

JULIA KRISTEVA: PERSPECTIVES ON HER LIFE AND WORK

JE ME VOYAGE: MÉMOIRES (I TRAVEL MYSELF: MEMORIES). By *Julia Kristeva*, interviewed by *Samuel Dock*. Paris: Fayard, 2016, 316 pp.

AT THE RISK OF THINKING: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY OF JULIA KRISTEVA. By *Alice Jardine*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, xiv + 400 pp., \$95.00 hardcover, \$26.95 paperback.

Reviewing these two books, *Je me voyage: Mémoires*, by Julia Kristeva and Samuel Dock, and *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva* by Alice Jardine, presents a fascinating challenge for the reviewer. Both books are out of the ordinary conventions in their respective genres. One is an autobiographical dialogue between the psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva and a young psychoanalyst, Samuel Dock, who interviews her over several weeks. The other is an intellectual biography of Kristeva written by a former student and close friend, Alice Jardine. Taken separately and together, the two books elaborate, interlace, and reflect the different voices, layers, and directions of Kristeva's life and work. Kristeva is highlighted in both books as a person, as a psychoanalyst, and as a philosopher. The multifaceted identity the two books depict reflects Kristeva's view that one is not a unified ego but rather a "multiverse" of intertwining and multilayered aspects. In these two books, she is portrayed from a range of perspectives: through her own words, through the questions and comments of Dock, and through the eyes of Jardine.

To write an essay on these books is also an exercise in following a double polyphony and a multiverse. *Je me voyage* was published in 2016. An English translation followed in 2020, included in *The Library of Living Philosophers* (Volume 36, *The Philosophy of Julia Kristeva*). *Je me voyage* consists of conversations with Kristeva based on questions preceded by careful study and preparation by Dock. The interviews begin with biographical details and

then range over Kristeva's entire oeuvre as she thinks out loud and travels from recounting, to thinking, to rethinking, to reviewing, and to elaborating in the present tense on her life and ideas.

Jardine refers to *Je me voyage*, respecting Kristeva's version of biographical details. In Jardine's exploration, however, she includes her own understanding of some of the biographical influences on her subject's thinking and writing. Jardine began her interest in and her relationship with Kristeva when she was a graduate student at Columbia University in 1976. She studied with Kristeva and was her research assistant there. She went on to become a colleague and friend. In the writing of this intellectual biography, Jardine draws on her deep and extensive knowledge of Kristeva's work, as well as on her history, friendship, interviews with, and travels with Kristeva. Jardine explores and explicates the long intellectual journey of this thinker. Their collaboration continued into the writing of this biography. The book weaves together the intellectual development of her subject with the personal and relational trends of her life and work. Jardine's work echoes but does not imitate Kristeva's emphasis on polyphony and multiverse in Kristeva's life and work. Jardine refers to Kristeva's voluminous oeuvre, as well as to her own observations of her mentor and friend.

Kristeva as protagonist is viewed and thought about through different lenses in the two books. Of a different generation and without benefit of the shared history that Jardine has with Kristeva, Dock's curiosity and questions bring Kristeva to readers in compelling ways. The collaboration with Dock reinforces the contemporary significance of Kristeva's ideas. There might be a particular accessibility to younger readers, discovering Kristeva more recently, in the questions posed by Dock. Both books make it clear that she is always a woman, a thinker in evolution, making meaning of all that comes her way and that she lives. Both approaches take the reader deeply into the process of thinking and becoming that characterizes Kristeva. Kristeva herself describes and elucidates this becoming in conversation with Dock. Jardine develops her own intellectual understanding that elaborates the study of Kristeva's unique creativity.

