

## Figures of Negativity in Julia Kristeva from “Poetry and Negativity” to *Black Sun*

### Abstract

This paper traces the role negativity played in Kristeva’s writings from the 1960s to the 1980s, i.e. from early texts such as “Poetry and Negativity” through *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Polylogue* to *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun*. On the one hand, negativity allows for a reconstruction of Kristeva’s conceptual development from the early “structuralist” work to her psychoanalytic turn. The paper demonstrates in what way the theorization of negativity opened the way for a new form of engagement with psychoanalysis. On the other hand, negativity helps to recontextualize Kristeva’s conceptions within the broader horizon of her contemporary theoretical scene. Negativity helps to delineate her unique position in the latter vis-à-vis thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, etc., and simultaneously vis-à-vis the psychoanalytical work of Jacques Lacan, André Green, and others.

The paper also contains a philosophical stake. By rereading and reevaluating Kristeva’s take on negativity it shows in what sense Kristeva’s work poses an ontological question about negativity that is at the same time a question about the possible redefinition of matter.

### Keywords:

*Julia Kristeva, negativity, subjectivity, language, psychoanalysis, ontology*

Negativity has a special place in twentieth-century thought. The history of the discourse on negativity over that century may be seen as defining the development of philosophy and the human sciences. At the beginning of the century, and in the shadow of Hegel, a whole series of thinkers (among whom one should mention at least Frege, Bergson, Freud, and Rosenzweig) construed negativity as derivative and dependent on affirmation, even insisting that negation is a form of affirmation. The problem of negativity was seen as related to that

of the origin of negativity and, with Husserl and Heidegger, this origin was revealed to lie in the sphere of the pre-predicative. Even though the latter defended opposing views (Husserl claiming that negativity is secondary, Heidegger insisting that it is primary), both pointed to the fact that there are various forms of pre-predicative negation not easily subsumable under the strict logical notion of negation. From the 1920s and 1930s to the 1940s, the discourse on negativity passed under the influence of Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (but also Bachelard's *La Philosophie du non*); then, into the 1950s, it played an important part in the work of people like Bataille, Blanchot, Lacan, and Hyppolite. This brings us to the 1960s and the 1970s, the immediate context of Julia Kristeva's early work. During that time thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray, and Lyotard were directly or indirectly working on negativity in France (in the 1970s most would withdraw from this problematic). In Germany, Adorno opened up new perspectives on the problem, which were to be taken up by scholars like Wolfgang Iser and the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* group (it is worth noting that the 1975 volume of *Poetik und Hermeneutik* was titled "Positionen der Negativität"). The problematic persisted in the 1980s as well with Agamben's *Language and Death* (subtitled "The Place of Negativity") and Laurence Horn's *Natural History of Negation*.

In my paper I want to address the question about the place of negativity in Kristeva's work from the 1960s to the 1980s. And if I gave a brief sketch of the history of the discourse on negativity above, it is because I believe it will be productive to read Kristeva's work on negativity against this background even when it is not thematized as such. There are already fine analyses of Kristeva's understanding and use of negativity. In more recent years, Cecilia Sjöholm has offered an in-depth interpretation of this in her *Kristeva and the Political* (2005), and Sina Kramer has dedicated a text to negativity in Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Kramer 2013). I will try to trace the development of Kristeva's notion of negativity and show its stakes.

My starting point will be not *Revolution in Poetic Language* but an earlier text, "Poésie et négativité," written in 1968 and included in *Semeiotiké* (Kristeva 1969, 246–77). This text plays a part in building the intricate conceptual network that is at the basis of Kristeva's early literary theory, and it should be read and discussed together with the other texts in the volume, with the argument about production as opposed to circulation

in the study of literature, with the analysis of the engendering of the formula, and so on. The same can be said of each of the books I will be discussing. However, in the limited space of the present essay I will not go in this direction. In the reading I will propose I will focus predominantly on the theme of negativity and therefore will oversimplify the general theoretical framework. After “Poetry and Negativity,” I will study the place of negation and negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Polylogue*, and finally I will focus on *Black Sun*. These four moments (or rather three plus *n*) of the genealogy of negativity in Kristeva’s thought provide a clear and yet somewhat neglected thread for the depiction of the philosophical role of negativity in her work, one that can help simultaneously associate it with the more general context indicated above and differentiate it from other theoretical takes on negativity.

