THE ETHICAL AND POLITICAL FUNCTION OF REVOLT
IN JULIA KRISTEVA’S NOVELS

by

Laura Bianca Rus

B.A., Babes-Bolyai University, 1998
M.A., Central European University, 1999
M.A., Babes-Bolyai University, 2001

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies
(Women’s and Gender Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)
January 2011
© Laura Bianca Rus, 2011
Abstract

This study examines the various ways in which Julia Kristeva’s novels complement her theoretical writings in reflecting on and responding to the cultural and political crises of European identity and the urgency of assuming responsibility for its heritage. By foregrounding Eastern and Western European aspects of her thought, Kristeva’s novels develop and illustrate the view that the crisis of Europe is not just collective, cultural and political. It also entails the suffering of individuals who are physically and/or psychologically oppressed and repressed, with a particular focus on female foreigners whose capacity to participate in the production of “what” and “who” is counted as European is limited or stifled.

Kristeva’s notion of revolt, seen as an important aspect of European tradition, serves as a framework to examine her four novels, and the first chapter presents a critical account of the ethical, therapeutic and political functions of revolt in her novels. The four subsequent chapters provide a detailed analysis of the novels, each examining one particular aspect of revolt. In analysing The Samurai, the notion of writing as thought serves to examine the impact of the French Revolution and May 1968 on women and foreigners. The Old Man and the Wolves illustrates individual resistance against a totalitarian regime through action as thought. In Possessions, a focus on imaginary decapitations in relation to matricide reveals the emergence of specular thought as a form of revolt. Murder in Byzantium provides an account of thought as freedom, in a Europe (past and present) where the society of the spectacle (from religion to consumerism) leaves little room for individual creative or critical expression. This research shows how Kristeva situates feminine sensibility and creativity as alternative spaces that can generate new ways for rethinking the cultural and political memory of Europe, in such a way as to assume responsibility for its heritage as well as for its future.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................... v
Dedication .......................................................................................................................................... vi

INTRODUCTION: Framing Kristeva’s Fiction ................................................................................. 1
Approaches to Kristeva’s Work .......................................................................................................... 2
Feminist Contexts and Controversies ................................................................................................ 5
The Shift to a Concern with Politics and Ethics ............................................................................... 6
Kristeva’s Novels ............................................................................................................................... 8
Problematizing “Europe” ..................................................................................................................... 11
The Foreign Woman as Witness ........................................................................................................ 15
Novels of Revolt ................................................................................................................................. 16
The Variants of Revolt ....................................................................................................................... 19
The Logic of Revolt in Kristeva’s Novels .......................................................................................... 21

CHAPTER 1. THE FUNCTIONS OF FICTION FOR KRISTEVA ....................................................... 24
Types of Texts and Intertextuality ...................................................................................................... 24
Self-Performing Poly-Texts ................................................................................................................ 26
Writing as a Psychoanalyst: Countertransference and Personal Therapy ...................................... 29
How the Personal Becomes Political Through Fiction .................................................................... 33
Thinking Novels ................................................................................................................................... 35
Narrative Revolts ............................................................................................................................... 39
The European Scene .......................................................................................................................... 41
The Detective-Journalist as Witness .................................................................................................. 44
Kristeva and Arendt on Aesthetics and Politics ............................................................................... 46
Individual and Collective Memory .................................................................................................... 49
Feminist Critiques .............................................................................................................................. 51
Kristeva’s Debt to Arendt .................................................................................................................. 52
The Imaginary As Revolt .................................................................................................................... 54
Representative Thinking and the Politics of Representation .............................................................. 56

CHAPTER 2. THE SAMURAI: NOVEL (OF) FOREIGNNESS ............................................................. 62
Reactions to The Samurai ................................................................................................................. 62
The Role of Women and Foreigners in Re-thinking the Legacy of the French Revolution .......... 65
(Dis)Connections between Strangers and The Samurai ................................................................. 69
Writing as Thought ........................................................................................................................... 74
The Interaction Between Literature and Psychoanalysis ............................................................... 75
Feminist Interpretations of The Foreigner ....................................................................................... 77
I. Foreignness Within: The Search for “Lost Time” ....................................................................... 80
   The Journey to China as a Quest for Anti-Origins/ Otherness in the Self ................................... 81
   Revolt as Heterogeneous Temporality ......................................................................................... 83
II. The Foreigner Outside: The Paradoxical Logic of the French Revolution .............................. 86
   The Paradoxical Tenets of the French Revolution .................................................................... 87
   Dissidence as Revolt ..................................................................................................................... 88
   The Cosmopolitourgies of the Now Group .................................................................................. 90
   Maoism: A Failed Revolt? ............................................................................................................ 93
   Feminism and The Chinese Cultural Revolution ....................................................................... 95
III. Psychoanalysis as a Politics of ………………………………………………………………………. 98
CHAPTER 3. THE OLD MAN AND THE WOLVES: BETWEEN REVOLT AND FORGIVENESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reactions to <em>The Old Man</em></td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arendt on Totalitarianism and Authority</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought as Action</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variants of Revolt: The Story of the Old Man</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadomasochism as Part of the Logic of Revolt</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning as Making Connections</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Whatever Singularity”</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Makes Revolt Impossible: The Story of Vespasian and Alba Ram</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatred and the Misdirection of Revolt</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narration as a Means to Finding Meaning</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Forgiveness</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readers in Revolt</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 4. POSSESSIONS: A NOVEL OF INTIMATE REVOLT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Possessions</em>: an Overview</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions to <em>Possessions</em></td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Matricide, “Thought Specular,” and the Role of the Imaginary</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Imaginary and Sadomasochism</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Thought Specular”</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Logic of Intimate Revolt in <em>Possessions</em></td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modes of Representations: Between Sensation and Thought</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images of Decapitation</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern/Byzantine and Western Art: Iconography and Iconoclasm</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Possessions</em> and <em>Visions Capitales</em></td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective Fiction by Women Writers</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Intimacy with Suffering and the Mother-Son Relationship</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Detective in <em>Possessions</em></td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Maternal as a Transitional Space</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 5. MURDER IN BYZANTIUM: NOVEL POLITICS OF REVOLT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Murder</em>: An Overview</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions to <em>Murder</em></td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-Mapping “European Cultural Memory”</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Association and the “Optimistic Model” of Language</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narration as a Link Between Politics and Psychic Life</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Critique of Freudian Psychoanalysis</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spectacle of the “Desirable, Impossible Europe”</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine Creativity and the “Illusory” Nature of Women</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Maternal: Another Model of Politics</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom: Personal, Religious, and Political Dimensions</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Western” European Freedom and Its Impasses</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom and the Western Economy of Representation</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Eastern” European Freedom and its Impasses</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie’s “own” Byzantium</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Tongues and National Texts</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

No one writes alone, in the end. It always seems as though we write alone, but there are others who encourage, inspire and support us throughout the process. I wish to express special thanks to those who have done just that: my supervisor, Prof. Sneja Gunew, and supervisory committee Prof. Valerie Raoul and Prof. Lorraine Weir. I am deeply grateful for their comments, direction and patience, which helped me to strive beyond what I thought possible. This work as it is would have not been possible without their meticulous reading and critical insights.

I would also like to thank my family and my friends for their unwavering support over the years. I wish to also acknowledge my colleagues from both University of British Columbia and Wilfrid Laurier University for their encouragement and energizing conversations. Chris Shelley, Sam Samper, Kim Snowden, Cecily Nicholson, Patricia Elliott, Margaret Toye deserve special mention: their generous advice and humour helped me push through the process. I have also benefited tremendously from the rich and stimulating environment of the Centre for Women’s and Gender Relations at UBC. I found in the faculty there both a model and inspiration for my feminist approach and teaching and a source of continuing support and guidance. I owe special thanks to Prof. Veronica Strong-Boag, Dr. Wendy Frisby, Dr. Becki Ross, Dr. Leonora Angeles, Prof. Gillian Creese, Prof. Sunera Thobani. Also the humour, warmth and efficiency of the graduate secretary and administrator, Wynn Archibald and Jane Charles, made the Centre a welcoming place and my time there a joyful experience.

Yet this thesis would have not been completed without the unconditional support and love of my husband, Horatiu, who kept me sane and grounded throughout the years. My son, Alex, unknowingly, helped me put things into perspective and gave me the courage to carry on. To all, I owe my deepest thanks.
Dedication

To Alex, Horatiu and Sophie
Introduction

Framing Kristeva’s Fiction

“While the goal of fiction is to create a world, the only world is that of memory.”

(Julia Kristeva, *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature*, 193)

Since her arrival in France in 1965 as a doctoral student, Bulgarian-born Julia Kristeva has published more than thirty theoretical books, countless articles, four novels, and some texts, including her most recent book on Saint Teresa d’Avila (2008), that are impossible to classify generically. Most of her work has been translated into English, with a few exceptions.¹ Her work has received critical attention across the world, in English even more than in French, so much so that it has been the subject, in whole or in part, of more than sixty books, over thirty-five theses and dissertations (in the UK, United States, Canada, France, and elsewhere), and more than five hundred articles in several languages.² A song entitled “Julia Kristeva” premiered in a rock concert in Norway in 2005, demonstrating the extent to which her name is known.³

On the Anglo-American academic scene, Kristeva’s thought is associated with terms such as *intertextuality, semiotic chora, foreignness within, abjection, subject in process/on trial* which she has examined differently in different contexts. As critics Chris Weedon and Steve Burniston (1977, 218) noted, “Any understanding of Kristeva’s work demands a willingness on the part of the reader to come to terms with her unfamiliar and, as such, difficult terminology.” In addition, she is famous for her encyclopedic knowledge, referring to a range of disciplines including linguistics, philosophy, literature, art history, psychoanalysis, and religious studies. She has adopted many different approaches, always building on her previous work, so that there

¹ Texts that still remain to be translated include *Contre la dépression nationale* (1998a), *Visions capitales* (1998f), *Lettre ouverte au Président de la République sur les citoyens en situation de handicap* (2003), *La haine et le pardon* (2005a), *Seule, une femme* (2007b), *Cet incroyable besoin de croire* (2007a) and *Thérèse, mon amour* (2008). Since this study is addressed to Anglophone readers, I will refer to the English translations whenever possible (all other translations are mine when mentioned).

² Helene Volat’s thorough bibliography of Kristeva’s work can be accessed at [http://ms.cc.sunysb.edu/~hvolat/kristeva/kristeva.htm](http://ms.cc.sunysb.edu/~hvolat/kristeva/kristeva.htm). Kristeva’s official web site also has a link to Volat’s site.

³ The Kulta Beats feature “Julia Kristeva,” praising her work on depression discussed in *Black Sun*. Kristeva added the YouTube video to her official web site: [http://www.kristeva.fr/kultabeats.html](http://www.kristeva.fr/kultabeats.html).
is no one Kristeva, but many both successive and simultaneous aspects of her mind at work. As Roland Barthes remarked in the early 1970s, Kristeva “always destroys the latest preconception, the one we thought we could be comforted by…. what she subverts is the authority of monologic science and filiation” (11). Even a cursory look at the secondary literature on Kristeva’s theoretical writings confirms that she has continued to surprise her readers, and the addition of fictional works to the mix makes it even more difficult to produce a coherent synthesis of all the existing commentary on her writings. Rather than attempting to do so, I will provide an overview of the main critical approaches. My aim is to situate my analysis of Kristeva's novels in relation to her other work, adopting an Anglo-American feminist lens. I will therefore focus primarily on the reactions from critics who take on a feminist perspective.

Approaches to Kristeva’s Work

Many critics foreground key “Kristevan” concepts, such as those mentioned above, or her particular formulations of revolt and forgiveness, which will be at the heart of the present study. Noelle McAfee (2004), for instance, offers a clear, systematic survey of some of her major terms and the ideas they represent. In 1990 John Lechte had already used a similar approach to explain some of her earlier concepts by suggesting clusters related to the broader discourses of psychoanalysis, literary theory, art history, philosophy, and theology. In 1993 Kelly Oliver, in Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind, offered a comprehensive analysis of the controversies surrounding Kristeva’s work at that point. Many Anglophone critics since then have examined the interdisciplinary nature of Kristeva’s ideas, often classifying their analysis as “Kristeva and post-structuralism,” “Kristeva and literary theory,” “Kristeva and psychoanalysis,” “Kristeva and feminism,” “Kristeva and religion,” or “Kristeva and the political.”

---

The connection to one discipline or another is sometimes seen as sequential rather than synchronic, and many critics have adopted the strategy used by Toril Moi (1986) and others in identifying distinct stages in her earlier career focused on structuralism/linguistics, literary theory, and psychoanalysis. Alice Jardine (1986) argued that there were already at that point three “Kristevas,” the first belonging to the ‘60s (the development of semanalysis), the second to the ‘70s with an emphasis on subject formation and its repression in Western history, and the third, in the ‘80s, concerned with the logic of psychic phenomena. Later studies have also tried to distinguish between an “early” Kristeva and a more “recent” one. Sjoholm (2004) discerns a series of “political” Kristevas: radical, with Marxist and Maoist preoccupations, in the ‘60s; feminist in the ‘70s; and psychoanalytical in the ‘80s and ‘90s. Sara Beardsworth (2005) also looks at Kristeva’s rethinking of the notions of revolution and revolt as having developed in two chronological stages, before and after the ‘80s when her engagement with psychoanalysis proved to be a turning point in her career.

