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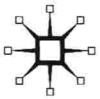

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General Editor's Preface

> Transitions: *transition* –, n. of action. 1. A passing or passage from one condition, action or (rarely) place, to another. 2. Passage in thought, speech, or writing, from one subject to another. 3. a. The passing from one note to another. b. The passing from one key to another, modulation. 4. The passage from an earlier to a later stage of development of formation . . . change from an earlier style to a later; a style of intermediate or mixed character . . . the historical passage of language from one well-defined stage to another.

The aim of *transitions* is to explore passages, movements and the development of significant voices in critical thought, as these voices determine and are mediated by acts of literary and cultural interpretation. This series also seeks to examine the possibilities for reading, analysis and other critical engagements which the very idea of transition – such as the transition effected by the reception of a thinker's *oeuvre* and the heritage entailed – makes possible. The writers in this series unfold the movements and modulation of critical thinking over the last generation, from the first emergences of what is now recognized as literary theory. They examine as well how the transitional nature of theoretical and critical thinking is still very much in operation, guaranteed by the hybridity and heterogeneity of the field of literary studies. The authors in the series share the common understanding that, now more than ever, critical thought is both in a state of transition and can best be defined by developing for the student reader an understanding of this protean quality. As this *tranche* of the series, dealing with particular critical voices, addresses, it is of great significance, if not urgency, that the texts of particular figures be reconsidered anew.

This series desires, then, to enable the reader to transform her/his own reading and writing transactions by comprehending past developments as well as the internal transitions worked through by particular literary and cultural critics, analysts, and philosophers. Each book in this series offers a guide to the poetics and politics of such thinkers, as well as interpretative paradigms, schools, bodies of thought, historical and cultural periods, and the genealogy of particular concepts, while transforming these, if not into tools or methodologies, then into conduits for directing and channeling thought. As well as transforming the critical past by interpreting it from the

perspective of the present day, each study enacts transitional readings of critical voices and well-known literary texts, which are themselves, conceivable as having been transitional and influential at the moments of their first appearance. The readings offered in these books seek, through close critical reading and theoretical engagement, to demonstrate certain possibilities in critical thinking to the student reader.

It is hoped that the student will find this series liberating because rigid methodologies are not being put into place. As all the dictionary definitions of the idea of transition above suggest, what is important is the action, the passage: of thought, of analysis, of critical response, such as are to be found, for example, in the texts of critics whose work has irrevocably transformed the critical landscape. Rather than seeking to help you locate yourself in relation to any particular school or discipline, this series aims to put you into action, as readers and writers, travelers between positions, where the movement between poles comes to be seen as of more importance than the locations themselves.

Julian Wolfreys

Preface

The purpose of this book is to introduce students of literature to what I would argue are the most pertinently "literary theoretical" aspects of Julia Kristeva's work. As the organization of the book bears out, I examine these aspects in two different ways. First, I attempt to offer the theoretical foundations on which Kristeva makes claims about and readings of literary texts. Second, I put Kristeva's theory in close conversation with specific literary texts and figures. In Part I, I divide these foundations (though their division is by no means absolute) into two categories: her radical effort to redefine "textuality" and the new interpretation required to grapple with it; and her highly influential effort to describe the earliest workings of subject formation, which turn out to be themselves highly "textual" in their own right. In Part II, I explore the way those theoretical commitments inform her treatment of two literary figures: Louis-Ferdinand Céline and James Joyce. My final chapter in Part II looks at the way other critics have put Kristeva in conversation with a literary figure she never has, and probably never would, examine directly: William Wordsworth. In focusing on the way two good critics have juxtaposed Kristeva's theories with Wordsworth's poetry, I hope to offer a model of what other, future encounters between Julia Kristeva and literary theory might best look like.

In each of these "reading" chapters, I attempt what Clifford Geertz famously calls "thick description." That is, I work slowly through the argument Kristeva makes about Céline's peculiar, disturbing prose, aiming to demonstrate that this superb critical analysis does not merely *apply* her theoretical ideas about subjectivity and abjection to Céline's fiction, but indeed allows those ideas to come to startling fruition by putting her theoretical discourse into an intricate conversation with Céline. That is, if Kristeva's theory helps "explain" Céline's rhetorical strategies and their effects, so does that very rhetoric, his style, insinuate itself into the way Kristeva makes her analysis, implicating her pronouncements, even shaping the contours of her sentences. While English-speaking readers may be relatively unfamiliar

with Céline's work, Kristeva's discussion of him offers a meticulous stylistic analysis of the affective significance at work in even the most elemental features of a prose sentence. This analysis is genuinely persuasively and carefully wrought, though perhaps lost on those who have not read Céline for themselves. In my discussion, therefore, I highlight her literary critical observations and put them in the larger context of her theory of abjection by explaining the larger context as well as the narrative particulars of Céline's works, the coordinates of which (plot, character, and so on) Kristeva rarely deigns to provide. Again, I discover that, in quite practical but also significant ways, reading Céline helps us understand Kristeva just as much as reading Kristeva helps us understand Céline.