## Poetic Speech and Negation

In “Poésie et négativité,” Kristeva first defines the general function of negation at the basis of all symbolic activities, and then proceeds to show what is specific in the case of poetic language. Poetic language is understood as one signifying practice among many. It is defined in contrast to non-poetic discourse, and this distinction, as the reference to Roman Jakobson at the very beginning of the text suggests, is an inheritance of Russian Formalism, a heritage she develops and displaces.

Following Hegel, Kristeva sees negation as defining difference and hence sees differentiation as based on negation (Kristeva 1969, 248). This allows her to link the logical operation of negation to any symbolic activity and to reread Saussure’s famous statement that in language there is nothing but differences as referring to a structural type of negation (Kristeva 1969, 248). However, at this point she goes back to Parmenides and Plato and focuses on the peculiar status of the negated in the very way that logic is constituted. Simply put, logic depends on the identity of the terms it uses but this identity is conceivable only against the background of what it excludes, the nonidentical, and so the nonidentical, for example, what is neither true nor false, is included only in the form of being negated. This is what makes everyday speech possible. This is how everyday speech operates. Paradoxically, what is negated by the speaking subject turns out to constitute the “origin” of the

subject's speech, as what is excluded from it (Kristeva 1969, 249). Kristeva lists death, fiction, madness, and other factors as marked by the index of nonexistence. The logical operation attempts to tame negation through notions such as Hegel's *Aufhebung*. In terms of the symbolic functioning of signifying practices, this means that negation, which constitutes discourse, bans the negated from discourse (Kristeva 1969, 250).

Among other things this means, first, that negation is primary before it becomes secondary (simultaneously suspending and maintaining the distinction between primary and secondary); and, second, that "primary" negation operates according to different logical laws or laws different than those of logic (as it makes logic itself possible). The operation of "primary" negation is, strictly speaking, translogical (Kristeva 1969, 267). This entails a *doubling of negativity*. On the one hand, there will be negation in the form of the judgment: "This is not that." This negation is internal to judgment and, in this sense, tamed and secondary. There is, however, as becomes clear, another negativity that makes possible and escapes the logic of judgment. Kristeva describes this type of negativity as ambivalent, indeterminate (Kristeva 1969, 252, 267), and heterogeneous. This translogical negativity manifests itself in poetic language.

The most telling examples of translogical negativity at the heart of poetic language are that the things spoken are at the same time concrete and general; and that fictional beings have no being, they simultaneously are and are not (Kristeva 1969, 252, 254). Kristeva calls the gathering of the two incompatible terms of a negation "non-synthetic union" (Kristeva 1969, 254).

Non-synthetic union frees the poetic signified and opens it to traversal by different codes, making it possible for the poetic text to absorb many texts at the same time. Kristeva famously defines the absorption of many texts and many codes into a single text as intertextuality and paragrammaticality. She lists three types of paragrammatic negation. The first is total negation, where the meaning of the foreign text is reversed and denied (Kristeva 1969, 256). The second is symmetric negation, where one of the texts gives a new and different meaning to another, even though they share the same general logic (Kristeva 1969, 256). Finally, there is partial negation where only part of the referenced text is denied (Kristeva 1969, 257). In all these cases a paragrammatic reading of the two texts is necessary, a reading that unites them without producing a synthesis.

In particular, the two logical or mathematical laws challenged by or ineffective in the signifying function of poetic language are the law of the excluded middle (every proposition must be either true or false, and there is no middle ground) and the distributive law (multiplying a number by the sum of a group of numbers is the same as doing each multiplication separately). However, the ambivalence of poetic negativity means that even these two laws are not simply negated. They are accepted and negated at the same time. Which is tantamount to saying that poetic language both follows logic and implicitly negates it (Kristeva 1969, 264). (Kristeva tries to formalize this movement between logical and nonlogical as an orthocomplementary structure [see Kristeva 1969, 265ff].)