This division into periods is often associated with “trilogies” of texts that have chronological and thematic connections5 (Lechte 2003; Sjoholm 2004; Carol Mastrangelo Bove 2006). In the ‘80s these are Pouvoirs de l’horreur (1980d) (Powers of Horror 1982), Histoires d’amour (1983) (Tales of Love 1987b), and Étrangers à nous-mêmes (1988) (Strangers to Ourselves 1991); in the ‘90s, Les nouvelles maladies de l’âme (1993a) (New Maladies of the Soul 1995), Le sens et non-sens de la révolte (1996d) (The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt 2000d), and La révolte intime (1998c) (Intimate Revolt 2002c); followed by the explicit trilogy on feminine genius, Hannah Arendt (1999) (Hannah Arendt 2001b), Melanie Klein (2000c) (Melanie Klein 2001d), and Colette (2002b) (Colette 2004a). These divisions tend to reduce the

5 I refer here to the original date of publication of these texts in French in order to clarify their classification into “trilogies,” since the subsequent English translations defy this chronological order.
assessment of Kristeva's work to a comparison or contrast with itself, narrowing down the possibilities of situating her concepts in broader contexts.

Not surprisingly, Kristeva often refers to moments of mis-recognition of her image, as refracted back by Anglo-American critics. In the introduction to a lecture given at Columbia University in 1998, subsequently published in *Intimate Revolt* (2002c), she highlighted some of these contradictory aspects:

> The hospitality Americans have offered me is directed above all to my ideas, to my work..... Some of my research has found a hospitality in America – by which I mean a resonance and a development – that has greatly heartened and encouraged me. Sometimes the image that Americans have of me surprises me; I don't recognize myself in it at all (257-8, my italics).

In 2004, on receiving the first Holberg International Memorial Prize for “innovative explorations of questions on the intersection of language, culture and literature” that have had a significant impact on the humanities, social sciences and feminist theory, Kristeva emphasized her on-going debt to Anglo-American engagement with her work:

> If I emphasize the American reception of my work today, here in Norway, it is because I believe that without the English translations of my books, and without the recognition that I have received in the United States, my work would not have been accessible to readers in your country and all over the world, and it is in this context that my work has been recognized and honoured by the Holberg Prize.7

She is aware that the Anglo-American image of “Julia Kristeva” as somehow typically “French” is at odds with her reputation in France, as she went on to remark:

> This often comes as a surprise to the French themselves who, obviously, do not see me as one of them. Sometimes, after returning from New York, while passionately discussing my work as part of ‘French theory,’ I am even tempted to take myself for a French intellectual. At other times I actively consider settling abroad for good, all the more so when I feel hurt by the xenophobia of that old country which is France.8

---

8 The text can be accessed at [www.holbergprisen.no/en/julia-kristeva.html](http://www.holbergprisen.no/en/julia-kristeva.html).
The classification of Kristeva as one of the pillars of “French feminist theory” has been the source of further heated debates, not only about her questionable “Frenchness,” but about whether she can be considered a “feminist.”

**Feminist Contexts and Controversies**

Kristeva's relation to feminism has been fraught with difficulties on both sides of the Atlantic, and complicated by the impossibility of reducing her work to a single allegiance or commitment to one school of thought. Whether we consider Kristeva a feminist and how we interpret her relation to feminism in general depends on what sort of feminism we have in mind. McAfee (2004) considers some of the different implications of “feminism” as a movement in relation to “feminist theory,” in France and in the Anglo-American context. The “French feminist theory” studied abroad appears to be concerned primarily with questions of sexual difference in relation to subject formation, rather than with empirical studies of the material lived experiences that condition and oppress women, which were the focus of feminist movements in both Europe and America. Kristeva's exploration of the question of “woman” (based on sexual difference premised on biological, psychological, and symbolic grounds) makes many feminists in the Anglophone context nervous, as they suspect that any perpetuation of the idea of an “essence” of “woman” risks justifying the inferior status conferred by patriarchal categorizations. Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler, Elisabeth Grosz, Toril Moi, Gayatri Spivak, and Jacqueline Rose are among the prominent Anglo-American feminists to have charged Kristeva with essentialism, biologism, compulsory maternity, etc. There is even a “list of crimes” of which Kristeva is accused, put together by Chanter (1993), who finds “ahistorical, biologically reductive, universalist [...] assumptions” among her most serious “sins” (182). Following Chanter, McAfee (2004) argues that Kristeva's critics find her theories problematic because they mistakenly map “the feminist distinction between sex and gender onto Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic
and the symbolic, equating the semiotic aspect of signification with biological, including sexual, processes and the symbolic with culturally-defined gender” (80). McAfee agrees with Chanter that this clear-cut distinction implied by the critics obeys an either/or logic that fails to take into account the complexity of Kristeva's thought (80).

Oliver (1993a) addresses the apparent gap between French and Anglo-American feminism(s) eloquently, arguing that when American theorists and practitioners talk about feminism, “they refer to a multifaceted conglomerate of different views and strategies that cannot be easily reduced to a single element” (164). What the “French feminist theorists” in fact reject, Oliver argues, is a specific political movement in France that “many of them think engages in, and merely replicates, oppressive bourgeois logics and strategies of gaining power” (164). Their frequent refusal to be identified as feminists does not necessarily imply a rejection of some of the goals and strategies of feminism in the American context. Oliver's contextualization of the differences between “feminisms” on different sides of the Atlantic steers attention away from a limited partisan debate towards a more profound engagement with Kristeva's thought, working with her concepts within a specific cultural and political context, rather than classifying them according to an either/or logic. More recent studies in the Anglo-American context move away from this staged opposition between “French theory” and “Anglo-American practice,” focusing rather on the interface between psychoanalysis and social / political praxis.

**The Shift to a Concern with Politics and Ethics**

The tendency now is for critics to expand on and think with Kristeva's theories in relation to multifaceted contexts (bringing in the intersections between race, gender, sexuality, class, and (dis)ability), rather than to condemn her for limitations that are conditioned and determined by the specificity of the cultural and political contexts in which her work has appeared. For
example, Margaroni's (2007) article offers a critical survey pinpointing some common questions asked in relation to Kristeva's work, pertaining to the possibility or impossibility of transposing psychoanalytical concepts onto the political realm. Current concerns focus on whether this transposition does or does not do justice to social, economic, and cultural oppression, “rethinking the relevance of her thought for some of the most urgent ethical and political dilemmas we are facing today, caught as we are in the midst of unprecedented changes on political, economic, and cultural fronts” (Margaroni 2007, 803).

This urgent need to shift attention to questions of ethics that are relevant to current political dilemmas, on both local and global levels, is apparent in Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva’s Polis (2005), a collection of essays edited by Tina Chanter and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek. Their declared aim is to address a growing criticism regarding Kristeva's focus “primarily on the personal or the psychic maladies of modern Western subjectivity rather than on group formations or the political structures of oppression” (1). They draw attention to three cross-cutting issues that arise in considering the political and ethical dimensions of Kristeva’s thought: (1) the functions affect and negativity play in power structures; (2) their role in the emergence of collective identities and the transformation of social relations; and (3) some notable gaps in Kristeva's ideas, particularly in relation to racism and (post)colonialism. Oliver’s (2005) essay in that collection focuses on Kristeva's notions of revolt and forgiveness, and seeks to elucidate the relationship between the nature of subjective agency and the historical and social contexts that determine the extent of that agency (77). This approach to the intersections of the psychoanalytical and the cultural will be central to my own analyses of Kristeva’s novels.

Cecilia Sjoholm's book Julia Kristeva and the Political (2004) also traces Kristeva's perspective on the political as situated at the junction between philosophy and psychoanalysis, connecting the public political domain to the intimate (2). Like Oliver, Sjoholm sees Kristeva’s ideas as useful for a psychoanalytic social theory that brings the subject’s social position “back
into discussions of the psyche and subjectivity” (82). Margaroni (2007), on the other hand, sees Sjoholm's analysis as converging with Chanter's and Ziarek's project in their “shared concern not only for restoring the political stakes of (Kristeva's) psychoanalysis but also with displacing the very concept of the political ‘from the universal towards the singular’” (803).

Seeking like these authors to locate the intersections of the psychoanalytical, the political, and the ethical in Kristeva’s work, I will also bear in mind the feminist debates over the “question of woman,” since this question remains central in Kristeva’s fictions. As McAfee (2004) argues, Kristeva takes into account women’s role as (biological) mothers as well as their contributions to culture; this provides, according to her, a “third way” that avoids binary logic by bringing the natural and the cultural together, without imposing one over the other (76). McAfee's and Oliver's analyses of Kristeva's notion of “herethics” will be reference points in my analysis of Kristeva's articulation, in her novels, of “an/other politics” based on a reconfigured notion of ethics with the feminine at its centre.

**Kristeva’s Novels**

The various approaches adopted in the many works on Kristeva mentioned above share one thing in common: they ignore her works of fiction, which have until recently been conspicuously neglected on both sides of the Atlantic. Kristeva has published four texts which she classifies as novels: *The Samurai* (1992), *The Old Man and the Wolves* (1994), *Possessions* (1998b), and *Murder in Byzantium* (2006). Although the first three appeared in the 1990s, when Kristeva’s theoretical work was receiving a great deal of attention, most of the reviews at the time of their publication conveyed, above all else, the critics’ perplexity. Rather than wondering if Kristeva’s thought was entering a new “stage” (bringing together psychoanalysis and politics), for which fiction seemed to her as useful as theoretical discourse, there seemed to be a widespread
assumption that Kristeva’s novels “fail” in comparison with her “outstanding” theoretical work. As works of fiction, they disappointed the readers’ expectations, offering neither coherent, straightforward stories with which the reader can easily identify, nor innovative formal experimentation. When she came back to the novel ten years later, reactions were still lukewarm at best. Most readers turn to these works with a prior interest in Kristeva’s ideas, and intellectual satisfaction may be gained by searching out echoes of her various concepts in the stories she weaves. Others may be motivated by curiosity about the autobiographical elements which the author has herself indicated. Most reactions are marked, however, by confusion and frustration, and relatively few critics have attempted to untangle the web of intertextual allusions that sustains her plots, or to pinpoint what it is she tries to achieve by writing fiction.

A few have made the effort to examine at least one of the novels more closely: these include Anna Smith (1998), Valerie Raoul (2001), Carol M. Bove (2006), and Margaroni (2007). Only one, Szu-chin Hestia Chen (2008), has published a book-length study of the first three novels, entitled French Feminist Theory Exemplified Through the Novels of Julia Kristeva: The Bridge from Psychoanalytic Theory to Literary Production. Chen focuses on the ways in which these works can be seen as exemplifying the interaction between French feminist theory and Anglo-American feminism, starting from the premise that French feminist theory has provided Anglo-American feminists with a “framework for the development of the feminist culture,” while Anglo-American feminism has managed to politicize French feminist theory through its interaction with it (282). With reference to lesbian feminist and postcolonial theory, Chen seeks to demonstrate that these works of fiction illustrate the subject-in-process and provide examples of possible ways to arrive at a “harmonization of differences” between “rival groups of all kinds (including that of the sexes)” (286).

Like Chen, I will focus on the interaction between theory and fiction in Kristeva’s novels,

9 In my analysis of each novel I survey the reviews from both sides of the Atlantic.
beginning with a discussion of her own theoretical work on the novel in an attempt to ascertain why she turned to fiction. While Chen engages Kristeva’s theories up to the ‘90s, in relation to only the first three novels, I will include the fourth novel, *Murder in Byzantium* (2006), and focus on her later work on “revolt,” from *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2000d) to *Cet incroyable besoin de croire* (2007a). The different time frame in relation to Kristeva’s theoretical ideas, and the explicit re-writing of European history in the last novel, produce not only a different approach from Chen’s, but a different interpretation of Kristeva’s position in relation to the personal and the political where Europe is concerned.

For Kristeva, fiction provides a way to transpose her own auto-bio-graphical memory and to situate herself in relation to the collective memory of history. In Chen’s view, Kristeva’s novels are variations on what she calls (borrowing David Putner’s term) “remembrance.” According to Chen’s interpretation, they convey a series of representations of Western dominance. In Putner’s (2000) analysis of the relationship between postcolonial literature and melancholy, “remembrance” is bound on one side to memory, and on the other to mourning, while it is itself “a challenge and a potential terror, an activity that will be perceived and codified, as required by the state machine, under the heading of the ‘terroristic’” (Putner, quoted in Chen 2008, 28). Using Spivak’s notion of the “privileged informant” (which referred to First World academic appropriations of the Third World) in discussing Kristeva’s characters, Chen argues that these novels (i.e. the first three) offer a view of “the corruption of the East from the perspective of a Westerner” (27). She reads *The Samurai* as a “remembrance’ of the colonial mentality of Western theory” (28), *The Old Man and the Wolves* as a story of “remembrance’ of Western civilization” (28), and *Possessions* as a “remembrance’ of Western humanism” (28).

My approach differs from Chen’s in two fundamental ways: (1) regarding the role of

---

10 Even before writing fiction, Kristeva makes the connections between auto-bio-graphy and memory clear in her article “My Memory’s Hyperbole” (1984a) to which I return in more detail in Chapter 1.
memory in relation to literary experience in Kristeva’s work, and the narrative function we assign to her novels; and (2) regarding our assessment of Kristeva’s depiction of Eastern-Western European relationships. To Chen’s analysis of memory and “remembrance” as representing different aspects of the colonial mentality of Western theory, I propose an analysis of memory from a psychoanalytic perspective in order to examine how, through recollection and interrogation, individual stories re-map European cultural memory. As well, where Chen considers the Eastern-Western European relationships as a form of appropriation of the East by the West, following Said’s model of Orientalism, I see that relationship as being much more complex than an unproblematic equation of Eastern Europe with “barbarism” and Western Europe with “civilized humanism” (27). I hope to show through my analysis that Kristeva’s novels serve precisely to challenge the unitary meaning of terms such as “East,” “West,” or “European,” and to blur any clear delineations between Eastern and Western European traditions. This focus no doubt relates to Kristeva’s Eastern European origins in Bulgaria, and my own in Romania. As a person of Eastern European origin myself, I bring together what I perceive to be the Eastern and Western European aspects of her thought, evident especially in Kristeva’s discussions of religion, of the meaning of freedom and its variants, and of the imaginary. Aware of my positionality and possible dangers of appropriating or lapsing into personal and/or cultural forms of identification, I have tried to be as rigorously self-reflexive as possible in my analyses of Kristeva’s work.

