

## WRITING AS RESISTANCE:

### ALICE JARDINE'S *AT THE RISK OF THINKING*<sup>1</sup>

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Alice Jardine's new book, *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva*, is an impressive example of life writing emerging from feminist literary criticism and theory of the 1970's when she first discovers Kristeva's work. The volume's insight into a major cultural critic and novelist of our time confirms one's sense of the importance of both author and subject. The most valuable contribution in my reading of this biography as well as the primary problem it poses derives from the dyad psyche/society.

Jardine's precise description and analysis of Kristeva's corpus includes her theories, fiction and interviews. *At the Risk of Thinking* points out the ways in which they are relevant to today's questions of power and ethics. Given the menace to creative thinking along with the erosion of women's reproductive rights in the drive toward totalitarian government fueled by the marketplace in the U.S. and beyond, this intellectual biography reveals how developments in writing on feminism and psychoanalysis can resist the impasses threatening us.

While retaining its special characteristics, the book represents a particular group of writers in the anglophone literary world of that period. Some might see 1970-90's writing by and about women as marginal and essentialist. The work in fact has important ramifications for human rights across the board, including those relating not only to sexual orientation but also to ethnicity and class.

The critique of psychoanalytic readings—that they fail to recognize the historical and material grounding of literary texts and/or are essentialist—is sometimes legitimate. Such readings may also at times neglect the imperialist leanings of contemporary societies including liberal ones in their turn from Marxist-inflected approaches (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 33). These

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<sup>1</sup>Review of Alice Jardine, *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva*, ed. Mari Ruti (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 400pp.

critiques of Neo-Freudian approaches, which indicate potential problems in this intellectual biography, are ultimately not valid in my examination of Jardine and other literary critics whose work derives in important ways from the second wave of feminist thought. While “1970’s feminism” sometimes refers to a reductive identity politics, which can neglect women of color and other constituencies such as women who are in themselves sexist, the term also and more precisely indicates the productive turn of women writers in the anglophone world to French feminist authors and their engagement with Freud. This was in fact the historical period when Kristeva herself, influenced by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Emile Benveniste, Philippe Sollers and André Green, as Jardine indicates, turned from linguistics, the discipline in which her graduate degrees are based, to psychoanalysis. Important examples in English are Juliet Mitchell’s work in England (*Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, 1974), Jane Gallop’s in the U.S. (*The Daughter’s Seduction*, 1982), and Toril Moi’s in Norway, England, and the U.S. (*Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 1985). Mitchell in particular indicates the contribution of the turn to Neo-Freudian theory in a clear and cogent way when she states that “psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one” (Mitchell 1975, xiii). Jardine’s work on Kristeva over the years and especially in this biography is one of the best examples.

Her book describes Kristeva’s thinking and indicates its relevance for issues of power and ethics, for instance, the analysis of the ways in which psychological formations and social behavior form parallel tracks which are linked and can lead to clearer thinking and more ethical action. Jardine inscribes her description and analysis of Kristeva’s life and writing in the context of the author’s own intellectual biography, providing the reader with a compelling experience that is relevant on a personal level, as is arguably the case for others who began exploring psychoanalysis and feminism in the 1970’s as I did.

Jardine’s discovery of Kristeva as a person and as a writer began on arrival at Columbia University as a graduate student in French assigned to become the research assistant of the French-Bulgarian. The revelation was “un coup de foudre”: she discovered a beautiful woman who was also a mother and brilliant thinker. Jardine draws on these origins in her biography as she provides insight into Kristeva’s major contributions to literature and cultural theory from 1970 to 2018, an astonishing accomplishment given that this includes over fifty much-cited books and many more articles and interviews. It is therefore not surprising that the biography of just over 300 pages devotes only a few pages to each book or person introduced in her primarily chronological account of Kristeva’s life and work. The volume introduces and manages to probe key themes in ways that are both personal and significant, having insight into the subject’s psyche and writing. The book is clear for informed readers with or without prior knowledge of her subject. To take one example, Jardine provides a visceral, personal understanding of Kristeva, probing her mind and heart on the topic of her son David. The biographer

offers as a significant revelation of both her own fascination with her subject and also the latter's relationship "the way Kristeva looked at David" (8). She also provides concrete details such as the fact that her subject insisted on sleeping on a mattress in his hospital room during one of his illnesses while writing her book on Hannah Arendt (253). At the same time, Jardine connects this relationship to Kristeva's turn to psychoanalysis and her theories on the maternal during the crucial decade of the 1970's when her son was born.