It must be noted that the text does not end at this point. If its first two parts were focused on the (trans)logical status of poetic language as seen in different literary works, the final part, dedicated to paragrammatic space, focuses on the place of the subject. Drawing mainly on Hegel, Freud, and Lacan, Kristeva describes the speaking subject as constituted according to the laws of logic, and therefore through the negation internal to judgment. If this is the case, then ambivalent translogical negativity should be viewed as a general negativity in which the subject dissolves in order for a non-subject to come to the fore (Kristeva 1969, 273). The non-subject is not related to the circulation of constituted meaning but to the actual production of meaning. In this sense, it indicates a point prior to the text that survives its production and continues to operate within the produced text to keep engendering meaning. (This turn of literary study from circulation – which is to say, communication – to production was quite important for the young Kristeva and may be said to constitute one of the starting points of her theory.)<sup>1</sup>

However, at the stage of “Poésie et négativité,” attention to the subject whose constitution and deconstitution are linked in general negativity is not a separate theme; it is subordinated to research on poetic language, not reducible to something in the unconscious but studied as a signifying practice (Kristeva 1969, 274). The movement of negativity reveals how this practice negates both speech and the result of this negation (Kristeva 1969, 276).

<sup>1</sup> Kristeva’s 1968 text “La Sémiotique – science critique et/ou critique de la science” is particularly important in this respect (see Kristeva 1969, 27–42).

I want to stress here, before moving to *Revolution in Poetic Language*, that general negativity understood in this way always entails the negation of the negation. However, not only is there no resulting sublation of the Hegelian type, but also the very definition of negation becomes problematic. General negativity implies many forms of negation.

## Negativity as a Material Process

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva develops the above main points but also introduces many new elements and shifts the stress. She devotes the second part of the book to the notion of negativity (Kristeva 1984, 107–50), thus making the discussion of negativity a stepping stone for her whole theory.

If in the early work negation was discussed exclusively in relation to signifying practices, here it is seen “as the *very movement of heterogeneous matter*” (Kristeva 1984, 113; emphasis in original) on which signifying practices are based. The “*production of the symbolic function*” is seen as the result, as “the *specific* formation of material contradictions within matter itself” (Kristeva 1984, 119; emphasis in original). This implies that matter itself neither can nor should be thought separately from negativity and heterogeneity (a materialist line of thinking that is not without relation to the work of Georges Bataille, but which also resonates with the way in which Aristotle associated matter and *steresis* or privation). Negativity is what links the real and the symbolic, “reinvents the real, and re-symbolizes it” (Kristeva 1984, 155). This process (and negativity is the process itself, this is in fact the starting point of the chapter) was partially described in “Poésie et négativité” as that of primary negation, where it was associated with the becoming of the subject. Here the point is developed further and with much greater psychoanalytic precision.

Negativity produces a “subject in process/on trial” (*un sujet en procès*) (Kristeva 1984, 111). This subject’s material side is the biological, bodily space where scissions, separations, and divisions occur as “a biological operation” (Kristeva 1984, 123) introducing the possibility of the symbolic function. This argument is in line with the idea developed in “Poésie et négativité” that negation introduces the differentiation necessary for any symbolic activity. In the earlier

text, there was the implication that some part of this operation passed into the literary text, making it constitutively ambivalent and incessantly productive. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, the part that is irreducible to the symbolic function, the primary negation that keeps coming back in one form or another, along with the surplus negativity related to it (that is, the negativity that cannot be subjected to the power of logical judgment or be reduced to logical negation), are conceived in biological and social terms. The biological space of the operation of scission is that of the drives and of bodily pulsations. The social element is defined in terms of social struggles and social contradictions. “*The sole function of our use of the term ‘negativity’ is to designate the process that exceeds the signifying subject, binding him to the laws of objective struggles in nature and society*” (Kristeva 1984, 119; emphasis in original). As the term “struggle” (*lutte*) makes clear, negativity is thought of as *force* (see Kristeva 1984, 114–16) and this force, whether biological or social, is conceived as a material process.

This interpretation of negativity may at first glance seem like an attempt to ground negativity objectively in biology or society, either suggesting a classical Marxist account or the biologization and naturalization of the symbolic. However, it is in fact a radical rethinking of negativity that instills a groundlessness in both society and biology. Negativity is not only pre-predicative in Husserl’s sense; it is also a presubjective movement of matter, a material process. The force of negativity is the force of heterogeneous matter.

