

Kristeva's Revolution in Poetic Language Today

Review: Angelova, E. (Ed.), 2024. *“Revolution in Poetic Language” Fifty Years Later: New Directions in Kristeva Studies*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2024.

Original Study

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Abstract: This is a review of Emilia Angelova's edited volume *“Revolution in Poetic Language” Fifty Years Later: New Directions in Kristeva Studies*. The volume commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of Kristeva's magnum opus and explores whether the text, first published in 1974, retains its relevance when transposed to differing social, historical, or cultural contexts. The review discusses the various forms of this transposition as presented in the volume, offering insight into contemporary approaches within Kristeva studies.

Keywords: Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, Speaking Subject, Psychoanalysis, Feminist Theory, Decolonial Critique, Contemporary Reception

Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language (RPL)*, first published in French in 1974 as *La Révolution du langage poétique. L'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle, Lautréamont et Mallarmé*, then partially¹ translated into English by Margaret Waller in 1984, is now a classic work in 20th-century French thinking. Kristeva, then a member of the avant-garde circle associated with the journal *Tel Quel*², attempted in the book a theoretical intervention in semiotics and linguistics, drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis

and the Marxist notion of practice. She developed a theory that endeavored to redefine the relationship between the subject and speech: the “signifying practice”, “the semiotic” and “the symbolic” are probably the most influential concepts Kristeva introduced (1984, 19–106). She established a theory of a speaking subject not reducible to the static, structural dimension of language, but always set in motion by its pre-sign, drive-based functioning. Therein Kristeva recognized a subversive

¹ As Leon S. Roudiez notes in the preface: “I have just alluded to a lack: part of the original version of this book has not been translated. Actually, only about a third of it now appears in English. *La Révolution du langage poétique* is a weighty 646-page tome that Kristeva presented for her State Doctorate in Paris in July 1973. [...] In the remaining four hundred and some odd pages of *La Révolution du langage poétique* Kristeva analyzes, often in great detail, French passages from Lautréamont and Mallarmé. But this translation is intended for persons who are not specialists in French literature and who perhaps read French with some difficulty or not at all.” (1984, 9–10)

² *Tel Quel* was a French literary journal founded in 1960 by Philippe Sollers. Active until 1982, it brought together influential figures such as Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Marcelin Pleynet, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

potential that could lead to a transformation of the structure of language and, therefore, to the structure of society; her theoretical intervention thus became a political intervention, in conjunction with the contemporary intellectual tendencies in France that considered the role of language to be immensely important for social change. However, Kristeva's theory (and practice) was developed under distinctive social conditions. Today, fifty years after the publication of *RPL*, the question arises as to what remains of the "revolutionary impulse" of that time and whether Kristeva's theory of the speaking subject is still relevant when transposed to a different social, historical, or cultural context. The reviewed anthology enters precisely into the very core of this dilemma.

The book is composed of thirteen chapters, which are divided into three parts. The first part consists of two texts written by Julia Kristeva herself and the editor's commentary. The second and the third parts include ten critical and analytical essays devoted to diverse aspects of Kristeva's magnum opus and her later work. As Emilia Angelova, the editor, writes in the Introduction, the book is intended primarily for a North American audience. Additionally, she mentions an essential constraint of the whole volume: "We celebrate the anniversary of Kristeva's text, yet this volume is focused on the (partial) translation and not on the original French text [...]" (Angelova 2024, 3). A book conceived in this way risks being mostly a repository of "American" perspectives on an "Americanized" Kristeva. Even though such moments can indeed be identified in the volume, they are effectively neutralized by the overall, very Kristevan composition of the collection, as the three parts closely resemble voices of polyphony that intersect throughout the text and confront each other.

Although the volume does not focus on the untranslated portions of Kristeva's work, it introduces new translations of two of her texts that have previously been unavailable in English: *The Impossibility of Loss* (1988, translated by Elisabeth Paquette) and *Of What Use Are Poets in Times of Distress* (2016, translated by Elisabeth Paquette and Alice Jardine). Despite the considerable temporal gap between the publication of *RPL* and these two texts, they have been carefully selected, as they offer further elaboration on themes central to Kristeva's earlier work. *The Impossibility of Loss* provides new insights into Kristeva's critique of Lacan, which can be traced back to *RPL* and the fundamental conceptualization of the semiotic and the symbolic. This new translation underscores the continuity of Kristeva's theoretical development. While in *RPL*, her critique of Lacan primarily focused on his conception of language as a symbolic structure, in this later text, Kristeva distances herself from Lacan regarding the clinical practice of psychoanalysis. The second text *Of What Use Are Poets in Times of Distress* brings the reader even closer to the core

concerns of *RPL*, as it deals with a question of the psychodynamics of poetic language. Kristeva's shift "from revolution to revolt" (often also conceptualized as a shift from linguistics to psychoanalysis), which is frequently addressed in this volume and widely acknowledged in Kristeva studies (e.g. Beardsworth 2005; Brandt 2001; Oliver 2005), is evident here. Whereas, in 1974, poetry was understood as a revolutionary space of transgression of the social laws, by 2016, Kristeva's focus shifted towards a more personal and intimate form of revolt. In this later work, poetic language becomes a "language of sharable singularities" where (national) identity is reconfigured. However, it retains its character of a space irreducible to mere communication through signs, as Kristeva had already argued in *RPL*. These new translations thus reveal that the themes Kristeva explored in *RPL* remain central to her thinking, even after significant theoretical shifts in her work.