**Problematizing “Europe”**

For Leslie Hill (1990), Kristeva’s “remarkable appetite for intellectual synthesis” (140) reflects a particular intellectual background shaped at the junction between Eastern European lived experience and Western European cultural tradition. In Moi’s (1986) opinion, Kristeva’s Eastern Europe background and first-hand experience of communism provided her with valuable
knowledge of Marxist theory and of the Russian formalists, including Bakhtin (2). In “Europhilia-Europhobia,” published in *Intimate Revolt* (2002c), Kristeva emphasizes the contribution of her work to the “Western” tradition in terms of a constant effort to bring various traditions together, and by this intertextuality to present a more complex approach to European cultural memory. This synthesis is complicated by her position in France as a foreigner educated in a Francophone Catholic school in communist Bulgaria, neither completely inside nor outside the “Western” European tradition:

> I contributed - and continue to contribute – a French and European cultural memory in which the Germanic, Russian, and French traditions are mixed: Hegel and Freud, Russian formalism, French structuralism, the avant-gardes of the New Novel and *Tel Quel*. […] And through the intermediary of the foreigner that I am, access can thus be gained to this French and European culture that often proves so inaccessible and guarded in terms of its purity (2002c, 257-8, my italics).

My aim in this study is to bring out the Eastern and Western aspects of Kristeva’s work, as re-presented in her novels, in order to suggest that Kristeva offers a hybrid space of interaction that points to the strengths as well as the limitations of both the “East” and the “West.” Kristeva’s novels construct a universe where various cultural elements of the European tradition, through their interactions, relativize and transform each other. My focus is not on the “harmonization of differences,” as perceived by Chen (2008), but on how fiction enables Kristeva to explore the cultural and political crises of Europe, ranging back and forth in time from the French Revolution and the revolt of May ’68 (in *The Samurai*) to the fall of the Roman Empire and of the Berlin Wall (in *The Old Man and The Wolves*), and from the “crisis of the imaginary” experienced by the “society of the spectacle” (in *Possessions*) to the crisis of belief related to Christianity (in *Murder in Byzantium*). Fiction allows Kristeva to demonstrate the inseparability of both theoretical thought and lived experience (as it is remembered) from the imaginary realm. The stories she weaves engage with philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, and religion, to provoke the reader to reflect differently on the concepts of subjectivity, freedom, and
authority, as well as interpersonal relations, especially motherhood. Her characters are situated in imaginary contexts that evoke both Eastern and Western Europe. Their “stories” convey the crises of European culture and identity, as reflected in the absence of narrative forms that are “meaningful” and not only “useful” for adequately addressing the heterogeneous populations living in Europe.  

It would be easy to infer that Kristeva’s focus in her novels on the crisis of “European” subjectivity and cultural identity reflects a form of Eurocentrism. This accusation was already part of Spivak’s (1982) critique, in “French Feminism in an International Frame,” and is echoed to some extent by Chen (2008). My approach is more closely aligned with Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s (1998) argument that Eurocentrism is not the same thing as being interested in European thought or in Europeans, but the reduction of cultural heterogeneity into a “single paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning” (1). According to them, Eurocentrism attributes to the “West” an almost “providential sense of historical destiny,” while at the same time belittling the “East” and the “rest” (2). I argue that Kristeva’s fiction can be more accurately read as an attempt to pluralize the meanings of the “East” and the “West,” by exploring the heterogeneity of “European” identity.

This process begins with the demystification of the idea of a “monumental” Europe, which Kristeva already began in “Women’s Time” (1986e). Fiction has played a significant role in perpetuating imaginary constructs of a mythical, harmonious Europe that has never existed. From the perspective of postcolonial studies, Cornel West (1993), in “Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism,” conveyed a similar idea when he claimed that any dismantling of the “fiction of Europe,” must pay attention to “the power that fiction has wielded” (153). Imaginary worlds, West argues, have the power to “lead to war” (153). Closer analysis of Kristeva’s work on

---

11 In Crisis of the European Subject (2000a), Kristeva makes a similar point when she addresses different paradigms of freedom and subjectivity that are “meaningful” and not only “useful” for reestablishing a European cultural identity, on grounds other than economic and political ones (116).
fiction and her own novels will reveal how she deploys various novelistic techniques to
dramatize or poke fun at some myths of European identity. I will also attempt to situate her
representations of “West,” “East,” “Europeanness,” as part of debates that include the
perspectives of writers like Milan Kundera and Jacques Derrida, who also bring together
“Eastern” and “Western” perspectives.

In *The Art of the Novel* (1998), Kundera defines Europe not so much as a territory, but as
a spiritual tradition that extends beyond its geographical borders (4). Derrida, in *The Other
Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe* (1992), imagines Europe as a space torn between two
“contradictory imperatives,” a “drive for unity,” on the one hand, and a “reality of disunity,” on
the other hand (2). He argues that Europe must acknowledge responsibility for its cultural
heritage: “We did not choose that responsibility; it imposes itself upon us” (28). In *Spectres of
Marx* (1994), he explains that an inheritance is “never a given, it is always a task” (12).
Responsibility toward the heritage and memory of Europe is necessarily also a responsibility to
the “other” (13). Commenting on Derrida’s genealogy of European responsibility, Rodolphe
Gasché (1994) argues that this act of assuming responsibility implies “the double injunction of
being faithful” not to “an idea of Europe, to a difference of Europe, but to a Europe that consists
precisely in not closing itself off in its own identity” (74).

Kristeva’s novels need to be located in the midst of this debate concerning the crisis of
Europe’s identity, and the urgency of assuming responsibility for its heritage. She shares with
Kundera and Derrida an insider/outsider perspective, yet her point of view is different from
theirs because she is a woman. While Kundera’s and Derrida’s analyses are apparently
genderless, Kristeva includes feminine sensibility and creativity as essential elements for any
formulation of memory and responsibility. Her novels develop and illustrate the view that the
crisis of “Europe” is not just collective, cultural and political, but entails the suffering of
individual bodies which are oppressed and repressed, with a focus on female foreigners whose
capacity to participate in the production of “what” and “who” is counted as “European” is limited or stifled.

The Foreign Woman as Witness

One of the things that fiction allows Kristeva to accomplish is to interrogate various aspects of European cultural memory from multiple positions: those of a woman, a mother, a foreigner, an artist, a psychoanalyst, and a political journalist-turned-detective. These are marginal perspectives that bear witness to the difficulty of belonging, of formulating relations with others premised on respect, responsibility and accountability. I borrow the term “witness” from Oliver’s *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001). Oliver distinguishes between “eyewitness testimony,” based on the gathering of evidence through vision, and “bearing witness,” which offers an account of something beyond recognition that cannot in itself be seen (16). Bearing witness is, for Oliver, the process that lies at “the heart of subjectivity” (16) and requires a “responsibility” to oneself and to others (223), placing an ethical obligation at the core of subjectivity-as-performance (115). Kristeva’s women characters, from both Eastern and Western European backgrounds, provide an opportunity to focus on ethical dilemmas facing Europeans, from liminal border positions.

These stories highlight the importance of women as/and foreigners as witnesses to a long and convoluted history of repression and marginalization, obscured by conventional history as well as by various religious, metaphysical, psychological and political discourses and power structures. Both women and foreigners have been denied access to language and the means to record their experiences in the unfolding of the European tradition. The foreign woman, in Kristeva’s novels, is a crusader on a mission to expose the mentality of European civilization that led to the exclusion or repression of women and foreigners. Fiction offers Kristeva alternative, more concrete, ways of thinking about the issues of freedom, femininity,
motherhood, ethics, and politics that she addresses more abstractly in her theoretical writings. Writing novels constitutes one means to convey what she means by “revolt.”

Novels of Revolt

The notion of revolt emerges as central to the underlying logic that connects subjective expression with cultural representation, as both unfold within various contexts of social and political crises. Revolt is an aspect of the European tradition that Kristeva wants to revive and preserve, as she discussed in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2000d), *Intimate Revolt* (2002c), and *Contre la dépression nationale* (1998a). Some of the ideas developed in these texts were already introduced in her fiction, as will be demonstrated in the chapters on each novel, and others were developed further in the novels.

Kristeva (2000d) presents her theoretical discussion of revolt as part of an analysis of what she considers the “new world order,” involving a general crisis of European culture and politics, with authority, law, and values reduced to “empty, flimsy forms” (24). The resulting “power vacuum” that occurs as political authority is replaced with an “amorphous, fluctuating global market” (4-5), deprives the individual of a stabilizing centre. The legal system becomes part of a certain “theatricalization,” as crime becomes “theatrically media-friendly” (5). This leads to a normalization of crime, which eventually encourages indifference, with the perverse effect of engendering all sorts of further “breaches and transgressions” (5). The new world order renders one less capable of critical thinking and therefore less likely to assume responsibility (198).

Kristeva (2000d) is concerned with the effect of the new world order on the status of the individual as well, noting for example the replacement of terms such as the “subject” or the “person” in certain provisions set forth by the European Economic Community by “patrimonial individual” (24). In her view, this means that questions of human rights and human dignity no
longer concern a “person with rights,” but a “patrimonial person,” defined as an “assemblage of organs that are more or less negotiable, that can be transplanted, converted into cash” (24-25). Technology and the market assign a utilitarian value to the meaning of life. In the current context of the European Union, individuals are subjected to an “undifferentiated supranational identity” that elides differences (25). In his introduction to Kristeva’s *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000a), Samir Dayal (2000) calls this process a “desubjectivization of the (European) subject” that goes hand in hand with an ongoing “depoliticization of the public sphere,” and produces an absence of participation (4). In his view, this is not only “the effect of apathy or consumerism” but also the result of “ideological manipulation of public discourse”(4). He uses as an example the fact that any issues involving the family are seen as “matters exclusively of private morality and private ‘character’” (14).

This “desubjectification,” to use Dayal’s term, produces a decline in psychical life, inducing depression, anxiety, and stress, which ultimately lead to a loss of interest in representing one’s inner life. Kristeva diagnosed this condition as the “new maladies of the soul” in her book with this title (1995). The deficiency of representation also affects sexual, sensory, and intellectual life, as psychic life becomes “blocked, inhibited, and destroyed” (1995, 8-9). A revival of interest in religion may stem from a “psychological poverty that requests that faith give it an artificial soul that might replace an amputated subjectivity” (1995, 7). Kristeva also examines the rise of religious fundamentalisms as a direct consequence of the new world order in *Intimate Revolt*. In *Contre la dépression nationale*, she discusses the “new maladies of the soul” as a crisis of representation at both individual and national levels, suggesting an analogy between individual and national depression. Referring specifically to the case of France, she argues that this depression manifests itself as an inability to deal with the influx of immigrants, to make itself heard in international negotiations, and to find solutions for unemployment and
poverty (67). As for the individual, national depression manifests as a severance of social ties, making the transformation of social relations difficult.

In *Intimate Revolt*, Kristeva traces the seeds of the new world order back to “the French Revolution and the development of democracy that followed” (25). In *Crisis of the European Subject*, she explains that the French Revolution marked a radical break with tradition and religious authority, and made the universality of the citizen the foundation of public jurisdiction and public morality (99). Yet the legislation that made the French Republic “one of the most egalitarian regimes in the world” excluded foreigners and women from participation in the political sphere (100). In an interview with Arnaud Spire entitled “The Future of a Defeat” (2003), Kristeva argues that the notion of revolution has been “wrongly defined as meaning destroying earlier political systems and social controls in order to promote their renewal” (21). In their call for “more justice” for the “excluded and the underprivileged,” the French Revolution and other revolutions, such as the 1917 Russian Revolution, acquired a restrictive meaning that led to Terror (in the case of the French Revolution) or to the totalitarianism “that was born of the proletarian revolution” in the USSR (21). At the same time, the notion of revolution has glossed over other forms of revolt, in the sense of individual forms of expression and interrogation, making freedom a meaningless word (21). Kristeva’s concern is that attention to singularity of expression and particular forms of protest became lost in the political revolutions of 1789 and 1917.

This led to a paradox: on the one hand, the rise of capitalism encouraged individuals to express their singularity by measuring their ability to accumulate goods; on the other hand, it made it possible for communist ideologies to point to liberal individualism as illustrating the failure of capitalism to achieve a social transformation that would rehabilitate the poor. As communism was replaced by “an arbitrary law that took into account neither desires (ultimately desires for freedom) nor needs (ultimately economic)” it became totalitarianism (2002c, 201).
both cases (capitalist or communist), Kristeva argues what has been stifled is creative expression and critical thinking based on questioning of one’s own situation in the midst of economic, social, and political realities.

Kristeva’s work on revolt appeared around the same time as her study of Hannah Arendt (2001b), with whom she shares many ideas on the crises of the European tradition. In her analysis of the Eichmann trial, Arendt defined the “banality of evil” as the inability to think for oneself, to make judgements that take a plurality of perspectives into account. Kristeva echoes Arendt when, in Intimate Revolt, she defines the aptitude for judgment as synonymous with interrogation, and declares this to be “our only remaining defence against the ‘banality of evil’” (2002c, 4). For Kristeva, losing the aptitude for thought and judgement also means obscuring “an essential component of European culture- a culture fashioned by doubt and critique” which then becomes in danger of losing “its moral and aesthetic impact” (4).

