

JULIA KRISTEVA

John Lechte

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FEMINIST THEORY

JULIA KRISTEVA

JULIA KRISTEVA

A leading literary critic and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva is one of the most significant French thinkers writing today. In this up-to-date survey of her work, John Lechte outlines fully and systematically her intellectual development. He traces it from her work on Bakhtin and the logic of poetic language in the 1960s, through her influential theories of the 'symbolic' and the 'semiotic' in the 1970s, to her analyses of horror, love, melancholy, and cosmopolitanism in the 1980s. He provides an insight into the intellectual and historical context which gave rise to Kristeva's thought, showing how thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Emile Benveniste, and Georges Bataille have been important in stimulating her own reflections. He concludes with an overall assessment of Kristeva's work, looking in particular at her importance for feminism and postmodernist thought in general.

Essential reading for all those who wish to extend their understanding of this important thinker, this first full-length study of Kristeva's work will be of interest to students of literature, sociology, critical theory, feminist theory, French studies, and psychoanalysis.

Editor's foreword

The twentieth century has produced a remarkable number of gifted and innovative literary critics. Indeed it could be argued that some of the finest literary minds of the age have turned to criticism as the medium best adapted to their complex and speculative range of interests. This has sometimes given rise to regret among those who insist on a clear demarcation between 'creative' (primary) writing on the one hand, and 'critical' (secondary) texts on the other. Yet this distinction is far from self-evident. It is coming under strain at the moment as novelists and poets grow increasingly aware of the conventions that govern their writing and the challenge of consciously exploiting and subverting those conventions. And the critics for their part – some of them at least – are beginning to question their traditional role as humble servants of the literary text with no further claim upon the reader's interest or attention. Quite simply, there are texts of literary criticism and theory that, for various reasons – stylistic complexity, historical influence, range of intellectual command – cannot be counted a mere appendage to those other 'primary' texts.

Of course, there is a logical puzzle here, since (it will be argued) 'literary criticism' would never have come into being, and could hardly exist as such, were it not for the body of creative writings that provide its *raison d'être*. But this is not quite the kind of knock-down argument that it might appear at first glance. For one thing, it conflates some very different orders of priority, assuming that literature always comes first (in the sense that Greek tragedy had to exist before Aristotle could formulate its rules), so that literary texts are for that very reason possessed of superior value. And this argument would seem to find commonsense support in the

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difficulty of thinking what 'literary criticism' could *be* if it seriously renounced all sense of the distinction between literary and critical texts. Would it not then find itself in the unfortunate position of a discipline that had willed its own demise by declaring its subject non-existent?

But these objections would only hit their mark if there were indeed a special kind of writing called 'literature' whose difference from other kinds of writing was enough to put criticism firmly in its place. Otherwise there is nothing in the least self-defeating or paradoxical about a discourse, nominally that of literary criticism, that accrues such interest on its own account as to force some fairly drastic rethinking of its proper powers and limits. The act of crossing over from commentary to literature – or of simply denying the difference between them – becomes quite explicit in the writing of a critic like Geoffrey Hartman. But the signs are already there in such classics as William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1928), a text whose transformative influence on our habits of reading must surely be ranked with the great creative moments of literary modernism. Only on the most dogmatic view of the difference between 'literature' and 'criticism' could a work like *Seven Types* be counted generically an inferior, sub-literary species of production. And the same can be said for many of the critics whose writings and influence this series sets out to explore.

Some, like Empson, are conspicuous individuals who belong to no particular school or larger movement. Others, like the Russian Formalists, were part of a communal enterprise and are therefore best understood as representative figures in a complex and evolving dialogue. Then again there are cases of collective identity (like the so-called 'Yale deconstructors') where a mythical group image is invented for largely polemical purposes. (The volumes in this series on Hartman and Bloom should help to dispel the idea that 'Yale deconstruction' is anything more than a handy device for collapsing differences and avoiding serious debate.) So there is no question of a series format or house-style that would seek to reduce these differences to a blandly homogeneous treatment. One consequence of recent critical theory is the realization that literary texts have no self-sufficient or autonomous meaning, no existence apart from their after-life of changing interpretations and values. And the same applies to those *critical* texts whose meaning and significance are subject to constant shifts and realignments of interest. This is not to say that trends in criticism are just a matter