Jardine's "love at first sight" for her subject resonates with Kristeva's central relationship, her partnership with Philippe Sollers, who describes his discovery of her in the same terms (7). The link leads the reader to reflect on the problematic aspects of both the biographer's fascination with her subject and her thought as well as that of the famous couple for each other. The reader engages, for instance, in Jardine's analysis of 1) Kristeva's work on the dyad psyche/society, even as the biographer examines 2) the relationship with Sollers (115). Analyzing the latter, she states, "It is actually hard for me to imagine Julia Kristeva as anyone's wife, perhaps especially as Philippe Sollers' wife" (204). Here Jardine acknowledges that, from her perspective, Kristeva's marriage to Sollers raises questions as it does for the many feminists and journalists who, the biographer points out, often complain about and question it (5, 104). While the surface of the text concludes that the problem, for instance, of his shortchanging her in public is not an issue, the emotional language conveys to the reader that it is: "what is most stunning to me," "it is the only time I have ever felt" (115).

The examination of the dyad psyche/society in her subject's work appears throughout the biography, beginning early and developing momentum in the last third of the book. The fact that all phenomena come to us via consciousness is an important qualification to recognize before considering Jardine's discussion of the psychic and the social in Kristeva. Given personal experience and monumental scholarly research on the two, it is however credible to make a distinction between what constitutes a) the life of the psyche, what occurs primarily internally, within the mind and body, on the one hand, and b) the situations of social life, what transpires outside, including the cultural forces shaping the most intimate sense of one's agency.<sup>2</sup>

Jardine demonstrates this foundational component of her subject's thinking by introducing the dyad early on and connecting it to her partner. A principal reason for Kristeva's engagement with Philippe Sollers and the journal he edited, *Tel Quel*, as early as the 1960's was his commitment to bringing about social change via a molding of the mind through the arts (88, 93). Jardine shows how the French-Bulgarian's long-standing critical stance on both communist and capitalist economies, arising out of her youth in communist Bulgaria, informs her publications in *Tel Quel*, her relationship with Sollers, and the growing focus on time and memory in dealing

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<sup>2</sup>Emily Zakin (2011, 5) distinguishes psyche and society in this way in her fine article on "Psychoanalytic Feminism."

with society's failures. That is to say, she increasingly writes on the need to develop the sense of historical time enabling one to understand and act on the present with a full understanding of past events.

The link between psyche and society with emphasis on the impact of the first on the second appears cogently in Jardine's discussion of Kristeva's analysis of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Jardine points out that Kristeva emphasizes in 1994 the power of Eastern European intellectual writing in bringing about the general conviction that the Berlin Wall must come down (72, 327).

Later in the biography, Jardine returns to the central idea of the psyche's impact on the social in discussing her subject's monumental state doctoral thesis, part of which appears in English as *Revolution in Poetic Language* (138). Many readers refer to this volume's elaboration of the key concepts of the semiotic and the symbolic, which Jardine states is Kristeva's best-known theoretical legacy. Her assessment is correct in the sense that the theories of abjection and the maternal as elaborated within that of the semiotic have given rise to an astonishing number of fine analyses of literary and film texts in the U.S. (see my forthcoming *Kristeva in America* to be published by Palgrave). What is at least equally important in her doctoral thesis, as Jardine had pointed out as early as 1986, is the implied demonstration that Mallarmé's and Lautréamont's work indirectly launches a critique of the demagoguery that leads to the rise of fascism in Europe, a message that was not heeded (Jardine 1986). In other words, in my reading of Jardine on Kristeva, their poetry had the power to develop resistance to the totalitarian regimes of Stalin and Hitler and their anti-Semitism if readers had understood more clearly and acted in response to these poets.

In revisiting her 1986 analysis of *Revolution*, the biographer also qualifies and corrects her earlier reading of the semiotic, "gendered" as feminine. The revision is a good example of Jardine's achievement in presenting Kristeva's thought and the development of the understanding and reception to it over time. She points out that the category refers to the difficult separation from the mother's body in the process of developing language (138) more than to a feminine identity. The revision also reveals Jardine's at times problematic relationship to her subject's thinking on identity politics. I will return to this question and its implication in the linkage between psyche and society that is central in the biography.