Arendt (2000) regarded remembrance as the only defence against the annihilation of the depth of human experience: “We are in danger of forgetting, and such an oblivion would mean that we would deprive ourselves of the dimension of depth in human existence. For memory and depth are the same, or rather, depth cannot be reached by man [sic] except through remembrance” (464). For Kristeva (2000d, 2002c), the “forgetting” of the past manifests itself not only in the loss of tradition, of authority, of religion and values, as deplored by Arendt, but also in the erasure of any acknowledgement of the repression of the feminine/ maternal as well as of the violence and desires that lie at the foundation of culture and civilization. Kristeva follows Freud in situating revolt not only in opposition to utilitarianism, dogmatism, or totalitarianism, but also in the interface between the social and political, on the one hand, and the body, sexuality, affect and drives, on the other.

The Variants of Revolt

Revolt for Kristeva is not simply a confrontation with authority, law, or tradition. It is not based
on the dialectical logic of law and transgression, as was, for instance, her notion of revolution in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984b). In a context where there are no laws or authority to revolt against, Oliver (2005) argues that Kristeva is talking about a revolt that occurs as a displacement of authority within “the psychic economy of the individual” (79). This perspective challenges the conventional understanding of authority as externally situated and proposes a more nuanced formulation where the individual “sees that authority as its own” (79). In *Intimate Revolt*, Kristeva defines revolt as “return/turning back/displacement/change”: “What makes sense today is not the future (as communism and providential religions claimed) but revolt: that is the questioning and displacement of the past. The future, if it exists, depends on it” (5). In other words, revolt takes on the form of a necessary retrospective questioning that is as much recollection as it is interrogation: “the suspension of retrospective return amounts to a suspension of thought” (6). She concludes that “questioning remains the only possible thought: an indication of life that is simply alive” (223).

Fiction enables Kristeva to represent the intellectual process of questioning in a context that also evokes the complex interaction of psychical, physical, and social elements that make up the individual subject’s position – an interaction that affects both the questions and the possible responses. One of the original contributions of Kristeva’s analysis of revolt is her engagement with Freudian theories in order to challenge the philosophical conception of a thinking ego which appears to be “ageless” and “sexless,” as she writes in *Hannah Arendt* (2001b, 190). Another important insight is her perception of thought as inseparable from negativity and from a kind of timelessness that Freud associates with the death drive. These are concepts that will be developed further in analysing the individual novels.

Kristeva’s ideas on revolt are part of a psychoanalytic social theory that places conflict, antagonism, and contradiction at the core of what Margaroni (2005) explains in terms of the inseparable dialectical understanding between self and society (28). It is a model that Kristeva
emphasizes in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, when she argues that any discussion of social integration or inclusion must take into account the fact that contradictions are “permanent,” and not solvable: “When one recognizes that the contradictions of thought and society are not soluble, then revolt – with its risks – appears as a continuous necessity for keeping alive the psyche, thought and the social link itself” (144).

In her novels, Kristeva attributes the role of investigation to women, who examine and question various social and cultural aspects of the European tradition. It is women who point to the marginalized and repressed elements of different components of the European heritage, from the French Revolution to both Orthodox and Catholic religious traditions. The novels draw on psychoanalysis, philosophy, historical research, scientific reason, and theology, combining these with political analysis, fantasy, and emotions. They enable the author not only to emphasize the role of thinking and desiring women and their creative ability to lead various forms of inquiry, but also to propose, from a place that forges together thought and sensory intimacy, new ways of thinking about authority, laws, and values.

**The Logic of Revolt in Kristeva’s Novels**

I propose a reading of Kristeva’s novels that illustrates the notion of revolt as “thought as return,”¹² at the interface between (political) philosophy (with an emphasis on the works of Kant, Arendt and Giorgio Agamben) and psychoanalysis (with a focus on Freud and Melanie Klein). By insisting on the interface between (political) philosophy and psychoanalysis, I want to prevent the limitation of the notion of revolt to a psychoanalytic vision of subjectivism, on the one hand, or to the abstract theoretical thinking of philosophy, on the other. At the same time, the point of this synthesis is also to stress that the crisis of the new world order, of European culture, cannot be adequately addressed unless one attends simultaneously to both psychic and

---

¹² I follow here Kristeva’s definition of revolt in *Intimate Revolt*, p.5.
political life. As Kristeva argues in *Intimate Revolt*, revolt is realized in “psychical life and its social manifestations (writing, thought, art)” which also have political implications (11).

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt argues that thought is a form of action that “interrupts the flow of time” to begin something anew (186). Action is the precondition of political life, since it is never possible in isolation, but always part of what Arendt calls the “web of the acts and deeds of other men [sic]” (188). Imagination is essential in order to see from multiple perspectives, and so create the possibility of plurality. While action makes political life possible, speech is essential for remembrance, for actualizing that dimension of the “past” that is threatened by “forgetting” (176). Recollection through narration engages the imagination, allowing one to “think horror,”\(^\text{13}\) while at the same time creating the distance necessary for representation. New beginnings start with birth, and since each birth begins something anew it contains an element of action, and creates the possibility of political life, as Arendt explains:

> If action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals (178).

By forging a link between new beginnings and political action, Arendt places birth at the centre of political life. This notion makes it possible to re-think Kristeva’s theories of motherhood and of the feminine through a political lens. It prompts us to reconsider the function of fictional narrative for Kristeva, as will be discussed in Chapter 1. Kristeva’s representation of women’s lives and perspectives acquires a political as well as a theoretical dimension. The novel form enables her to challenge the aestheticization of the political and the politicization of aesthetics, by reconfiguring both politics and narrative as “open structures” and “living relations.”\(^\text{14}\)

In analysing each novel, I will focus on particular aspects of revolt. I will move from a

\(^{13}\) In Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, p.28.

\(^{14}\) As Kristeva defines them in *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, p. 43.
general discussion of the ethical, therapeutic, and political functions of revolt in Kristeva’s novels in Chapter 1, to detailed analysis of each of the four novels. In Chapter 2, on *The Samurai*, I use the notion of *writing as thought* to examine the legacy of the French Revolution and its impact on women and foreigners. In Chapter 3, on *The Old Man and the Wolves*, I look at *action as thought* to consider the possibility of individual expression in a totalitarian regime. In Chapter 4, on *Possessions*, the concept of *specular thought* allows me to consider the relationship between matricide and the emergence of thought, in the framework of (imaginary) artistic decapitations. In Chapter 5, on *Murder in Byzantium*, I focus on *thought as freedom* in a context where the religious imaginary and the society of the spectacle leave little room for creative expression. The Conclusion will summarize what emerges from these analyses in relation to the theoretical framework introduced here.
Chapter 1

The Functions of Fiction for Kristeva

“In my own case, the clinical practice of psychoanalysis, the writing of novels, and work in the social domain are not ‘commitments’ additional to my theoretical and scholarly work. Rather, these activities are an extension of a mode of thinking at which I aim and which I conceive as an *energeia* in the Aristotelian sense: thought as act, the actualization of intelligence.”


Types of Texts and Intertextuality

Kristeva’s theoretical writing, whether it addresses primarily linguistics, literature, or psychoanalytic casework, is always preoccupied with the use of language in self-construction through communication with others. Several of her major works focus on fictional narrative texts, from her early work on the origins of the novel to her later studies of Proust and Colette. As a literary critic belonging to the intellectual community of Parisian structuralists and post-structuralists, Kristeva takes for granted the problematization of traditional notions of literary “genre” associated with convention, conformity, predictability, and standardization. Since she is inevitably in dialogue with authors of *nouveaux romans*, like her husband Philippe Sollers, she can be expected to produce fiction that will be what Barthes (1977) termed “writerly” (texte *scriptable* rather than texte *lisible*) (156). Her novels invite the reader to participate in an act of writing that lays bare its techniques, calling attention to its production and narrative construction.

Like all the members of the *Tel Quel* group, Kristeva refers to *texts*, rather than “works” (*oeuvres*), and one of her major contributions has been a theory of *intertextuality*. In “Intertextuality and Literary Interpretation” (1996b), she argues that the term “novel” can be applied to various experiences of writing, in which case we can define the novel as an “interminable” process in which any type of writing can participate. She writes:

ever since the rise of the novel in the West we have had an interminable novel, and the word becomes the generic term for a drastically expanded experience of
writing. The term *roman* can now be applied to poetic writing incorporating a narrative element. It can also be applied to *récits* of a journalistic type that integrate the possibility of narrative, provided the category can be expanded. It can be applied as well to the intermingling of autobiographical elements with essays and theoretical texts. These are all *romans* - as long as we understand ‘novel’ as an intersection of genre and as a generalized form of intertextuality. If one identifies the novel with intertextuality, then every contemporary type of writing participates in it (191-2, italics in original).

In her case, theory and fiction intertwine inextricably, with autobiographical elements added to the mix. These elements are often emphasized by her own commentary on her writings in interviews and articles.

Even before she began to write novels, Kristeva’s academic and theoretical work came under scrutiny for its juxtaposition of personal elements with abstract argument. Jacqueline Rose (1993a), for instance, in “Fleshy Memories,” a review of Kristeva’s *New Maladies of the Soul*, commented on the ways in which Kristeva inscribes her own subjectivity in her academic texts, deploying what Rose calls “partial autobiography” (6). For some critics, like Anne-Marie Smith (1998), Kristeva’s crossing of disciplinary and generic borders and mingling of heterogeneous discourses is confusing. In the case of Kristeva’s analysis of a poem by Nerval, Smith claims that “we are unaware whether she is reading this poem as a literary critic, clinician, or as a lyrical poet” (1998, 68). One might object that Kristeva reads as all three at once in this case, and refuses to choose. This may be an example of “subjectivity challenging the establishment, revolt in practice,” but it also constitutes a “shock to those of us educated in the heyday of structuralism and post-structuralism, who learned to ignore biography, both the writer’s and our own, when writing academic papers” (Smith 1998, 68). In fact, several of the *nouveaux romanciers* or theorists most closely associated with “the death of the author” went on to produce their own life-stories, albeit in unconventional formats (Robbe-Grillet, Barthes, and Derrida among them).15 Since Kristeva became a psychoanalyst, it is less surprising in her case that the personal

---

15 For further details, see Gabara 2006, X.
should have a place in her writing. What is more difficult to explain is why she turned to relatively conventional fiction, rather than confining herself to hybrid theoretical texts.

Kristeva has produced at least one apparently more straightforward autobiographical document. The essay is entitled “My Memory’s Hyperbole” and is included in *The Female Autograph* (1984), an anthology of essays on women’s auto/bio/graphy edited by Domna Stanton. The title itself, which draws attention to the non-reliability of memory, challenges the conventional “autobiographical pact” discussed by Philippe Lejeune (1974) and other theorists of the supposed specificity of autobiography. For Kristeva, writing about her life as she remembers it is not an attempt to obey the rules of mimesis, of “truthful” recording of events, but is rather a self-conscious performance that assumes an ethical stance. As Oliver (1993a) explains, for Kristeva the logic of alterity implied by writing for a reader takes on an ethical function, in that it demands acknowledgement of the fragility of meaning, its dependence on inter-subjectivity and social relations. It forces us to set aside universal claims of objectivity and requires us to learn “to live within the flexible, always precarious borders of our subjectivity in order to learn to live within the flexible, always precarious borders of human society” (Oliver 1993a, 13). Close analysis of her novels will show that the personal and subjective elements in them are inseparable from a political and ethical analysis that links her life to her thought and to collective history in complex ways.

**Self-Performing Poly-Texts**

The novel seems to have drawn Kristeva’s attention early on precisely because it is what Northrop Frye (1957) called an “impure” genre, one that grew out of autobiographical accounts “by a series of insensible gradations” (307). The novels or novelists Kristeva has chosen to analyse reflect the *nouveau romancier* Ricardou’s (1967) famous claim that “writerly” texts are
less “l’écriture d’une aventure” than “l’aventure d’une écriture” (111). The inseparability of writing and life for those who spend a large part of their life writing blurs the superficial distinctions between exterior and inner reality. As Paul de Man (1979) argued, for those who attempt to record their life “the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life” (920). Philippe Lejeune’s (1974) early conviction that autobiography is “all or nothing” (14), that a recognizable “l” must claim to tell the “truth,” proved untenable even for Lejeune himself, as he had to admit later that it can take a wide variety of forms, including third-person narration and imaginary events.

In an interview in 1973 (cited by Caws 1973, 4) Sollers conveyed the Tel Quel group’s adoption of Barthes’ (1977, 143) distinction between an “author” and a “writer” (scripteur), when he described his aim as a type of writing that is “plural.” Rather than linear and univocal, it is polivocal and participates in an on-going dissemination and transformation of texts. These terms obviously resonate with Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality, but also with the self-in-process, since the self and text are inextricable. In “My Memory’s Hyperbole” she uses the first-person plural to postulate a process of writing whose subject is “alive only if it is never the same” (1984a, 220). Her essay illustrates Stanton’s aim, in her anthology, to demonstrate that women often “graph” the “auto,” rather than narrating a “bio” as in conventional male autobiographies. Stanton (1984) sees Kristeva’s text as indicating a non-referential understanding of the self, a self seen as “a dramatis personae, not only as a critical observer, but as a major protagonist” (x, italics in original). This opinion is echoed by Dawne McCance (1996), who refers to Kristeva in “My Memory’s Hyperbole” as a “player in the drama,” who does not give us “a treatise on ethics” but a “performance of ethics” (145). In McCance’s view,

---

16 “Writerly” texts are rather more about “the adventure of writing than about the writing of an adventure” (my translation).
this performance brings the speaking body to the forefront, since the text, incorporating both conscious and unconscious elements, is “constitutive of soma” (145.)  

