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Kristeva's subject-in-process: From structure to semiotic criticism

As presented in the early work, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva's "subject-in-process" can be interpreted as a semiotic alternative to older conceptions of the philosophical subject. However, although previous discussions of Kristeva's early work have centered around the break with structuralism, the feminist implications of the early work as well as the application of semiotics to cultural analysis, we require a somewhat different exposition to see how the theory of a "subject-in-process" involves a departure from received notions of subjectivity. This discussion will attempt to demonstrate how Kristeva (i) opposes Fregean logic to Husserlian phenomenology and (ii) adopts a Lacanian view of negativity and exclusion in displacing the traditional philosophical subject, while (iii) employing Hegelian dialectics to introduce a "textual" conception of cultural practices that (iv) allows actual works of art to be used as the material basis for a critical analysis of social reality.

I. Subjectivity in Husserl and Frege

Kristeva's early work is immediately concerned with the task of clarifying the possible role of phenomenology within the semiotic context. Phenomenology in its 'classical' form evokes a thematic of subjectivity and argues that experience is brought to light through intentional acts of ego-consciousness. Its notion of constitution is based on a conception of the ego that tends to privilege the results of normal functioning, rather on modes of awareness associated with non-intentional mental activity. Hence, while acknowledging that phenomenology provides a source of insight into the importance of constitution to verbal experience, Kristeva challenges the

tendency of 'classical' (Husserlian) phenomenology to identify linguistic research with the operations of the ego as such. The genesis of the ego is more crucial than the issue of how the ego consolidates the space of signification. In Kristeva's account, the genesis of the ego is related to the positioning of the subject, rather than to its phenomenological constitution. While phenomenology suggests that the "speaking subject" can be interrogated and linked to various horizons, Kristeva claims that the conditions that *produce* the subject cannot be examined within the scope of phenomenology (1984: 36).

Kristeva discusses Frege in order to develop an alternative to a phenomenological conception of the speaking subject. The analytical tradition, dominant in Anglo-Saxon countries for nearly a century, has drawn upon the contributions of Frege as an epistemologist, and, more recently, as a philosopher of meaning. Kristeva attempts to establish the internal difference between predication and meaning through a new reading of Frege that replaces the traditional subject with an inherently divided structure: "By straddling these two 'levels,' Frege's *Bedeutung*, in our view, designates, precisely, the break that simultaneously sets up the symbolic thesis and an object; as an externality within judgment, it has a truth value only by virtue of the scission" (53). Thus, rather than attribute the bestowal of meaning to the activity of a philosophical subject, Kristeva examines the structure of judgment from within and identifies the emergence of the Thetic with "the pre-condition for both enunciation and denotation" (53).

Nevertheless, Kristeva does not completely invalidate the oppositional framework in which Frege operates. While citing "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" as a key source, Hans Sluga has argued that "empirical objects as items of acquaintance" should not be posited as the primary concern of Fregean logic (Sluga 1980: 159). Comparisons have been made to the medieval theory of supposition and also to J. S. Mill's distinction between connotation and denotation, but Sluga contends that an originally Kantian background is essential to an understanding of Frege's thought: "My suggestion here is that Frege's distinction is to be found in neither of these sources but that it lies in the Kantian distinction between objects and concepts" (154). According to Kristeva, however, Frege demonstrates how a break occurs within the structure of judgment, instead of foregrounding transcendental unity. This new approach to judgment would allow Kristeva to re-articulate Foucault's "empirical-transcendental doublet" as

a divided subject, and to transform a Kantian opposition into a linguistic one (Foucault 1972: 303–343). At the same time, the break that occurs within the structure of judgment itself explains the emergence of the symbolic as an unstable foundation.

2. *The Lacanian turn in psychoanalysis*

Kristeva agrees with Freud as revised through Lacan in stressing the role of repression in clarifying the break with the semiotic in the formation of symbolic consciousness. Repression can be interpreted psychoanalytically through the myth of castration, which can be read as an attempt to explain the blockage that invariably accompanies the rise of symbolic thought. From the structuralist standpoint, Lacan employs a notion of Law that accentuates the radical nature of the symbolic break presiding over the repression of the imaginary that occurs in mature ego functioning. The *chora* of castration in Lacanian analysis would mark the site where the semiotic ceased to intrude on symbolic awareness. Kristeva, however, argues that the *chora* of castration does not refute the importance of the semiotic *chora* but sustains the possibility of achieving new (and less repressive) ego positions: “castration may have been a problem, a trauma, a drama, so that the semiotic can return through the symbolic position it brings about” (Kristeva 1984: 51).¹

