

BOOK REVIEW

Passions of Our Time. Julia Kristeva, Edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman; translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019 (ISBN: 9780231171441)

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At age six or seven, Julia Kristeva marched through the streets of Sofia with her schoolmates, celebrating her first Alphabet Day, honoring Cyril and Methodius, the brothers who created the Slavic alphabet. Her father accompanied her to the procession, explaining the etymology of the Bulgarian term for alphabet: *Azbouka*. Its meaning is derived from the very words making up its letters: “I / letters / understand / the word / the good / is”—a refrain that young Kristeva read forward and backward and otherward until she arrived at the magic formula of an infinite present: “I is a letter, I is the letters” (5), and “I am the letter that knows the joy of the written word” (9). Citing Colette, who “cultivated her alphabet in the flesh of the world,” Kristeva reflects on her own experience on that day: “Imprinted in me, the alphabet overtakes me” (3). FLESH and WORD—the two terms that are capitalized in her seminal essay “Stabat Mater” (1977/1985)—merge here as they so often do in her work. Their merging implies a series of mergings and tensions and ambiguities, between unconscious and conscious, semiotic and symbolic, soma and psyche, biology and thought, private and public, affect and reason, sense and language, literature and philosophy, the need to believe and the desire to know.

The essay in which the young Kristeva became a letter, “My Alphabet: Or, How I Am a Letter,” opens *Passions of Our Time*, a collection of articles, essays, interviews, and speeches, first edited in French (*Pulsions du temps*) by David Uhrig and Christina Kkona in 2013, and then in English by Lawrence D. Kritzman in 2019. The volume, divided into six thematic sections, covers a wide range of topics, such as language and love, motherhood and monotheism, disability and the death penalty, digitalization, and globalization. It spans several time periods and genres, from Greek tragedy and medieval mysticism to modern humanism and psychoanalysis. As always, Kristeva exhibits an impressive and expansive grasp of bodies of literature and thought. She crisscrosses from Saint Teresa and Saint Bernard to Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan; from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Simone de Beauvoir to Roland Barthes and Emile Benveniste. In each instance, she offers in-depth readings, spanning entire oeuvres, engaging biographical journeys and the trajectory of each of their thinking, always generously, rigorously, and creatively.

In addition to WORD and FLESH, a third word is capitalized in “Stabat Mater”—FLASH—and it appears in the second essay of this volume, now as then in the context of a discussion of motherhood. If Freud scandalized the world by introducing infantile

sexuality, Kristeva follows suit through her discussion of maternal eroticism. The influence of Kristeva's work on motherhood in feminist discourse can hardly be overstated. And as much as it spans half a century by now, it is striking that she still manages to have new things to say about the maternal continent each and every time that she revisits it. In the current volume, two essays focus specifically on motherhood, and both have to do with love and eroticism—the very *passions* that also appear in the title of the book. *Passion*, of course, has its root in the Latin terms *pati* and *passio*—to suffer or endure—but also in the rendering of the Greek term *pathos* as both suffering and, more broadly, feeling or emotion, which by the sixteenth century had come to mean sexual love and desire. So, passion is an ambiguous term, full of contradiction and internal tension, and its affective associations are many. We might add that it is at the heart of *com-passion*, which implies relational logics of identification and feeling for another. All of this seems apt as a term that would frame Kristeva's work at large, and more specifically her work on motherhood, which is so consistently marked by ambiguities and tensions. WORD, FLESH—and the FLASH that binds them together while also keeping them apart; a FLASH that has also always had temporal dimensions in Kristeva's work.

But if the French original of this book was described first and foremost as opening up questions of *time*—in my book *Revolutionary Time* (2019) I have argued that Kristeva's entire corpus ultimately should be read as a critical engagement with questions of time and temporality—the more striking theme in the present volume, on my reading, is that of the value of *singularity*, and the urgent need to challenge and resist forms of abstraction and massification. Kristeva has a lifelong interest in these issues—arguably an interest that was born in her native Bulgaria, as she was navigating the perverse universalism that communism behind the Iron Curtain came to represent: “There is no universal formula for what *the* woman or *the* mother should be. Coming from a totalitarian country, I was particularly sensitive to this” (356). We saw this in her now classic essay “Women's Time” (1979/1995), and it has often been the reason that Kristeva hesitates to label herself a feminist, worried as she is that any and all “movements”—no matter their ideological appeal—run the risk of totalization, and of erasing the singularity and specificity of each lived life. The all-too-common “denial of singularity,” she asserts, “opened the way to banalization and totalitarianisms” (356). Her own attention to embodiment, affect, birth, revolt, and the psychoanalytic talking cure—all are ultimately variations on the theme of singularity, and this seems even more explicit here than elsewhere in her work.

