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Women and Society in Literature, or Reading Kristeva and Proust

For those of us who are engaged in studying the vital connections between literature, society, and consciousness from a feminist perspective, Julia Kristeva's work is of critical importance. She has developed an approach to literature that locates sociopolitical and psychological levels within the formal structure of the text and she successfully analyzes these levels in a wide variety of works, those of Céline, Beckett, and the Russian Futurist poets Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky, among others.¹ Kristeva offers new insights into reading literature and into re-evaluating classic texts. Yet few critics have dealt with her work, and those who have, do so briefly and give the impression that the sociopolitical aspects of her theory are negligible. Within the limits of a short, descriptive essay, I will attempt to characterize her particular version of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, to consider its sociopolitical aspects, and to reveal its implications for the re-evaluation of a classic text like Proust's *The Remembrance of Things Past*.

Examined together, her studies of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky (pp. 23-25), of the Italian Renaissance painter Giovanni Bellini (pp. 237-270), and of Chinese women² demonstrate more clearly than her other writing the connections between art, society, and consciousness. These three domains are inextricably linked because all are organized as a Language.³ Kristeva is using the category of Language here, (and "text", "writing" or "discourse" as synonyms for such Language) as do many other French theoreticians, to discuss the thought patterns that underlie all human activity and of which we are only partly in control: such patterns constitute us, and we them.⁴ In particular, for Kristeva, art, society, and consciousness are all constructed upon the symbol of the Father as absolute authority.

Although she does not discuss art at any length in *About Chinese Women*, this meditative account of her 1974 trip to China does talk about how the symbol of the Father or unified male Self characterizes the thought patterns (in Lacanian terms, the symbolic practice) of

Western society. She traces this male back to the monotheism and the economic necessities of early Judaism and declares that the women's movement (and, more generally, Western thought) needs to become free of this unified, male Self.⁵ In the Russian Futurists, this Self takes the shape of the sun that is a threatening entity because it constricts the poet's life as a writer and social being. The sun is the agency of language that molds and limits the rhythmic physical and psychic life that the poet is trying to express in his writing. At the same time, this sun constitutes a "paternal law" and a "legislative seat," that is, a male entity that controls the individual's relations with others inside and outside of the family.

The symbol of the Father is indirectly present in Bellini's canvases in the apparently traditional madonna and child icon. Like many of the artistic and social structures of the period, Bellini's paintings seem to depict the woman as a narrowly limited, child-oriented figure, implicitly supportive of the man who is head of both her household and of society at large. For Kristeva, the Renaissance Humanist ideology that underlies many of this period's representations of mother and child in religious art makes a fetish of the mother in her strictly defined role within the family as a stable institution in a social hierarchy.

Central to Kristeva's understanding of art in the essays on the Futurists and Bellini is Jacques Lacan's interpretation of the Freudian unconscious. The unconscious shapes the formal elements of the artwork in such a way that it transforms the notion of the Self as a fixed, rational, male entity that is the product of Western civilization. What emerges from this transformation is a more corporeal, volatile Subject that is not male. In the Futurists, for instance, not only does this Subject oppose a male Self, but it takes on the form of a mother or virgin (p. 30). In fact, Kristeva shows that the structure underlying Khlebnikov's and Mayakovsky's poems can be understood as an alternation between two personae. The Subject (mother, virgin, or poet) attempts to express the movements of unconscious, instinctual life, and the male Self (paternal Sun, apparent poet) attempt to impose the fixity of language onto this life:

Khlebnikov takes another aspect of this solar contest: a mother, coming to the aid of her children in their flight against the sun. 'The otter's children' are squared off against three suns, one white, one purple, the other dark green. In 'God of the Virgins,' the protagonist is 'the daughter of the sun prince.' The poem 'Ka' calls forth the 'hairy-armed sun of Egypt.' All of Khlebnikov's pagan mythology is underlain with a contest against the sun supported by a feminine figure, all-powerful mother or forbidden virgin, gathering into one representative and thus substantifying all that which, with Mayakovsky, hammered in sonorous thrusts within and against the system of language—that is rhythm (pp. 29-30).

