

# AN OUTLAW ETHICS FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS: MATERNALITY AND THE DIALOGIC SUBJECT IN JULIA KRISTEVA'S "STABAT MATER"

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## Abstract

In this essay I examine Julia Kristeva's transgressive body of work as a strategic embodiment of, and argument for, an ethical orientation towards otherness predicated on the image of divided subjectivity identified by Jacques Lacan but powerfully re-theorised as dialogic by Kristeva. I focus on what is, for Kristeva, a stylistically unique essay – "Stabat Mater" – which examines a number of institutional discourses about motherhood from the western philosophical, religious, and psychoanalytical traditions, and simultaneously subverts them with a parallel discourse (and enactment) ostensibly by an actual mother. The text itself, I argue, can be read as a performance of dialogic subjectivity and of Kristeva's conception of maternity, which implies a radical ethical imperative – termed "herethics" – towards alterity. I propose that this heretical model might heuristically inform current debates regarding the ethical orientations of the study of religions as an academic field.

## I

**Framing: Ethics and Religion**

In the last twenty years, the Study of Religions as an academic field has undergone what can be described as a “political turn,” that is, an accumulating discourse has developed amongst theorists in the field drawing attention to how the *taxon* “religion” is closely tied to three socio-political regimes of truth:<sup>1</sup> (1) the creation of a series of conceptual dichotomies –public/private, secular/religious, religion/state – that underpin and sustain the project of European modernity and the nation-state; (2) the colonialist “invention of religion”; (3) the dominance of a phenomenological paradigm – exemplified in the work of Mircea Eliade – that elevates the *sui generis* nature of religion in order to protect it from reductionist scrutiny. All of these have been critiqued as rendering the continuing use of “religion” as a normative epistemological category deeply suspect, if not morally and intellectually untenable. A variety of analyses have indicated how the academic study of religions, as it consolidated its place in the academy,<sup>2</sup> traded in a series of rhetorical techniques (involving claims to the uniqueness, universality, irreducibility, etc. of the datum “religion”) that obscured the manufactured nature of its central category of analysis. Concomitantly, these techniques have masked the ordinariness of the data cut out as “uniquely religious,” obscured its social and thus contingent and interested construction, and in turn have contributed to uncritical attitudes, descriptive impotency and an anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Amongst the more prominent contributors to the debates are scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith, whose work was influential in inaugurating the debate, Russell McCutcheon, Bruce Lincoln, Willi Braun, Gary Lease, Talal Asad, Donald Wiebe, Samuel Preus, Ivan Strenski, and, to a lesser degree, Richard King and Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Daniel Dubuisson. I do not mean, of course, to suggest that these scholars’ various analyses converge or are even in agreement; rather, what they share is an interest in the discursive and socio-political operationalisation of the category “religion.”

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); “The Imperial Dynamic in the Study of Religion,” in C. Richard King, ed., *Postcolonial America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 275-302; *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescrining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); and Timothy Fitzgerald *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

theoretical culture. The critical work undertaken by the theorists of the political turn has made a compelling case for the attention of scholars of religions to be directed to their own discursive practices and orientations in order to trace and undo the political effects of the imperialist imposition of “religion” on the ordinary practices and cultures of the groups, practices, phenomena that are studied.<sup>3</sup> A tone discernable throughout much of the critical reflection is one of ethical urgency: the very call to attend to the underlying assumptions of the field, to those intellectual practices that have inscribed distortive, protectionist, or imperialist understandings on the data, is an ethical imperative. Take for example Richard King’s assertion that a critical assessment of the politics of representation is implicitly an ethical enterprise:

Problematizing the way in which Indian religion has been represented within Western scholarship ... is an exercise in calling into question the paradigms of knowledge and constellations of power that have continued to divide the world up into ‘us’ and ‘them’ – maintaining an asymmetrical relationship between the relatively powerful and the relatively disempowered. This intellectual and *ethical* ‘malaise’ exists, of course, in many forms other than the classic Orientalist division between ‘East’ and ‘West’ ... Difference is perceived in oppositional rather than pluralistic terms, and differences between cultures become fetishized at the same time as internal heterogeneities within each culture are effaced.<sup>4</sup>

There is little here with which to disagree. However, what I mean to exemplify by way of this quotation is a certain kind of equivocality with respect to the modelling of ethical orientations that is repeated throughout the critical literature of the political turn. The “ethical” premise of opposition to oppressive forms of representation is taken as given, but there is rarely concrete proposals of ethical models that might drive forward attempts to be more reflexively attuned to the distortive and damaging aspects of scholarly representation; no clarity is offered with respect to possible means of negotiating a way through the detritus of the field’s history; little critical assessment of how the vaguely ethical orientations that appear to motivate critical re-assessment of the field’s operations might themselves run the risk of making normative

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<sup>3</sup> See Russell T. McCutcheon *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (London and New York: 2003), 79-80.

<sup>4</sup> Richard King, *Orientalism & Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and ‘the Mystic East’* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 187-188; my emphasis.

pronouncements similar to those they critique.<sup>5</sup> If it is ethical to remove “religion” from academic vocabulary in order to find richer, more complex and situated renderings of particular sets of social practices, will this ameliorate the effects of colonialism and its aftermath? To dispense with either the category or the object runs the risk of ignoring the ways in which both now seem to have lives of their own. Even if “religion” is a scholarly invention,<sup>6</sup> hyperreal or fictional,<sup>7</sup> can we place an embargo on its use in scholarly circles and deny its other life, one where it operates strategically as a source of valued and collective identification, or as a work of active translation and contestation within diasporic frameworks that rework social categories? That “religion” is an identity marker *as well as* an intellectual category demands that our focus as scholars not merely a concern with epistemological reflection, however important that is; it must also necessarily be directed towards the ontological dimensions of our work: to people, their valuations and inscriptions, and to our own subjectivities as they are constructed in the academic domain and elsewhere. What are our ethical responsibilities as we traverse the differential requirements of knowledge production and of fidelity to the dignity of people’s experiences and accounts of themselves? Does not the critique of the colonial invention or imposition of “religion” run the risk of denying or ignoring the creative, transformative, and resistant nature of postcolonial conditions?