She repeatedly attributes her own philosophy of singularity to John Duns Scotus. In medieval scholasticism, *haecceity*, or “thisness,” was first coined by followers of Duns Scotus to denote a concept that originates in his work: the discrete qualities, properties, and characteristics that *particularize* something or someone as unique and different. As Kristeva puts it: “truth is neither in the universal idea nor in opaque matter, but in ‘anyone,’ this man here, that woman there; whence the notion of *haecceitas* or *ecceitas*, of *hoc*, *haec*, or *ecce*, ‘this,’ the demonstrative indexing an unnamable singularity” (216). To the extent that Duns Scotus gives us a theory of individuation, he foreshadows the Freudian revolution so important to Kristeva's own thinking: psychoanalysis as a framework for thinking the birth of the subject as individual, singularly embodied and impassioned, perpetuated through new births and multiple beginnings. Her reading of Lacan highlights this importance of singularity, as she describes him as having asserted, in essence, “that the mother tongue is the supreme way to understand the singularity of each analysand” (145). Psychoanalysis is a quest for singularity, and

the royal road there is speech, which is a legacy of the mother. Having been born, our condition is uniqueness. And through psychoanalysis, we are born again. Each birth marks us as “this” rather than “any” self.

Kristeva here joins a trajectory of female thinkers—from Hannah Arendt to Adriana Cavarero—who have attended to individuation understood not as liberal-disembodied agency (on the path to death) but rather as relational-embodied singularity (rooted in birth). Indeed, Kristeva devotes one of the volumes of her trilogy *Female Genius* to Arendt (the other two are on Melanie Klein and Colette). Echoing her claims in “Women’s Time” and elsewhere, in an interview in the present volume, Kristeva notes that the trilogy should be read “as a response to massifying feminism,” as she wants to move against the grain of what she calls a “massive myth of ‘all women’ gathered in the ‘community’ of women” and instead attend to “their *singularity* (*l’ecceitas* according to Duns Scotus)” (80). Such an approach can be summed up by the formula she develops in one of several readings of Beauvoir gathered in this volume: “one’ is born woman, but ‘I become woman” (352). In abstraction we are women from the start, but each embodied woman can only ever become one, insofar as her specific and unique life story and circumstances are what make her who she is and what she aspires to be. For Kristeva, this represents a fundamental tension—one that she views as organizing and motivating Beauvoir’s project. Because “the universal is incarnated . . . in the experience of each man and each woman . . . Beauvoir’s universal is conjugated in the singular” (356).

Having thus identified Beauvoir as avoiding the kind of militancy that “confines all women in a Promethean totality” (356)—and this seems to be the reason Kristeva initiated the Simone de Beauvoir Prize to honor and celebrate individual women around the world whose life stories and contributions to feminist agendas mark them in their singularity—she ultimately identifies as a “Scotus feminist” (80). The references to Duns Scotus have never before been as pronounced in her work—I count at least four essays in the present volume in which his ideas appear—and in each instance, it is precisely his insistence on singularity (*haecceitas*) that is emphasized, at times framed as a precursor to the Freudian theory of the unconscious (243), elsewhere put forth as a model for feminism (80), or as an intervention into a long (and, for Kristeva, crucial) history of assessing the relationship between subject and language (231), elsewhere again as a prelude to a distinctively modern understanding of freedom, which for Kristeva becomes intimately linked to new forms of humanism (216), and perhaps most emphatically as a foundation for engaging questions pertaining to disability—an issue that has concerned Kristeva for decades (since the birth of her son, David, who navigates multiple disabilities), but that is thematized in increasingly systematic fashion in her most recent work (221).