The most extended and convincing elaboration of the dyad psyche/society appears especially in Kristeva's writing on Marcel Proust as Jardine explains in discussing *Time and Sense* (1994). Jardine recognizes the significance of its analysis of the social critique, especially of technological efficiency and spectacle as well as of its homophobia, in Proust's monumental novel. The volume's references to her subject's long engagement with Proust is especially insightful on this topic. *At the Risk of Thinking* demonstrates that at the heart of his aesthetic and political writing lies a psychic formation attaching him to the mother in ways that are specific, universal, and

socially relevant. While Kristeva does not discuss Serge Doubrovsky's work, his examination of *A la recherche du temps perdu* is an important precursor of her analysis of Proust to the extent that he demonstrates the links between the narrator's longings and his violation of the social contract, including the terms it sets out for sexuality. Written by a man and not normally understood as a feminist text, *La Place de la madeleine*, like Claude Richard's work on American literature, focuses on desire as a complex exploration of the maternal including a resistance to patriarchal values of reason and "objective truth."

Jardine points out that *A la recherche du temps perdu* has been her subject's life-long love and one of her most important inspirations, mentioning that it was the book always on her bedtable when she was twenty (220). Among the many informative notes making this biography function as a concise critical edition of her subject's work, the biographer documents the frequent analyses of Proust in Kristeva's work for over twenty years and especially between 1993 and 2013, including published lectures, radio and television interviews, and a doctoral seminar at the University of Paris 7 that I visited (352.63).

Returning to the linkage between psyche and society, Jardine concludes that Kristeva's analysis of *A la recherche du temps perdu* in *Time and Sense*, while focusing on a journey "away from our conscious mind toward our 'inner wealth'" is at the same time a critique of the developing society of the spectacle and technological efficiency, which Proust presciently represented back in 1913-27 (221). To the extent that French society, in its hegemonic fascination with the image and the pragmatic, posits one form of sexual orientation as the norm, the novel also targets more specifically homophobia. Jardine's brief analysis in the context of her biography as a whole conveys this, confirmed by a careful reading of his monumental novel—no easy feat, given that it may be the longest ever written.

*At the Risk of Thinking* leads one to consider the daunting problem of how one changes the world via a transformation of consciousness. Is it possible, particularly after the publication of this volume in 2020 when the corona virus is so easily able to bring about change, though we do not fully understand how? As stated previously, the biography reveals the relevance of Kristeva's thinking on the need for social change and its ramifications for human rights, including sexual orientation in its multiple forms, ethnicity, and social class. I refer especially to the curtailing of women's reproductive freedom. Jardine does not deal directly with this issue. She does, however, reveal facts Kristeva has brought to light and which are not widely known, a revelation that should raise and/or reinforce readers' consciousness of the violation of women's reproductive rights throughout the globe. The 2015 preface to *The Feminine and the Sacred* states: "today, 700 million women were forced to marry as children; every year 15 million fall victim to this practice" (233).

One of the best examples of the ways in which Kristeva's thought as represented in Jardine branches out to indict varieties of the violation of

freedom appears in the very definition of the idea. Liberty does not manifest itself exclusively or primarily in behavior in the world, choosing to engage profitably in the marketplace dominating our environment, though it is understood that virtually everyone must do so to some extent in order to make a living. Real freedom for Kristeva, as Jardine understands it, is an internal process, developing your particular talents, “making yourself strange” despite the marketplace’s indifference and/or devaluation of your singularity (263). In other words, developing your special characteristics as a thinking person is an exercise of liberty in the face of the increasing pressures to conform in an age of hyper connectivity and its often-simplified language. Another good instance of the relevance of Kristeva’s thinking on freedom appears in Jardine’s analysis of Proust’s novel as an indictment of French society’s increasing focus on the spectacle and technological efficiency, as I have discussed. Such social factors made the creativity of the homosexual as well as of anyone whose sexual orientation was not heterosexual so singular as to be rejected and/or significantly marginalized—a form of oppression still operative to some extent today.

I have pointed to evidence of the credibility of the impact of psychic transformation on social change, for instance, in Jardine’s references to Kristeva’s writing on the fall of the Berlin Wall as well as on the sociopolitical traces in Mallarmé’s and Lautréamont’s poetry. Yet, the dyad remains problematic. Kristeva has acknowledged the utopian character of the belief that shaping psychic formations via psychoanalytic readings is the best approach to molding social structures in the direction of greater freedom for all. Jardine includes her subject’s acknowledgment of the problem posed by her conviction in her book on Melanie Klein. Elaborating her concept of “reliance,” she speaks of the utopian vision of grounding behavior on the mother-infant bond: transformation “would require us to begin to value those who care for others in our society” (265).