The new translations prepare the ground for the following two sections, consisting of texts written by Kristevan scholars. The first section of the volume is called *Beyond Feminism: Engaging Kristeva for Decolonial, Trans, and Disability Studies*. As is well known, Kristeva was warmly received in an Anglo-American environment in the 1980s. Her theory did not abandon its political charge there, but took on a different direction from the one she and her colleagues in France pursued. Her theory of the speaking subject was not seen there primarily as a contribution to materialist linguistics and semiotics. It was instead filtered through the discourses of feminist scholarship (e.g. Gallop 1982; Moi 1985) and was later also seen as a promising source for developing a cultural theory focused on minority discourses. This section shows that this reading of Kristeva is still dominant today, and the field has even expanded: Kristeva's work is confronted here with the intersectional feminism discourses, i.e. discourses that did not practically exist at the time (and place) of *RPL*'s publication. This poses a notable challenge for the authors.

In *Julia Kristeva's Maternal Ethics of Tenderness*, Kelly Oliver discusses the question of the maternal body in Kristeva's work. Although Kristeva's views on maternity have been widely criticized (e.g. Butler 1992; Fraser 1992; Meyers 1992), Oliver argues that they can serve as a structural model for human relationships and can be particularly useful in the context of disability studies, offering an extensive ethical perspective on human otherness that goes beyond traditional notions of acceptance, tolerance, and even solidarity. While Kristeva (2013) is partly familiar with the discourse of disability studies, the same cannot be said for the context in which her work is examined in the second text written by Sid Hansen (and maybe in all the other texts included in this section)³. In *Kristeva in Trans Poetic Frame*, Hansen explores whether Kristeva's work can be helpful in transgender studies,

³ Here it is worth mentioning, for example, an interview with Julia Kristeva in the 2024 *Avec Philosophie* podcast series, where Kristeva refers to such discourses as "Wokism" and expresses a dismissive attitude towards the US reception of her work (Muhlmann 2024).

a discourse towards which Kristeva is often hostile today. Hansen quotes Kristeva's dismissive statements and subsequently illustrates a degree of irony in her oeuvre, identifying multiple sources for trans liberation in her early work: in particular, Kristeva's rejection of sex/gender dualism, implicit in her conception of poetic language, is considered productive. Nevertheless, Kristeva's failure to address the issues of racism and colonialism is seen as a significant shortcoming. The same problem is identified in Kristeva's work by Fanny Söderbäck in *Stranger than Other Strangers: On the Crossroads between Subjectivity and Language in Kristeva and Anzaldúa*. Söderbäck analyzes Kristeva's notion of strangeness and stresses its "uneven distribution" among populations due to the colonial and racial dynamics, which Kristeva does not address. Kristeva's work is brought into dialogue with the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, a scholar of Chicana feminism, to underscore Kristeva's neglect of these crucial issues. Another critical dialogue between Kristeva and the authors of decolonial theory is staged in Elisabeth Paquette's text *Theories of Poetic Resistance: Julia Kristeva and Sylvia Wynter*. Paquette compares the poetic theories of Kristeva and Wynter, revealing significant intersections, despite these being limited to Kristeva's early work. Later, according to Paquette, Kristeva undermines her position by the openly dismissive attitude towards discussions of coloniality and by excluding a historical-colonial framework in favor of the psychoanalytic "micropolitics" focused on the individual person. The tension between the radical potential of *RPL* and Kristeva's later work is also explored in Elaine P. Miller's *Proust among the Patients, Kristeva on Proust, Psychoanalysis, and Politics*. Miller confronts the politically fruitful conceptual apparatus of *RPL* with Kristeva's later analysis of Islamic fundamentalism in France (2009). She is again criticized for an overly individualist approach to the problems, which, apparently, are also anchored in France's colonial past and thus irreducible to the one-to-one approach taken up in psychoanalytical treatment.