In the two books there is emphasis on Kristeva's interest in people, in the human condition, that found deep roots in psychoanalysis. Speaking to Dock about her experience as a counselor of children in a summer camp of "young pioneers," Kristeva describes how she recognized and made herself receptive to the need of these young people to express themselves and be heard (Kristeva and Dock, p. 47). In a more generalized statement,

Jardine emphasizes “the importance of the intimate” for Kristeva (p. 9). Jardine describes how in all the intellectual pursuits of Kristeva there is a personal core. Whether in her experiences with children in the summer camp or interviewing women in China (Kristeva and Dock, pp. 76–78), Kristeva’s recognition of and interest in the inner life of people point to the home she found in psychoanalysis in the early 1970s.

EARLY YEARS IN BULGARIA AND BEGINNINGS IN PARIS

Both Kristeva/Dock and Jardine, in the exploration of Kristeva’s work and life trajectory, emphasize the development of a “contestatory intellectual” and “energetic pessimist.” Both books describe the origins of these attributes as they began in her childhood in Bulgaria. If the external world in which she grew up was repressive and limiting, the world of her home was rich in intellectual stimulation and love. Her parents dedicated themselves to the education of their daughters with a view to giving them more freedom, probably through eventual escape from the repressive society that was Bulgaria in the 1940s and 1950s. They provided opportunities to become fluent in other languages, especially French. Importantly, the home environment provided the foundations of critical thinking. Kristeva’s father’s refusal to join the Communist Party, and the atmosphere at home of quiet protest, set a deeply ingrained tone of critical thought and action. An avid student, Kristeva mastered Russian, English, and some German, and became essentially bilingual in French, thus creating opportunities for interviews and reviews in her first career, in journalism, which began when she was in high school.

Kristeva describes herself, and this is taken up by Jardine as well, as “swimming through life,” that is, not having a plan or direction. This way both of living and of being an intellectual well describes the trajectory of her life and thought. Having developed her intellect in studying the work of Eastern European thinkers (Roman Jakobson and Mikhail Bakhtin notably), being steeped in French language and literature, and having already worked as a journalist, Kristeva arrived in Paris late in 1965 on a scholarship sponsored by the French government for young French-speaking Eastern Europeans (Jardine, p. 60; Kristeva and Dock, pp. 53–54). Kristeva soon found a community of young intellectuals who welcomed her; they were hungry for the knowledge she brought, especially about these little known “Eastern” philosophers, and they were impressed with

the strength with which she could articulate her erudition and develop her own ideas. Kristeva has many times repeated the story of this beginning, and I will not go into detail here. Both books describe how she arrived in Paris with the equivalent of five dollars in her pocket and how, in part because of past accomplishments and connections, in part because of some luck, and certainly as a result of her fierce determination, Kristeva made her way into the intellectual and academic milieu of Paris in the 1960s. At the prompting of Dock, she recounts her early work in the seminar of Roland Barthes, in which she presented the ideas of “dialogisme” and “intertextualité,” which in April 1967 would be published in *Critique*. This was her pre-psychoanalytic period, a time in which she linked what she brought from Bulgaria to new ideas and concepts encountered in Paris. Barthes was drawn to her and to her work, and was adulatory in his commentary. Of her early work, he wrote in 1970 that “Julia Kristeva changes the order of things. Her work shakes up the small-minded nationalism of the French intelligentsia” (p. 477; all translations mine). Kristeva describes her integration into the theoretical discussion group of the journal *Tel Quel* in answer to Dock’s questions about the personalities within and around this group of intellectuals and her relationships with them. Kristeva vividly describes the characters and their discussions, debates that would begin in the journal’s office and extend into long social evenings over dinner and further conversation in the cafés and bistros of Saint Germain des Près. Famous people are described, as are the relations among them, friendships sometimes falling prey to intellectual or political disagreement, temporary or permanent. In recounting this history to Dock, Kristeva evokes the times and ideas vividly, seemingly with pleasure. Jardine, from a greater remove, but at the same time having known Kristeva well beginning ten years later, also writes about these early days in Paris. She notes Kristeva’s position as the observing and participating foreigner. “Intertwined with Kristeva’s observations of Paris and its different kinds of citizens,” she writes, “there quickly surfaced her second and more sustained primary narrative: her determined, even frenzied quest to find and be welcomed into what was for her at times a vaguely familiar but also a shockingly uninhibited intellectual community of pre-1968 Paris. In retrospect, it is an impressive narrative, and much has been made of Kristeva’s rapid succession of successful encounters with luminaries such as Lucien Goldmann, Louis Aragon, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and the young male upstarts of the journal *Tel Quel*—including her soon-to-be husband, Philippe Sollers” (p. 67).