Homi Bhabha has suggested, for example, that the discourse of the coloniser about the colonised was one of inescapable ambivalence, of “hybridity,”<sup>8</sup> and this very fact opens up ways of seeing how colonised populations were not merely hapless victims of actual and discursive tyranny, but were creative and agentive in their resistance and re-employment of the values and inscriptions of the European metropole such that it was acted *upon*, remade, and deconstructed. In overlooking the complex interplay between coloniser and colonised, the critical voices in the study of religions, in my view, insufficiently acknowledge the potential

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<sup>5</sup> See Tyler Roberts’ very effective critique of McCutcheon in this regard in “Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72:1 (2004): 143–172.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

<sup>7</sup> Sam Gill, “Play,” in eds. Russell T. McCutcheon and Willi Braun *Critical Guide to the Study of Religion*. London: Cassell, 2000), 406.

<sup>8</sup> See particularly Homi K. Bhabha *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 101 and 122-124.

for subversion that is created by the ambivalence and hybrid space of the discourse on/of religion in a colonial/postcolonial frame. To assume otherwise is, I think, to cooperate in what is effectively a (neo)colonial narrative that denies affective agency to the other whilst accruing to the knowing critical scholar a kind of ontological capital that is in the end *unethical* to the degree that it also denies the layered subjectivity of the other, of his or her discourse, and of the very hybridity of the scholar's own discourse. How might we formulate and figure then an ethical relationship to the hybrid nature of category formation such that "religion" might now be remade from and with "the other"? How might we ethically both frame and engage with the ambivalence and hybridity that is characteristic of the aftermath of the field's history in a way that might avoid unreflexive reliance on, or accidental repetitions of, the oppressive binarisations which the political turn has identified? How might we begin the task of establishing an ethical orientation that is attuned to the complexity and entangled nature of category formation and its relation to material conditions? In what follows, I want to examine Julia Kristeva's staging of an ethically unconventional, dialogic relation between self and other, and between linguistic modes of signification, and to argue that it might serve as a heuristic device for rendering the ethical as a more concrete focus of the political turn.

If there can be said to be a recurrent theme that runs throughout Julia Kristeva's prodigious oeuvre it is arguably a preoccupation with those processes through which subject/object boundaries are both constructed and broached dialogically. I want to examine Kristeva's transgressive body of work precisely as a strategic embodiment of, and argument for, an ethical orientation towards otherness predicated on an image of divided and dialogic subjectivity. I will focus on what is, for Kristeva, a stylistically unique essay – "Stabat Mater" (1987) – which examines a number of institutional discourses about motherhood from the western philosophical, religious, and psychoanalytical traditions, and simultaneously subverts them with a parallel discourse (and enactment) ostensibly by an actual mother. I will argue that the text itself can be read as a performance of dialogic subjectivity and that its embodiment of Kristeva's conception of maternity distils many of the themes that characterise her work regarding dialogic subjectivity more generally, all of which imply an unconventional – but nonetheless ethical – orientation towards alterity. I begin by outlining a number of key Kristevan concepts, particularly the "subject-in-process" (*sujet en procès*) and the dialogic relation of the

symbolic and semiotic in language. My discussion here leads me to focus on the maternal body as a metaphor of the kind of dialogic subjectivity that Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of dialogue implies and upon which Kristeva builds. This metaphor challenges that logic which positions the self in an oppositional relation to the other. I undertake a close reading of Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater" to show how she reorients this logic towards a model of subjectivity that she refers to as a "herethics" based on a specific rendering of maternity. Herethics refuses the conventional ethical model of western metaphysics that postulates an autonomous agent whose obligations to the recipient of ethical attention are founded on principles of sameness and equivalence rather than a recognition and acceptance of difference. Kristeva, in contrast, offers a means of conceiving a notion of difference that does not operate according to a dialectic logic of opposition but rather as dialogic.

## II

### The Subject-in-Process/on-Trial

The phenomena which interest me are precisely those that blur the boundaries, cross them, and make their historical artifice appear, also their violence, meaning the relations of force that are concentrated there and actually capitalize themselves there interminably. Those who are sensitive to all the stakes of 'creolization'... assess this better than others.<sup>9</sup>

Kristeva arrived in Paris from Bulgaria to begin graduate study in 1966, the year that Jacques Lacan published his *Écrits*. Her doctoral dissertation, published as *La Révolution du Langage Poétique: L'avant-garde à la Fin du XIXème Siècle* (1974; translated as *Revolution in Poetic Language* in 1984), brought together theoretical concerns with avant-garde literature, the somatic elements of language, borderline psychological states, the nature of public discourse, and the acquisition by children of language. Because of the coincidence between the ideas developed in this work and Lacan's structuralist theories of infantile development, she became interested in psychoanalysis. Between 1976 and 1979 she trained as a psychoanalyst and has since practiced in Paris whilst holding a chair in

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, OR, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9.

linguistics in the Department of Texts and Documents, University of Paris VII, periodically teaching in comparative literature at Columbia University. Her work is a reflection of her own border crossings, moving as it does between disciplines, paradigms, genres, styles and subject positions.<sup>10</sup> These “crossings” for Kristeva are reflected in her suggestion that subjectivity itself is a form of crossing, of self-formation in the space between self and other that occurs through and in the encounter between selves. She theorises subjectivity as tenuous and processual:

All identities are unstable: the identity of linguistic signs, the identity of meaning and, as a result the identity of the speaker. And in order to take account of this destabilization of meaning and of the subject I thought the term ‘subject in process’ would be appropriate. Process in the sense of process but also in the sense of a legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled.<sup>11</sup>

Her theorisation of subjectivity in this regard is indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic model of communication and subjectivity, one that she uses to good effect to understand the constitution of the self by analogy with textual signification – its unfolding as a process rather than as a completed product bearing the signature of a single author. For Bakhtin, the subject is not autonomous, self-originating, nor transcendent; rather it is produced as an effect of (and in the process of) the interactions and communications – the dialogue – between individuals:

In reality the relations between A and B are in a state of permanent formation and transformation; they continue to alter in the very process of communication. Nor is there a ready-made message X. It takes form in the process of communication between A and B. Nor is it transmitted from the first to the second, but constructed between them, like an ideological bridge; it is constructed in the process of their interaction.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Birgitte Huitfeldt Midttun, (2006) “Crossing the Borders: An Interview with Julia Kristeva,” *Hypatia* 21: 4 (2006), 164-177; Marilyn Edelstein ‘Metaphor, Meta-Narrative, and Mater-narrative in Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater”’ in David Crownfield, ed., *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women, and Psychoanalysis* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1992), 27–52.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva and Susan Sellers, “A Question of Subjectivity—An Interview,” *Women’s Review* 12 (1989): 19.

