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Kristeva's Reformation

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The prefix “re-” forms a central axis of Julia Kristeva’s writing and thinking. She emphasizes *rebirth*, *revolt*, *return*, *re-pulsion*, *representation*, *rejection*, among other renegotiations and repetitions of the past. One of the latest such terms to emerge in her writing, is the notion of *reliance*, specifically *maternal reliance*, as a rebinding of maternal eroticism. Maternal reliance is a return to the very beginnings of subjectivity and representation. It is the rebinding to the mother’s passion or what Kristeva calls “maternal eroticism.” As we will see, the mother’s passion or maternal Eros is what supports the child’s entrance into language. Already immersed in signification from birth, the child learns language proper through the support of the mother’s love. But, on Kristeva’s account, the mother’s love is a kind of circuit that returns to the child through the paternal function, specifically what she calls the imaginary father.

In my brief remarks, I would like to consider what it means to return and rebind—that is to say, the significance of the “re-” for Kristeva’s thought. Kristeva does not just talk about binding or birth, or unbinding or death, but rather about rebinding and rebirth, suggesting that it is a retrospective return rather than an original moment that is crucial. The most significant moment, then, is not the moment of imaginary plenitude, nor the moment of originary loss, but rather the moment of rebirth that comes through rebinding. Indeed, Kristeva’s insistence on re-turning suggests that there is no originary moment of plenitude, of castration or loss, but rather a constant movement of compensation for a recurrent loss. By emphasizing rebinding and rebirth, she underscores not the loss as cutting wound but rather the healing power of signification, always already inherent within loss. The flipside of separation is reattachment. And rather than just focus on the separation or cut, Kristeva looks to that which allows us to rebind and reattach in order to create relations that sustain us. Both unbinding and binding are necessary for rebinding. Thus, by focusing on rebinding, Kristeva insists on the process of unbinding and binding, and the oscillation between them.

One reason that Kristeva focuses on rebinding rather than binding or unbinding may be the fantastic status of what Freud might call the primal scene. If there is no originary experience, then all experiences are repetitions of an imaginary scene that continues to haunt the psyche. Psychic energy can become attached to a foundational fantasy that drives it. This fantasy will be repeated in various forms throughout the life of the psyche. And yet, Kristeva remains optimistic that these patterns of repetition can be interrupted and that new forms of revolt are possible through rebinding psychic energy.

The repetitive nature of psychic experience is another reason that Kristeva emphasizes the return as retrospective rebinding. Binding is never once and for all but rather a continual process of binding, unbinding, and rebinding. The time of the psyche as described by Freudian psychoanalysis is one of repetition and return. And, Kristeva insists that psychoanalysis must follow the lead of psychic time by interminably turning back on itself through analysis. Rebirth and rebinding, then, are interminable processes through which the speaking subject negotiates and renegotiates the wound at the center of the psyche, the split between being and meaning. Insofar as we are beings who mean, we are cut off from our being in-itself, always searching for ways to reunite with our own being in-itself. This search is what Freud called the death drive. He postulated the death drive to explain why human beings—and perhaps all living beings—tend toward stasis rather than tension, even when that tension is pleasurable. In other words, both the tension inherent in pleasure and in displeasure is overcome by stasis or a steady state devoid of tension. In human beings, one way to view the death drive is as the drive toward being, which is always in conflict with the drive for meaning. The idea is that to “just be” would be without tension, while the search for meaning is the essence of tension. Of course, this assumes that beings that are not self-conscious do not experience psychic tension.

One way to interpret Kristeva’s insistence on rebinding, then, is through Freud’s theory of cathexis in terms of bound and unbound drive energy, which he introduced in “Project for a Scientific Psychology” as an economic theory of the drives and developed later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in relation to the repetition compulsion.¹ In the “Project,” Freud describes binding as the inhibition of free psychic energy linked to neurons firing in the brain as they become associated with concrete ideas or memories and therefore “bound” to them. Free energy is associated with the instincts or drives while bound energy is drive energy put in the service of stabilizing the ego. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, bound and unbound energies are not necessarily linked to biological processes in the brain, but rather to the primary and secondary processes of the psyche. There, Freud discusses the binding process not only as continually taking place, but also as the motor of psychic functioning. Unconscious drives are constantly being bound to

ideas, images and memories, which make their way into consciousness to varying degrees. In analysis, the repetition compulsion can make manifest these psychic connections through which a particular drive is linked over and over again to a certain idea. Given that the repetition compulsion repeats traumatic and unpleasant experiences, the project of analysis is to unbind and rebind this drive force into something more positive and less painful for the analysand.