In this early period of her intellectual development in Paris, Kristeva developed the work she had begun in Bulgaria around the ideas of Bakhtin and Jakobson. She indeed “changed the order of things,” as both she and Jardine describe in their different ways, through expanding, deepening, and never reaching an end point in her work, as she included those early linguistic and philosophical threads into her work in the present. In writing about the early work of Kristeva, in particular the article based on Kristeva’s doctoral thesis in the late 1960s on the early French novel *Little John of Saintré*, Jardine notes that “several of Kristeva’s main arguments in the article have remained at the heart of her work ever since, especially the idea that it is important to understand the history and ideology of whatever seems to be most transhistorical (or natural) at any given moment and place” (p. 117). This fundamental approach is exemplified in Kristeva’s approach to *étrangeté*.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE FEMININE

Kristeva (with some modesty) and Jardine highlight the enthusiastic welcome received by this young intellectual from the East. However, they are both also clear that it was not an entirely easy beginning. Kristeva’s enormous strengths, on display throughout both books, include her drive and her ability to make deep and complex meaning out of her experience, very much including difficult experience. Over the decades, her work has evolved from the more purely theoretical (though always holding personal meaning for her), with which she proved her intellectual mettle, to a multidisciplinary way of thinking embedded in both theory and experience. It seems that psychoanalysis, which she experienced first as a patient in the 1970s and then as a psychoanalyst herself, allowed Kristeva to navigate among different disciplines and various facets of the mind’s activity. This rich combination informs her clinical work, her understanding of disability, her psychoanalytic approach to the understanding of the importance of religion, and recently her concerns about the effect of the 2020 pandemic on the psyche and on society.¹

The complexity of Kristeva’s thinking is evident in her elaboration of the place of women in society. Kristeva is deeply a feminist. When it comes to changing the world, she regards feminism as one of the few “isms” that can provide leadership without rigidity; for her, humanism

¹See IPA Webinar, June 14, 2020.

can only be a feminism “that will only happen if feminism invites each woman to celebrate her singular creativity, her own specific genius, which can then be shared with others through new forms of social connection and revolt” (Jardine, p. 230). So, while expressing a lack of interest in organized groups and their tendency to become hierarchies modeled on repressive social constructs (Kristeva and Dock, pp. 90–91), she demonstrates in myriad ways her commitment to an original way of taking seriously women’s place in the world. Kristeva’s study of women in China (1974), her studies of women of genius (*Hannah Arendt* [1999], *Melanie Klein* [2000b], and *Colette* [2002]), her study of Teresa of Avila (2008), and the development of the concept of maternal reliance (Kristeva 2011) all exemplify Kristeva’s exploration of the plurality of the feminine, as being a sociopolitical commitment to women’s rights² and as a transformative biopsychical thinking modality beyond gender identifications and modifications. Throughout her work, Kristeva revisits and deconstructs the figures of the feminine (in painting, literature, philosophy, and, mostly, psychoanalysis) and redefines them from a biopsychosexual psychoanalytic perspective that emphasizes the foundational nature of a primary maternal oedipal reliance (Kristeva 1996).

ESTRANGEMENT

Throughout her work it is clear that Kristeva’s deep thinking interweaves with and even emanates from close and often painful personal experience. Starting with her family’s position in Sofia, and then in her experience of being a foreigner in many senses, Kristeva was led to deep work on the meaning of *étrangeté*, of being a foreigner, or stranger, including to oneself. Psychoanalysis has been the way of being able to know oneself according to Kristeva, and it became a foundation for thinking about everything else. “Personally, Freudian psychoanalysis brought me to the revelation of the advantages of estrangement and to develop them by other means: through sublimation, through writing. The journey continues” (Kristeva and Dock, p. 142).