This part of the volume is valuable mainly for its attempt to show that Kristeva's work from the 1970s does not have to be perceived only as a historical document, but when assessed critically, can successfully contribute to the dialogue of crucial problems of the 21st century. We can see an earnest attempt to retheorize Kristeva's work for the current context, as well as a bold criticism of her present-day political positions, which are often, according to the authors, in strong contrast to her revolutionary stance in *RPL*. The authors strive to bring greater plurality to her work by confronting Kristeva's work with non-European contexts. However, they succeed only at the level of isolated texts; as a whole, the texts of this part constitute a relatively homogeneous ensemble, advocating a monotonous rhetoric of criticism and, sometimes, an apparent nostalgia for the "good old Kristeva". Nevertheless, maybe in this lies the political power: we learn from Kristeva's work that the work of repetition and mourning for the lost object, when introduced into

speech, is what may lead to change.

The second block of texts, *The Evolving Meaning of Ontological Loss: From Revolution to Revolt*, offers a more diverse and multifaceted examination of Kristeva's work. Unlike the first part, where a shared political and theoretical framework connects the chapters, these essays explore a singular aspect of Kristeva's thought – the moment of loss – from various perspectives. In *RPL*, the loss represents a critical juncture of a subject's entry into language, permanently shaping their engagement with the signifying structures. Even after Kristeva shifts her focus from revolution to revolt, and from linguistics to psychoanalysis, this formative moment remains decisive. The fact that Kristeva's work is above all a site of various shifts is demonstrated already in Miglena Nikolchina's first text, *From Praxis to Chōra: The Filter of (In) Humanization in Julia Kristeva's Early Work*. Nikolchina identifies one such pivotal transition between *RPL* and Kristeva's earlier work, *Séméiotikè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969), framing it as a movement from the inhuman to the human. She argues that Kristeva's insights are especially relevant in the contemporary age of artificial intelligence and digital production. In addition, the essay provides a detailed exploration of the Bulgarian intellectual context, which profoundly influenced Kristeva's theoretical development in France. This essay thus offers a more decentralized reading of Kristeva's work, in contrast to the merely unified interpretations found in the book's earlier section. In the second text, *The Mental Image and the Spectacular Imaginary: Kristeva with Lacan and Sartre*, Surti Singh posits that the experience of loss is primarily a visual experience and situates it at the intersection of phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Paying special attention to the question of "spectacular imaginary", Singh argues that Kristeva's notion of the speaking subject creates a rupture between image and power, which are otherwise closely linked. John Montani's essay *Rhythm and the Semiotic in Revolution in Poetic Language* emphasizes the importance of another layer of signifying practice. The question of rhythm is situated in the context of Kristeva's notion of intertextuality (reconceptualized in *RPL* as "transposition") and the author demonstrates that rhythm functions as a practice that generates a dynamic movement of the subject's appearance and disappearance, from which meaning emerges. Emilia Angelova's essay, *Excription and the Negativity of the Speaking Subject: Reading Kristeva with Heidegger*, anchors Kristeva's work within the broader European philosophical tradition, focusing on the role of bodily negativity and the articulation of meaning in relation to the body, particularly the dead maternal body. Angelova is attentive to Kristeva's non-linear conception of temporality as it emerges through her theory of the subject. In the final essay, *Kristeva and Arendt on Language, Sanity, and the Sensus Communis*, Anne O'Byrne explores the striking affinities between Kristeva and Hannah Arendt, particularly their shared experience of being "strangers" in language. Both thinkers grapple with the problem of communication following the experience of loss and

the challenges posed when “language goes mad”. While Arendt views the madness of language as a boundary, Kristeva contends that madness is an inherent feature of language and cannot be separated from it.

Both sections of the volume effectively demonstrate that Kristeva’s work remains intellectually provocative after fifty years, although they do so in different ways. The first part is primarily critical, whereas the second part adopts a more conciliatory approach, aiming to uncover the most philosophically stimulating aspects of her work, which are able to address the pressing issues of our time. However, it is disappointing – this criticism applies to both sections – that many of the contributors, despite celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Revolution in Poetic Language (RPL)*, use the text primarily as a springboard to explore Kristeva’s later work, without engaging more deeply with the specific concerns raised in *RPL*. For instance, the semiotic and linguistic perspectives are notably absent. Instead, attention is given to whether Kristeva’s conception of the subject can serve any (political) purpose. However, an analysis of Kristeva’s former involvement in the field of semiotics might reveal that her conception of the subject is inherently resistant to being instrumentalized for any specific purpose, as it eludes grounding in particularist discourse. A variation on this view is offered by Emilia Angelova in the Introduction, when speaking of an “inassimilable remainder” that causes “that the oppression and dominance of the laws of language may never fully repress the power of language to signify ‘new’ things.” (2024, 40). However, we are convinced that the issue is not solely one of oppression (which has taken a distinct form fifty years after *RPL*’s publication), but also the more general irreducibility of the language emerges in Kristeva’s work. It is precisely this remainder that makes language, when we try to use it for a particular purpose, inevitably fail to achieve its goal. Perhaps this idea could be the lesson for the 21st century that Kristeva’s work from the 1970s teaches us.

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