Kristeva puts an emphasis on the rebinding operation of analysis. In light of Freud's remarks on binding and unbinding in his later work, Kristeva's focus on re-binding can be interpreted as calling attention to how the unbound energy of the death drive can be rebound and put into the service of life. For, as Freud describes them, bound energy is the result of Eros and serves life, whereas unbound energy is the result of Thanatos and serves the death drive.² Binding helps establish unity while unbinding destroys unity, which is why binding is associated with stabilizing the ego.

Extending Freud's theory of bound and unbound energy to Kristeva's notion of "new revolt," rebinding or reliance appears as the re-binding of drive energy, particularly of the death drive, to more productive sublimatory creations and forms of signification in order to avoid the extremes of either falling into the death drive and identifying with it (embracing it with a wish for death) or disavowing the death drive by fixing an ideal and denying change. The latter of these extremes easily topples over into the former; and therefore, they go hand in hand. Kristeva describes "the malady of ideality" as either of these—the nihilist who believes in nothing or the suicide bomber who kills others and himself or herself in the name of an absolute ideal.

Kristeva identifies this fundamentalism of belief with adolescence. Beyond the childish wonder at the world with its continual questioning "why," the adolescent looks for something to believe in. The adolescent wants to believe in an absolute truth or eternal love, a soul mate, something to replace its parents, who have proved a disappointment. The adolescent, says Kristeva, is a true believer, who either embraces an absolute ideal or gives up all ideals and embraces the death drive. Both extremes can amount to the same thing if the adolescent turns to violence in the name of one extreme or the other. The adolescent cannot move beyond the need to believe and is doggedly fixed there rather than risk questioning and uncertainty.

Kristeva associates the need to believe with sensation, a sort of trust in one's senses. She describes belief not as a supposition but rather as an unshakeable sensorial certainty. Before Oedipus, before language, before representation, there is the need to believe, which is supported by the imaginary father. Kristeva identifies the imaginary father with "paternal listening" that "gives meaning to what would otherwise be an inexpressible

trauma," most especially the separation from the maternal body.³ This father is the one whom the mother loves, or the one whom the child imagines the mother loves. This father is the object of the mother's desire such that, not only is the child forced to separate from the mother, but also it sees that it too is an object of her affection. Because she loves another, she is capable of loving me. Kristeva adds that the imaginary father also provides positive representations for the child. This father, loved by the mother, also loves and supports the child, if only indirectly through the mother's love. Signification, representation, and language are possible because of the connection between love and belief. Loving support in the circuit between the mother and the father (real and/or imaginary) enables the child to separate from the mother in order to love her.

In "New Forms of Revolt," Kristeva postulates the need to believe as separate from the desire to know. She maintains that although the need to believe is primary, a meaningful life also requires the desire to know. It is noteworthy that Kristeva uses the terms *need* and *desire* here, given their history within Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, desire is what is left over once we subtract need from demand. This is to say that desire is the remainder between having to ask for what you want or need and actually getting it. Given that what the child wants is to have its needs met automatically without having to ask, the necessity of making a demand (or asking) insures that its needs will never be met completely, and therefore, it will become a desiring subject, always experiencing as much loss and lack as satisfaction. For Kristeva, we need to believe just as we need to eat and sleep. But we desire to know because of the gap between our belief or ability to believe and the satisfaction of that need through signification. Because we can never say completely once and for all what we mean when we try to express our beliefs, there is always a remainder when we subtract what we mean from what we say. Language never fully captures experience, which is why we keep speaking. The remainder between experience and language corresponds to the gap between need and desire once demand enters the scene. In other words, because we must express our beliefs in language, they are always already put into doubt. And yet, in order to take the first step, we must believe--we need to believe. We need to believe we can say what we mean, and that what we say can be understood by others. This is a matter of faith that founds the possibility of communication. Of course, certainty of knowledge is impossible and therefore desire is always the oscillation between lack and satisfaction. Kristeva calls this movement the "eternal turnstile" of the need to believe and the desire to know. We are always moving back and forth between them, between certainty and questioning.