In the case of James Joyce, Kristeva's engagement is considerably different, and my study is necessarily different as well. While her analysis of Céline is painstaking and comprehensive, her treatment of Joyce (someone she refers to in more than two decades of her work) also constitutes a "literary" analysis, but not one born of close reading. Rather, Joyce serves as an emblem for Kristeva of a certain literary tradition (of otherness, radicality, linguistic revolution) that she has variously, but persistently turned to in more than three decades of theoretical work. Here, I am interested in Kristeva's "reading of" Joyce, but also in the way "Joyce" functions as an example for her theory. I study her one substantial, extended reading of Joyce's *Ulysses* not only for what it says about Joyce but also for what, in turn, the passages from Joyce she chooses to discuss say about Kristeva's theory itself.

In my final chapter, on Wordsworth, I explore the arguments of two critics who read Wordsworth by way of Kristeva in ways that I believe transcend the mere "application" model of theory-and-literature that I, throughout the book, caution against. In a sense, what I explore in this final chapter brings us back around to Part I, indeed to what I see as the very purpose of the book as a whole. For to some extent, the two sections of the book belie its very thesis: "theory" and "reading" are *not* separate activities. In Kristeva's work in particular, they have always been deeply interconnected, mutually generating. For example, Kristeva points out emphatically and often that it was in reading certain literary texts that she came to rethink the idea of subjectivity, as much as the other way around. In Part I of the book, especially, I lay out the important ways in which Kristeva's own most penetrating theoretical arguments militate against the assumption that "theory" can serve as a masterful key for unlocking a subservient "work" of literature

or anything else (the unconscious, for example). And in Part II, I try to demonstrate what reading Kristeva and reading literature would look like if we proceed not by the application of the former to the latter, but rather by seeing how they are indeed implicated by one another.

The supplementary matter in the book – its glossary and annotated bibliography – aims to follow the principles I lay out above. The glossary does not merely "define" key terms in pithy sentences; instead, it identifies the context in which Kristeva used those terms in the first place, the role they serve in the argument in which they appear. In the case of terms she has used throughout her career, I have attempted to map their multiple appearances and, when necessary, account for the ways in which the terms change with Kristeva's evolving theoretical investments. The annotated bibliography serves a similar purpose and was produced with similar imperatives in mind.

Again, the book's organizational divisions might be somewhat misleading. In every part of the book, I try not only to "explain" her terms, her theoretical concepts, her interpretations, but to "experience" them. In other words, I have tried to model the difficult but necessary process of really *reading* Kristeva, which is not the same as reading *about* Kristeva or reading distilled *summaries* of what her concepts mean. In this sense, I suppose, this book aims to tell you that this book is not good enough on its own. Its final thesis, then, would be, as Kristeva herself says of Céline: you will not just understand Kristeva's work, but get it, feel it, understand how and why it unfolds so strangely only once you read it for yourself.

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Contents

Part I

Theoretical Grounds

1 The Objects, Objectives, and Objectivity of Textual Analysis

Kristeva in the English Department

In his 1984 introduction to the Columbia University Press edition of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Margaret Waller's partial translation of the massive 664-page work that earned Julia Kristeva her doctorate, Léon Roudiez makes an announcement that, in its mixture of urgency and provocation, resembles some of Kristeva's own most memorable assertions. He maintains that: "Julia Kristeva is a compelling presence that critics and scholars can ignore only at the risk of intellectual sclerosis" (1).[1] This call to notice is implicitly directed to readers of English, particularly those in the United States, who have perhaps "been slow in recognizing the importance of her work, for it has not been translated [here] as promptly as it has been elsewhere" (1). Since that time, the warning has been duly heeded, in the United States and throughout the world. Indeed, more than thirty years of writing, psychoanalytic practice, and teaching on two continents have secured Kristeva's status as one of the most formidable figures in twentieth-century critical theory. To date, her work has been translated into ten languages.

A number of excellent resources are available to those who set out to explore Kristeva's prolific *oeuvre*. In English specifically, translations by Roudiez and others, Toril Moi's and Kelly Oliver's readers (as well as their scholarly work), Ross Mitchell Guberman's recent collection of interviews, John Lechte's critical introduction, and John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin's collection of critical essays are only the most prominent among them. Such navigational tools, however, do not

necessarily answer the crucial, though often unspoken, question of why Kristeva's work belongs in the context in which most people first encounter it, or why it might enrich that context. For despite the fact that most readers are introduced to Julia Kristeva in courses offered by literature departments, her precise relevance to the study of literature – the extent to which her theory is specifically a *literary* theory, if it is one – has yet to be articulated fully. The fact that Kristeva has sparked so much debate among feminist, political, and psychoanalytic thinkers can make her place in literary studies especially hard for new readers to fathom. In his recent *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler addresses this very problem when he outlines the general difficulty of understanding the relation between "*literary theory*, the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analyzing it" and "theory – not theory of literature, mind you; just plain 'theory.' "[2] He acknowledges that, for many, the latter represents "too much debate about general questions whose relation to literature is scarcely evident, too much reading of difficult psychoanalytical, political, and philosophical texts" (1–2). Approaching Kristeva's best-known work or that of her critics for the first time, a reader would likely place her in the "just plain 'theory' " category, with perhaps the same negative assessment. Just how her work might represent the former as well – a "systematic account of the nature of literature and the methods for analyzing it" – poses a more difficult, but similarly important, question, which this volume aims to address.