²For example, see Kristeva’s speech at the 2021 Conference on Rafah Nashed, a Syrian psychoanalyst, “Rafah Nashed, Victim of Assad’s regime.” See also Kristeva’s Letter to Malala Yousafzai, written for the latter’s reception of the Simone de Beauvoir prize in 2013. Kristeva established this international prize in 2008 to promote women’s freedom when it is threatened. When she won the Hannah Arendt prize for her study of Arendt, she donated the prize money to an NGO that cares for Afghan women who self-immolate in order to escape forced marriage (Kristeva and Dock, p. 93).

Étrangeté, or foreignness, speaks to a perspective that is personal, individual and, in Kristeva's view, universal. Foreignness, or strangeness, describes a state from which to be always in a process of getting to know oneself, and of seeing others as different beings, with different psychic experience. Kristeva elaborates this idea in the individual context (with patients, for example), and in large contexts such as that of understanding religion, the historical, and the sociological. Looking back, Kristeva writes about how she values the outsider position she had as a newcomer in Paris that allowed her to observe and decipher people, ideas, and the society in which she was immersing herself (Kristeva and Dock, p. 118). Jardine writes that in the beginning of her time in Paris, in spite of all the success, Kristeva was lonely, missing her parents deeply. "She decided to live it, to move beyond it, because that kind of effort provided her with a kind of happiness" (p. 97). She remembers those first years in Paris as a time of going beyond herself, of experiencing exile as an exile of/from the self. "For Kristeva, there is no doubt that it was her life as a foreigner living within a foreign language that finally truly opened the door to the mysterious 'inside' of otherwise superficial, banal, syntax-produced communicative meaning, ultimately allowing a *resurrection* of meaning and self" (p. 137)

In *Je me voyage*, Kristeva vividly evokes the experience of being a stranger, even beyond those first years. Realizing, surprised, that she remains a foreigner in the eyes of others, she has continued to work with this realization. It permeates her appreciation of otherness as a psychoanalyst, and it connects to the humanism at the foundation of her deep appreciation for the experience of other cultures and of those who remain outside, like the inhabitants of the poor neighborhoods of the Paris *banlieues*. Kristeva has organized a program to work with adolescents who feel outcast and can therefore be drawn to the idea of belonging by a crisis of ideality.

In her work as a psychoanalytic thinker about the mind of the other, linking to *étrangeté*, and to this work with young people, Kristeva has elaborated the idea of ideality and the adolescent psyche. Referring to the lack of an ideal and drawing on André Green's concept of *déliasion*, delinking or disobjectalization, Kristeva approaches the problem of radicalization as a "malady of ideality." Expanding from this vulnerable stage of human development, Kristeva theorizes the particularities of the psyche suffering from maladies of ideality and the attraction to absolute destructivism, as in

suicide bombers. She likens this further to the Kantian question of radical evil (Kristeva and Dock, pp. 223–224; Jardine, pp. 274–275).

Kristeva's curiosity about her father's religiosity extrapolated to examining the meanings of religion in history and culture, through a psychoanalytic understanding of the question of faith and fanaticism. Kristeva's years of deep work in this area led to her participation in an interreligious conference convened by Pope Benedict XVI held in Rome in 2011. Raising a "special needs" child, her beloved only child David, led to a pursuit of understanding of how disability and otherness, foreignness from another angle, is thought of and treated in society. This in turn led to the pursuit of serious change in care of the disabled through conversation and engagement with the French government (Kristeva and Dock, pp. 162–163). Kristeva earns her respect through the seriousness and depth of her thinking and through her tenacious commitment. Drive and thinking do not fail her in the most deeply personal challenges. In fact, all is deeply personal for Kristeva. That is a powerful example of engagement, of "contestatory intellectualism" that Jardine elaborates and that Kristeva describes without naming as she recounts her experience of living.

