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The Subject Who Says "I Suffer": The Semiotic in the State of Singularity[1]

Abstract

The aim of this text is to explore how Kristeva deals with the question of unity and singularity in her early work, particularly in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. In particular, the conceptual pair of the semiotic and the symbolic, which is commonly subject to schematic evaluation, is confronted: the symbolic is a unifying element in discourse, whereas the semiotic is a pluralizing or destructive force, and the latter is favored by Kristeva over the former. I will argue, however, that the above-mentioned characteristics do not exhaust this pair of concepts. I will read *Revolution in Poetic Language* alongside Georges Bataille's texts, where he deals with the notions of heterogeneity, homogeneity, and experience, and I will try to highlight the intersections with Kristeva's work. I will also take into account Kristeva's own reading of Bataille. I turn to Kristeva's 1972 "Bataille, Experience and Practice" to emphasize important aspects of her work, where unity is clearly privileged. I focus on the moment when the dissolution of unity results not in the emergence of a plurality (of the text) but of a singular experience, for which she finds inspiration in Bataille, and which becomes an important theme in her later work.

Keywords

the semiotic, heterogeneity, experience, unity, singularity

For [Lacan] the real is a hole, a void, but I think that in number of experiences with which psychoanalysis is concerned—most notably, the narcissistic structure, the experience of melancholia or of catastrophic suffering, and so on—the appearance of the real is not necessarily a void. [...] Thus perhaps the notion of the semiotic allows us to speak of the real without simply saying it's an emptiness or a blank; it allows us to try to further elaborate it. (Kristeva 1996, 23)

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Seen from our present perspective, and in light of the continuing evolution of her work, Julia Kristeva is above all a thinker of change. Her interest in the topic of revolt places her among contemporary thinkers for whom questions of change, transformation, and the emergence of unpredictable events are central – although each thinker approaches these questions from a unique perspective. The questions themselves, however, were already central to the works of the "previous generation," called poststructuralism or postmodernism. Contemporary thinkers of change are drawn to this way of thinking, yet they also take a critical distance, especially to notions of symbolic order, text, and *écriture*; or, more precisely, to the pretension that these notions are limitless.

An explicit critical distance can also be observed in Kristeva's late work, after the shift from "revolution" to "revolt," after the move from the linguistic paradigm to psychoanalysis. Elements of the late Kristeva's "critique of postmodernism" can be found, for example, when she speaks of the "invasion of hyperproductivity, all-pervasive spectacle" (Kristeva 2010, 42), characterized by a nullification of subjects, the colonization of the psyche, and the consequent subjugation of anything that could be called an event, i.e. the passion (and perhaps also suffering) of a living body. In this context, Kristeva explores the possibilities of a resistance that would confront this "virtual sweep" (Kristeva 2010, 279). Another, more focused example is her dismissal of "abstract deconstruction", which remains confined to the textual realm and compensates for its lack of contact with lived experience with empty political commitments (Kristeva 1996, 24). Kristeva's strong emphasis on the dimension of the subject and the need to "reintroduce" it as a stable element into automated complexes is evident here. Yet this subject is always corporeal, as Kristeva's project is tied to the singular material speaking bodies that are her patients.

It must be asked if Kristeva's early work (the period of "revolution") is not a bit of an accomplice of the kind of thinking that she later criticizes. There is no doubt that her notions of intertextuality, semanalysis, the subject in process/on trial, and polyphony (especially in their American reception) played a crucial role in shaping the poststructuralist or postmodern line of thought. One could even consider them as wholly representative of a thinking based on the principle of endless textual or discursive play, of uninterrupted movement and multiplicity without limit. These core concepts of

Kristeva's early work draw their force from the critique of the unitary Cartesian conception of the subject, or the conscious and intentional transcendental ego, to which they seek to offer an alternative. But the *dissolution of the subject* is the main keyword of this alternative. In the end, it can, from a certain perspective, be seen as the principal outcome of *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

The problems associated with feminist critiques of the Cartesian subject are very accurately summarized by Kolozova: "in accordance with the rules governing the poststructuralist and postmodern philosophy, any contention in favor of (any sort of) unity of the subject must be summarily dismissed as metaphysical or reactionary. This discourse [...] remains reluctant to explore possible instances and configurations of unity, which is emphatically not a unity of differences, but of oneness and singularity" (Kolozova 2014, 19).