<sup>12</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin in Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 55.

According to Kristeva, Bakhtin shows how dialogism is “inherent in language itself,” that it signals “another logic...the logic of distance and relationship...indicating a *becoming* – in opposition to the level of continuity and substance, both of which obey the logic of *being* and are thus monological.”<sup>13</sup> “Becoming,” here, signifies a fluid and ongoing process of subjectification, whereas “being” signifies closure and completeness.<sup>14</sup> Dialogism is thus an “other logic” to a dialectic framing of the subject; it is one of “analogy and nonexclusive opposition, opposed to monological levels of causality and identifying determination.”<sup>15</sup> In differentiating the dialogic from the dialectic, Kristeva wants to replace an oppositional schema with a concept of “relation” which does not “strive towards transcendence but rather toward harmony ... implying an idea of rupture ... as a modality of transformation.”<sup>16</sup> This effort underlies all her work on the interdependence of seemingly oppositional categories and the development of models that can respond to and exemplify a dialogic system as part of an ethical project of resisting those “totalitarian” social systems which seek to banish alterity from the scene of subjectivity and consolidate subjectivity as monologic. She understands the unsettling of oppositional thought to consist in the alignment of ethics with sites of negativity – of that which is marginalised or effaced by singularity – in order to challenge the binary logic that places the other as inimical to the self.<sup>17</sup>

For Kristeva, subjectivity is also a form of intertextuality in which human beings, like texts, are signs of the intersection of multiple voices, multi-layered and plural.<sup>18</sup> One of the most distinctive ways in which she

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<sup>13</sup> Julia Kristeva *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 68.

<sup>14</sup> There is a parallel here between this becoming/being construction and the Levinasian formulation of the Saying and the Said (*le Dire et le Dit*). See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essences*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), *inter alia*.

<sup>15</sup> Kristeva, *Desire*, 71-72.

<sup>16</sup> Kristeva, *Desire*, 88-89.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Kristeva has stated that she is interested in discourses that disintegrate those forms of identity that are constituted as monological and atomised because she is a woman (a site of negativity) and that her work consequently “obeys ethical exigencies.” Julia Kristeva in eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 138.

<sup>18</sup> She draws here on Bakhtin’s concept of intertextuality to refer to a particular kind of textual history able to trace the citational influences and derivations of texts as they



theorises this heterogeneity is through her reconfiguration of Jacques Lacan's tripartite model of infantile development and her challenge to its temporal linearity. She subsequently is able, more adequately than Lacan, to model the processual nature of plural subjectivity by attending to the dialogic quality in language of materiality and the psyche. She thus develops a theory of two distinct linguistic modalities – the “semiotic” and the “symbolic” – that characterise both subjectivity and signification.<sup>19</sup> For Kristeva, like Lacan, the “symbolic” is the realm of language and culture, operationalised by the metaphoric paternal interdict that inaugurates subjectivity in the figure of the law of the Father (“*nom-du-père*”<sup>20</sup>). Her concept of the “semiotic” – which has no precise parallel in Lacan's three-part scheme of Imaginary, Symbolic and Real – is the realm of the body, the drives and the unconscious that is ‘remembered’ in language. For Kristeva, the semiotic “logically and chronologically precedes the establishment of the symbolic and its subject,”<sup>21</sup> and yet symbolic and semiotic permanently and dynamically co-exist in the subject and in language: “Since the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, any signifying system he/she produces is never ‘exclusively’ symbolic, but necessarily marked by a debt to the other modality.”<sup>22</sup> The semiotic and the symbolic are thus in continual dialogue.

Kristeva's concept of the “semiotic” suggests the interpellation into signification of elements of corporeality (rhythm, flow, inflection) which the symbolic never succeeds in replacing and dominating; its supposedly rational formulations can never master the semiotic inasmuch as the territory of reason is continually transgressed by corporeal rhythms and flows. As Kristeva argues, “these two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language;”<sup>23</sup> the subject-in-process must always negotiate this terrain, must dwell within and be constituted by the

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encounter others: “any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva makes a distinction, clearer in French, between “semiotics” (*la sémiotique*) – the study of signifying systems – and the semiotic (*le sémiotique*) – the non-syntactical element of language.

<sup>20</sup> See Jacques Lacan *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 1977), 73-74 *inter alia*.

<sup>21</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 41.

<sup>22</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution*, 24.

process of this negotiation. Thus, the semiotic and symbolic, materiality and language, coexist as heterogeneous partners within the Symbolic register rather than remaining in a linear temporal relation. Signification is always heterogeneous, a combination of symbolic syntactical stability and semiotic materiality, of conscious articulation and unconscious drives:

To keep an account of this heterogeneity implies that one no longer consider the symbolic function as super-corporeal, super-biological and super-material, but as produced by a dialectic between two orders. Therefore, rather than of ‘symbolism’, we will speak of the *semiotic* as the place of this heterogeneity of sense.<sup>24</sup>

Although Kristeva refers here to the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic as a “dialectic” (which for Lacan it is), the relationship actually seems more dialogic (in the Bakhtinian sense). She stresses that it is not only the psychological (conscious/unconscious) aspects of the self that are produced in language but also the physical (the semiotic) insofar as the body has a central role in the signifying process, interacting with and in dialogue with those elements of language configured as syntactical. Kristeva intends to restore materiality to the domain of signification in order to demonstrate how the “instinctual rhythm” of the semiotic punctures, punctuates and disrupts stable meaning but is absolutely necessary for the production of meaning in language.<sup>25</sup> Kristeva wants, therefore, to reimagine the space of signification (language itself) as a site where signification processes are simultaneously systematic (governed by pre-existent rules) and corporeal (contingent, contextual and disruptive).