REVOLT AND HUMANISM

In Communist Bulgaria, being a member of the party or not defined who was insider and who was outsider. Not being a member deprived one of many privileges and made life dangerous; Kristeva's father did not join the party. Kristeva experienced being the outsider, with the indignities and deprivations—not being recognized for her scholastic accomplishments in the official sphere and being denied honors. Dock picks up on this past, asking, "Didn't you live a certain discreet dissidence? And, in a certain way, a form of foreignness?" (p. 50).

Kristeva's answer to this both elaborates the idea of foreignness and brings forth the subject of humanism, a theme that since her earliest beginnings has been central to her thought. Kristeva describes the deleterious effect of his dissidence on her father, and her awareness of her parents' anxiety, as well as the strength of their "revolt." However, Kristeva evokes as well the "communist humanism" that, although meant to be an "engineer of human souls," still could not prevent the burgeoning of original thoughts and ideas, and thus contributed to the formation of her thought (p. 50). Reflecting on the course of Kristeva's thinking about revolt, and her commitment to it, Jardine states, "she argues that those

who have been excluded from society—the unemployed or underemployed, the alienated youth of the suburbs, the homeless, foreigners and so on—cannot achieve happiness without revolt” (p. 225). This comment, on the role that Kristeva has played in recent decades, underlines how humanism and revolt developed and continue to develop as foundations of her thought. Humanism ties together the importance of thinking, expressed in language, coming from estrangement from ourselves and tying us at the same time to humanity. Thus Kristeva’s humanism naturally expands from the individual experience of being in the world to a psychoanalytic understanding of the human condition. It is this very understanding and elaboration of the unconscious, and the human experience of oneself and the other, that forms the complex basis of her writing on everything from clinical theory to literature, politics, religion, and ethics—essentially all of human experience as founded in what Kristeva calls “the poetics of the psychoanalytic” (Kristeva and Dock, p. 200). One of myriad examples is her book *Black Sun* (Kristeva 1987). A study of depression, it draws on literature to illustrate the personally catastrophic state of depression and melancholia that Kristeva ties to the context of the larger social crisis. These ideas of the importance to the human psyche of the sociohistorical context are further elaborated in *New Maladies of the Soul* (Kristeva 1993). In this book, she takes up the ways in which modern society, with its social inequities and proliferation of social media aggravate the fragile psychic structure. This intertextuality of Kristeva’s mind and work is exemplified clinically in her work at the Hôpital Cochin with staff and with adolescents in difficulty who are heading toward violent radicalization (Kristeva and Dock, p. 214).

During these decades, Kristeva has developed more and more the interweaving of psychoanalysis and politics to address new maladies of the soul. As described in Jardine’s book, since the 1990s “Kristeva became more explicit about her longtime sense that psychoanalytic listening is a form of resistance against totalitarian tendencies in all of us. . . . it offers a bulwark against the banalization of the ordinary and commodification of everything” (p. 246).

NEW PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPTS: SIGNIFIANCE, ABJECTION, AND RELIANCE

Since beginning her own personal analysis in 1970, humanism is inextricably linked to the foundation of Kristeva’s work in psychoanalysis and

psychoanalytic thinking (Kristeva and Dock, p. 88). It is in this context that Kristeva develops her concepts of abjection and reliance. Her multi-versal way of thinking has led to her psychoanalytic identity, which Kristeva described in a recent podcast as “Kristevian Freud” (*France Culture: Chemins de la Philosophie*, February 26, 2021). Closer to Freud, in his biological approach, than to Lacan, whom she knew personally, she argues that human psychic experience goes beyond the verbal. She has developed her theory of the importance of semiotics, rooted in the body, in the prelinguistic, sensorial experience of oneself and the other (Kristeva and Dock, pp. 144, 180).