These questions of oneness and singularity can also be made to confront Kristeva's early work, especially the conception of the semiotic and the symbolic in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. This is because the symbolic is a unifying element in discourse, while the semiotic is a pluralizing or destructive force. Kristeva favors the latter over the former. I will attempt to show, however, that the above-mentioned characteristics do not exhaust this pair of concepts, and therefore Kristeva's "linguistic" period cannot be simply considered a variant of the repression of the unity of the subject, with all its political and philosophical consequences. To accomplish this, I will turn to a significant source of inspiration for Kristeva, one whose influence tends to be less thematized. I will read *Revolution in Poetic Language* alongside Georges Bataille's texts, particularly those in which he discusses the key conceptual pair of heterogeneity and homogeneity, while simultaneously taking into account Kristeva's own reading of Bataille.[2] Kristeva's 1972 text "Bataille, Experience and Practice" deals primarily with Bataille's literary work, but does not lose sight of his theoretical writing. It reveals aspects of Kristeva's conception of language that would perhaps be lost among the other topics addressed in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. These aspects of Kristeva's theory that are close to some variant of the thinking of oneness and singularity. Consequently, it is possible to argue that the move away

[2] The influence of Bataille on Kristeva's notion of the abject, which has been thoroughly discussed by others elsewhere, will not be my object here.

from the paradigm of the text is not exclusively tied to the shift "from revolution to revolt," but has its origins in the 1970s.

The heterogeneous semiotic and the homogeneous symbolic

In "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," Bataille defines two segments of society, the homogeneous part and the heterogeneous part. The homogeneous part appears as the one commonly practiced. On the other hand, the heterogeneous part appears as completely other, because its elements are not easily assimilable (socially, scientifically and, of course, linguistically, which is highly relevant in the context of Kristeva), especially because it produces a strong affective reaction. The distinction between these two spheres is comparable to that between the symbolic and the semiotic: "Homogeneous reality presents itself with the abstract and neutral aspect of strictly defined and identified objects [...]. Heterogeneous reality is that of a force or shock. It presents itself as a charge, as a value, passing from one object to another" (Bataille 1979, 70). Kristeva builds on this fundamental division, accepts its implications, and further develops it in relation to language. The heterogeneous "force" is understood as a quantity of energy which moves through the body (Kristeva 1984, 25) and constitutes the realm of the semiotic. The part that would consist of clearly defined objects is the symbolic, explained by means of the Lacanian mirror stage. (Kristeva 1984, 49). The analogy between the semiotic and heterogeneity, and between the symbolic and homogeneity, is also suggested by other characteristics. Homogeneity is characterized by productivity and utility. It arises by establishing a relationship of identity between elements, thus reducing their complexity. It seeks to reduce that part of every object that escapes identity or utility. It defends against what is violent or not subject to rules (Bataille 1979, 64). The latter is related to the heterogeneous part, which is composed of everything excluded by this (intellectual) reduction. Bataille likens the moment of the separation of heterogeneity and homogeneity to the dissociation of the unconscious from consciousness. His aim is not to prove that the heterogeneous can be identified with the unconscious.[3]

[3] However, Bataille acknowledges that the unconscious is one aspect of the heterogeneous (Bataille 1979, 68).

Rather, he uses this reference to emphasize that heterogeneity resists the operation of homogeneity, that is, the reduction associated with intellectual knowledge (science, theory): "The difficulties opposing the revelation of unconscious forms of existence are of the same order as those opposing the knowledge of heterogeneous forms" (Bataille 1979, 68). Heterogeneity thus poses a certain epistemological problem: the main difference between heterogeneity and homogeneity lies in the possibility of knowledge. However, according to Bataille, heterogeneity cannot be positively defined even within the discourse of psychoanalysis, although psychoanalysis comes much closer than other discourses, meaning anthropology and Durkheimian sociology above all, as their apparatus permits the exclusively negative definition of heterogeneity as that which is non-homogeneous (Bataille 1979, 69). This is also true of psychoanalysis and its "incursions occasionally made into the *heterogeneous* realm" (Bataille 1979, 68; emphasis in original), which, however, are not "sufficiently coordinated to yield even the simple revelation of its positive and clearly separate existence" (Bataille 1979, 68). Yet, unlike anthropology and sociology, psychoanalysis can explore heterogeneous phenomena beyond their religious forms and "finally reaches directly to eroticism, genitalia and *excreta*" (Bataille 2018, 35). *La psychanalyse* clarifies this statement. Bataille welcomes the basic contribution of psychoanalysis, but its possibility of defining heterogeneity positively is limited by Freud's subordination of the distinction between conscious and unconscious to the practical end of treatment. (Bataille 1948, 320). For the early Kristeva herself, the discourse of psychoanalysis seems insufficient to examine the semiotic. Despite its strong influence on her terminology, psychoanalysis is brought to its limit by the action of the semiotic (Kristeva 1984, 15) precisely because psychoanalysis is a practice constructed for a particular purpose (Kristeva 1984, 236). Bataille and Kristeva share a similar position in this respect.