Although Kristeva theorises several ways in which the semiotic and symbolic intersect to produce signification, she primarily figures the semiotic as the disposition – the rhythms and sounds of merged bodies – that exists in the pre- and post-natal mother-child dyad as formulated by classic psychoanalysis.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Kristeva plays on the notion of the corporeal exchanges between mother and child prior to language exchange to indicate the dialogic nature of linguistic exchange. The corporeal exchange that constitutes the fusion of the maternal body with that of the infant is conceived by Kristeva as a foundational dialogue that precedes the syntactical exchanges operationalised by the inauguration of the subject in the symbolic. The semiotic is a dialogue *before* language, and the fluidity

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<sup>24</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 76.

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Kristeva, *Desire*, 157.

of its mode of exchange crosses into and is thus re-membered in the space of the symbolic. The semiotic is transgressive; it is mobile, crossing borders between bodies; it thus ensures the subject, constituted as a dialogic division, will always remain in process. Importantly, for Kristeva dialogue requires division, it requires a space *between*. Dialogue implies a crossing *over* rather than the crossing *out* that a dialectic model of bifurcated relationality necessitates. Moreover, the kind of subjectivity characteristic of the dialogic modality is one that is necessarily incomplete, open to the other, requiring the other for moments of self-constitution. At the heart of Kristeva's attempt to signify the interrelatedness of self and other, therefore, is an effort to guarantee the possibility of creativity and change; to resist the violence of the dialectic model inscribed in the Lacanian isolation of the symbolic by demonstrating its own porousness and openness. The mother's body and relation to her child, more than any other image Kristeva presents, offers an imaginative figuration of a dialogic relation of self and other, one that holds out the possibility of a "heretical ethics" that provides a contrastive foil to the ontotheological convention of *phronesis* that presupposes atomised subjectivity. Kristeva theorises a performative model of this figuration most solidly in her essay "Stabat Mater" (1987).<sup>27</sup>

### III

#### **"There stood the Mother:" Maternity and the Split Subject**

"Stabat Mater" is an essay both generically and stylistically unique within Kristeva's oeuvre, and appears to be an experiment in experimental writing, a form of "postmodern" writing that she refers to elsewhere as "writing-as-the-experience-of limits."<sup>28</sup> The essay is typographically split between two columns: the right-hand column constitutes the majority of the text and is written in a conventional academic style; the left-hand

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<sup>27</sup> Originally published as "Hérétique de l'amour" (1977); renamed "Stabat Mater" when it was included in Kristeva's *Histoire d'amour* (1983), later translated in English as *Tales of Love* (1987). All citations are from *Tales of Love*.

<sup>28</sup> Julia Kristeva "Postmodernism?," *Bucknell Review* 25 (1980): 137.

column, in bold typeface, has a more impressionistic and personal tone.<sup>29</sup> Both the content and the form of “Stabat Mater” indicate, I will suggest, that it should be read as a performative staging of an alternative discourse on motherhood from the point of view of a mother. In so doing it seeks to resist, and indeed refute, the totalising narratives of both Christian Mariology and the paternal romance of Freudian psychoanalysis, replacing these instead with a narrative of dialogic maternity. The text effectively instantiates the dialogic relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, weaving together its two styles to demonstrate the ways in which the semiotic and the symbolic coexist in language, suggesting an analogical relationship with maternity. The right-hand column, which begins the essay and which appears to describe Kristeva’s own experience of motherhood, is continually disrupted by the left-hand column. The left-hand account interleaves the right-hand column, occasionally seeming to mimic its tone and sometimes disappearing altogether. The columns finish almost simultaneously.

The essay begins with an analysis of the Virgin Mother, the most resonant symbol of motherhood in western socio-religious discourses where the “*consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood.”<sup>30</sup> Kristeva points out that this image is a “fantasy...of a lost territory” that involves “less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the *relationship* that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized.”<sup>31</sup> She argues that the figure of the Virgin Mary is a fundamentally unsatisfactory and paradoxical construction – both virgin and mother, unique (“alone among women”) and simultaneously a generic model for all women, that encourages them to be self-sacrificing and submissive to male authority. Kristeva’s argument is that Mary is, in essence, projected as a mother solely for others, and that she represents a form of “masculine sublimation”:

What is there, in the portrayal of the Maternal in general and particularly in its Christian, virginal, one that reduces social anguish and gratifies a male being; what is there that also satisfies a woman so that a commonality of the sexes is set up, beyond and in spite of their glaring incompatibility and permanent warfare?<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> I indicate in bold type any quotations from the left-hand column.

<sup>30</sup> Julia Kristeva *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 234.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

## She further asks if

... there is something in that Maternal notion that ignores what a woman might say or want – as a result, when women speak out today it is in matters of conception and motherhood that their annoyance is basically centred.<sup>33</sup>

Kristeva suggests that certain forms of feminism consequently demand a “new representation of femininity” but in doing so they mistake the idealised representation of motherhood that the Virgin Mary appears to represent as the only possible discourse of femininity within patriarchy and so they reject it. However, as a result feminists “circumvent the real experience that the fantasy overshadows” and simultaneously acquiesce to its power by granting it a hegemonic status.<sup>34</sup> In many ways, the left-hand column of “Stabat Mater” appears to parody the style of *l’écriture féminine*,<sup>35</sup> but it is accompanied by the rigorously analytical right-hand column which enables Kristeva to avoid what she suggests is the “Manichean position which consists in designating as feminine” the kind of language that is characterised by the “imprecise ... with impulses, perhaps with primary processes” and which results in “maintaining women in a position of inferiority, and, in any case, of marginality.”<sup>36</sup>