This discussion of Khlebnikov's and Mayakovsky's poetry offers an excellent example of the importance of the mother's role, a role which, as I will show, is an integral element to Kristeva's theory of literature.

The conflict between male Self and female Subject erupts once again for Kristeva in the formal structure of Bellini's canvases. The male entity is implicit in many paintings in the orthodox madonna and child icon, that is to say, in those formal elements that may be called "traditional representation." Other formal elements, however, oppose and deconstruct this icon: the madonna's face appears to care little for the male child close by, and surprisingly abstract modernist blocks of color are used for the human figures. For Kristeva, the elements that oppose and deconstruct possess a foreign, unorthodox character and express the painter's repressed pleasure. The distinction between a traditional, communicative male Self and an innovative, instinctual female Subject sounds dangerously close to jargon, and to sexist jargon at that, when summarized, but takes on a very concrete and carefully articulated meaning within the context of Kristeva's work. She uses this distinction to explain how art becomes a privileged mode of existence for the human being because it is in this mode that the artist no longer repeats Language (words in the case of the Russian Futurists, images in the case of Bellini) into which the cogito is again fixed; that is, the artist no longer imitates the traditional, orthodox patterns of Western thought. Instead he or she creates a new Language into which the long repressed life of the instincts is projected.

In what sense can Kristeva's theory of art as a Language that liberates the individual from repression, a theory that appears to be primarily psychological, be considered sociopolitical as well? How and to what extent could this theory help to provide a foundation for feminist criticism? Not many writers have discussed Kristeva's work in any detail, and even fewer have seriously considered the question of a political level in her theory. In his essay, "Materialist Literary Theory in France, 1965-1975," Claude Bouché describes her work, and that of the *Tel Quel* and *Change* writers in general, as an example of an approach to literature that is philosophically idealist.⁶ Summarizing a lengthy version of the same thesis that appeared six years earlier as the collaborative work of a group of Marxists,⁷ he separates Kristeva from writers who see literature as an attempt to effect change in specific social structures — from those, that is, who are materialist. Bouché is correct to locate Kristeva's approach outside of materialist theory if such theory is to be defined in this narrow sense. I would argue that if we broaden the definition to include other approaches — those that see literature in its more general connections to society and not to specific structures — Kristeva could not be described as an idealist or as a writer

with no particular interest in (let alone commitment to) social transformations. Philip Lewis' understanding of the connections between literature and society in Kristeva is broader than Bouché's. His review essay of Kristeva's *La Révolution du langage poétique* is a fine brief introduction to her work and recognizes the avant-garde's sociopolitical function for her. He brings discussion to a halt, however, soon after recognizing the complexity of her notion of the sociopolitical level of literature and implies that this level is insignificant.⁸

Kristeva's theory appears to be primarily psychological to the extent that it stresses literature's therapeutic effect on the individual writer or reader who experiences a release from repression. The theory is, however, sociopolitical as well to the extent that the individual experiences a break with male authority and an identification with a female Subject. This break, as it appears in her discussion of the Russian Futurists and of Bellini, to take just two examples, goes beyond a violation of the conventional rules for using language or painting as communication, as the vehicle for a one-dimensional signified or referent. The unconscious organization of the formal elements in art violates the notion of a male Self that functions as the core of Western Language and social structures. How does Kristeva explain the usual prevalence of this notion of the Self in Language? Why is it that the break with this Self takes the form of an identification with a female Subject?

The answers, as might be suspected in a Lacanian framework, can be found by studying the process of the child's mastery of language. In terms of the child's consciousness, learning to speak necessitates a wrenching separation from the Mother and from the physical and psychological well-being derived from an original connection to her. At the onset of speech, the girl or boy identifies with the Father as the seat of authority in personal and public life. Learning to speak means entering a kind of social contract that recognizes the male Self as the authority underlying language and social structures. It is logical that any radical break with communicative language will violate this notion of the Self so crucial to Western society. According to Kristeva, in breaking with language as society understands it, the writer rejects the contractual identifications with the Father and experiences a reunion with the Mother; this is a re-enactment, within literary language, of his or her existence before the mastery of language.