Moreover, Kristeva translates the opposition between the semiotic and the symbolic into a distinction between the genotext as a “pre-subjective” process and the phenotext as an essentially “communicative” structure in the new semiotic theory (86–89). The opposition between spoken and written Chinese articulates the functional difference between a continuous field and a discrete action (87). This difference situates semiotic mobility in the space of writing rather than on the sidelines of an analytic structure. Nonetheless, we should proceed cautiously: writing is not a new ground, nor does it function in a “space” that is entirely separate from the utterances of the speaking subject. Moreover, the inexorable movement toward communication in psychoanalysis is a reminder that speech is not simply “the shadow of something that was once alive” (Lacan 1981: 254). Hence, in this new situation, the phenotext continues to assume the form of a linguistic structure, while the signifying process as a whole now includes a

new dimension insofar as “language” (as something that exceeds structure) is *not limited to the role of speech in the scene of transference*.

Kristeva's special view of psychoanalysis becomes defensible insofar as Freud himself often made use of figures and metaphors in order to convey his most provocative hypotheses. For instance, while attempting to clarify the concept of repression in *A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis*, Freud at one point suggests that the dynamic structure of almost every mental process can be compared to the development of a photograph (Freud 1943: 259–260). His use of a topological metaphor allows the Unconscious to be compared a photographic negative, and also to explain how most thoughts must pass through a psychic dark-room before they can become conscious. This *textual* metaphor even illustrates how thought can remain unconscious (or undeveloped) while continuing to possess psychic importance. The possibility that a “textual” conception of the human mind could deepen the psychoanalytic structure requires a separate exposition, which will cast light on what is unique about the new semiotics.

3. *Semiotics and Hegelian dialectics*

Kristeva's understanding of “textual” difference provides us with the outlines for a new reading of Hegel that sheds light on semiotic theory itself. Jacques Derrida has suggested in *Of Grammatology* that Hegel's philosophy could be re-read as a meditation on writing, rather than as a mere eschatology (Derrida 1976: 26). Hence Derrida supplies an “archeological” index to the emergence of writing itself: “Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming unconscious of the subject” (69). Derrida implies that writing cannot be thought under the category of the subject but always refers to a self-same presence, or identity in difference, and thereby eludes the closure of metaphysics. Writing is what “produces” differences, not as an external cause but as the effect of language in a situation that cannot be stabilized with regard to its final outcome.

Hegel becomes a semiotic resource to the extent that “the first thinker of writing” can be linked to an encounter with the text in a manner that has precise implications (68–69). Kristeva's suggestion that negativity is “the fourth term of the dialectic” allows us to grasp triplicity as the non-dialectical appearance of rational experience. Negativity enables us to relate semiotic motility to a highly developed conception of (philo-

sophical) Reason (Kristeva 1984: 109–113). In opposition to Kant's logic of judgments, Hegel's logic refuses to maintain the unity of the subject outside the element of negativity and the dialectical process. The element in which the subject dies occurs in a phenomenological drama or 'text' whose meaning implies the despair of consciousness as well as the preservation of an alien presence in the dialectical context. The Hegelian subject cannot be grounded in a single moment of consciousness but acquires its features in an extended narrative in which truth and error intermingle, just as two speakers are sometimes surprised to learn what can be revealed only through an extended conversation.

The dialectical conception of negativity provides a key to Kristevan semiotics in at least two respects. First, Kristeva specifies the importance of negativity to semiotics by citing the "Introduction" to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which emphasizes how the *experience* of negativity profoundly disturbs natural consciousness: "Whatever is confined within the limits of a natural life cannot by its own efforts go beyond its immediate existence; but it is often driven beyond it by something else, and this uprooting entails its death" (Hegel 1977: 51). Kristeva presents the death of consciousness in the light of this uprooting (*Hinausgerissenwerden*) to emphasize the disturbing qualities of dialectical experience (1984: 185). Hegel's often neglected discourse on language provides Kristeva with the second aspect of a new conception of negativity. In the "Preface" to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel distinguishes the usual interpretation of subject/predicate relations from an understanding of linguistic unity that is no longer based on the identity of grammatical forms. The true form of the proposition entails a movement between expression and subjective fading that can be grasped according to the musical analogy of rhythm (Hegel 1977: 38). For Kristeva, therefore, the emergence of negativity as well as the formation of "subjective" unity in dialectical thought casts light on the symbolic break that occurs in the semiotic process.