Projecting a plural self enables Kristeva to distance herself from a view of the writing subject as having “assumptions of ownership and control of his or her propertied body,” an attitude that places the “reified body ‘before’ and ‘outside’ the object-text” (McCance 1996, 145). Similar performative strategies are apparent in several of her theoretical works (Strangers to Ourselves (1991b), “Stabat Mater” (1986c), Tales of Love (1987b), and Powers of Horror (1982) among others), where Kristeva uses the personal pronouns “I” or “one” (on) to develop her notion of foreignness within in relation to motherhood, love, and abjection. In an essay on Powers of Horror, Thea Harrington (1998) expresses the view that these personal and performative elements in Kristeva’s theoretical writings enact a critique of traditional philosophy and psychoanalysis, allowing “that which cannot speak (the abject)” to emerge, and to articulate the space for a new ethics (139-40). This new ethics challenges the traditional notion of ethics, which Kristeva defines in “The Ethics of Linguistics” as a “coercive, customary manner of ensuring the cohesiveness of a particular group, through the repetition of a code” (1980c, 23). In contrast, a new conception of ethics needs to take into account heterogeneous representations, the “free play of negativity, need, desire, pleasure and jouissance” (23). This type of ethical practice dissolves “narcissistic fixations (that are narrowly confined to the subject)” and the “univocal enunciation of such a message,” and aims to pluralize and pulverize meanings offered as “truths” (1984b, 233). Following Kristeva’s definition of ethics, Oliver (1993b) claims that, “By linking ethics and negativity Kristeva tries to steer between tyranny and delirium” (1). Ethics is therefore integral to the notion of practice as performance, playing a central role in the pluralization of the meanings of the text and the construction and representation of plural selves.

For Harrington (1998), “practice as performance” allows Kristeva to open up the writing “I” to a plurality of speakers and stories that allow contradictions to emerge, while at the same
time drawing attention to the fact that the contradictions are perhaps only a construction of the
“I.” In Harrington’s view, it seems that the “only way one can tell the story of these tense
contradictions is to create/perform these ruptures as well” (1998, 139). For Harrington, “Stabat
Mater” illustrates this well, as two columns of text in different formats tell the personal story of
Kristeva’s experience of pregnancy and giving birth, and the collective/historical story of the
erasure of the experience of motherhood in constructions of the Virgin Mary (141). The split text
seeks to convey this “battle” by performing two roles at once. As Oliver (1993a) points out, the
text enacts emotions and affects that indicate both a loss and a birth (53), as a double process of
identification is performed, involving Kristeva’s loss of her own mother even as she became a
mother herself. In Oliver’s interpretation, the two columns leave the “impression of a scar or a
wound,” gesturing to the repression of maternity in religious and scientific discourse, as well as
in theory in general (53). Oliver stresses the effects of the intermingling of theoretical and
autobiographical elements in this text. In her view, this intermingling is related to the
countertransference experienced by the psychoanalyst in relation to the analysand.

Writing as a Psychoanalyst: Countertransference and Personal Therapy

In Tales of Love (1987b), Kristeva defines countertransference as the “ability to put myself in
their place; looking, dreaming, suffering as if I were she, as if I were he. Fleeting moments of
identification. Temporary and yet effective mergings. Fruitful sparks of understanding” (11).
This identification occurs not only with case studies, but with literary figures (authors or
characters) such as Dostoyevsky (his need for forgiveness) or Camus’s The Stranger. According
to Oliver (1993a), “She [Kristeva] speaks as if she is speaking for them. She performs the task of
the analyst and provides words, symbols, fantasies, in order to name the unnameable” (135).
Kristeva speaks “as” and not “for” these others, indicating by quotation marks that these are her
fantasies, in a manner that bears some resemblance to the creation of fictional characters.
Conversely, Oliver (1993a, 136) also suggests that one can read Kristeva’s stories in *Strangers to Ourselves* as transposed accounts of her own experiences as a foreigner in France. Even her concept of the semiotic evokes a “lost territory” that can never be recuperated, and becomes the “foreignness within” that continues to shape the relationship between the self and others. From this perspective, Kristeva’s “embrace of Western culture” is always “in the shadow” of her Eastern European past (Oliver 1993a, 138).

Kristeva’s practice of writing as performance draws attention to the element of play, of staging of self-positionings that introduce an element of pleasure, of pretence and “make believe,” while indicating that the writing “I” is an effect of this spectacle of self-dramatization, rather than a pre-existing interiority. In her theoretical writings, as Harrington, McCance and Oliver demonstrate, Kristeva uses performance and practice to enact a critique of the traditional discourses discussed, while performing elements that were repressed or left unsaid by them. She also engages in a process of working through her own affective responses to the constraining limitations of those discourses on her life by acting them out in representations. For example, in *The Samurai*, by staging the stories of Olga and Joëlle in dialogue with each other, Kristeva manages not only to reveal the conflictual aspects of her own intellectual trajectory but also to use irony and probe the limits of her own theories. This interrogation of her own “self” and links with others constitutes the basis of the logic of revolt, as will emerge in analyzing the novels, where Kristeva shifts attention from the notion of the “revolutionary” poetic text, which demonstrates the dialectic of law and transgression, to that of writing as experience/revolt, founded on return, recollection, and critical interrogation (Kristeva 2002c, 6).

An emphasis on writing as the transposition of experience (as well as an experience in itself) appears in a semi-autobiographical essay entitled “The Love of Another Language” (included in *Intimate Revolt* (2002c)), where Kristeva discusses the loss of her maternal language, Bulgarian, her adoption of French, and “translation” as a continuous sublimation of the
sensory, “a ‘language’ in quotation marks, a chaos and order of pulsations, impressions, sorrows and ecstasies at the borders of unformulable biology” (2002c, 249). This language is the “true foreignness, more foreign than any already established idiom, that the writer hopes to formulate” (249). In her studies of Proust and Colette, she reinforces the idea that the writer, even when using a native tongue, “does not cease to be a translator of his unveiled passions, that the fundamental language that he takes pleasure in translating is the language of the sensory” (2002c, 246). Writing fiction, seen in a psychoanalytic framework, is comparable to a type of translation that conveys affects related to “true foreignness,” analogous to the psychoanalytic process of anamnesis. Kristeva describes anamnesis as a process of return to the past in order to repeat it, interrogate it, and work through the experience of trauma, to give it new meanings and create possibilities for change in one’s life (2002c, 21). She defines her use of the term “experience” as that which “marks a fragile, painful and jubilant link from the body to the idea, which makes their distinctions obsolete” (2002c, 252). Her emphasis is on the therapeutic function of translating experience into/through writing fiction, rather than on the process of sublimation:

When I write, whether The Samurai, or The Old Man and the Wolves, or Possessions, I am on a voyage, in transit – to the end of the night, intoxicated by a pregnancy carried through the ‘swamps of the Atlantic,’ the impossible tears that the murder of my father in Bulgaria inflicts on me, the murderous passions that a woman suffers but also inflicts in the experience of the feminine condition that we speak so much about but hesitate to see as a ferocious detective novel. This perturbation, this plunge, this ‘I am another,’ certainly delivers me from the dark continents of my unconscious but also from the regions of meaning before signification –sensation, perception…. (2002c, 252).

Writing as experience is integral to the logic of revolt, as Kristeva explains in The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: “I will try to introduce the notion of experience, which includes the pleasure principle as well as the rebirth of meaning for the other, which can only be understood in view of the experience of revolt” (2000d, 8). In her novels, the translation of personal and sensory experience into/through writing also takes on an ethical aspect in the sense that it calls
attention to Kristeva’s own “implication” in narrating the cultural and political crisis of European tradition. In her theoretical work, Kristeva’s incorporation of autobiographical, personal elements is relatively minimal, although it is enough to unsettle traditional philosophical or academic discourse. In writing texts labeled “novels,” she can give free rein to her imagination to mingle the personal, cultural, and political in ways that illustrate the interconnectedness of collective history and the individual’s experience of the sensory and affect. In doing so, she also integrates aspects associated with the feminine/maternal into accounts of the European tradition that abjected them.

Telling stories in this form has a therapeutic function for her, as it provides a means to work through her own suffering, melancholia, and mourning of her parents, in relation to a lost language and personal past. Yet Kristeva does not use autobiographical elements to translate or work through her stories of suffering; her novels also respond to the loss of authority, laws, values in European tradition. In the context of the new world order, characterized by the loss of authority, values, laws, that open the way to a return to faith, to a “higher authority” and fundamentalism, one of the implications is that, by introducing the thinly disguised autobiographical elements along with her theoretical views, Kristeva tries to lend some validity (credibility, authority) to her stories. Since her novels engage various aspects of the cultural and political crisis of the European tradition, that have directly or indirectly affected her life experiences, her use of autobiographical and theoretical elements suggests that she is both an accomplice and a witness to the events narrated. In that sense, her personal and theoretical insights are important to help shape the meaning of not only what happened, but also how what happened is important to her (and possibly to others).

Kristeva engages theoretical thought to lend some “authority” to the meanings conveyed, suggesting that, more than a narrative ploy or autoanalytic process, she offers stories that have some cultural relevance whose meanings need to be further examined and thought through. It
would be easy to infer from here that Kristeva responds to the loss of authority of the new world order, or to its obverse, the return to a “higher authority,” by offering her own instead. One can argue that her abundant use of theories gives a certain air of intellectualism to her novels, and risks imposing an authoritarian view. There might be some truth to such claims, if one judges her novels by her use of theories. Yet one can reframe the question of “authority” from the perspective of Kristeva’s notion of performance and her use of interplay of self-positionings present in all novels, perhaps most evident in Murder in Byzantium, where we have the two characters “Julia Kristeva.” Such interplay of self-positionings challenges the very idea of fixity of the self or of historical/cultural “authority,” while ironically exposing the persistence of the need to create “authority.”

How the Personal Becomes Political through Fiction

In commenting on Kristeva’s analysis of Arendt’s notion of the polis, McAfee (2005) claims that Kristeva is “one of the few philosophers of our day to provide a language for thinking how the personal becomes political, namely, how affective and somatic forces enter the language and culture” (113). Yet McAfee regrets that Kristeva is “curiously silent on how her own theory of language can supplement Arendt’s philosophy of the public sphere” (113). I propose that if we read Kristeva’s novels through the lens of Arendt’s notion of the political, as well as through her own psychoanalytical prism, they do offer an account of how the personal, the political, and the poetic (conscious and unconscious use of language) are inextricably woven together.

In The Human Condition (1958), Arendt defines the political as a form of willingness to expose oneself, “to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own” (186). She writes: “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second rebirth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance” (176, my italics). This second rebirth also grounds human life, according to
Arendt, what is specific to it, and that is the possibility of sharing the events of one’s life with others through narration:

The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, bios as distinguished from zoe, that Aristotle said it ‘somehow is a kind of praxis’ (1958, 97, italics in original).

Challenging the formulation of life as zoe (its physiological aspect), Arendt argues that it is through this second rebirth that human beings become political beings, insofar as this linguistic rebirth is the birth of the unique self, of the “who” through the action of narration. In other words, the birth of the political self coincides with the story of its actions. Or as Kristeva (2001c) explains, commenting on Arendt’s formulation of the political that links narratives and life together:

it is because a story is a memory of an action that is itself a birth and a foreignness that endlessly begin anew in the public space, and whose ontological possibilities are established in the initial fact of our birth. [...] Through this narrated action that story represents, man corresponds to life or belongs to life to the extent that human life is unavoidably a political life. Narrative is the initial dimension in which man lives, the dimension of a bios – and not of a zoe – a political life and/or an action recounted to others. The initial man-life correspondence is narrative; narrative is the most immediately shared action and, in that sense, the most initially political action. Finally, and because of narrative, the ‘initial’ itself is dismantled, is dispersed into ‘strangeness’ within the infinity of narrations. (25-7, italics in original)

Kristeva’s incorporation of autobiographical elements in her novels can be read in light of this second, linguistic birth. Her decision to open the first page of her first novel, The Samurai, with a date – 24 June 1989 - that marks the beginning of the story of the samurai as well as the anniversary of her birthday (24 June 1941), and 24 years since her arrival in France, indicates a renewal of subjectivity and French identity, in an attempt to open up the French language and cultural memory to new forms of expression, to its own foreignness. At the same time, this “graphing” of her date of birth takes on a political dimension insofar as we conceive of politics in the Arendtian sense as the narration of a life that can “be told as a story” (1958, 97).
It is this kind of interconnection between life-writing-thinking that Kristeva considers to be the defining feature of the works of Arendt, Klein and Colette, the three women writers to whom she devoted book-length studies. Each produced a “body of work” that is “rooted in the biography of their experience” (2001b, x), and their “genius” lies in the ability to show that “our experience can be perpetually revived by that which is extraordinary” (x). Their thought is extraordinary because they put themselves into question, and raise questions about the social and political through a constant process of self-reflection and self-projection into the position of others. This is what Kristeva strives to achieve in her novels.

**Thinking Novels**

Like Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Mandarins*, to which it has often been compared, Kristeva’s first novel, *The Samurai*, depicts the intellectual scene in Paris during a specific historical period, and is encoded as both a *roman à clef* (inviting the reader to identify the barely disguised public figures represented) and a *roman à these* (a novel of ideas (re)presenting a certain philosophical position, even if that position is to expose the weaknesses of *idées reçues*). While it incorporates aspects associated with the *nouveau roman* (writing as play or the “throw of a dice,” dissemination of characters and dissolution of plot, self-reflexive commentary on writing), it nevertheless maintains a narrative structure that is in many ways relatively conventional. The text is seen as part of an inter-textual constellation, and claims to adopt the non-linear shape and trajectory of a star, “in which things may move without necessarily intersecting and advance without necessarily meeting, …. it corresponds to what seems to be an essential tendency in the world itself: its tendency to expand, to dilate” (1992, 214). The title itself connotes contestation and combat, resistance to an oppressive sociopolitical system as well as to entrenched literary conventions. Kristeva uses heterogeneity and discontinuities in this novel to raise questions about belonging, to explore foreignness, and to direct the reader to psychoanalytic concepts, in a
way that ultimately makes it a novel of ideas represented through characters, rather than one
focused on formal experimentation.