A positive definition of heterogeneity is possible, however, even though the existing methods of science have failed in the task. In his text on fascism, Bataille speaks of the "knowledge of the *non-explainable difference*" (Bataille 1979, 68; emphasis in original). Elsewhere, he assigns this task to his own conception of science, which he calls heterology, defining it as "the knowledge of what appears as *completely other*" (Bataille 2018, 36; emphasis in original). "Knowledge" is an important term here, although it is certainly not

knowledge in the conventional sense. Bataille seeks to investigate heterogeneous elements in their specificity, not being content with defining them as what is completely other (to what is homogeneous and directly accessible). Such a definition would inevitably close off all knowledge and relegate the very notion of the heterogeneous to the realm of the unknowable and unreachable. Bataille also speaks of an "implicit knowledge of a heterogeneous value [which] permits a vague but positive character to be communicated to its description" (Bataille 1979, 69). This implicit knowledge appears in moments of encounter with elements appearing as completely other.[4] These moments fall within ordinary (in the sense of commonly occurring) human experience, which needs to be radicalized, scientifically elaborated and coordinated in order to become explicit and precise. Implicit knowledge also creates a connection to Kristeva's semiotic chora. In Plato's *Timaeus*, where the term originates, the *chora* is "grasped by a kind of bastard reasoning [...] when we take [the *chora*] into account we come to suffer from dreamlike illusions" (Plato 2008, 45). In the implicit knowledge that underlies Bataille's heterology, the heterogeneous is known as things are known in the unconscious.

The possibility of a positive definition of heterogeneity is also of interest to Kristeva. That is why she introduces the semiotic, a notion that can provide such a definition. Kristeva's theory of language portrays heterogeneous drives and energies as neither elements unrelated to language nor as elements that are simply translatable into language. The ultimate consequence would be the same: heterogeneity of drives would be portrayed as nonexistent, as untheorizable. In the first case, the reason is obvious. In the second, some explanation is needed, which Kristeva provides later, referring to Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, which, she argues, implicitly concludes that "[t]he drive is a myth [...] because we do not have access to it except through language. It is therefore useless to talk about drives; we should be content to talk about language" (Kristeva 2000, 43). The distinction between the *chora* and the semiotic plays an important role here. The *chora* can provide only a vague positive definition. This is because it can be localized either before coordination by the symbolic or after, when the symbolic is destroyed or ruptured by the affective force of

[4] Bataille gives a long list of such elements, which includes, among other elements, the waste products of the human body, unconscious processes, but also groups and individuals who refuse the rule of homogeneous society (impoverished classes, poets, madmen, etc.) (Bataille 1979, 69).

a heterogeneous element. The semiotic, by contrast (under certain conditions that I will discuss later), can provide a precise positive definition because it has a position in the symbolic; it is an entity coordinated by the symbolic thesis. However, this is not a situation in which the semiotic (plurality) overtakes the symbolic (identity).

The importance of the thetic moment

The possibility of defining the heterogeneous sphere positively seems to depend on the position of the subject. A purely symbolic position (a position in which the semiotic is repressed), identifiable with linguistic or conceptual knowledge, is insufficient for this task. From this position, heterogeneity is only perceivable as something prior to symbolic homogeneity, as untheorizable (or only theorizable as what it is not). Therefore the semiotic must not be repressed. But it is not enough to maintain that "we need both the semiotic and the symbolic." This is partly true, because the combination of these two modalities, according to Kristeva, produces different types of discourse. However, positive knowledge of heterogeneity is a very specific constellation of the two components, and differs significantly from other discourses formed by "mixing" the semiotic and the symbolic. The main features of this specific constellation emerge in the context of Kristeva's reading of Bataille.

Kristeva begins with a critique of "negativism," for which Bataille is a counterpoint. Negativism is a practice in art and literature that focuses on the dissolution, displacement or rupture of monological units, and is associated with the fetishization of the fragmented body, of language, i.e. the fetishization of what Kristeva herself calls the text. Kristeva identifies these tendencies as merely the "reverse side" of what such practices fight against. In fact, both employ repression, and thus stand side by side. In the case of monological units (characterized by rendering heterogeneity as completely other, and thus unthinkable), plurality is repressed. Negativism represses or neglects unity. They thus repeat the same gesture, the (im)possibility of accessing heterogeneity, and as a result one practice becomes the accomplice of the other (Kristeva 1995, 238).