This emphasis upon reunion with the Mother in literature is an integral element in the elaboration of Kristeva's theory and is not, to my knowledge, present in Lacan. Kristeva establishes vital links between the work of art and the flow of unconscious experience that ultimately derives both physically and psychologically from the initial

union enjoyed with the Mother, as she shows in her analysis of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky. The existence of unconscious experience will be called into question by critics with a behaviorist frame of reference but the fact remains that Freud's monumental work and the work of those who, like Lacan, have followed in his path attest to its existence.

I would summarize Kristeva's theory of literature by saying that it is sociopolitical in the sense that it implicitly connects the literary text and society by emphasizing the notion of a unified Self that presides over each. She views the text as a process advancing dialectically in time through concrete linguistic structures. This dialectical process unfolds, as we have seen, as an alternation or opposition between the traditional, communicative language of a unified Self and the innovative, instinctual language of a volatile Subject. Because this process is at the same time an alternation between Male and Female, her theory contains a feminist element that cannot be ignored, despite its apparent indirection. From Kristeva's point of view, literature liberates an unconscious, instinctual life that human beings experience in their early stages in the attachment to the Mother. Woman couldn't be given a more positive role—she is recognized as the symbol of a more joyful, freer life for the aggressive and depressive people of the West. Kristeva's theory helps to provide a foundation for feminist criticism to the degree that it incorporates woman's experience into literature: the union between Mother and Child that is a fundamental aspect of the human situation, an aspect more often than not ignored by literary theorists and critics, even psychoanalytic ones.

Lacan's version of Freud is the bridge that enables Kristeva to connect the formal materials of the text to the society that is exterior to it. The delicate balance that she maintains between form and content, between linguistic and social structures, and the vital bridge that she uses to connect the two can be seen as one of the great strengths of her approach. This approach manages to avoid the pitfalls of the various formalisms that unfortunately continue in the tradition of the American New Criticism to make the study of literature seem a frivolous game of aesthetics, given the social hierarchies that threaten us as individuals. Her approach avoids as well the pitfalls of overly simplistic sociological theories that narrowly define the text as a documentary or as a reaction to economic factors. Kristeva begins by studying the linguistic level of the text, and then proceeds to levels that are psychoanalytic and political. Her theory is particularly useful in reevaluating those classic texts whose aesthetic character has already been emphasized but whose sociopolitical implications have been considered marginal, like those of Marcel Proust. Can Kristeva help us to rewrite literary history with a keener perception of the political issues

implicitly raised in that apparently apolitical text, *The Remembrance of Things Past*?

Proust's novel is traditionally read as a Symbolist work where the dominance of formal beauty makes it an appropriate aesthetic object for an elite upper class.⁹ Valéry Larbaud is among the first to see Proust as a Symbolist and it is his judgment—together with the early, convincing commentaries of Edmund Wilson and Joseph Frank—that begins a practice followed more recently by Proustians as different as Germaine Brée, Georges Poulet, Jean-Pierre Richard and René Girard, among others.¹⁰ I do not intend in a few pages to refute the consensus of so many careful readers, nor to offer a new interpretation of the complex and voluminous *Remembrance*. I do, however, want to show that a different view of Proust is coming into focus and that Kristeva's theory may well provide the framework for this view. Back in the sixties, Harry Levin is to my knowledge the only critic to point out that the traditional reading of Proust is a misreading that fails to see that the work possesses a sociopolitical dimension virtually absent in a Symbolist aesthetic.¹¹ It is only recently that Levin's break with the tradition has been taken up by Pierre Zima who, without indicating his awareness of this break, discusses how Proust raises broad social questions concerning the distribution of power in early twentieth century French society.¹²

A variety of factors appear to blur the distinction between Symbolist narrator and Proust (his text as a whole) and may prevent many readers from perceiving *The Remembrance's* sociological dimension. One factor is the *apparently* teleological structure of the novel: the final epiphany which the narrator experiences after his foot slips on the uneven paving stones (III, 899) seems to fuse the disparate moments of his consciousness into an identifiable Self. This fusion offers the model of a kind of atemporal literature based upon recollection. On the surface at least, the novel's structure is not unlike that of the Symbolist work that the narrator believes to be safe from the "contingencies of time" (III, 925). The writer reveals a glimpse of the psyche in the formal structure of such a work. From this point of view, the sequence of events as they occur in the narrative is unimportant. Episodes are related to each other regardless of their order and the entire work is read as if it were simultaneously present in the mind of the interpreter, as if it possessed a "spatial" structure. Certain critical habits are also instrumental in emphasizing the static quality in the *Remembrance* that leads the reader to confuse the Symbolist narrator and Proust. Having read *Time Regained*, we interpret the work, like the ecstatic narrator reliving his past, as a coherent structure in which the discontinuous experience of consciousness is bound together by means of ar-