The adolescent is stuck at the need to believe stage to the point that the desire to know may seem threatening. No longer comfortable questioning everything, the adolescent needs certainty and security. Kristeva claims that

the analyst must convince the adolescent that there is pleasure in questioning, which she associates with revolt. This is to say, adolescent violence is not a new form of revolt. Protests in the street are not what Kristeva has in mind when she says revolt. Indeed, in Kristeva's terms, this is the opposite of revolt insofar as it forecloses questioning, and is too often the result of belief in an absolute ideal or fixed idea. The ability to revolt through questioning traditions and norms is threatened by what Kristeva calls "adolescent gangster fundamentalism." It is important to note that she also says that everyone is a perpetual adolescent insofar as we all need to believe and we all crave certainty.

And yet, she finds contemporary revolt, or new forms of revolt, which not only dwell with questions, but also find pleasure in continually questioning. What she calls "this new species of rebels" share something if not new, then only recently acknowledged, namely that meaning comes from "a radical inner experience" rather than from something outside or located in the social, historical or political. This inner experience is related to what she calls "intimate revolt." Inner experience is psychic life or psychic space, which is where intimate revolt takes place. In *New Maladies of the Soul*, she described intimate revolt as a way of making the clichés of one's culture one's own.⁴ Intimate revolt is an engagement between inner experience and the outer world. In this way, intimate revolt is an engagement between the deeply personal or this radical inner experience and the social, historical and political. Kristeva is clear, however, that intimate revolt is different from political revolt. Whereas most political revolt seeks to overthrow the old and establish something new in the name of some absolute ideal, intimate revolt neither dispenses with the old nor postulates something new, and certainly not in the name of an absolute ideal, unless that ideal is constant questioning and interminable analysis. In a sense, then, we could say that the value of values is in questioning them.

It may seem odd that Kristeva is attempting to articulate what is *new* about contemporary revolt while simultaneously chastising contemporary culture for fetishizing the new. She is critical of the constant clamor for newness even while she seems to bemoan the lack of greatness in art and literature today. Newness, she seems to suggest, like revolt, has become intimate. No longer the grand social, historical and political gestures of political revolutionaries and great artists, revolt and newness have taken a turn inward to occupy psychic space. And yet, Kristeva tells us, perhaps it has always been the case that true revolt happens in the imagination; true revolt has always been intimate revolt. In any case, she concludes that grand revolt is no longer possible for us, inundated, as we are, with the society of the spectacle that levels everything and overwhelms with quantity over quality. We are left with what she calls a "decorative ghetto," which could mean that we are left with poverty of meaning and mere decoration, or that we valorize the ghetto, and that ghetto aesthetic has become the new

art form. Either way, she suggests that there is a crisis of meaning caused by the society of the spectacle that can be addressed through the reformation of intimate revolt--that is to say, reforming a meaningful life through questioning and analysis that is intimate and personal.

Given that the crisis in meaning is caused in part by the inability of religion to fill the void left in the wake of constant screen time, we might be tempted to say that in the place of new age Christianity with its turn to a "personal knowledge," Kristeva offers us a personal revolt in the form of intimate revolt, which takes place in our personal inner experience. Revolt has become personal rather than global. Meaning has become intimate rather than universal. And what is unique or new in contemporary life is our ability, or willingness, to admit it. Straddling old and new, personal and political, Kristeva's new revolt could be interpreted as either waffling and uncertain or as embracing the ambiguity of a space in between, embracing the fluidity and ambivalence of psychic space with its intimate revolt, or more precisely, its interminable intimate revolts.

¹ See Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 18 (London: Vintage Classics). See also "Project for Scientific Psychology" in *Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 1 (London: Vintage Classics). And also "An Outline of Psycho-Analysis" in *Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 23 (London: Vintage Classics).

² See Sigmund Freud, "An Outline of Psycho-Analysis" in *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 23, 148.

³ See Julia Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, Vol XXII, no. 2 (2014): 1-19. This article is referenced throughout my essay.

⁴ See Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).