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The Feminine and the Sacred. Catherine Clément and Julie Kristeva. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. *European Perspectives: A series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism*, Ed. Lawrence D. Kristzman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. Pp. 190 roman pages. \$29.00 h.c. 0-231-11578-4.

This text unfolds within the space of unresolved questions and tensions, between the sacred and the religious, the feminine and the masculine, East and West – and not least of all, between Clément and Kristeva themselves. It is a collection of letters sent between the authors over the course of a year, November 1996 to October 1997. According to the Preface geographical distance led them to collaborate in this asynchronous way (Clément was living most of this time in Sénégal, and Kristeva in France); but this format also interestingly mirrors some of the major themes discussed in their letters on the topic of the feminine and the sacred.

The correspondence format leads to a somewhat disjointed discussion, a sense of two individuals moving along their own trajectories while trying locate points of connection along the way. Though each at times raises questions and issues to which the other responds, as a reader I felt less that I was overhearing a conversation than that I was looking over the shoulders of each writer as they thought and spoke in solitude (which, of course, is what they did). What is lost in foregoing an otherwise more integrated engagement between the authors and their views is made up for in the productivity of the space left open in between, a space of inquiry that invites, and even to some extent requires the engaged reader to continue the discussion beyond the bounds of the text. Because the approaches of Clément and Kristeva differ, because they do

not fully answer each other's questions, because they do not come to any ultimate conclusions regarding the feminine and the sacred, the reader is urged (by Kristeva herself, in her last letter) to "hold on to the imperative for permanent questioning" (178). The text partially satisfies and frustrates the desire for answers in regard to the relationship (if any) between the feminine and the sacred, and in so doing resembles the movement of a "tension toward" that Kristeva suggests may characterize our search for truth and meaning: a reaching towards answers that remain always "indefinite, always 'to come'" (142).

Not surprisingly, each author writes from her own experiences and expertise, and thus the content, method, and metaphors used by Clément and Kristeva differ between their letters. Clément's letters often focus on her experiences in Africa and India, relating myths, stories and beliefs from Hinduism, Buddhism, African animism, and her own experiences with Judaism. She connects the sacred to social and political struggles against oppression in developing nations, and criticizes certain Western values and behaviors for their oppressive tendencies. Kristeva, on the other hand, often speaks of experiences with analysands in her psychoanalytic practice, of maternity, love and the psyche as she has observed these operate in and through individual subjects, and of Catholicism – the relationship of the Virgin Mary and female saints to the sacred. At times it feels as if they are speaking *at* one another, responding to each other's questions and comments by reworking and reinterpreting them according to their own frameworks. This is perhaps not very different from how intellectuals often speak to and with each other. Yet there are common themes between the two, even if their explanations and approaches differ.

Both speak of the sacred as a kind of transition, a movement between order and disorder, the body and the law, inside and outside, self and other. Clément connects the sacred to the

“transitional zone” theorized by Winnicott as the “zone of creativity, of freedom even, . . . that space of formidable potential that is established between the baby and the mother the moment she withdraws from the child” (50). The development of individual subjectivity is made possible by that space of separation, but the subject and its laws can also be susceptible to disruption in its borders, crossings that take the form of resistance. Clément often links the sacred with the id which “must find an out somewhere” (10), with disorder, the unspeakable, the obliteration of the subject and of sexual difference. It “predates the religious,” she argues, turning the order required for religion “upside down” (29, 30). She also locates the sacred in the “secretion, humors, odors” of the body (10), in “nail clippings” and in hair (88). These exhibit the porousness of the body, the transitional spaces where the inside moves out.

Clément seems to link the porousness of boundaries and the sacred crossings to a kind of rebellion. “The sacred,” according to Clément, “can serve a good revolt” (176) -- against the order of religion, of language, economic structures, politics, etc. It is those who occupy a minority status who are closest to the sacred as capacity for revolt and moving through boundaries (10). “[M]inorities know how to rebel,” Clément argues, “with the body” and through the sacred (174). “The feminine” is sacred insofar as it occupies a minority position and is linked to the body; but men as well as women can express the feminine, can take up its position, and can engage with the sacred as it “shatters the order and introduces a new one” (112).

Kristeva also locates the sacred in transitions, calling it an “intermediary” (102), between biology and meaning, animal and verbal, bodily drives and symbolic languages (26-27, 96-97). Kristeva describes the porousness of boundaries by reference to “love” and “the imaginary,” in the particular meanings she gives to these terms in her other works. These are both means and methods of striving for connections across distances, for reconciling what cannot be fully

brought together, for dealing with the tension of being “an irreconciled being, a being of desire” (38). Like Clément, Kristeva argues that though as subjects we are split in two, we can revisit the space of this separation and locate traces of the other within ourselves, openings in the border of the split. It is within the tension between the body and the law, the maternal and the paternal, that we love, we imagine, and we create meaning. It is also there in the space of the split that we access the sacred, by going “along on both sides, from nothingness to being and back” (153).

For Kristeva women may have greater access to the sacred because of their more problematic relationship to the phallus and the symbolic order than men: “women seem a little absent, not really in their place in the phallic order” (59). The “protospace,” the “timelessness” before the word, before the beginning, before the split of the subject is connected to women and to the maternal, Kristeva argues (72-73). Further, the Virgin Mary is sacred insofar as she operates as a symbol of “the unnameable maternal betwixtment and the twilight of prelanguage” (77). Yet in her last letter, Kristeva indicates that perhaps it is not so much “women” who have easier access to the sacred than “men,” but rather something of the “feminine,” which can be manifested in men as well as women.

I have highlighted here some of the similarities between the two writers’ views on the feminine and the sacred, but there are certainly many disparities as well, as attested by the occasional flares in temper expressed at times by both Clément and Kristeva in their letters. I found that Clément seemed more focused on the side of disruption, disorder, the Other and the body, than on the transitional space between symmetrical doubles where Kristeva appeared to place most of her emphasis. Clément was more likely to locate the sacred on one side of an opposition, while Kristeva focused more on the space between. Yet, for Clément, the opposing

side was important precisely because and through its capacity to break through borders and disrupt order, to move through the porousness of the dividing line between sides.

As a reader, I often felt that I was attempting to make connections between these two writers and their disparate views, to find places of porousness in the gaps between. In a sense, then, one might say that in reading and thinking I was enacting a form of the sacred. Indeed, Kristeva argues that both she and Clément participate in a sacred activity through thought, by visiting “that cut, that prohibition, that reversal of meaning, where meaning is born on the edge . . . of nothingness” (153). It is within the space of that cut that creation and meaning are possible, through a transition from the bodily to the verbal that is a sacred movement. Though the sacred can be accessed and expressed through ritual and rite, it is also involved in thought as it visits this productive split. Insofar as thought allows us to move through boundaries, back to the “protospace” of “sense without signification” (150), perhaps through the workings of the imaginary, it enacts the sacred.

But even if this is possible (and I here leave open the question of whether or not it is), thought does not exhaust itself in the visiting of this boundary, since the latter’s porosity ensures irruptions of further material for future thought, just as the connections and crossings between the views of Clément and Kristeva in these letters may provoke us to revisit the notions of the feminine and the sacred afresh. Kristeva expresses the hope that readers will be encouraged by this text to continue the task of “permanent questioning” towards a meaning that remains always “to come,” rather than looking to find within it the answers that would close the boundaries on the issue once and for all. Searching for connections between the two writers expresses my own “tension toward” meaning, a tension that was satisfied enough by the text to continue the pursuit beyond it.

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