The right-hand column analyses three main themes in the “incredible construct of the Maternal that the West elaborated by means of the Virgin.”<sup>37</sup> Kristeva begins by examining the social context in which the Church came to present Mary’s immaculate conception (an idea that became dogma in 1854) and suggests that it was a way of asserting her sexlessness which could then be extended to link her to sinlessness and therefore to deathlessness. Noting that the doctrine of Mary’s Assumption was proclaimed dogma in 1950, she suggests that this may have served as a consoling fiction: “What death anguish was it intended to soothe after the conclusion of the deadliest of wars?”<sup>38</sup> The second theme is the representation of Mary as queen of heaven, again linked to social

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>35</sup> Kristeva seems to have in her sights the gynocentric theorisation of *l’écriture féminine* associated most prominently with Hélène Cixous, as a kind of linguistic expression unique to a feminine libidinal economy, uncontaminated by patriarchal language, and characterised by its defiance of conventional syntax, its mellifluous tone and allusive quality.

<sup>36</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution*, 122-123.

<sup>37</sup> Kristeva, *Tales*, 256.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 244.

exigencies, particularly the attempt by the Church to legitimise its earthly power. Finally, she examines the symbol of Mary as a “prototype of love,” and associates this idea with courtly love where “Mary and the Lady shared one common trait: they are the focal point of men’s desires and aspirations.”<sup>39</sup> Throughout, the purpose of the analysis is to suggest that while the various constructs of the Virgin Mary may have served some “women’s wishes for identification” insofar as they include a symbol of femininity in an otherwise masculine religious paradigm, they more obviously functioned to stabilise society by mediating between the “unconscious needs of primary narcissism” and the social requirement of “the contribution of the...symbolic paternal agency.”<sup>40</sup> Whatever one may think about the psychoanalytic paradigm that informs the analysis, what is more important is Kristeva’s interest in the needs that the construct of Mary does not resolve, at least for many contemporary women. Her intention is to offer a narrative of maternity, of women’s relationships to their own mothers and to their children, that is not accounted for in the Marian account. Further, although she appears to derive the impetus for her work from psychoanalysis, she wants to address the Freudian omission of a theory of motherhood:

The fact remains, as far as the complexities and pitfalls of maternal experience are involved, that Freud offers only a massive *nothing* which ... is punctuated with this or that remark on the part of Freud’s mother, proving to him in the kitchen that his own body is anything but immortal and will crumble away like dough; or the sour photograph of Marthe Freud, the wife, a whole mute story ...<sup>41</sup>

It is precisely at the point in the right-hand column where the word “maternal” is first invoked that the left-column first appears. Here Kristeva begins to write of a mother’s own desire – her *jouissance* – the intensely sensual pleasure of mothering, but also of her pain, alluding to the lack of separation between the mother’s body and the child’s:

**My body is no longer mine, it doubles up, suffers, bleeds, catches cold, puts its teeth in, slobbers, coughs, is covered with pimples, and it laughs. And yet, when its own joy, my child’s, returns, its smile washes only my eyes. But the pain, its pain – it comes from inside, never remains apart, other, it inflames me at once, without a second’s respite. As if it was what I had given birth to**

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 259

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 255.

**and, not willing to part from me, insisted on coming back, dwelled in me permanently. One does not give birth in continuous ... But a mother is always branded by pain, she yields to it.**<sup>42</sup>

Several important ideas are expressed in this passage, and are repeated throughout the text, all of which seem to confirm that the left-hand column can be feasibly read as representative of the semiotic: it stresses doubling; it describes the continuous oscillation between unity and separation that constitutes the relationship between the mother and child; it references somatic experiences; and it suggests an ambivalence between inside and outside that is a transgression of boundaries. Moreover, and significantly, it seems that it is the mother, rather than the child, who will henceforth struggle with the experience of separation and thus with a clear and singular identity: the very process of coming to motherhood and to the new subjectivity implied, is driven by encounter with an other who is at the same time not quite other.

The first two left-hand passages do not use any personal pronouns; it is only in the third passage that these appear and it is at that point in the text that gender identity and difference appear. Kristeva later establishes a connection between the lack of identificatory pronouns and motherhood when she remarks that **“the languages of the great formerly matriarchal civilizations must avoid, do avoid, personal pronouns”** and that they rely instead on **“trans-verbal communication between bodies ... A woman’s discourse, would that be it?”**<sup>43</sup> This statement seems to essentialise not only women but also mothers, and one might therefore be justified in suggesting – as several of her critics have – that the left-hand column, as a “woman’s discourse” is reduced to a biological, essentially inarticulate, form of communication. However, the column does not remain in this register. The dialogue between the two columns increasingly overlaps in both style and content, suggesting that the ostensible “woman’s discourse” is inseparable from, certainly entwined with, the more “symbolic” discourse of the right-hand column.

The right-hand column occupies the greater part of the text and thus seems to be the dominant voice, merely interrupted by the fragmentary, impressionistic statements of the left-hand “semiotic” column. However, the two columns do not remain isomorphic; they appear progressively in

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 240-241.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 259

dialogue as they repeat and exchange themes, motifs and terminology, overlapping, echoing and anticipating each other. The semiotic elements of the text appear in the right-hand column too: for example, towards the end of the essay when Kristeva requests her readers to “listen to the *Stabat Mater*, and the music, all the music...it swallows up the goddesses and removes their necessity.”<sup>44</sup> Here, Kristeva alludes both to the maternal (“*Stabat Mater*”) and to the musicality of the semiotic elements of signification,<sup>45</sup> suggesting that an acknowledgement of the disruptive force of the semiotic in the symbolic removes the necessity for impossible representations of femininity such as the Virgin Mary. The text is resolutely transgressive; words, images and ideas cross back and forth between the columns and visually perform the semiotic’s infiltration of the symbolic. The notion that the text represents the dialogical relationship between the semiotic and symbolic is, therefore, I believe, the key to its meaning and it aids reflection on Kristeva’s ideas of the subject-in-process and of maternity as an exemplar of the split subject.<sup>46</sup> The essay should thus be read as an enactment or embodiment of the subject-in-process, the split subject, insofar as it appears visibly to require the reader to cross back and forth between the two columns and negotiate the space between, in the process experiencing the disruptive and vertigo-inducing dialogical tension that Kristeva suggests is the nature of signification.