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of intellectual fashion or the merry-go-round of rising and falling reputations. But it is important to grasp how complex are the forces – the conjunctions of historical and cultural motive – that affect the first reception and the subsequent fortunes of a critical text. This point has been raised into a systematic programme by critics like Hans-Robert Jauss, practitioners of so-called 'reception theory' as a form of historical hermeneutics. The volumes in this series will therefore be concerned not only to expound what is of lasting significance but also to set these critics in the context of present-day argument and debate. In some cases (as with Walter Benjamin) this debate takes the form of a struggle for interpretative power among disciplines with sharply opposed ideological viewpoints. Such controversies cannot simply be ignored in the interests of achieving a clear and balanced account. They point to unresolved tensions and problems which are there in the critic's work as well as in the rival appropriative readings. In the end there is no way of drawing a neat methodological line between 'intrinsic' questions (what the critic really thought) and those other, supposedly 'extrinsic' concerns that have to do with influence and reception history.

The volumes will vary accordingly in their focus and range of coverage. They will also reflect the ways in which a speculative approach to questions of literary theory has proved to have striking consequences for the human sciences at large. This breaking-down of disciplinary bounds is among the most significant developments in recent critical thinking. As philosophers and historians, among others, come to recognize the rhetorical complexity of the texts they deal with, so literary theory takes on a new dimension of interest and relevance. It is scarcely appropriate to think of a writer like Derrida as practising 'literary criticism' in any conventional sense of the term. For one thing, he is as much concerned with 'philosophical' as with 'literary' texts, and has indeed actively sought to subvert (or deconstruct) such tidy distinctions. A principal object in planning this series was to take full stock of these shifts in the wider intellectual terrain (including the frequent boundary disputes) brought about by critical theory. And, of course, such changes are by no means confined to literary studies, philosophy and the so-called 'sciences of man'. It is equally the case in (say) nuclear physics and molecular biology that advances in the one field have decisive implications for the other, so that specialized research often tends (paradoxically) to break down

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existing divisions of intellectual labour. Such work is typically many years ahead of the academic disciplines and teaching institutions that have obvious reasons of their own for adopting a business-as-usual attitude. One important aspect of modern critical theory is the challenge it presents to these traditional ideas. And lest it be thought that this is merely a one-sided takeover bid by literary critics, the series will include a number of volumes by authors in those other disciplines, including, for instance, a study of Roland Barthes by an American analytical philosopher.

We shall not, however, cleave to theory as a matter of polemical or principled stance. The series will extend to figures like F. R. Leavis, whose widespread influence went along with an express aversion to literary theory; scholars like Erich Auerbach in the mainstream European tradition; and others who resist assimilation to any clear-cut line of descent. There will also be authoritative volumes on critics such as Northrop Frye and Lionel Trilling, figures who, for various reasons, occupy an ambivalent or essentially contested place in modern critical tradition. Above all the series will strive to resist that current polarization of attitudes that sees no common ground of interest between 'literary criticism' and 'critical theory'.

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

Preface

The discipline of semiotics – or semiology – is now well established in Europe, or at least in the French and Italian university and intellectual systems. It has become much better known in the last decade in Anglo-Saxon countries – especially in film studies – although it is not always treated with the respect it has achieved on the Continent. Julia Kristeva's work, the subject of this book, derives much from the development of modern semiotics, even if it is also distanced from it to a certain extent.

Although enough of an introductory nature has now been written on semiotics,¹ a brief remark about its nature and scope are appropriate in order that we may better take our bearings in relation to Kristeva's work.