tistic procedures. The critical habits to which I am referring are those of the American New Criticism which tends to consider the literary work as a formal object that does not refer to or signify anything outside of its own structure.

Serge Doubrovsky's fine psychoanalytic study of Proust in 1974 lays the foundation for the Kristevan reading that will, I believe, uncover the sociopolitical implications of *The Remembrance*.¹³ Doubrovsky's work is significant in that it offers the first extensive study of the unconscious level of Proust's novel that neither reduces the work to a document of the writer as he exists outside of the formal structure of this text, nor analyzes the unconscious as a static complex that reveals itself in a series of repetitive patterns. He uncovers the role of the bedtime and madeleine scenes in Proust's painful quest for fulfillment in writing, a quest that necessitates a rejection of the normal resolution of the Oedipal conflict. In the bedtime scene, the normal resolution appears as the narrator usurps the Father's role and unites with the Mother (persuades her to stay near him for the entire night) in an attempt to satisfy the lack of physical and psychological well-being originally created at birth. The madeleine scene, out of which the narrator's entire writing career eventually emerges, presents a later stage of the Oedipal conflict and a rejection of its normal resolution. In this scene, he rejects the earlier union and attempts to play the Mother's role; that is to say, he consumes the madeleine (the cake whose rounded shape, name, and nurturing function are maternal in this context) and goes on to try to create an independent existence in his writing. For Doubrovsky, (and I am, of course, greatly simplifying in order to give a brief summary), Proust's quest is not the triumphant, joyful, atemporal revelation of a unified Self described by his narrator, but rather a series of partial successes that leads to the awareness that such Selfhood is not real.¹⁴ In fact, Doubrovsky shows how the narrator creates a fantasy out of the experience of the lack of Self. This fantasy takes the form of an identification with the Female that moves, to take a few of Doubrovsky's examples of its distinct phases, from Mother (pp. 38-62) to Aunt Léonie (pp. 73-94) to grandmother (p. 42) to Albertine (pp. 134-135).

Although he never considers the sociopolitical implications of Proust at any length, Doubrovsky's approach to the *Remembrance* in a sense executes the initial stages of Kristeva's theory. He analyzes Proust's attempt to liberate himself from a repressive unified Self: the preference for the maternal name *Marcel* over the paternal *Proust* (p. 130) mirrors the liberation he seeks in identifying with a variety of Female Subjects and in rejecting the Male Self formerly assumed in the bedtime scene. By completing the next stage in Kristeva's theory, that

is, by studying the sociological significance of what appears to be aesthetic and psychological (the sociological significance of the narrator's identifications with his Mother, grandmother, Aunt Léonie, Albertine and even Françoise), I find that Proust's work offers not only an implicit criticism of Symbolism, but also of the exploitation of women in the *beau monde*. Rather than strengthening woman's marginal position as salon entertainment—a position that Odette occupies for the Verdurins, for example—Proust reveals the inhumanity of the politics that places her there. He elevates woman by associating her with the artistic process, as Doubrovsky's analysis of the series of female identifications shows. This process or series would seem to be opposed to the narrator's Symbolist theory and to the functioning of salon society in general. Both Symbolist theory and salon use women as objects of exchange to support a unified, male authority figure—the Symbolist's Self in the case of the narrator, the aristocracy or haute bourgeoisie (the Guermantes or Verdurins) in the case of the salon.¹⁵ Several passages, such as the following, indicate the role of women as exchange objects in the narrator's conception of art:

A work, even one that is directly autobiographical, is at the very least put together out of several intercalated episodes in the life of the author—earlier episodes which have inspired the work and later ones which resemble it just as much, the later loves being traced after the pattern of the earlier. For the woman whom we have loved most in our life we are not so faithful as we are to ourself, and sooner or later we forget her in order—since this is one of the characteristics of that self—to be able to begin to love again. At most our faculty of loving has received from this woman whom we so loved a particular stamp, which will cause us to be faithful to her even in our infidelity. We shall need, with the woman who succeeds her, those same morning walks or the same practice of taking her home every evening or giving her a hundred times too much money (III, 945-946).