The split typography of “*Stabat Mater*” requires that a reader adopt a reading strategy to access its meaning; the necessity of this choice further occasions the performative elements of the text to come to the fore. Does one read the right column first and then the left? Does one attempt a complicated synthesis of both columns at once? How does the text position the reader? Edelstein suggests that

A reader’s specific relation to, and experience of, this challenging text depends on who that reader is – whether a woman, man, another mother, a woman not a

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>45</sup> The structure of the text appears to mimic the hymn “*Stabat Mater*” by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710–1736) from which the title is taken, which alternates between a solo voice and a counterpoint duet and to which the essay makes several allusions. See Kristeva, *Tales*, 245, 251–252 and 263.

<sup>46</sup> Amongst the many commentators on “*Stabat Mater*,” Marilyn Edelstein alone appears to recognise the significance of the essay’s typography, suggesting that its “narrative strategies and construction of both its speaking and reading subject(s) are as much part of its meaning – and inseparable from – its prepositional statements or theses.” Edelstein “*Metaphor*,” 29.



mother, a Christian, etc. For those readers not mothers, the discourse by the mother may be alien, exotic, spoken by a sort of “native informant” from the land of mothers. For non-Christian readers, the discourse about the Virgin Mary may seem merely a description of a quaint or peripheral phenomenon, not a powerful cultural myth or religious symbol. Perhaps this text’s ideal imagined reader would be a heterosexual Christian woman who has borne at least one son and who knows something about theoretical and literary avant gardes. If one doesn’t match this description on any or all counts, then perhaps one becomes the very other, even the other woman, of whom this text speaks. Does this text love or exclude and marginalise such an other?<sup>47</sup>

This is a pertinent question in view of the seeming preoccupation of the text with rethinking relations between self and other, mother and child. Edelstein wonders whether Kristeva is speaking in both columns as a “subject who knows” in order to employ an exclusionary textual strategy, concluding, however, that the “other reader” could “decide to read the maternal as metaphorical in order not to be excluded.”<sup>48</sup> She argues persuasively that the text “makes us all mothers metaphorically, as split-subjects, or reveals that we are already both [other and mother].”<sup>49</sup> Thus, the structuring of the text thus forces the reader not just to read about the dialogic tension between the semiotic and the symbolic, but also to experience it. The reader, unable to manage or overcome the counterpoint voices of “Stabat Mater,” has to encounter a performative dialogic position within connected (though possibly competing) discourses. It is a position where the production of stable, linear meaning is disrupted through encounter with an other meaning: allusive, fragmentary and maternal.

The typography thus also hints at an analogy with the maternal body which Kristeva elsewhere suggests is “the place of splitting”<sup>50</sup> and indicates that “a woman or mother is a conflict – the incarnation of the split of the complete subject, a passion.”<sup>51</sup> In “Stabat Mater” she remarks that “**A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very self, and consequently a division of language – and it has always been so.**”<sup>52</sup> The text appears to be an attempt to embody the mother’s body (as Kristeva

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<sup>47</sup> Edelstein, “Metaphor,” 39.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>50</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), 238.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>52</sup> Kristeva, *Tales*, 254.

understands it) as a metaphor for the subject-in-process. The significance of the maternal body, specifically the pregnant body, in Kristeva's work, and as exemplified by "Stabat Mater," is that it cannot be neatly divided into subject and object, self and other. For Kristeva,

Pregnancy ... is an identity that splits, turns in on itself, and changes without becoming other. The threshold between nature and culture, biology and language ... If pregnancy is a threshold between nature and culture, maternity is a bridge between singularity and ethics.<sup>53</sup>

Making a connection between the Virgin Mary's pain and that of her son, and between his pleasures and hers, Kristeva suggests that mothers are "**crossroads beings, crucified beings.**"<sup>54</sup> Here a direct analogy can be drawn between the postnatal mother and the divided nature of the dialogic subject, a subject which cannot be secured as a singularity. When Kristeva talks of the maternal as a site of splitting, therefore, she employs it as a metaphorical device to illustrate the temporary constitution of the subject, a subject-in-process. Metaphor (from the Greek *metapherein* meaning "to carry or transfer," or "to carry beyond"), is etymologically connected to the root "to bear children" or "to give birth to" as well as "to transgress," and thus to *matter* (materiality and mother). Metaphor, like the subject-in-process and the maternal body, is always other to itself – it does not provide meaning as purely present but rather gestures to a space beyond itself, leaving meaning deferred and in process. It is a space of suspension, and one that suggests a model of identity radically at odds with that of the self-same. Subjectivity, for Kristeva, appears to reside in a gap, and so the dialogue between the two columns in "Stabat Mater" gestures towards – orients the reader towards – the space in between, recalling Bakhtin's notion of the constitution of the self as a form of intertextuality in the dialogue *between* self and other.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader*, 297.

<sup>54</sup> Kristeva, *Tales*, 254.

<sup>55</sup> The structure of the text resembles Jacques Derrida's novel *Glas* (trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986 [1974]) and his two-columned essay "The Double Session" in *Dissemination* (trans. Barbara Johnson. London and New York: Continuum, 2004 [1981]). As Barbara Johnson argues in her introduction to *Dissemination*, this type of double typography suggests "that an effort is being made to call the reader's attention to the syntactical function of spacing in the act of reading" (p. xxviii).