For Kristeva, this gives rise to a “Scotist-inspired ethics” akin to what she elsewhere has named *herethics*, which is articulated here in terms of a “*love of singulars*” (222). She proposes that we turn to a “philosophy of singular sharing” as an antidote to “postmodern and morose” forms of humanism (224). Her most systematic analysis of the concept of singularity in this volume appears in the chapter “Disability Revisited: The Tragic and Chance,” in which she proposes that “the situation of disability reveals our *irreducible singularity* as speaking beings” (213). She identifies the refounding of humanism as one of our major tasks (tellingly, the section on humanism in the book, in which this chapter appears, is by far the most extensive, with a full eight chapters, including her “Ten Principles for Twenty-First-Century Humanism”). Through a reflection on disability, a new humanism can appear, and

for Kristeva, that new humanism has everything to do with the issue of singularity, insofar as she is convinced that “modern and collectivist humanism failed when it tried to turn its back on singularity” (216). In what way does disability enable us to develop a humanism grounded in the singular? Through its intimate relationship with death and finitude—and the anxieties they evoke. But also by invoking a paradigm in which this finitude and the vulnerabilities it entails are not seen as deprivation, weakness, or sin, but rather as signs of an “*incommensurate singularity*” (221) that, in turn, is the only value worth striving for, a value that renders norms into “dynamic, evolutive concepts” rather than abstract absolutes (222). These passages echo much recent discourse on vulnerability and precarity in feminist discourse, and of course echo much of what Kristeva has said elsewhere on disability, perhaps most notably in her essay “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and . . . Vulnerability” from *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2005/2010).

What troubles me about Kristeva’s attention to singularity and her recuperation of the carnal, unique self is her assumption that it must be constituted “in the wake of the Greco-Judeo-Christian tradition” (260, 276). Time and again throughout the book—whether it be in her discussion of different forms of humanism, or in her psychoanalytical reflections, or in the more straightforwardly “feminist” essays—Kristeva reasserts the normative and historical priority of the Greco-Judeo-Christian tradition, and insists both on European and French exceptionalism. To the extent that she ventures beyond the European continent, it is usually either to revisit the China she once journeyed to and described in rather orientalist terms (a China where, admittedly, her work is hugely popular and celebrated), or the United States that is her homeland “by adoption” (311) and where she traces specific forms of freedom and political potential. The place and status of Islam and Muslim fundamentalism remain fraught issues here as elsewhere in her work, and I won’t linger more on them here; let me simply state that I continue to be confused, indeed troubled, by her views on these matters.

As far as edited volumes go, what is lacking for me is some context to frame each chapter. The editor offers no information on where the essays included here have been published earlier and elsewhere, and I am unable to find any information about the year in which each piece was originally written or delivered. Of course, none of this was included in the French edition either, but it would have been helpful to add such details to the English edition. The index provides a helpful resource for scholars of Kristeva’s work, but otherwise there is not much there by way of guiding readers and scholars through the texts included. The translation is straightforward and largely accurate. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier are most famous for translating Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, and this is (to my knowledge) the first time that they have translated Kristeva’s writings. Sometimes you can tell that they are unfamiliar with how certain concepts or expressions have been previously translated in the literature. For instance, in the context of Kristeva’s discussion of adolescence and her diagnosis of the violence of the *banlieues*, they render her *syndrome d’idéalité* as a *sickness of ideality*, whereas in translations of previous works touching on this phenomenon, it has always been rendered as a *syndrome of ideality*. For the experienced Kristeva reader, *sickness* here sounds a bit odd. There are other instances like this where it simply seems that the links to previous works are missing—not in the chapters themselves, of course, but in the manner in which they have been organized, translated, and left to speak for themselves rather than being folded into the context and specificity of her corpus.

Twice in the book Kristeva identifies herself as a “journey-woman” (262, 362) and elsewhere she has described her own trajectory through life as a self-travel of sorts

("I travel myself" or "*Je me voyage*"). To be sure, Kristeva has traveled a lot, not only from her native Bulgaria to the France that made her a citizen; not only to her adoptive United States and other countries inviting her to talk, teach, and share her work. But also, as she herself notes, through herself, along a psychic trajectory: a journey-woman on the path to growth, rebirth, renewal. And she travels in her work, revisiting certain themes, evolving in her vocabulary, deepening already established ideas, engaging new bodies of work or returning to ones she has read before but with new questions in hand. This volume is a testament to some of those journeys, rich in themes and tone, at times provocative, sometimes conservative, but always acutely original. To be sure, Kristeva's is a singular voice, in all of its complexities. Her own irreducible singularity shines forth in the pages spanning this book. Yet, as the cover art (Louise Bourgeois's *Seven in a Bed*) suggests, singularity is always already relationality. The passion that is both suffering and desire also involves compassion. As much as this book exhibits a singular voice, it can also be read as a series of dialogues: between Kristeva's present and former selves (the world-famous semiotician and the little girl marching the streets of Sofia); between the many authors and thinkers she engages; between her, her interviewers, and her readers; and between the multiple experiences and subjectivities that she gives voice to as they manifest in our time.

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