Seminal texts explaining the nature of the discipline of semiotics, such as those of Barthes² and Eco,³ apart from showing how it is dependent on a theory of the sign and signification, also point towards the breadth of its researches. Barthes speaks for example of 'extra-linguistic' sign systems: the food, car, furniture, clothing, and architecture systems.⁴ Eco goes much further than Barthes, and shows that there is hardly any field of human endeavour which does not potentially fall within the province of semiotic studies. Eco's list of studies includes, *inter alia*: zoosemiotics; olfactory signs; tactile communication; paralinguistics (including one study of 'vocal characterizers' such as laughing, crying, whimpering, sobbing . . . etc.); medical semiotics; kinesics and proxemics ('the idea that gesturing depends on cultural codes'); musical codes; visual communication; systems of objects (objects cultures); formalized languages (algebra, chemistry); aesthetic texts; mass communication; and rhetoric.⁵ Clearly, hardly an aspect of social

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and cultural life fails to have a signifying/communicative aspect. And this means that, despite the claims sometimes made to the effect that semiotics 'occludes material relationships',⁶ hardly an aspect of cultural and social life is uniquely instrumental (geared to the satisfaction of needs), or narrowly material (a concrete object). Broadly speaking, semiotics has challenged the notion that the material, instrumental dimension of human life does not also have symbolic implications.

Especially in its early phase, Julia Kristeva's work constitutes a particular version of semiotic studies increasingly influenced by psychoanalysis. No doubt due to the specific character of French (or Parisian) intellectual life, certain aspects of semiotic theory may seem highly elaborated, if not obscure, to an Anglo-Saxon audience. My position is that the difficulties of reading Kristeva outside France are as much due to a particular Anglo-Saxon intellectual disposition as they are due to the intrinsic nature of her work. Kristeva herself speaks – admittedly in 1980 – of 'the *difference* in mental and intellectual habits that persist in spite of recently increased cultural exchanges between the United States and Europe'.⁷ One aim of this book is to transcend these 'mental and intellectual' habits, and to throw light on Kristeva's *oeuvre* for people outside the Hexagon.

To the extent that Kristeva's name is known outside France, it is usually in connection with so-called French feminism. But while Kristeva has indeed commented publicly, and written about issues relevant to the position of women in western society, there is a sizeable other dimension to her writing which has been somewhat neglected in the literature on her work. This book is principally a consideration of this 'other dimension'. It includes Kristeva's theory of society and culture as inspired by Freud and avant-garde art; her consideration of writing as a practice, and elaborations of psychoanalytic theory with respect to 'horror', 'love' and 'melancholy'. It is especially these latter three topics which contribute to raising fundamental questions about social life in advanced capitalist – postmodern – societies. Not to be neglected, in this regard, is Kristeva's position as exile and foreigner. Her book, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* published late in 1988, provides an important insight here.⁸

The assumption made throughout this study is that some readers of Kristeva not only have difficulty in following each step in her thinking, but try to read her work on the wrong level. I have

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attempted, therefore, to bring into focus the appropriate dimension involved, or the general region where one's gaze should be directed. The aim, nevertheless, is not to read Kristeva *for* someone else; it is rather to help people read Kristeva for themselves. And this means to help them truly to confront the difficulties involved. The point, then, is not to have these difficulties (supposedly) resolved in a secondary text which 'simplifies' them. A profound thinker is just not open to simplification in this way. To be cast in the role of 'teacher' is often to be cast in the role of simplifier in this sense. As Heidegger said, however, teaching is much more difficult than learning because 'the real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than – learning'.⁹ Here, we see that teaching has nothing to do with the transmission of knowledge in a simplified form, but with learning to let people themselves learn. I have just such an aim in the following pages.

Finally, all quotations from French texts are in my own translation unless otherwise indicated.

Notes

- 1 See Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism & Semiotics*, New Accents Series (London, Methuen, reprinted 1982).
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York, Hill & Wang, 1977).
- 3 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Advances in Semiotics Series (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, first Midland Book edition, 1979).
- 4 See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, pp. 25–7, and pp. 62–3.
- 5 Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp. 9–14.
- 6 See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 169:

To occlude these [material and social relationships], by reducing their expressed focus to a linguistic system, is a kind of error closely related, in effect, to that made by the theorist of 'pure' expression for whom, also, there was no materially and socially differential world of lived and living practice; a human world of which language in, and through its own forms, is itself always a form.

- 7 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, reprinted 1984), p. vii. Kristeva's emphasis.
- 8 Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris, Fayard, 1988).

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9 Martin Heidegger, 'What calls for thinking' in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 356

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