Certainly, this practice is also found in avant-garde texts. One could even say that this gesture is, with a few exceptions, their most defining

characteristic. Kristeva identifies Bataille as one of these exceptions: "Within the perspective of avant-garde literary adventure, Bataille is perhaps the only one, with Joyce, not to have modestly or disdainfully renounced this thetic moment of the process producing meaning that creates the subject as subject of knowledge and as social subject. In our opinion, Bataille's work seems to revolve around this precise moment" (Kristeva 1995, 239). Kristeva associates the thetic moment with the instance of unity. It is defined as a "*stasis*, an ephemeral pause" and "an affirmative moment" (Kristeva 1995, 238; emphasis in original). In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, this moment is presented as an identification supporting the subject as a "divided unity" that emerges in the symbolic. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the thetic moment aligns with the mirror stage (the constitution of a primordial "I" through the recognition of one's own image, accompanied by pleasure) (Lacan 2005, 2). Its completion is then castration. On the one hand, the thetic is already separate from the semiotic *chora*; on the other hand, it does not yet belong to the order of the symbolic, that is, an order constituted by absence. The thetic moment constitutes the link or bridge between the different phases of the subject's development. By analogy, and in a synchronic perspective, it constitutes the link or bridge between the different layers of fragmented subjectivity. Thanks to the thetic moment, they form a whole. It is a moment in which the subject is momentarily full and unified but at the same time at risk of dilution. Kristeva attributes supreme importance to this instance: "there can be no signifying practice without a thetic phase" (Kristeva 1984, 64).

According to Kristeva, avant-garde literature sidestep the thetic moment by abandoning any ideological content or theme. Kristeva considers this to be the main ideological limit of this type of literature (Kristeva 1984, 188–89). The action of heterogeneity remains all at the level of language (Kristeva 1984, 189), or more concisely, avant-garde texts remain "'children at home'" (Kristeva 1995, 247). Given the sharper critique of the avant-garde that is offered in her text on Bataille, play at the level of language is neither the end nor the means of "revolutionary practice." In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva's position is more subtle: a certain potential emerges if the scope of avant-garde texts is situated in the *chora*. Heterogeneity's action at the level of language can even be redirected into another spheres, namely by engaging with the thetic moment. This is the role of the "modern text," of which Bataille's work is an example. The situation is

thus analogous to the coordination of implicit knowledge introduced above. As Kristeva writes, without thetic coordination, "these texts are condemned to be nothing but the complementary counterpart of philosophical speculation" (Kristeva 1984, 188), implying no possibility of a positive knowledge of heterogeneity.

Kristeva emphasizes the maintenance of the thetic moment (unity) over "pluralization" in two respects. The thetic moment, the experience[5] of the mirror stage and castration, is, in the genetic view, a condition of language in general, and thus of any of its further modifications. Kristeva's emphasis on the thetic moment is also evident in the context of her critique of "negativism." Without the affirmation of the thetic moment, any pluralization of language is ineffectual in that it does not touch the deeper layers of language or the conditions of the constitution of subjectivity. However, when Kristeva speaks of a contact, or "clash," of the thetic and the heterogeneous, there is a certain ambivalence. In her description of Bataille's textual practice, she repeatedly highlights the one-sided nature of this clash, with unity seemingly placed in a subordinate position. There are several examples (and analogous statements can certainly be found in *Revolution in Poetic Language*):

> [Bataille] rehabilitates the tangible and human activity of the *self* but only in order to denounce the illusions it fosters. (Kristeva 1995, 239; emphasis in original)

> The "I" [is] affirmed only in order to disappear. (Kristeva 1995, 245).

> Bataille's operation explores precisely the moment constitutive of practice which consists of postulating and destroying the unity of the subject in process. (Kristeva 1995, 262)

Such statements suggest that the dissolution and disappearance of the subject is the final state, the only goal of textual practice. The result is a state in which all the operations of discourse are carried out by an infinitely pluralized subject that has renounced any unity.

[5] This is experience in the strong sense. Kristeva writes that the thetic moment must become "a problem, a trauma, a drama" (Kristeva 1984, 51) in the subject's life.

Singularity of experience

The aforementioned ambivalence also casts doubt on whether Kristeva's subject in process/on trial can be a (feminist) political agent. For example, Nancy Fraser's critique can be seen as emerging from the reading just presented. Briefly, Fraser argues that the subject in process cannot form the basis for any collective solidarity because it is always divided and any unifying instance of the subject (the link between the semiotic and the symbolic, i.e. the thetic moment) is by definition always absent (Fraser 1992, 189). But I will endeavor to show that this questionable moment in Kristeva's work can be read in another way. There is no doubt that the unity of the subject is destroyed – but not in favor of plurality. What is destroyed is the unity of differences (the type of unity that Kristeva calls nondisjunction, characteristic of narrative).[6] In its conflict with the heterogeneous sphere, this unity becomes a singular unity. It is therefore possible to claim that semiotization is not a "pluralization of truth," with all its ideological implications, but rather a singularization.