In this context, Jardine’s revision of her earlier understanding of the semiotic as feminine (138) is at odds with her later statement (204) that, despite Kristeva’s aversion to identity politics, her ethical commitment to social change is based on a psychological formation that is a maternal practice. The biographer builds on Kelly Oliver’s understanding that it is only by recognizing the centrality of the metaphor of the feminine that one can appreciate the political efficacy of her work. Jardine also goes on to document the increasing focus on women writers in Kristeva’s publications, beginning with her essay on Georgia O’Keeffe in 1987, continuing in the late 1990’s, and culminating in her trilogy *Feminine Genius* (1999-2002/2003-2004). In other words, Jardine portrays her subject as both averse to identity-based politics and, to the degree that it is a maternal practice that will bring about social change, in favor of an identification with the feminine.

Nevertheless, despite inconsistencies in the analysis of Kristeva’s aversion to identity politics, I see credible documentation of the biographer’s insight into the belief that psychic formations mold social structures, especially in

her analysis of her writing on Proust. His fiction's emphasis on the imagination and its ruminations on time shape sexual orientation to the extent that his writing is also a critique of French culture's valorizing heterosexuality as the right one. It is thus reasonable to believe that making such an indictment public in one of the best-loved novels of the twentieth century influences the minds and hearts of its readers. While my methods as a literary and film critic are not primarily empirical and qualitative, the fact that a Google search of "Proust and sociology" yields over 500,000 results is nevertheless relevant.

Jardine's biography suggests that the theory of social transformation that her subject has elaborated mirrors Proust's novel as a representation of modern developments in fiction. *At the Risk of Thinking* records Roland Barthes' comment, as I interpret it, at Kristeva's defense of her state doctoral thesis that her *Revolution in Poetic Language* is an incisive theory of the novel in the twentieth century (140). In other words, her thought provides a theoretical, philosophical, and psychoanalytic foundation for contemporary fiction—a remark that appears puzzling given that the thesis examines primarily poetry not the novel. I believe Barthes made his statement, however, in reference to twentieth century fiction, bringing to light the relevance of her theory to developments in the novel. In that way, thinking has an impact on social situations and structures, influencing the behavior, for example, of creative writers, by making the theory underlying the modern novel public and open to the response of others. More generally, it seems that Barthes' comment on the theory underlying her study, given its elaboration of how psychic formations lead to social transformation, explores the question of literature's power in shaping not only poetry, fiction, and theatre, but also social structures, such as the government and religion.

My hypothesis is that Barthes' comment may have encouraged Kristeva's increasing attention to both the contemporary novel and to psychoanalysis during the 1970's and beyond. Here too, Jardine's biography is thought-provoking in drawing attention to the remark, to her subject's adoration and "deep affection" for her friend/mentor, as well as in analyzing her subject's turn to writing fiction (188-189, 213). Among literary genres, the novel is particularly well-suited to the eruption of the unconscious and to the communication of this emerging language to a broad audience more likely to pick up a novel than poetry or plays. Dreams, time shifting, and word play, for instance, often characterize its forms since the early twentieth century, especially in the modernist mode of Proust, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, and Kristeva herself. Turning to fiction during the critical 1970's when her son David was born, she drew more and more on Freud and frequently embeds the theme of separation from the mother, including matricide, in her novels.

Another significant question posed by the book is whether the universalizing tendencies of psychoanalysis, for instance, the focus on the mother's murder at the heart of the development of language and thought sufficiently consider material and historical conditions that distinguish human beings living in different countries and times. Jardine implicitly acknowledges this

problem and argues for an affirmative answer by probing the apparently contradictory language in Kristeva's theory of singular universalism. The theory pleads for the need to enforce basic human rights while encouraging the development of each person's special qualities as a thinking subject. Jardine also documents her subject's increasing advocacy in the ethical struggles of the early 21st century not only for women but also for many other groups including, for example, the disabled and those engaged in the pro-democracy uprisings during the Arab Spring of the early 2010's. This advocacy extends to knowledge production encompassing 1) new educational initiatives for a more inclusive history of world religions covering Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well as 2) marginalized authors/countries in the emerging field of Francophone Studies (249).

A final troubling issue emerges from the biography: has an imperialist tendency tainted psychoanalytic writing in English emerging from 1970-1990 feminist authors to the degree that it represents a turning away from Marxist/socialist thought? Jardine does not address this issue directly. She does discuss Kristeva's elaboration in her lecture/essay "To Dare Humanism" (2012) of a new feminist vision in which women would lead, revising an older form of humanism and ridding it of its imperialist component (282). In the context of Jardine's discussion of Kristeva's singular universalism and increasingly public engagement in human rights issues throughout the globe, I agree with the biographer that her version of psychoanalytic thought avoids imperialist leanings, at least for the most part.