According to Susan Suleiman (1994), the *roman à thèse*, which promotes certain ideas, is
“an authoritarian genre” (10) related to the tradition of religious or political allegory, but
distinguishable from the latter because of its realist as well as didactic mode (11). Like novelists
before her (such as André Gide) who also wished to promulgate unconventional ideas, Kristeva
produces an *anti-roman à thèse* which, ironically, has a *thèse* constituted by the blurring of
boundaries between discourses to allow meanings to emerge in conflicting, contradictory
fashion. Both the *roman à clef* and the *roman à thèse* become models to parody rather than
imitate, inviting the reader to engage in a (serious) game, to solve the puzzle by becoming a
player in co-construction of the “writerly” text. Bearing in mind these aspects of Kristeva’s first
experiment in novel-production, it is not too surprising that she should have turned to another
conventional genre involving an enigma or interrogation in her three subsequent works of fiction,
which adopt some of the characteristics of the detective novel or *polar (roman policier)*.

The latter is in fact difficult to pin down as a genre, since it can take a wide range of
forms, from the thriller to the cerebral “whodunit,” from the “metaphysical” to social
commentary or satire. For Tzvetan Todorov, who attempted to analyze its mechanisms as early
as 1977, the “true” detective story “must be perfectly transparent….; the only requirement it
obeys is to be simple, clear, direct” (1977, 46). In a circular argument common in generic
formulations, he claims that if it does not conform to the model, it becomes something else:
“Detective fiction has its norms; to ‘develop’ them is also to disappoint them: to ‘improve upon’
detective fiction is to write ‘literature,’ not detective fiction” (43).17 More recent critics,
especially those dealing with Anglophone texts, do not agree that detective fiction has to (or

---

17 Todorov examines closely the possible variations and provides a solid genealogy of detective fiction, but excludes
anything that does not fit into his definition of the genre.
should) remain a sub-literary, formulaic genre. Catherine Nickerson (1997) argues that ever since Poe’s Auguste Dupin stories, the detective story as produced in America has challenged the normative model by becoming “deeply enmeshed with most of the thorniest problems of the Victorian, modern and postmodern eras, including gender roles and privileges, racial prejudice and the formation of racial consciousness, the significance and morality of wealth and capital, and the conflicting demands of privacy and social control” (744).

Other critics have focused on the narrative construction of the detective story and its emphasis on the decoding of meanings. Shawn Rosenheim (1989), also referring to Poe’s stories, examines their incorporation of the cryptograph as a strategy that disrupts a superficial reading and brings into question an assumed “metaphoric identity between self and script” (379). For Michael Holquist (1971), post-war “metaphysical detective stories” focused less on the plot and more on the detective’s thought process, implying that “there are no mysteries, there is only incorrect reasoning” (141). The detective is a mathematician who solves not crimes, but puzzles, and the detective novel acquires postmodern characteristics as it raises questions about how meanings are constructed and challenges the traditional discourses of literary analysis, history, and psychology (148). This type of detective story may ultimately have more in common with the nouveau roman, as it abandons the linear, teleological plot and neat ending in which all questions are answered, inviting the reader rather to share in constructing a possible explanation.

Kristeva herself has shown an interest in Anglophone detective story models, particularly the work of Patricia Highsmith. In the fourth chapter of Murder in Byzantium, the epigraph is a quotation from Highsmith’s Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction (1990):

> Perhaps I have a strong criminal tendency buried deep within me, otherwise I wouldn’t be so interested in criminals and I wouldn’t write so often about them…. A suspense novel is quite different from a detective novel…. Its author will take a much greater interest in the criminal mind, because the criminal often takes up the whole thing from start to finish and the writer has to get down what happens in his head. Unless one is attracted to him, one does not succeed (2006, 89).
Here Highsmith excludes the “psychological suspense thriller” from the category of detective fiction, assuming like Todorov that the latter is formulaic, a way of “organizing experience and life itself,” for which there is still a need (Highsmith 1990, 80). Kristeva makes direct reference to Highsmith’s text in *Murder in Byzantium*, when she insists on the analogy between living and writing detective fiction:

> Like a detective novel, life itself needs detours and subplots to be readable, livable. Not to follow the same leads, the same ideas: a good investigation does not follow the laws of parthenogenesis but instead requires a second angle if it is going to develop. Patricia Highsmith even made this into a rule of thumb in the art of suspense (110-1, my italics).

Identifying with both the criminal and the detective may be seen as representing the kind of countertransference discussed above, in reference to a psychoanalytic approach to the writing of novels as representing a plural self/selves.

While *The Samurai* includes a psychoanalyst as character/commentator, Stephanie Delacour, a journalist-cum-detective, takes over this function in the three other novels. It is, of course, not original to compare the detective to a psychoanalyst (Jacques Lacan (1988), Jacques Derrida (1971), and Barbara Johnson (1988) have all done so). As Juliana de Nooy (2003) argues in her analysis of *Possessions*, both psychoanalysis and the detective story were inventions of the late nineteenth century, and both are concerned with “cases” (114). Both seek to unravel a mystery, to reveal the hidden meaning of an action (crime or trauma), through the rehearsal of past events and examination of clues/symptoms, with special attention to anything uncanny or pathological (114). Other critics, such as Slavoj Zizek, insist on the differences between detective fiction and psychoanalysis. In *Looking Awry* (1991) he argues that the main difference lies in the promise of solving the murder that the detective novel usually guarantees. Whereas psychoanalysis suggests that we are “all murderers in the unconscious of our desire,” Zizek writes, the detective reconstructs the crime and promises that “we will be discharged of any guilt…. and that, consequently, we will be able to desire without paying the price for it” (59).
In “Psychoanalysis, Detection, and Fiction: Julia Kristeva's Detective Novels” (2002), Colin Davis (also focusing on *Possessions*) argues that for Kristeva the detective novel represents “the immersion in desires that can no longer be identified with any particular subject” (295). Drawing a parallel to psychoanalytic discourse in general, Davis notes that in *Possessions* Kristeva “tracks the emergence of a story out of the troubled material of the mind” (295), rather than seeking to establish guilt or innocence. He sees Kristeva as “an author of dark, violent, enigmatic fictions that attempt to trace in words the passage of trauma and desire, and the permeable identities of self and other” (298). From a psychoanalytic perspective, what matters is not the truth of the story but the exchange of meanings, in a situation where the identity of both self and other is “in play and at stake” (298). In Kristeva’s detective fictions, it is not a case of the criminal transgressing the law, and the detective/policeman catching the culprit who will be punished. Rather, the “criminal,” the detective, the victim, and the witnesses may all be seen as caught in ethical dilemmas that lead them to engage in various kinds of revolt.

**Narrative Revolts**

In the light of the above discussion, it is not surprising that readers who approach Kristeva’s novels expecting pure entertainment, conformity to any model, obvious information about her life, or direct discussion of her theories, are likely to be disappointed. My chapter on each of the four novels will begin with a review of the reviews, conveying the range of responses each has provoked. My aim is to show that the interest and value of these works of fiction may be seen to lie elsewhere, in their illustration of Kristeva’s turn to the political and ethical (in relation to her theories of the feminine-maternal as abjected), and the various functions of both intimate and public “revolt.”

Kristeva’s choice of form and distribution of characters in all the novels relates, as Chen (2008) has discussed, to her early work on Greek Menippean discourse and on the
“carnivalesque,” as analyzed in her study of Bakhtin (1970, 1986f). Both embody dialogic/polyphonic structures that can accommodate elements of dramatic personae, play/acting, masks/costumes, and the fantastic/dreams, elements that allow the speaking body and the logic of nonexclusive opposition to be foregrounded. Such narrative constructions lend themselves well to Arendt’s (1958) formulation of the polis as that which “arises out of acting and speaking together,” whose “true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be….” (197).

Arendt herself borrows from drama and theatre to advance the notion of the political as “the space of appearances.” In her reading of Aristotle, she argues that this space is actualized when people have the courage to leave their “private place,” and expose themselves through action and speech (1958, 186), as occurs in drama. Arendt’s notion of the political is thus closely tied to notions of performance, and Kristeva’s novels offer an example of how to actualize Arendt’s space of appearances, to set the stage for the exploration of various aspects of cultural and political crisis by acting out individual situations.

Kristeva not only consciously reiterates Arendt’s model of the relationship between aesthetics (in this case fictional narrative) and politics, she also reworks some of its major tenets. By using the context of revolution and revolt (from 1789 to May 1968 and the Chinese Cultural Revolution) in The Samurai, and the detective story framework in the three other novels, Kristeva is able to explore the logic of violence and sadomasochism that psychoanalysis reveals as animating both individual and political interpersonal bonds, based on “another politics, that of permanent conflictuality” (2002c, 11). I do not mean to suggest that Kristeva uses her novels to propose a particular political model or concrete solution to the crises examined. Rather, my intent is to demonstrate how her notion of revolt is central to the production of narratives that illustrate the kind of interaction (aesthetic, personal, and political) that she sees as essential to the reinvigoration and renewal of individual and social bonds. This renewal is urgently needed, in a
context marked by a new world order that entails the collapse or crisis of the “European” tradition that fostered creative and critical self-reflection and revolt.

Chen (2008) concludes her discussion of Kristeva’s ideas on the novel, as conveyed in her earlier theoretical work, by drawing attention to the importance accorded to time in Kristeva’s study of Proust (1993c, 1996e). Chen suggests that the “idea of a novel in search of time…. has an impact on Kristeva’s actual novels” (16). I hope to demonstrate that Kristeva’s novels serve as both witness and accomplice in her psychoanalytic/detective inquiry into the cultural and political crisis of “European” identity, involving actions and reactions in relation to individual and collective crimes, with ethical and political implications.

The European Scene

In Le texte du roman (1970), Kristeva argues that the Russian formalists saw the novel as bringing together various narrative forms by focusing on a single character, whereas for structuralist and poststructuralist theorists new types of novel were seen as reflecting a loss of mythic unity, conveyed by innovative narrative explorations (15). Other approaches drawing on sociology and Marxist theory perceived the novel as a by-product of the socio-economic rise of the bourgeoisie on the European political scene (16). Kristeva herself described the novel as a post-epic narrative that emerged in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, around the time of the dissolution of what she calls the first attempt at a “European Union,” based on the unifying force of Christianity (16). Already, for Kristeva, the birth of the novel was inseparable from issues surrounding “European” (comm)union and its dissolution, movements which it both reflected (as witness) and participated in (as accomplice). It also recorded and produced a larger cultural and historical process of transformation, namely the transition from symbol to sign in aesthetic and narrative representation. By defining the novel in terms of constant “transformation,” with a protean form, Kristeva emphasizes its capacity to engender endless structural (and interpretive)
possibilities (18). The novel subverts any attempt to offer a static classification of its narrative function, and hence constantly undermines any stable meanings where (inter)personal and collective relationships are concerned. As she explains in “Word, Dialogue and Novel” (1986f):

The novel, and especially the modern, polyphonic novel incorporating Menippean elements, embodies the effort of European thought to break out of the framework of causally determined identical substances and head towards another modality of thought that proceeds through dialogue (a logic of distance, relativity, analogy, and non-exclusive and transfinite opposition) (56).

One might consider that one of the attractions of the detective story for Kristeva is that it is, like the novel in general, constantly changing and impossible to pin down. Meaning can be seen to emerge, not from a fixed structure but from dynamic processes. In *The Old Man and the Wolves* she argues for a reading that transgresses the compartmentalization of discourses and allows a plural understanding of the text: “the novel opens up into philosophy…. the interfusion of one with the other abolishing the frontiers once drawn up between different genres for the benefit of lazy boys” (65).

Hybridity becomes a sign of subversion of the inertia of convention, opening up the texts to trans-cultural conversation and heterogeneous temporality. What emerges in each novel is a formulation of revolt that takes on ethical and political dimensions through thought, which Kristeva sees as a kind of action. The narrative space brings together a plurality of cultural and political dimensions, as Europe is seen from Eastern and Western perspectives, as well as from outside, allowing a diversity of opinions to emerge.

The view of a text as an intertextual “mosaic of quotations” and “the absorption and transformation” of one (or several) sign systems into another (1986f, 60) evokes a transposition akin to the Freudian notions of condensation and displacement (typical of dreams). Such a transposition implies the abandonment of a former system, the passage to a second, and the articulation of a new system with its own, new representability. This results in a pluralization of signification, which is better able to address multiple manifestations of complex subjectivities.
(1986f, 60). In “’Nous Deux’ or a (His)Story of Intertextuality” (2002d) Kristeva reformulates intertextuality as a “mental activity able to open a psyche to the creative process,” making diverse temporal and spatial connections and producing “a social melting pot,” along with “a political openness” and “a mental plasticity” (9). Her novels adopt structures that enable the author to investigate all sorts of political crises, without being circumscribed by national frontiers. The emphasis on “mental plasticity” and “political openness” resonates with Arendt’s formulation of narration as an “open memory” (cited in Kristeva 2001c, 43) which challenges the notion of the political as being tied to a national language or national aestheticism, as will be discussed later.

