today do not make up for what is lacking to the individual: the possibility of establishing ourselves as *particular*—separate and connected (Kristeva 1983, 7).

This whole change in perspective implies that Kristeva has abandoned the attempt to seek out a logic of social transformation on the grounds of negativity in literature. More precisely, she has abandoned the attempt made in *Revolution in Poetic Language* to elucidate the transition from a transformation of meaning and the subject to social transformation. As has been seen, a major objective of that book was to modify dialectical materialism by exposing it to psychoanalysis and art. The endeavor relied on the possibility of bringing the conception of the Cultural Revolution into connection with her psychoanalytically inspired theory of signifying practices. "While affirming that the *activity of production* determines all practical action, he [Mao Tse-tung] adds class struggle, political life, and scientific and aesthetic activity to the range of possible practices" (1974, 200). What remained to be worked out in the doctoral thesis was the mediation that carries the negativity inscribed in artistic representation into the social realm. Kristeva describes it in one passage as an agency without self-consciousness. "Having joined the course of historical processes—though uniquely within representation—the signifying process gives itself an agent, an ego, that of the revolutionary who has no need of knowing and even less of closely examining the mechanism of rejection that pulverizes or brings him together again, since objectively this misjudging—imaginary or ideological—ego is the module by which the mechanism of rejection in question invades the social realm" (206).

However, this whole undertaking disappeared along with Kristeva's withdrawal from Maoism, a withdrawal which represents an abandonment of the underlying arrangement of the elements of the 1974 thesis. To recall her reiteration of the classical Marxist arrangement, psychoanalysis, in the role of theory, stands apart from the problem it grasps and elucidates—the mechanisms through which the modern bourgeois social order is maintained—but remains impotent with respect to the problem. Equally, psychoanalysis stands indefinitely apart from the artwork whose "work" as practice it can articulate theoret-

ically. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in line with the difficulties that beset the classical Marxist conceptions of theory and “work,” reaches powerlessly for the moment of social transformation, for the three moments of theory, the problem, and practice are insufficiently bound together for the transition to social change to be anything more than a theoretical posit.