The authority figure makes its presence felt in the male writer's exploitation of the women he has loved in order to write and in order to enjoy subsequent women. As the stuff of writing and the source of future pleasure, the woman is dehumanized, reduced to an image to be traced, a set of habits to be repeated, an economic dependent to be patronized.

This passage can be seen as a kind of microcosm of the *Remembrance*: it alludes to the bedtime and madeleine scenes ("several intercalated episodes in the life of the author—earlier episodes which have inspired the work and later ones which resemble it just as much"). As in this passage, in the bedtime episode, the woman becomes the victim, the child becomes the adult male whose pleasure necessitates the suppression of her will: ". . . this return to humane conditions which

raised me to the dignity of a grown-up person, brought me of a sudden to a sort of puberty. . . . if I had just won a victory, it was over the . . . she would prefer to let me enjoy the soothing pleasure of her company . . ." (I, 41). In the madeleine scene, however, as in subsequent scenes where Proust identifies with female figures, no such victimization of the woman occurs. Although the narrator remains unaware of it, in the process of drinking the tea and eating the cake, he assumes a female role. His pleasure does not suppress that of the other person but rather leads to the birth of his childhood memories and eventually of his book: ". . . a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses . . . this new sensation having had in me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence" (I, 48). In the context of the *Remembrance*, viewed as a series of identifications with female figures like the Mother of this quotation, the original passage on women and literature can be read ironically as an implicit critique of both Symbolism and the *beau monde*.

Given that for Kristeva the unconscious frees itself from the authority represented in linguistic and social norms and projects itself into a feminine role in the novel, her theory offers a startling parallel to Proust's attempts to break with the structures of Symbolism and of salon society. A consideration of this theory in reassessing Proust (a reassessment already begun by Levin, Zima and, particularly, Doubrovsky), promises to move the *Remembrance* forward, away from the "temps perdu" of the Symbolists and closer to the present time of the feminists. Far from being the artist isolated in his ivory tower, Proust is much more accurately described, in light of Kristeva, as one who periodically enters his cork-linked room in order to criticize the salon society of which he remains a member.

NOTES

1. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon Roudiez, ed. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers referring to Kristeva are from this work.
2. *About Chinese Women*, Trans. Anita Barrows (London: Marion Boyars, 1977).
3. "Language" in this special sense will be capitalized throughout my essay.
4. Gayatri Spivak discusses these interconnections without referring to Kristeva in "Feminism and Critical Theory." *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 1 (1978), 241-246.
5. *About Chinese Women*, p. 18.
6. Claude Bouché, "Materialist Literary Theory in France, 1965-1975," *Praxis*, 5 (1981), 4.
7. "Les pratiques artistiques dans le marxisme-léninisme (I. Deux révisions, deux idéalisés)," *Cinéthique*, 11-12 (1971), 38-59.
8. Philip E. Lewis, "Revolutionary Semiotics," *Diacritics*, Fall 1974, 31.

9. *The Remembrance of Things Past*, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1981). All references are to this edition.
10. Harry Levin discusses Larbaud's reading in *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); see Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (New York: Scribner's 1931), p. 132 and Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), pp. 19-25. See also my "Proust and Psychoanalytic Criticism," Diss. SUNY, Binghamton 1979, ch. 11.
11. *The Gates of Horn*, p. 373.
12. Pierre Zima, *Pour une sociologie du texte littéraire* (Paris: Union Générale d'Édition, 1978).
13. Serge Doubrovsky, *La place de la madeleine: écriture et fantasme chez Proust* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1974). Page numbers are from this edition.
14. See also Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Little, Brown, and Co.: Boston, Toronto, 1976).
15. I discuss this point in a different context in a review essay on Kristeva to appear in an issue of *Boundary 2* in 1984, "The Politics of Desire in Julia Kristeva."