The novels convey a sense of continuous movement in the transitory temporal stages of the “European” identity crisis, through spatial metaphors. In Murder in Byzantium, for example, a “mental surface” is punctuated by intimate historical and geographical co-ordinates, with “traces” left everywhere to be returned to. Maps and images of spaces and buildings serve to actualize past events. The incorporation of roman à clef or detective novel conventions directs the reader to see these traces as “clues” in an investigation into stories of individual suffering and historical crimes against humanity. The trans-cultural and trans-historical search brings to the fore semiotic elements, what Kristeva calls the “trans-verbal-reality of the psyche from which all meanings emerge” (1986f, 9). We must remember that the etymological root of “semeion” is a distinctive mark, a trace; this connects to the Freudian “psychical” marks which Kristeva describes as rhythmical articulations of embodied impulses and psychical movements (9).

“Trace” and “mark” (in both literary and psychoanalytic terms) initiate a process of return/remembrance and displacement of the past, transforming collective cultural memory through the unique stories of the individual characters. “Tracking” becomes a metaphor connecting the subjective and the cultural, conveying a form of openness to others and to the past, a “mental plasticity” played out at the personal and collective levels.
**The Detective-Journalist as Witness**

The recollection or rediscovery of the past is conveyed specifically in the last three novels by the reappearance of Stephanie Delacour, who concludes each novel with a promise to return, and begins the next one by reminding readers of her previous assignments. *Possessions* ends with her promise to carry on: “And the investigation is starting up again…. Everything is starting over…” (249). In *The Old Man and the Wolves* the technique of *anamorphosis* (which is also the title of the novel’s second chapter) suggests that any understanding of the situation depends on the angle from which it is looked at. As Lawrence Wright explains in *Perspective in Perspective*, “We prefer an ordered world, regular patterns, familiar forms, and when flaws or distortions occur, provided they are not too gross, our mind’s eye tidies them up. We see what we want or expect to see…” (1983, 27). Anamorphosis introduces a riddle into the field of vision, and the viewer must seek out an unconventional viewpoint in order to “solve” it. In *The Old Man and the Wolves*, we are reminded that “There is meaning here …. but it’s a hidden meaning” (65), in a context where “Any phrase may be interpreted as meaning the opposite of what it actually says…a harmless or even flattering remark can become an accusation, a criticism, or a threat” (73). The plurality of perspectives sought by Arendt in the polis is played out in the narrative.

Menippean discourse was described by Kristeva as a “kind of political journalism,” as it exteriorized the political and ideological conflicts of its time and constituted “the social and political thought of an era fighting against theology, against the law” (1986f, 54). On a mission to document human rights abuses, the political journalist-cum-detective Stephanie Delacour not only records such events for her paper, *The Event*, but also bears witness to individual stories of suffering, abuse or murder. As discussed previously, Oliver’s (2001) concept of witnessing serves also to construct the observer’s subjectivity. Stephanie becomes implicated in events, as her own past experiences are interwoven with the stories she recounts or records. She not only
remembers her own stories of loss and suffering, she also writes them down, which becomes a personal form of testimony with a therapeutic function. This model of subjectivity recreated through witnessing seems similar to the psychoanalytic process of anamnesis, which aims at the end of the analysis to open up the interpretation of trauma to new meanings. Yet if we turn to Oliver’s definition of witnessing, it also entails an ethical obligation of response-ability to others. Thus, subjective recollection and historical recording or commemoration are brought together to rethink the relationship between the psyche and the political as an open structure of inter-action.

Stephanie’s role as both witness and actor recalls Kristeva’s analysis of the canivalesque. In “Bounded Text” (1980a), she argues that in the scene of the carnival there is “no stage, no ‘theater’” but it is “both stage and life, game and dream, discourse and spectacle” (49). Language is no longer bound to linear laws of communication, but becomes a “split speech act” where the actor and the crowd are “each in turn and simultaneously subject and addressee of the discourse” (46). The writer is, according to this logic, both author and actor, and the text is conceived as “both practice (author) and product (actor); process (actor) and effect (author); play (actor) and value (author)” (44-5). Commenting on Kristeva’s analysis of the logic of the carnival, Lechte (1990a) argues that what is at stake in carnivalization is not so much a blurring of distinctions between these categories, but rather an attempt to incorporate ambivalence, otherness, and contradiction within representation, in contrast to “monological”discourses:

To understand exactly what is at stake in carnivalization, we must recognize that all monological discourses – discourses which operate according to the laws of representation and identity – cannot assimilate otherness, negation, opposition – contradiction, in a word. Such discourses include: theology, science, philosophy, ‘everyday’ language – all those depending, in fact, on definition and the exclusion of falsity. The discourses are bi-valent (either one or the other), homogenous, and subject to the law of ‘One’” (109).

For Kristeva the irrelevance of “falsity” relates to the ambivalent position of the author/narrator, who is complicit in the distortions of meaning and plot. For instance, in Part II of The Old Man and the Wolves entitled “Detective Story,” the “author” denies responsibility for the story of the
Old Man in Part I, supposedly written by the “author in disguise,” while claiming responsibility for “the twists and turns of the plot, the changes of genre” (63). Similarly, in *The Samurai*, the title refers to a children’s book by Olga Morena, relativizing the notion of “authorship.” Olga tells us (echoing Kristeva), that “the novel is descended from the carnival…. in which “dialogue is irony, a sign of both impossibility of understanding and of fragmentation of totality…. (21). In *Murder in Byzantium*, the interplay of authorial self-positionings, from Julia Kristeva, the author of the novel, to “Julia Kristeva,” the specialist in migrations, foreigners etc, to “Julia Kristeva,” the expert in female sexuality, provides an example of how to turn the dynamics of subjectivity into a spectacle of interiority, with the irony that provides the necessary distance to see oneself as both character and author at the same time. What results (as in other self-referential fictions, from Gide to the *nouveau roman*) is a dramatization of the creation of meanings, in which the story becomes “the stage machinery behind the performance,” “the string that moves the puppet” (*The Old Man and the Wolves*, 66).

**Kristeva and Arendt on Aesthetics and Politics**

Like Menippean discourse, Arendt’s notion of the political has its roots in Socratic thought; but unlike Menippean discourse it considers narration as a kind of political action that opens up towards the singularity of individual experience. Kristeva finds in Arendt’s connection of aesthetics to politics a model for her narratives that show how singular forms of expression, of revolt, come up against or are stifled by various aspects of the new world order (be it communism, the society of the image, or a fundamentalist religion). Such a narrative framework does not operate on the basis of exclusion or purification of “foreign” elements that do not “belong,” either in a nation or in a type of textual genre. Arendt’s model connecting aesthetics and politics draws on Kant’s notion of an “enlarged mentality” (Arendt 1982, 14) to propose a type of political thought that involves considering others and their viewpoints, and allows
Kristeva to emphasize the central role of imagination in fulfilling what Oliver (2001) calls our “responsibility/response-ability” to others (15).

In terms of aesthetic choices, Chanter and Ziarek (2005) believe that Kristeva demonstrates a preference for “a ‘culture of words’ over a ‘culture of images’,” since she sees narrative/art as able to “re-establish the connection between the semiotic and the symbolic,” thus endowing it with a therapeutic role (8). There is a risk, they argue, of valuing art “only insofar as it plays a therapeutic role,” and lapsing into an “aesthetics of malady” (8). Yet Kristeva attributes other functions to narrative, albeit possibly “minimal”: “Alongside and in addition to the culture of the image – [...] - the culture of words, the narrative and the place it reserves for meditation, seems to me to offer a minimal variant of revolt” (2002c, 5). In fact, she ascribes to her novels both therapeutic and ethical/political functions. In my view, her focus on interrogation, on distancing suffering through representation, and the integration of dialogism and carnivalesque elements, ensures an ironic self-reflexive stance on the part of the (implied and actual) author that prevents the novels from remaining purely therapeutical. The emphasis does not lie on personal crisis and “malady,” mourning or melancholia, related to a private therapeutical kind of writing, but rather on how these experiences can be endowed with new meanings and transformed through intertextual and interpersonal dialogue into something else, which ultimately has a more polemical or political goal. In Between Past and Future (1961), Arendt writes: “The common element connecting art and politics is that they are both phenomena of the public world…. They are in need of some public space where they can appear and be seen” (218).

Kristeva’s theoretical formulations based on revaluing the marginal/abjected have been useful to advance a more dynamic model of literary texts, shifting the focus away from more formalist and conventional approaches to literature to the signifyng practice of publicly shared texts in relation to the construction of meaning and subjectivity. This model, as Ziarek (1993)
argues, “anticipates a different understanding of language that takes into account interweaving of heterogeneous elements” (93). Kristeva proposes a version of fiction as a signifying practice that engages Freud’s notion of the unconscious and the logic of dreams with Hegel’s notion of negativity, to postulate the “subject-in-process/on trial” as a “theory of the subject in literature that was designed to be non-reductive” (Hill 1990, 143). Initially developed as a critical response to Althusser’s concept of history as a “process without a subject,” as Hill (1990) explains, the notion of a subject “in process/on trial” conveys a split speaking subject divided between unconscious and conscious motivations, between physiological processes and social constraints. In Roudiez’s (1980) view, this formulation, which introduces the semiotic into the symbolic order, allows Kristeva to elaborate a theory where instincts can “challenge authority without producing anarchy,” and authority is able to “contain instincts without resorting to concentration camps” (4). Similarly, for Oliver (1993a), the subject in process calls attention to the death drive and eros, and postulates an ethical position by bringing to the fore the force of the drive in its capacity to transgress the Law, “because it assumes that we recognize, on the one hand, the unity of the subject who submits to the law - the law of communication among others; yet, who, on the other hand, does not entirely submit, cannot entirely submit, does not want to submit entirely” (16). While some critics, like Oliver, value the political and ethical possibilities of this approach, other feminists, like Fraser (1990) or Diane Coole (2000), see Kristeva’s displacement of the political onto aesthetic practices as problematic. Neither Fraser nor Coole discusses the difference between an aestheticization of the political and the politicization of national aestheticism, which would be a more adequate description of Kristeva’s project as seen through her reading of Arendt.
Individual and Collective Memory

Kristeva herself provides her own definition of politics in *The Crisis of the European Subject*, when she challenges the equation of “power” and “politics” and argues that politics is “the experience of a debate in which free individuals come forth and measure themselves against one another in their plurality, so as to better think about the public interest” (2000a, 97). It should be a “living interrogation and polemic, life of the mind remote from all archaism, investigation that can shed light on other peoples as well” (98). Like Arendt, Kristeva challenges two assumptions: the link between art and a national aesthetic, and the alignment of the political with a national belonging that is based on the exclusion of foreigners. Kristeva points out that Arendt’s formulation of narration “participates in another politics, that of open memory, a renewed and shared memory” that leaves “the structural potentialities of narration as wide-open” to accommodate an “infinite political action, offered to the judging perspicacity of inter-esse” (2001c, 43). The political is an “open memory” because, Kristeva explains, it is through remembrance that the meaning of the story is articulated, and the action that the story recounts is elucidated through the thought that follows. Arendt (1961) saw this kind of narration as a challenge to the crisis threatened by modern culture, which she saw as stifling the ability to think and to remember by subordinating them entirely to a teleological function:

> The tragedy began…. when it turned out that there was no mind to inherit and to question, to think about and to remember. The point of the matter is that the ‘completion,’ which indeed every enacted event must have in the minds of those who are to tell the story and to convey its meaning, eluded them; and without this thinking completion after the act, without the articulation accomplished by remembrance, there simply was no story to tell (6).

The European cultural memory that Kristeva maps out in her novels is constituted through stories that bear witness to the construction of individual subjectivities as inseparable from collective remembrance. In contrast to the perspective of Fraser or Coole, we can argue that Kristeva’s novels insist on the subjectivization of the political, rather than its aestheticisation. They offer the
example of narrative works in which both subjective and political meanings are re-created through acts of remembering that depend on a plurality of open-ended inter-actions. The political importance of this approach emerges if one recognizes that one of the premises of Kristeva’s critique of the new world order is that European cultural identity is unable to take into account different conceptions of the human person and subjectivity. In other words, Europe lacks what Samir Dayal (2000) calls “a narrative, a discourse comprehensive enough and particular enough to give meaning to the diversity and the specificities of European subjectivity” (13). If we agree that narrative is both an art and a praxis, then we can argue that Kristeva’s novels provide examples of how to accommodate diverse European subjectivities, enacted through the stories of her foreign women characters who share both Eastern and Western European heritages.

Arendt’s formulation of the political as an “open memory” emphasizes a form of narration that, in opposition to national-aestheticism, is based an inter-esse, an “in-between” founded, as Kristeva explains, on “action and speech” (2001c, 14) and open to all who consent to act and speak, regardless of their cultural and national belonging. This still begs the question of who can speak and in what language. Kristeva argues that, in Arendt’s view, what is essential is the “narrative and not language itself (though language is the pathway to narrative) that provides the mechanism for innately political thinking” (2001c, 86). In Arendt’s view, the most important thing is for the narrative to reveal and draw attention to a “who,” to “identify the agent of the story” (2001c, 73-4). Similarly, Kristeva is not so much concerned with the stylistic effects of her narratives (which many critics consider “too cerebral” if not “utterly bad”), but rather with revealing the singularity of individual experience in a collective context. Like Arendt, she is concerned with “looking at what is becoming of the individual, the singular subject, in this new normalizing and pervertible economic order” (2002c, 6). Literature becomes what Kristeva (1996a) calls a “way of getting to a politics of singularity, of keeping ‘foreignness’ within discourse” (42).
**Feminist Critiques**

Yet the idea of individualism is linked, for many American feminists, to a discourse that is liberal, positivist, and middle-class, and serves patriarchal and capitalist structures. In the Anglo-American context, where collective grassroots activism has played a crucial role in women’s ability to voice their concerns and combat oppressions, Kristeva’s focus on the singularity of individual experience has been received with suspicion and even hostility. These critiques emerge directly or indirectly out of Kristeva’s own disavowal of “mass” feminism, following her return from China and disillusionment with the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Her emphasis shifted to the singularity of each woman’s experience, on what constitutes difference within herself rather than commonality. As early as in “Women’s Time,” where she breaks down the evolution of feminism into three stages, Kristeva promotes the “demassification of the problematic of difference,” and the acknowledgement of the singularity of each woman, without attempting to subsume it into a group identity (1986e, 52). Seyla Benhabib’s (1992) critique of Kristeva’s politics of identity and difference captures many feminist concerns over this stance, when she argues that Kristeva’s concept of the political is tied to notions of privileged entitlement arising from whiteness, first-world hegemony, middle-class affluence, and heterosexuality assumed as the norm.