The concept of experience inscribed in Hegel's phenomenology requires a theory of mediation to explain how the object as in-itself can be transformed into a being-for-consciousness. The practical confrontation with heterogeneity performs a more theoretical role in Hegelian dialectics than it does in Kantian thought. At the same time, practices are dialectically meditated only because the role of the negative can emerge in terms of conscious experience: "It comes as no surprise, then, that Hegelian experi-

ence leads to a practice; the latter is not only a subordinate moment of theoretical synthesis, it must also be a test – a confrontation with heterogeneity" (Kristeva 1984: 197).² Knowledge in this framework would involve an interpretation of cultural practices that constitute a limitless "text" that cannot be identified with a single, unequivocal meaning.

Readings of Hegel commonly assimilate the movement of the negative to dialectical results. Of course, the possibility that adequacy may not be the ultimate dialectical goal at least suggests that Hegel's thought is compatible with the limitless "production" of cultural texts. If texts are capable of registering the movement of the negative in the signs of rejection itself, cultural practices might be interpreted in Hegelian terms. However, this special understanding of Hegelian thought would not allow us to assimilate practical experience to a purely logical conception of the dialectic: "Although Hegel was the first to identify and put so much emphasis on this movement and its negativity, he subsumes it under the *presence of consciousness*, which Heidegger in turn over-emphasized, by reducing the essence of the dialectic to it" (184).

Kristeva readily admits that the problem of presence necessarily haunts Hegelian discourse. Heidegger argues that Hegel allows us to read phenomenology as a path that runs "in-between" what connects natural consciousness and knowledge (Heidegger 1989: 53). Kristeva partially concurs, suggesting that Hegelian phenomenology tends to confuse the presence of consciousness with the meaning of the dialectical process itself. Nonetheless, Heidegger's critique of dialectical ontology is clearly "overstated" when it argues that the Hegelian Subject is simply a more recent version of the Cartesian Subject (Kolb 1989: 213–232). The identification of Hegel's thought with an "egological determination of being" leaves little room for what exceeds metaphysics (Heidegger 1988: 126). In contrast, Kristeva conceives of the dialectic as a movement whereby human beings can confront the alienated majesty of the past and achieve mediation with what would otherwise escape the boundaries of conscious experience.

4. Semiotics and cultural practices

Kristeva develops the notion of *texts* as signifying practices that are inseparable from the situation of speakers engaged in actual language use. The possibility of understanding is inseparable from our ability to identify the

text as the vehicle for a new sort of practice: "In calling the text a practice we must not forget that it is a radically new practice, radically different from the mechanistic practice of a null and void, atomistic subject who refuses to acknowledge that he is a subject of language" (Kristeva 1984: 210). The semiotic text that emerges in this way functions in a general economy of signs as a mediatory link, drawing together signifying practices that are conscious and other practices that occur on the threshold of unconscious, or, more loosely, "natural", processes. As the bridge between spirit and nature, the semiotic text provides a space in which signifying practices can begin, just as it marks the limit of what can be achieved by an ego that continually strives for higher levels of cultural awareness.

Kristeva helps us see that art cannot be limited in meaning to momentary aesthetic experiences (215). Art both supports a critique of the subject and opposes the idealistic dissolution of the subject that occurs in most speculative thinking. Moreover, while separating us from direct experience, art has the capacity to present the semiotic in a mimetic guise: "Mimetic verisimilitude does not, therefore, eliminate the unique break Frege saw presiding over signification. Instead it maintains that break and, within, a certain object" (58). In offering us a *critique* of mimetic realism, Kristeva claims that the work of art is neither "true" nor "false" but the locus of semiotic possibilities (58). The work of art is a *text* that provides the "space" of illusion that opens up after an epistemological break has occurred, just as it offers legible signs of being connected to the world that exists "outside" the break. What this means in semiotic terms is that the work of art constitutes the space of a non-true "presence" that testifies to both an inside and an outside, just as it opens up the possibility of *untruth* (and *misunderstanding*) while testifying to the virtual possibility of societal knowledge.

Notes

1. Kristeva derives the term, *chora*, from Plato's *Timaeus* to denote "a non-expressive totality" that pre-exists the speaking subject as an unstable foundation of semiotic drives (1984: 25). The *chora* is part of the field of language, rather than a fixed abode, since "it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form" (26).
2. The importance of Hegel to early pragmatism is reinvented in Kristeva's semiotic approach to cultural practices. A partial explanation for this

might be that the Peircean *interpretant* is analogous what motivates Hegelian Reason, which dispenses with the Kantian thing-in-itself in opening the human subject up to a new sense of the Infinite.

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