I make this qualification in response to an important note in the biography, another example of the extensive documentation that is one of its valuable components. The reference is to Toril Moi's brief but substantive introduction to Kristeva's controversial interview along with Sollers and Marcelin Pleyne in the journal *Tel Quel*, "Why the United States?" As Jardine notes, Moi mentions a possible imposition of high French theory of the 1970's on the "void" of American culture, as was displayed earlier in Kristeva's and *Tel Quel*'s discussion of China (346.232). The introduction identifies an ethnocentric use of "Paris" and "France" to discuss Europe as well as condescension, at least for American readers, to examine a "non-verbal" culture in the U.S. While indicating a degree of imperialism in this language, Moi's introduction to Kristeva's article is a balanced reading, including both its problematic valorizing of France and condescending attitude toward the U.S., as well as its contribution in recognizing the textual/linguistic character of political and historical change in her work with *Tel Quel*.

Jardine's reference to Moi's introduction also leads the reader to consider the two different takes on Kristeva's earlier and less well-known article on the U.S., "From Ithaca to New York." While Jardine does refer to the important topics mentioned in Moi, the biographer characterizes it as "personal," "dreamy" and "naïve," while the introduction in *The Kristeva Reader* highlights its political importance, stating that it is "deeply involved in the burning issues of its day such as the Yom Kippur War and Watergate...[and]

presenting reflections on the growing women's movement...and the situation of intellectual women" (1986, 272). I am inclined to agree with the latter. It may be that the style of the earlier text, more like the personal language used in "Stabat Mater," may have led Jardine to read it as less compelling than it is.

Her attention to the form of her subject's writing on the whole, however, leads to thought-provoking insights, as in the account of the Sabina episode at the end of the book. Jardine's and Kristeva's statements explaining that the Bulgarian government's accusation that she served as a spy in the 1970's is false and a terrible defamation of her character are compelling. The complexity of the biography's portrait is admirable throughout and in dealing with the episode. Jardine documents her assessment with direct reference to the Sabina file. She also points out that if her subject had agreed to serve as a spy to protect herself, her family, and her friends, she would have said so, once the Berlin Wall came down. Jardine finds it "uncanny" that, when accused, Kristeva was writing on an author Bulgarian bureaucrats considered unfavorable to communism, Dostoyevsky, as was her former boyfriend, Tzvetan Stoyanov, when he was murdered in 1971, most probably by the Bulgarian Secret Service. While the accusation is most likely false, it seems to me possible and understandable that Kristeva was forced to let the Bulgarian government believe that she would serve as a spy for protection.

The context that Jardine provides throughout her biography conveys a woman as complex and brilliant as the writers she examines in her trilogy *Feminine Genius*, Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Colette. Kristeva understands the critical role of strategy in accomplishing one's goals and dealing with others. I see her extensive attention to religion and "the need to believe" – well-documented in the biography – for example, as such a strategy, given her avowed atheism and reference to the damage religions have wrecked over the centuries. In other words, Kristeva may well consider that in order to effectively deal with such problems as Catholicism's oppression of women and violent fundamentalism in evangelical Christians and Islamic jihadists, one must examine the psychological formations on which such behavior is based. Jardine also points to her subject's devout Orthodox Christian father who took his daughter to communion as another factor in her concentration on religion (35).

Jardine includes the discussion of the journalism of concealment written in Bulgarian in a fascinating analysis of the complex process the young graduate student experienced in her move to Paris. She was speaking and writing on difficult subjects in her second language and finding a way to remain in a city both welcoming and hostile to immigrants in 1965. Jardine points out that the dense, nearly incomprehensible character of her early publications may derive from the habit of obfuscation she was forced to adopt in her newspaper articles written under a communist regime in Bulgaria during the early 1960's. The biographer provides the example of the review her subject wrote of Albert Koen's *Roads and Stops* in 1962. Jardine takes up Miglena

Nikolchina's analysis that Kristeva's early theoretical writing, in its dense theoretical surface, is connected to her earlier writing in Bulgaria in which she had to conceal oppositional ideas in a cover of communist ideology (51, 71). My reading of the biography leads me to consider that she may have had to adopt a similar strategy in appearing to be an agent for the Bulgarian Secret Service.

*At the Risk of Thinking* is among the best of anglophone responses to her work marked by their roots in an important wave of feminist writing on psychoanalysis. Jardine's book has the reader engage with both the controversial reception to Kristeva's life and psychoanalytic writing over the years and the ways we might receive her today. A reading of the biography is fully capable of empowering a resistance to globalization and populist governments, dangerous developments in 2020 to say the least.

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