Many of Kristeva's critics accuse her of essentialising an equation of femininity with maternity, or alternately of prioritising the semiotic over the symbolic or *vice versa*. Paul Smith, for example, accuses Kristeva of turning "her emphasis away from the mutually constraining dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic, and toward a revindication of a putative priority and primacy of the semiotic."<sup>56</sup> Alternatively, Judith Butler contends that Kristeva's theorisation of the semiotic as a subversive force reifies the hegemonic power of the symbolic because the paternal law is what imposes the illusion that femininity is somehow outside of the symbolic.<sup>57</sup> However, Kristeva's theorisation of the temporal and spatial simultaneity of the semiotic and the symbolic suggests a greater coincidence between their respective projects than Butler allows. Kristeva has suggested, for example, that "bio-psychological processes" are "already inescapably part of the [symbolic] signifying process."<sup>58</sup> When "Stabat Mater" is read in the context of Kristeva's broader theoretical arguments regarding the dialogic relationship between self and other, inside and outside, the semiotic and the symbolic, it becomes clear that neither take priority but are rather interdependent. To suggest otherwise misreads the transgressive – dialogic – subjectivity that is represented by Kristeva's figuration of the subject-in-process. Thus Kristeva's critics read "Stabat Mater" selectively, confusing either right-hand or left-hand column with Kristeva's own position on motherhood instead of recognising that the columns are in a dialogic relationship and consist in a description *and* critique of what motherhood has signified within patriarchal systems such as the Christian tradition of Marian devotion and Freudian psychoanalysis. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, singles out the left-hand column as the subject of her critique and suggests that

Kristeva focuses her analysis of maternity, not on the experience of motherhood, nor on women's representations of maternity, but on phallogocentric textual images, most particularly those of the Virgin Mother presented in Christian theology.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 126.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 82.

<sup>58</sup> Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 162-163.

Those commentators who attend to the right-hand column accuse Kristeva of conflating motherhood with femininity, reducing it to a marginal corporeal domain.<sup>60</sup> However, Kristeva herself resists such readings when, in “Stabat Mater,” she critiques the “resorption of femininity within the Maternal,” calling it a “masculine appropriation ... which is only a fantasy masking primary narcissism.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, while she maintains a perspectival link to the experiences of actual mothers (indeed, she must to sustain the metaphor’s resonance), I think a reading of the text as a dialogic and performative rendering of processual subjectivity indicates that Kristeva holds these experiences open to others too. Consequently, I agree with Edelstein when she advocates that “there’s something to be gained by (plural) theories or metaphors of the maternal that allow mothers, child-free women, and even men to *become* (rather than *be*) ‘maternal’.”<sup>62</sup> I think there is an argument, therefore, for seeing the maternal as a synonym (and certainly not the only possible one) for dialogic subjectivity. Kristeva certainly articulates a conception of motherhood at significant odds with the dominant patriarchal accounts she recounts in the left-hand column, however much it is in dialogue with elements of these accounts.

The dialogic mode Kristeva’s conception inscribes, moreover, is framed specifically as an ethical orientation towards otherness intended to resist totalitarian and oppressive social systems. The socio-political domain as the specific focus of her theorising of maternity as a model of ethics is another aspect of the text that indicates that she has in her sights a broader project than that of merely providing an account of motherhood that resists patriarchal idealisations. Kristeva has insisted throughout her work that rethinking the maternal body has to be inseparable from rethinking language as social structuration. Maternity consequently is not reduced to mute biologism, or a naïve mystification of the prelinguistic unity between mother and child. Her complex and rich body of writing implies that the question of the maternal is necessarily intertwined with the reconfiguration of language as a social practice rather than merely a nostalgic return to what is, in patriarchal discourse, a prelinguistic phantasy of maternal emptiness. Her alternative model of maternity is equally, therefore, an

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<sup>60</sup> Stanton, Domna C. “Difference on Trial: A Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva,” in eds. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 158-160.

<sup>61</sup> Kristeva, *Tales*, 236.

<sup>62</sup> Edelstein, “Metaphor,” 43-44.

alternative model of subjectivity and of ethics to the degree that these can each be characterised as heretical formulations.

## IV

### ***Herethics: An Outlaw Ethics for the Dialogic Self***

I began this essay by calling attention to the attenuated nature of ethical reflection and modelling in the literature generated by the political turn in the study of religions. I want, in my closing remarks, to indicate more concretely, although necessarily briefly, how Kristeva proposes an ethical model that is a helpful heuristic instrument for reimagining relationships between theory, data and concept formation, and for conceiving of subjectivity as heterogeneous and dialogically constituted. Coinciding with the original title of the essay, Kristeva advocates a neologistic “*hérétique*” (“a heretical ethics...a *herethics*”) based on the conception of the mother who relates to the other through and with love rather than the Law,<sup>63</sup> whose own subjectivity is interleaved with that of the child’s and subsequently transformed in the encounter. Kristeva presents maternity as a model, founded on and then proceeding from the ambiguity of pregnancy and birth that oscillates between the inside and the outside, between subject and object to move towards an ethics that proceeds from the divided subject. Generally speaking, within the ontotheological tradition of western metaphysics, the ethical orientation towards others has postulated an autonomous agent, routinely inscribed as normatively male, whose obligations to the other come from “his” recognition that the other must be the same, or at least equivalent to, “himself.” In the Christian era, how one was supposed to act was dependent on what one understood God to be, that is, on one’s basic metaphysical commitments. In the aftermath of the Enlightenment, as God became more distant and more abstracted, the confessional basis for ethical judgement that justified moral rules in terms of duty or salvation receded. In its place, ethics moved to the empirical realm and was transformed into a descriptive utilitarianism, explained by David Hume in terms of what is “useful, or agreeable to a man himself, or to others.”<sup>64</sup> The basis of ethics thus shifted from a pre-ordained religious

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<sup>63</sup> Kristeva, *Tales*, 263.