When ideas and concepts have reached beyond existing words for them, Kristeva has created neologisms. “Signifiante” combines the ideas of semiotic, what is nonsymbolic in sounds, movements, and rhythms, in a baby’s glossolalies, for example, and what can be symbolized in language (Kristeva and Dock, p. 183). Kristeva recounts to Dock how the theoretical discussions in the group *Tel Quel* led her to thinking about “transference in analysis in light of Hegelian dialectic, and to introduce the notion of heterogeneity of the drive. For Hegel “the force” only acts “from the back of the concept,” whereas for Freud, the sexual instinct is from the beginning heterogeneous between the body energy and the sense made (in language) (Kristeva and Dock, pp. 185–186).

The concept of abjection began as Kristeva was trying to understand the mind of Louis-Ferdinand Céline. How to think about Céline, brilliant writer and anti-Semite that he was? Kristeva was trying to understand this on her analyst’s couch, comparing an excerpt from one of Céline’s books, and at the time describing the extreme experiences of early motherhood, “its joys and its miseries.” Kristeva was struck by the word *abjection*, which she had just heard from a patient. Her analyst offered, “Isn’t that what you are experiencing?” Both Kristeva (Kristeva and Dock, pp. 186–187) and Jardine (pp. 194–197) describe her ideas of abjection as they were developed in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Kristeva 1980). Jardine describes the book as “travels through Western religious and philosophical texts, continuing to a Freudian analysis of the mother-infant relationship, and linking to Borderline psychopathology” (Jardine, pp. 194–195).

Reliance, as defined by Kristeva (p. Kristeva and Dock, p. 139) is an experience incumbent on both genders, and is not to be confused with mothering. “It is at the heart of humanization. . . . It is about becoming conscious of the ambivalence of drives and passions: attachment and

aggression, love and hate, and to transform them into a bond, into the possibility of relying, speaking and thinking. Reliance operates against maternal domination, on the contrary, it operates to make separation possible, and the autonomy that makes new encounters possible” (p. 139). With reference to her own mother, quoted by Kristeva as using the oft-repeated motto, “I did not overprotect you; I gave you wings” (p. 280), Kristeva says to Dock, this is “the ‘mystery’ of maternal passion, which I later named *reliance*. To allow the newly arrived one, the ephemeral stranger, to acquire his own originality” (p. 280). Jardine explicates these ideas by describing how Kristeva traces models of reliance from the Greeks, through Christianity to its greatest crisis to date, the Holocaust. Jardine states that “Kristeva hopes that besides working to make the lives of mothers more possible with adequate childcare, parental leaves, decent educational systems, . . . feminist intellectuals will take the lead in rethinking maternity symbolically. This is important because she is convinced that there can be no freedom for women until there is a maternal ethics, a discourse and practice of reliance, . . . a *herethics* of reliance” (pp. 166–167).

Kristeva’s journey is long, wide, and deep. As both Kristeva and Jardine point out, her earliest interests, having to do with language, *étrangeté*, the self in the context of culture and history, have continued to develop throughout her lifetime. What has interested scholars, including Jardine and Dock, is the way in which all the themes from the beginning develop, elaborate, and endlessly intertwine, leading to further elaboration and deepening. To be reductionistic about the thinking of Kristeva would be to contradict the foundation of all her thought, its complex, polyphonic, and multiversal quality.

Je me voyage offers unique opportunities to get to know Julia Kristeva as she opens herself to the interviewer and reader with lively, thoughtful reminiscences. In the interviews one sees how she thinks constantly; the memories and ideas she recounts stay open to revision, elaboration, and deepening before our eyes. Through Jardine’s careful study and passionate interest, we see the development of a life’s œuvre more in reflection and explication. There will be many “definitive biographies” and intellectual studies of Kristeva over the next decades. However, what is special about these two works will endure. Written in her lifetime, one in her own words, with spontaneity and her own personal comments on her ideas and on her journey, the other so close to the person of Kristeva and devoted to her intellectual identity and contribution, they will retain a particular place in the literature that will amass in the years to come.

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