If this is in fact the case, then the very concept of negativity becomes problematic as it would imply the negation of heterogeneity. Yet, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, not only does Kristeva take up her earlier distinction between radical, exterior, heterogeneous negativity and negativity subjected to the interior of judgment (Kristeva 1984, 114–16), not only does she again stress that negation leads to a “fading’ of negation” (Kristeva 1984, 125); but, even more importantly, at a certain point she practically stops using the word, instead using “expenditure” (*dépense*) and “rejection” (*rejet*) as more apt to specify the material contradictions engendering the semiotic (in contradistinction to the symbolic) function (see Kristeva 1984, 117ff). Expenditure (which is another element tying Kristeva’s understanding of negativity to Bataille’s) is defined by the way it poses an object as separated from the body and “fixes it in place as *absent*, as a *sign*” (Kristeva 1984, 123). Thus, expenditure always has to do with what is rejected; and expulsion “constitutes the real object as

such” (Kristeva 1984, 148), as both absent and signifiable.<sup>2</sup> She associates rejection understood in this way with the anal phase (Kristeva 1984, 150–51). However, as I have already pointed out, this would not mean that negativity has its ground in a biologically determined place in the body; rather, negativity introduces heterogeneity at the level of the body, opening the way for the subject in process/on trial, dislocating and complicating any origin it might have had. It is in this sense that one can read Kristeva’s quite Derridean claim that “[r]ejection rejects origin” (Kristeva 1984, 147). Not only is there no ground for negativity (as negativity makes both ground and positing possible) but it cannot even be said that negativity is primary or originary, as its operation rejects any origin. “To posit rejection as fundamental and inherent in every thesis does not mean that we posit it as origin. Rejection rejects origin since it is always already the repetition of an impulse that is itself a rejection” (Kristeva 1984, 147).

In this way, the materialist rethinking of negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language* implies a rethinking of materiality itself. As the driving force of biological and social struggles, it makes possible the very distinction between the biological and the social that it calls into question, just as it does that of the subjective and the objective. Even this does not make it less elusive. Above all, Kristeva’s non-thetical negativity always differentiates itself, negates itself. And this is precisely why it is never vanquished and keeps producing its mark on the signifying matter (Kristeva 1984, 163).

Before moving forward, I would like to point out that the pages on negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language* also trace a kind of genealogy of thinking on negativity. She discusses Frege, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Feuerbach, Marx, Lacan, and Derrida, but for her theory Hegel and Freud are the most important.<sup>3</sup> What I want to stress is that these discussions, readings, and misreadings – which, unfortunately, I cannot analyze in depth here – contextualize Kristeva’s own work.

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva introduces “rejection” (*rejet*) as a translation of Freud’s *Verwerfung*; in the English translation, Freud’s *Ausstosung* is rendered as “expulsion.” This move is in direct polemic with Lacan’s influential rendering of *Verwerfung* as foreclosure (*forclusion*). I cannot develop this here.

<sup>3</sup> Within the limits of this essay, I cannot develop the question of the relation between Kristeva’s understanding of negativity and Jacques Lacan’s work on negation. It is noteworthy, however, that Kristeva probably started attending Lacan’s seminar in 1966–67, when Lacan returned to the problem of negation, distinguishing four different types (see Lacan 2023, 68–73). I have not been able to verify that Kristeva actually attended these sessions, but it is highly probable that she did. (See Kristeva 2016 [translated in Beardsworth 2020]; and Jardine 2020, 63, 86.) If this was indeed the case, it would shed a different light on her discussions of Lacan’s theory.



This self-contextualization is telling in various ways. Saussure and the structuralist legacy play less of a role. The level at which the question of negativity is posed has changed. In 1974, it is more and more tightly tied to a psychoanalytic and – even more surprisingly – an ontological problematic.

*Polylogue* contains most of the tendencies in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. This is hardly surprising as most of the essays on negativity included in *Polylogue* (above all “Le sujet en procès” [1973]; but also “Comment parler à la littérature” [1971], on Barthes; “L’Expérience et la pratique” [1973], on Bataille; etc.) were integrated in some form in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. They were originally published individually, for various occasions, then, edited and rewritten, became part of the 1974 book, only to be later included in the 1977 *Polylogue*. Their displaced temporality testifies to Kristeva’s own processual character.