Using Bataille's thought as an example, Kristeva throws into relief the extraordinary situation that arises when any unity (conceptual, thematic, narrative, etc.) breaks down. Affirmation, even if negativized or relativized, is itself "indispensable and indestructible" (Kristeva 1995, 247). Although the affirmative moment emerges in order to be destroyed, it appears to persist in some form, resisting the heterogeneous force that strives to dilute it. To specify this condition, Kristeva uses Bataille's notion of experience, which relocates the whole issue on a plane other than writing or discourse (Kristeva 1995, 248). In a way that may conceal the radical nature of the condition, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* experience is described as a situation "in which heterogeneous contradiction is maintained" (Kristeva 1984, 195). However, if we read Kristeva side by side with Bataille, attention should fall on "maintained" rather than on the aspect of "contradiction." In experience, there is a "cutting [of] the social chain" (Kristeva 1995, 262) – a temporary suspension of the movement of the symbolic and language, which relies on the constant filling of empty positions. Kristeva offers laughter as an example – one borrowed from

[6] The "two 'terms' are distinct, differentiated, and opposed but their opposition is later disavowed [*àpres coup*], and so the two are considered identical" (Kristeva 1984, 90). Kristeva discusses this notion in detail in "The Bounded Text" (Kristeva 1980, 36–63).

Bataille. The suspension is caused precisely by the affective intensity that accompanies laughter and which absorbs language (and the subject). Experience thus becomes extradiscursive.

Nevertheless, experience is not "empty" but follows a certain logic: it is grounded in the unexpected, the unpredictable. It does not arise from calculated action, or better, the calculative nature of language or action offers no certainty that it will appear. And if it appears, its affective intensity swallows up all calculated action (Bataille 1981, 204–11). The subject survives in experience as a minimal, singular self, suffering and diminishing under the weight of affective intensity. But it is able to speak about this extreme state. With reference to Bataille's notion of intense communication, Kristeva highlights an important moment. Experience abolishes language and yet speaks: "it speaks—Bataille would say 'communicates'—with all the subjects who, in different domains, pass through this problematic moment of practice" (Kristeva 1995, 262). In *Revolution in Poetic Language* she provides a similar description: "This practice has no addressee; no subject, even a split one, can understand it. Such a practice does not address itself at all; it sweeps along everything that belong to the same space of practice" (Kristeva 1984, 101–2). Although this is a singular moment not reducible to ordinary communication, thus escaping ordinary (conceptual) knowledge, it is nevertheless universal and sharable. The concept of experience makes it possible to satisfy Nancy Fraser's demand for collective solidarity. Solidarity, however, is not based on the subject's position in the symbolic order; it is solidarity with the subject in its most exposed and vulnerable state, of which laughter is a representative example.

Singularity: Practice and knowledge

Where plurality and textual play are usually located in Kristeva's theory, I have tried to place the Bataillean notion of experience. But the notion of experience is intrinsically linked to the notion of practice. In conclusion, therefore, it is necessary to illuminate the latter and outline its limits. Practice is an action that obeys laughter's logic (the logic of experience) and produces something new, not only on the level of language, but on the social and political level (Kristeva 1984, 225). The question of the possibility of a "translation" from a literary to a

social and political practice is often considered problematic and under-researched. The notion of experience offers a somewhat satisfactory answer. As noted above, there is a special type of communication (and mutual mobilization) between subjects and elements in different signifying systems sharing a *single* experience. On this basis, and employing a similar mechanism, it is possible to generate a certain "knowledge of what appears as completely other," the focus of the first part of this text. From the perspective of experience, however, another point appears much more significant. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* there appears to be a consistent demand that experience (as practice) have a definite goal. In this way it deflects from its own logic. Practice demands the production of something new; it seeks to stimulate such production, forgetting that change cannot be the product of conscious activity and calculation. This offers a possible answer to why the project failed; or, rather, to why Kristeva, in her later work, stepped away from politics in the strict sense. However, the notion of the semiotic was already a means to view various phenomena in their singularity and to develop the knowledge of singularity. This approach is applied in Kristeva's later work, and especially in her psychoanalytic practice. But there is no radical turn; on the contrary, Kristeva relies heavily on the foundation she laid in her early work.

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