Certainly one obvious answer is that Kristeva herself often writes about literature, not only in presenting her theory of poetic language, but also in offering compelling accounts of abjection, melancholia, love, and other "borderline cases" of subjectivity. Kristeva's discussions of literature and her use of literary examples, however, rarely offer up clear models of how another reader might produce a sustained literary criticism in her spirit. Nor do they explicitly indicate *whether* and *why* one should. In some ways, this lack of clarity has not seemed to pose a problem at all, for readings of literary texts "using" Kristeva have become a fairly regular occurrence in scholarly journals and academic books. Yet while acknowledging the contributions of excellent critics whose subtlety transcends this characterization, I would also suggest that literary commentators who invoke Kristeva tend to *apply* her formulations without giving rigorous attention to what is at stake in doing so.[3] And though it is inviting to do so, reading Kristeva's accounts of signification and subjective crises primarily as *concepts* or *themes* to

identify in literary or cultural texts limits – in fact, misreads – her theoretical contribution. We might see application as a readerly strategy, a critical stage, that is indeed a "resistance to theory," if an eager and well-intentioned one.[4] Its next stage – determining how one might properly produce an informed critical reading of literary texts that contends with the genuine implications of Kristeva's wide-ranging speculations – could not be more crucial to think through deliberately and self-consciously.

This question about Kristeva is a version of the vexed and much contested question of theory's relation to literature and literary study more generally. A voluminous body of discourse exists on this subject, and it is not the express domain of this book to survey it. As the title of this volume indicates, it is, instead, an effort to consider this general question by means of a particular case, one valuable for very common and practical reasons: although initiated readers may find the need to justify reading "theory" naïve or obsolete, for new readers it can be a formidable and prohibitive problem. In the case of a theorist like Kristeva – prolific, eclectic, rigorous, difficult, and occasionally outrageous – the problem has had significant effects, involving not just how her work gets used, but also how it has been situated within the academy at large. As Lechte, Moi, and even Kristeva herself have argued, prevailing Anglo-American assumptions that her work is essentially feminist, psychoanalytic, or political – assumptions at times used to condemn her – deny much of its full force, its full potential, as well as much of its intellectual context.[5] Not often enough do critics acknowledge that Kristeva presupposes and deploys a specific understanding of literary language and representation that speaks more directly to students of literature than her wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary studies might at times seem to do.

The project here will be to identify in Kristeva's work, in its sprawling "superdisciplinary" ambition, a workably coherent theory of both literary *production* and literary *criticism*.[6] On the former issue, Kristeva is fairly explicit, and on the latter, rarely so. But it is valuable to recognize that they are actually inextricable. To understand Kristeva's account of the way signification takes place in a literary work or a cultural phenomenon necessarily involves asking how that text is to be read, how it is to be interpreted. Her work persistently engages existing debate about critical discourse itself, most specifically by challenging two key assumptions: first, that language generates stable textual objects, clear referents of the world or experience, perspicuously open

to critical understanding; and, second, that criticism may ever stand as an authoritative meta-discourse on such texts.

"Archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs"

Articulating what is typically considered a poststructuralist critique of those assumptions, Kristeva's work reconceives both the object and the objective of literary analysis, as well as the objectivity earlier literary critics sought as an interpretive ideal. Roudiez's introduction to *Revolution in Poetic Language* not only situates this theoretical insistence, but also pointedly argues that Kristeva "has something to say to those whose principal affiliation is with 'literary' research," and even that "she, perhaps more than others, has provided a conceptual foundation for significantly changing one's approach to whatever he or she chooses to include under that vague heading" (6). To understand, however, just how her work would provide such a foundation, it helps first to recognize that Kristeva herself was working from – and seeking to dismantle – the broad foundations of a linguistic theory whose domain always included, but also extended beyond, the concerns of scholars interested in the particular forms of literary language.

While Kristeva everywhere acknowledges her debt to linguistic theory (Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles S. Peirce, Emile Benveniste) and indeed rigorously works from its precepts, she also, as Roudiez stresses, puts pressure on its "tendency [. . .] to 'eliminate from its field of inquiry everything that cannot be systematized, structured, or logicized into a formal entity' " (4). This claim is not original to Kristeva, of course. Her early articulations of it are contemporary with analogous critiques by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida. Whereas Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, for example, famously explores the simultaneous orthodoxy and radicalism of Saussure's structural linguistics, Kristeva identifies similar fissures, similar possibilities in the work of Benveniste. She argues that Benveniste, although caught up in the formalizing trend, "nevertheless opened this object called language to practices in which it realizes itself, which go beyond it, and on the basis of which its very existence as monolithic object is either made relative or appears as problematic."[7] Questioning the vision of language or signification as a static, "monolithic object," Kristeva seeks to develop a theoretical discourse equipped to regard it, rather, as a complex set of "practices" – not as signification per se, but