If I find it necessary to turn to *Polylogue* it is because it stresses even more clearly the role of negativity in the constitution of the subject, on the one hand, and of heteronomy, on the other. Negativity is productive and at the same time inscribed in its product. This inscription means that the product is not static but dynamic; it means that in the product the force of negativity is still active and operative. The product will thus have at least two sides, one of which will keep transforming it, multiplying the figures of negation. The term “product” includes not only an author’s literary production but also – and most of all – the subject. Negativity affirms the position of the subject (Kristeva 1977, 68). This is why Kristeva speaks of affirmative negativity (Kristeva 1977, 63; Kristeva 1984, 113). However, its affirmation is a movement of force, of materially inscribed force that dissolves what it produces (and Kristeva also speaks of productive dissolution). In this way the subject as product becomes a unary subject and, since it is simultaneously an incessant process, it constantly subverts its own unity (Kristeva 1977, 65). Negativity poses heteronomy (Kristeva 1977, 64). This heterogenizing process is what makes each subject singular. By positing heteronomy, negativity makes itself unavoidably heteronomous – it doubles itself, opening the path for the genealogy of the logical negation in judgment, a negation that is stopped or absorbed, and yet always escapes the logical trap of identity. Negativity is without identity. The doubling of negativity implies that negativity is its own doubling (therefore at least triple once there is doubling). Its doubling

is therefore also a multiplication – it becomes other than itself, it is this becoming other than itself. Hence the stress on a “multiplicity of rejections” (Kristeva 1977, 58; my translation) in which even the name of negativity is put in question.

## Negativity and the Psyche

In the years after *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Polylogue* Kristeva focuses more and more on the problematic of the subject and fully develops her own psychoanalytic theory. This has an effect on her discussion of negativity.

In the opening pages of *Powers of Horror*, published in 1980, she writes: “Put another way, it means that there are lives not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*. They are clearly distinguishable from those understood as neurotic or psychotic, articulated by *negation* and its modalities, *transgression*, *denial*, and *repudiation*. Their dynamics challenges the theory of the unconscious, seeing that the latter is dependent upon a dialectic of negativity” (Kristeva 1982, 6–7). In this passage there is a multiplication of the figures of negativity: exclusion, negation (*sic!* negation itself is but a form of negativity), transgression, denial (here a rendering of Freud’s *Verneinung*; in other places the word translates Freud’s *Verleugnung*, or disavowal) and repudiation (or rejection, that is, a translation of Freud’s *Verwerfung* – this is the rejection discussed in *Revolutions in Poetic Language*) – all are figures of negativity, some of which participate in what Kristeva calls the “dialectic of negativity” constitutive of the unconscious. In order to understand the psyche, one needs to understand negativity and its dialectic even prior to the unconscious. What is more, the different terms are not all equal as some of the figures of negativity are modalities of others (transgression, denial, and repudiation are modalities of negation). Additionally, there is an “exclusion” that, though a figure of negativity, does not operate according to the dialectic of negativity, and other “articulations of negativity” have “become inoperative” (Kristeva 1982, 7). As is well known this exclusion in *Powers of Horror* is abjection, which does not allow a secure differentiation between subject and object. What happens to the dialectic of negativity in the case of abjection? Is abjection a negation of dialectics? If the latter were the

case, then it would have been included in the dialectic it negates. Is it not, then, rather a stopping of the dialectical machine, the negativity of a dialectic at a standstill?<sup>4</sup>

As the word “dialectic” makes it clear, negation and its modalities are conceived on the basis of the Hegelian model discussed in “Poésie et négativité” and *Revolution in Poetic Language*. And here again Kristeva moves beyond the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. However, this does not involve an attempt to save Hegel from the teleology of his system (see Kristeva 1984, 113), but leads rather to the openly non-Hegelian model of negativity found in abjection.

In *Powers of Horror* all figures of negativity, whether dialectical or not, are discussed within a psychoanalytical framework. Several years later, in *Black Sun* (1987), there is the same focus on the operation of negativity in the psyche and the same stress on the multiple forms of negativity. There Kristeva writes: “I deem negativity to be coextensive with the speaking being’s psychic activity. Its various dispositions, such as *negation*, *denial*, and *repudiation* (which can produce or modify repression, resistance, defense, or censorship), distinct as one might be from another, influence and condition one another” (Kristeva 1992, 45–46). This is in line with everything Kristeva has said on negativity since “Poésie et négativité,” but it is worth noting that the attention here is exclusively on psychic activity.