<sup>64</sup> David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the*

soteriology to one founded on human autonomy and use of reason. In the latter model, the autonomous subject of this ethics does not have a relation to any other *qua* other; rather it always and only has a relationship to the self-same, to another individual who can be posited as sharing the same or similar qualities. It effectively operates as a dualist system that must assert the self-same against an other who is representative of difference and who, on the basis of that difference, does not necessitate ethical responsiveness; the implication is a dialectic between self/other, same/different. Kristeva, in contrast, conceives of a notion of difference that does not operate according to a dualist logic of opposition but rather one of relationship and indebtedness insofar as one's self is the gift of the other, the consequence of encounter with the other. Throughout her work Kristeva develops a series of ethical models that present an assumption of the other as inherent within oneself rather than as exterior – maternity is but one example – and which instantiate a “subject-in-process/on-trial.” She proposes that models of alterity can inform a new way to conceive of the structure of the relation to others and thereby produce a new way to conceive of ethics, or “herethics,” a term which well conveys the sense in which such an ethics goes against conventional, binary understandings of the self. As such it is an “outlaw ethics.”<sup>65</sup>

Herethics is effectively an ethics that both challenges – rather than presupposes – the autonomous ethical agent that sets up obligations to the other as obligations to the self, and binds the subject to the other through love and not through the interdiction – the severance between bodies – required by “Law-of-the-Father.” It is thus an ethics which is predicated on a reaching out to, rather than overcoming, the other in recognition of the gift of the other. It is thus a sacrifice of singular, unitary identity: it is predicated on a meeting at the borders and of constitution in the space between. It offers an alternative to the individualism of a dualistic subjectivity that seeks a *dialectical* framework of self and other, distilling the essence of subjectivity into singularity through an agonistic encounter that ensures the triumph of the self-same over the other by means of the erasure or marginalisation of otherness as difference. The stress in Kristeva's presentation of maternity provides, instead, a dialogical understanding of identity, open to both men and women *as a metaphor* –

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*Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 [1748]), 336.

<sup>65</sup> Kelly Oliver, ed., *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 5.

an image which aids the imagination of a different economy of being and relationship – that seeks a non-agonistic encounter between self and other. Her representations of maternity and of the dialogic nature of the semiotic and symbolic that constitute the subject-in-process imply a prioritisation of heterogeneity over homogeneity, and this heterogeneity must be taken in a double sense: not only as the intersection of corporeality and language, but also as the intersection of two signifying economies, and of two subjects – plural, processual, intertextual and mutually constituting.

The question remains, of course, as to how Kristeva's model of "herethics" might be pursued heuristically to frame an ethical approach to the analysis of "religion." The criticisms generated by the political turn with respect to the epistemological emptiness of "religion" as a homogenous, essentialisable, transcendent or universalisable signifier, seem, as I indicated above, to call for an ethical reflection on its usability – the strong implication being that there is something intellectually, if not ethically suspect with continuing to wield it at all. However, the intellectual debate that has filled appears not to matter to millions of people who identify themselves – heterogeneously – under its sign and who use it to make and shape the language with which they articulate their experiences, their internal and collective sensibilities, and their political, social, or familial commitments. I fear that in the rush to attend to the political dimensions of category-making in the field, what may result is the denial of the (disruptive? marginalised?) voices of those for whom *category*-making is rather ongoing *meaning*-making which enables assertions and contestations of belonging, well-being and agency. In not attending to these voices – not recognising their re-formulation, reactivation and reorientation of intellectual codings – we run the risk of placing them at a hierarchical distance from the scholar intent on demonstrating the banal ordinariness of those things that are, in fact, held by many to be extraordinary. Whilst scholars of the political turn are quite right to point to the alienating operations of *sui generis* phenomenology which mystifies and sacralises ordinary human behaviours, in the process legitimising inequitable social arrangements, or of the colonial invention of (religious) traditions that imposed a Christianised prototype of religiosity – traditions and cultures that then shaped their own self-understandings to a detrimental degree – we must be alert to the potentially damaging bifurcations that persist in our own reformist efforts, to those separations and divisions that are consequent upon our insistence that "the religious" is solely a matter for epistemology, and to the possibility that these efforts might in part be

motivated by a fear of contamination by that which exceeds – or transgresses – epistemological management. Thus, as Roberts insists,

We ... must not ignore questions about the value of the pursuit of knowledge ... *Why* uncover the ideological pretensions of religious people? Without efforts to answer these kinds of questions, explanation and the search for knowledge simply result in the kind of sterile historicism [which is] ‘hostile and dangerous to life.’<sup>66</sup>

It is when the epistemological is opened up to the heterogeneity of the ontological that a fruitful and ethical dialogue can begin. It seems to me that Kristeva’s dialogic model of maternity, of subjectivity as an interleaving of heterogeneous modalities, proposes a promising – though not necessarily wholly unproblematic<sup>67</sup> – figuration through which scholars of religion can begin to locate – or at least recognise – themselves as “crossroad beings,” as subjects constituted dialogically by the demands of epistemological clarity and ontological fidelity, and by the re-presentation of categories from and by the place of the other. The other, let it be said the *religious* other, Jonathon Z. Smith has suggested, is the offspring, the “brain child” of the academic study of religion:

Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalisation. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.<sup>68</sup>

The language of paternal self-creation, of male parthenogenesis here is both striking and tired, additionally troubling because of its exaggeration of the agency and power – potency – of the scholar, however cognisant he may be of the need to dismantle that power through self-reflection. The

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<sup>66</sup> Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 167.

<sup>67</sup> I recognise, of course, that the image of “maternity” presented by Kristeva is not free of some of the problematic associations that are almost inevitable when the language of parentage is invoked – the potential for condescension – and the relationship of metaphor to material referent is remembered – many individuals experience relationships with their actual mothers as agonistic. However, what I want to stress here is the heuristic value of the image suggested by the umbilical relationship between mother and child, and that of the pregnant body insofar as it visualises the oscillation between autonomy and connectedness that is constitutive of dialogic subjectivity.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.



risk that Smith's proposal for the cultivation of "relentless" self-consciousness runs, however, is that reflexivity can easily turn to self-*absorption*. However, according to the logic and demands of herethics, the responsibility of the scholar qua "mother" must be to acknowledge that the creation of life, of subjectivity, even of categorisation, is a process of mutual, ongoing constitution: the mother-child metaphor as Kristeva reconfigures it is not by any means uni-directional. To take this model and apply it to an attempt at dialogic conceptualisation of "religion" might enable its reconfiguration as an intricately woven network of contingent, processual and transgressive sites of self-constitution between the academy and the field, one that opens a space for an ethical orientation towards otherness which is productive, open, and where scholars of religion might be cognisant of their debt to the "other modality."

## **BIOGRAPHY**

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