In the quoted passage “negation” translates Freud’s *Verneinung* while “denial” is saved for *Verleugnung*. This could be read as a non-systematic use of terms in Kristeva. However, it is much more probable that this is a strategic move, one that keeps the elusive nature of negativity visible in the very instability of the terms that name it. This strategy would run parallel to Kristeva’s ongoing redefinition and broadening of terms. For example, in *Black Sun*, she generalizes the meaning of denial, or *Verleugnung*, to mean “the rejection of the signifier as well as semiotic representatives of drives and affects” (Kristeva 1992, 44), which is much broader than Freud’s definition, and this broadening of the term is something she insists on. This would mean that there is *a constant renegotiation between the different forms of negativity, there being no supreme form*. In fact, it could be argued that this is the ground on which one of the main arguments

<sup>4</sup> I cannot pursue here a comparison between Walter Benjamin or Theodor W. Adorno and Julia Kristeva. On Benjamin and Kristeva, see Bullock 1995; Caputi 2000; and Yoanna Neykova’s essay in this volume.

in *Black Sun* is developed: “Signs are arbitrary because language starts with a *negation* (*Verneinung*) of loss, along with the depression occasioned by mourning. [...] Depressed persons, on the contrary, *disavow the negation*: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss” (Kristeva 1992, 43–44). The classic understanding of the sign as killing the thing – found in Hegel, Mallarmé, and Blanchot – is here psychoanalytically complicated by a dynamic of negativity, one in which negativity changes its nature and its *modus operandi* from one moment to the next. Loss, which, as a form of privation, is already a figure of negativity, is negated, and this gives birth to language (or to signifying practices, as the early Kristeva would say) only to be later disavowed. And the disavowal of negation is immediately described in a manner that gives two additional modalities of disavowal, namely, canceling out and suspension, making the disavowal double. And so on. The resemblance of this process, loss-negation-disavowal, to the Hegelian dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis is telling, but also misleading, as it should not be understood in the Hegelian framework but, rather, the role of negation and the negation of negation in Hegel’s system should be rethought in terms of the multiplication of negativity in its self-heterogenizing operation.

Despite the coherent way in which Kristeva develops her understanding of negativity (to the point of practically rejecting the word since it serves as a unifying unit), there is one important difference between books like *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun* and her earlier work.<sup>5</sup> I have already hinted at this. The focus in the 1980s is exclusively on the psyche. Negativity is coextensive with psychic activity and discussed as such. One could put it like this: where Kristeva’s early writings offered a theory of the subject in order to develop a theory of the poetic text, *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun* used the analysis of poetic texts to develop a theory of the subject. And in between, there are the radical texts of the 1970s in which both poetic works and the subject are referred to the movement of matter. Such a view is too simplistic. Did Kristeva move in the direction of a psychologization of negativity?

<sup>5</sup> For a general discussion of the relation between the different stages of Kristeva’s work on psychoanalysis, see Beardsworth 2004.

## No One

She did not. No psychologization of negativity is possible if the question concerns the way that the constitution of the psyche is dependent upon negativity.

Yet there has been an easily discernible shift of accent. If I were to summarize it in four points, I would say that the accent shifts (1) from poetic language to the constitution of the subject; (2) from production and productivity to the organization of the psyche; (3) from the zero subject through the subject in process/on trial to the birth of the object; (4) from linguistics and logic to psychology.

Seen as the development of a single theory of negativity, however, the shift of accent reveals matters in a different light. The genealogy of negativity and all forms of negation in the subject shows that *the genesis of negation is the very genesis of the subject*. In the way that Kristeva poses the question of negativity, she is closer to Husserl and phenomenology (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, etc.) than she seems to suggest. However, she moves beyond Husserl once she refuses to ground negation in an already constituted subject. Negativity is constitutive, productive, affirmative, determinative. Negativity determines but is not determined in advance; it is not predetermined. (Let it be said in passing that this makes all twentieth-century criticism of negativity, from Bergson to Deleuze, look naïve and simplistic.) I will come back to this.

If negativity does not have its ground in the subject except as a subjected, reduced form of negation, if it does not have a ground at all, as Kristeva demonstrates in the final analysis, then the discussion of negativity is an ontological discussion. *Kristeva ontologizes the question of negativity*. Paradoxically, in this sense, she is perhaps closer to the thinker she most severely misrepresents and misunderstands, in the chapter on negativity in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, than to anyone else. And this thinker is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger writes: “No matter how much or in how many ways negation, expressed or implied, permeates all thought, it is by no means the sole authoritative witness of the manifestness of the nothing belonging essentially to Dasein. For negation cannot claim to be either the sole or the leading kind of nihilative comportment in which Dasein remains shaken by the nihilation of the nothing. *Unyielding antagonism* and *stinging rebuke* have a more abysmal source than the measured [logical] negation of thought. *Galling failure* and *merciless prohibition* require

some deeper answer. *Bitter privation* is more burdensome. These possibilities of nihilative comportment – forces in which Dasein bears its thrownness without mastering it – are not types of mere [logical] negation” (Heidegger 1998: 92–93; emphasis added). Unyielding antagonism, rebuke, failure, prohibition, and privation are all forms of negation that cannot be reduced to logical negation. The critique of logicism, which Heidegger and Kristeva share, does not invalidate logic but rather circumscribes it in a problematization over which it has no control. Two other things that the thinkers seem to share are more fundamental. Negation is initially multiple. And this multiplicity is due to the fact that negativity is not ontologically predetermined.

I will leave a possible comparative analysis of Kristeva and Heidegger aside in order to point out the main ontological aspects of negativity in Kristeva.

*Negativity is not one.* Perhaps there should not even be a general term to name all figures of negativity except as a retroactive logical operation. Part of Kristeva’s strategy would be the constant introduction of new names, paired with the instability of the given names.

*Negativity is initially doubled.* It is doubled as exterior negativity and negation interior to judgment; exterior negativity can itself be further divided into rejection and expenditure, etc. And rejection in itself is already multiple.

At every step, *the doubling of negativity is multiplication.* Being both two and the difference between the two, negativity is always multiple. Thus, either before or beyond rejection, there is exclusion, abjection, denial, negation, disavowal, and so on and so forth.

The different forms of negation are not without relation to each other. *The figures of negativity negate each other.* And this signifies different things according to the prevalent form of negation.

Among other things, this means that *negativity is immanent.*

But immanent to what? Not just the poetic work, and not just the subject. Negativity is immanent to matter. *Matter is negative. The negativity of matter takes the form of heteronomy and heterogeneity.*

If the ontological aspects of negativity are taken into account, one notices that the shift of accent performed by books like *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun* is not a psychologization of negativity, but an ontologization of the subject. The subject is traversed by heterogeneous matter, the matter of its own body, the matter of natural and social struggles. In the light of what was said, however, this should not be

understood as meaning that there is a determinate social or natural state of affairs that univocally defines the constitution and the problems of the subject. The biological and the sociological are themselves ontologized through the paradoxical notion of negativity as open to what cannot be predetermined. Disavowal, rejection, abjection, and so on, are forms of the ontological singularization of the subject operated by the dynamics of negativity.

The ontological question of negativity is, therefore, a question about the possible redefinition of matter. Matter is here not some substance; however contradictory it may sound, it is not something material in the classical sense. Matter is a dynamic of force movements of negativity. And as negativity is not predetermined and is always other than itself (Kristeva points this out in her discussion of Hegel's concept of force [Kristeva 1984: 114-16]), matter is always heteronomous and heterogeneous. There is no one matter. Just as there is no one negativity, and because this is the case, there is heteronomy and the production of differences, the difference between biological.

It is in this perspective that one should read the final point to which the trajectory of Kristeva's theory of negativity has led her. Negativity is what links Being and the psyche, it is the ontological side of the subject and that is the subject's non-predetermined singularity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This reading of course leaves many questions open. If negativity is affirmative and productive, how can one differentiate it from positing? There should be something in affirmation that is not affirmative but would negativity itself then be affirmative? The question can be generalized. Does negativity act? Is it active? Kristeva's reference to Hegel seems to suggest that she thinks that this is the case. However, as soon as negativity is grasped as an act, it turns into something positive. It should be that which in the act is other than the act. A *potentia*, a *dynamis*. But then, there will be no operation, no work of the negative. Another question left suspended above concerns the relation between singularity and negativity. This question seems all the more interesting when one realizes that it may explain the relative withdrawal of the theme of negativity in Kristeva since the 1990s, along with her growing attentiveness to the problem of singularity, the stress she puts on Duns Scotus, and so on. I leave these and many other questions open.

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