Moi (1986) also raises questions about the usefulness of such an approach for a feminist practice of transformation, arguing that “the specificity of the individual subject is fore-grounded at the expense of a general theory of femininity and even of political engagement tout court” (168). Fraser (1992) sees the tendency to idealize singularity as going hand-in-hand with a tendency to consolidate an “ahistorical,” “apolitical,” and undifferentiated feminine identity, alternating with moments that repudiate women’s identity altogether. Spivak (1982) went so far as to declare that she is “repelled” by Kristeva’s politics, seeing in it “an unproblematic analogy
between the single-person situation of analysis and the vastly multitudinous, multiracial, and multinational political arena” (271). The debate over whether Kristeva’s view of women is essentialist fails to address accusations by Marxist-Socialist and postcolonial feminists who do not see Kristeva’s notion of politics as providing a feminist direction for political emancipation and social transformation. More recently, Ziarek (2005) has re-directed discussion of these issues by juxtaposing Kristeva’s notion of revolt with Franz Fanon’s theory of revolutionary violence in order to address some of the limitations of Kristeva’s work, particularly in the context of racism and colonialism.

Oliver (1993a) calls for a more sympathetic understanding of Kristeva’s politics, emphasizing that it grows out of the ethics of psychoanalysis (12). She sees Kristeva as concerned with an analysis of unconscious structures that may allow us to recognize difference in ourselves, which Kristeva considers the condition for interacting with others in non-exclusionary ways. For Oliver, like Kristeva, language and artistic practices may be sites for ethical engagement and for embracing alterity, and lead to “a new ethics and politics” (61). This argument has been reinforced by Marilyn Edelstein (1993), who coined the term “poléthique” to suggest the inseparability between ethics and politics in Kristeva’s work, where they are not opposed to each other but on a continuum, just as self and other are always in a continuing dialogic relation (206). Neither Oliver nor Edelstein refers to Kristeva’s novels, which had mostly not yet been published at that time, but their emphasis on the inseparability of ethics and politics in Kristeva’s work is, as I hope to demonstrate, illustrated and corroborated in her fictional texts.

Kristeva’s Debt to Arendt

More recent work focused on the political aspects of Kristeva’s thought (such as Sjoholm 2005) further develops the implications of her psychoanalytical focus, but few have looked closely at
the extent to which Kristeva’s notion of the political (particularly in her most recent works) is indebted to the kind of politics proposed by Arendt. Three texts, by Oliver (2005), McAfee (2005) and Birmingham (2005), do take up this comparison. Oliver examines Kristeva’s notion of revolt and forgiveness in dialogue with Arendt’s notion of forgiveness and hope (which I will discuss in relation to The Old Man and the Wolves). In “Bearing Witness in the Polis: Kristeva, Arendt and the Space of Appearances” (2005), McAfee demonstrates how Kristeva’s reading of Arendt challenges conventional understandings of political discourses premised on the distinction between the public and the private, or between thought and bodies. She sees Kristeva’s contribution as providing a framework for understanding how “affective and somatic forces enter into language and culture” (113), as illustrated by Truth and Reconciliation Commissions where subjectivity and the polis are constructed through narration. Kristeva’s notion of the imaginative capacities of psychic space is relevant to this kind of public testimony and bearing witness to stories of suffering, since having their story heard may allow the narrators’ own psyche to heal.

In my reading of Kristeva’s novels, I stress the importance of imagination and how it is deployed to create a plurality of perspectives which rethinks Arendt’s notions of the “enlarged mind” and “representative thinking.” I disagree with McAfee’s (2005) argument that Kristeva’s notion of psychic space remains caught in an individualistic subjectivity, unable to move on to inter-subjective dialogue. She writes: “Even though Kristeva argues that subjectivity is constituted dynamically by heterogeneous processes, the subject seems always to be by herself. She is a speaking being creating herself” (2005, 116). My position is that Kristeva does move from a subjective to an intersubjective space in her novels, and I hope to show how her model of representative thinking – of putting one’s self into the shoes of another – stresses this politics of relationality.
Birmingham’s essay, “Political Affectations: Kristeva and Arendt on Violence and Gratitude” (2005), provides an important insight into the “affection” that animates the political bond of a “we” (128). Her reading of Kristeva’s and Arendt’s understanding of violence and fear as the animating affects of the political bond is of particular relevance for my own analysis of Kristeva’s novels. In them the adoption of some aspects of the detective fiction format facilitates an exploration of violence, fear and abjection, which (unlike Arendt) she locates in both the psyche and the political bond. Birmingham uses Kristeva’s reading of Melanie Klein to show how Kristeva situates the logic of violence and abjection in “the conflict between the inherent destructiveness of the sadistic aim (the paranoid-schizoid position) and reparative aim of gratitude (the depressive position)” (137). She goes on to demonstrate how Kristeva’s attention to the logic of violence and sadomasochism emerges as a concern for keeping foreignness within the political sphere, and this move “becomes a challenge or call for the gratuitous embrace of the alien” (142.) In my analysis, I reach a slightly different conclusion from Birmingham’s by taking a different approach, one which locates Kristeva’s “reparative aim of gratitude” in the very ability to keep questioning and thought alive by adopting different points of view.

**The Imaginary as Revolt**

In Arendt’s view, “plurality,” as Linda M.G. Zerilli (2005) explains, is not an “ontological condition,” but an activity that has a “distinctly political sense,” since it requires the ability to take into account the viewpoints of others and then to form an opinion (174). Arendt’s model, which developed from her reading of Kant’s philosophy of taste and aesthetic judgment, involves a kind of ethical obligation to others based on “representative thinking,” which implies the effort to think in the place of others. One can “enlarge one’s own thought so as to take into account the thoughts of others” (Arendt 1982, 42). This point is important to Kristeva, since it links political practice to the question of affect, and critical thinking to its place in social relations.
Ziarek (1995) argues that Kristeva turns to Arendt’s revision of Kant’s theory of aesthetics in her analysis of the status of the foreigner and reconstruction of an alternative “group psychology” (10). Ziarek explains that what Kristeva finds useful in Arendt’s reading of Kant is an alternative sense of politics premised on “judgments rooted in affect” that challenges the assumption that judgments based on affectivity remain “outside” the political realm (10). This allows her to incorporate such judgments into her discussion of the formation of modern nation states through the imaginary logic of identification.18 Kristeva’s emphasis on the role of affectivity in the process of national identification constitutes, in Ziarek’s view, a departure from Arendt’s aesthetics. While Arendt turns to an analysis of “the pleasure of the beautiful” in order to reconstruct a sense of community based on identification with others, according to Ziarek, Kristeva draws on the Freudian aesthetics of the uncanny to offer a more complex understanding of politics by stressing the uncertainty of judgment, the negative affect of the uncanny, and the ways in which they reveal “the erosion of the communicability of language and the instability of communal boundaries” (10).

In examining Kristeva’s reading of Arendt’s aesthetics my interest lies in bringing out the function of representative thinking in Kristeva’s novels. My argument is that by positing critical thinking as an exercise in narrative reflection grounded in imaginary encounters with others and common experiences, these fictional texts fulfill their political function in the Arendtian sense of the term. By emphasizing the interplay between imagination and representative thinking in her novels, Kristeva challenges both the classical assumption that the narrative imaginary offers only

---

18 Ziarek explains that Kristeva’s emphasis on the ambivalent role of affectivity in the process of national identification advances further other similar analyses on the relationship between nationalism and the imaginary logic of identification. She offers as an example Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism, in which he considers the formation of modern states premised on the imaginary logic of identification (14). His argument is that nation can be seen as “an imagined political community” despite the dispersion of people or mass migrations, because the members of the nation imagine their belonging together as a “community.” Yet Ziarek argues that Anderson’s analysis fails to explain the crucial role of affect in the formation of national imaginary and consciousness as well as to show how the relationship between “love for the nation” and “hatred of racism” reconfigures these imagined communities (14). For Ziarek, Kristeva’s aesthetics of the uncanny not only explains the role of affectivity in the process of national identification, but also posits an ethics of respect for the other at its core, premised on the recognition of otherness within.
“fictive” constructions, with little political value, and the realist novel’s view that the narrative imaginary is a “correct” reflection of reality.¹⁹ In her emphasis on a plurality of perspectives that allow contradictory meanings to emerge, as well as on women’s “embodied imagination” that allows their critical reflections to be situated in relation to their experiences, Kristeva comes close to many Anglo-American feminist analyses of the relationship between women and politics. Her ideas finds an echo in Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1998), which calls for “embodied objectivity” and “situated knowledges,” arguing that standpoint claims are insufficient as critical theory since they ignore the complex framework of social relations that mediate the connections between knowledge and power. What is needed, Haraway argues like Kristeva, is a plurality of perspectives that allows contradictions to emerge and is able to take into account disagreement and rival perspectives. According to her, such a plurality is “not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point” (439). “Single vision,” she warns, “produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters” (439). Both Kristeva and Haraway identify critical thinking, imagination, and contestation from diverse perspectives as crucial in reconfiguring the understanding of women’s contribution to politics.

Representative Thinking and the Politics of Representation

Kant’s term for what Arendt calls “representative thinking” is “enlarged mentality,”²⁰ which arises from the imagination rather than from reasoning. As Arendt (1961) explains:

---

¹⁹ In rejecting the naturalism of the European novel, the Marxist critic György Lukács, in Studies of European Realism (1950), argues that the novel reflects reality in the sense that it uses psychological realism to render a more complete, “truer” account of the world.

²⁰ Kant defines a person of “enlarged mind” as someone who is able to shift the “ground to the standpoint of others” (151), offering three maxims of taste to support his argument: a) “to think for oneself”; b) “to think from the standpoint of everyone else”; c) “always to think consistently” (152, my italics). It is the second maxim – to think
Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the viewpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective. This is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses or joining a majority, but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering on a given issue, the better I can imagine how I would feel and think in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking, and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion (241).

As is clear here, for Arendt representative thinking is not possible in isolation, but requires the ability to take into account the standpoints of those who are not present. Imagination is the faculty that “makes the others present:”

The trick of critical thinking does not consist in an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what goes on in the mind of all others…. To accept what goes on in the minds of those whose standpoint (actually the place where they stand, the conditions they are subject to, which always differ from one individual to the next, from one class or group to another) is not my own would mean no more than passively to accept their thought, that is, to exchange their prejudices for the prejudices proper to my own station (Arendt 1982, 43).

Rather, representative thinking requires us to be able to take into consideration points of view with which we might not identify at all, allowing disagreement and conflict to emerge and be addressed in an open-ended debate. In commenting on Arendt’s formulation, Kristeva argues that this kind of thinking does not aim at generating answers or at creating new values, but rather at dissolving preconceived notions or accepted rules of conduct before they become rigidified sociosymbolic structures (2001b, 216). Thus Arendt’s representative thinking is important to Kristeva for two reasons: first, because it places imagination at the core of political thought; and second, because it defines a kind of thinking that resembles psychoanalytical interpretation, particularly the effect of countertransferance, as discussed earlier.

---

from the standpoint of every one else – that Kant chooses for his formulation of the notion of “enlarged mind” as the basis for “making appropriate judgments in particular situations” (152).
Kristeva uses this capacity for representative thinking to define her notion of revolt (2002c), and in creating her fictional characters. Revolt, in this case, means “being capable of questioning things from the place of another subject” (2002c, 237). Kristeva’s fictional characters also emphasize this logic of revolt. What defines Stephanie Delacour’s detective work is not the intellectual ability to solve the “puzzle,” but the capacity to put herself into somebody else’s shoes. As Stephanie explains: “All I had was the adaptability and the nerve to put myself in someone else’s place” (1994, 143). As well, the Old Man stays alive under communism because he “put himself in the place of the artists dead and gone” (48). All the characters who revolt against various aspects of the new world order demonstrate this capacity for self-estrangement. This capacity is the source of subjective freedom and independent thinking, in contexts where the social system attempts to control perception and communication: “When barbarism reigns, the only form of civilization might be migration, a nomadism based on the strange ability some people possess of never identifying with ‘themselves’ or ‘here’ or ‘now’” (149-50). Similarly, Joëlle Cabarrus, the psychoanalyst in The Samurai, notes that “caring comes from an abolition of the self…. You yourself are being transfused, and your dissemination disperses the unhappiness of others” (286).

In Arendt’s view, the aesthetic model that best enacts this kind of representative thinking is drama, since it involves actors undertaking self-estrangement and spectators who distance themselves in order to form an opinion. As Leonard C. Feldman (1999) notes, Arendt’s emphasis on the uninvolvement of a non-participating spectator is difficult to reconcile with her formulation of the transformative possibilities that arise from speaking and acting together (7). Ronald Beiner (1982), the editor of Arendt’s Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, reframes the issue from the perspective of Arendt’s critique of the crisis of culture. He argues that it is possible to see Arendt’s insistence on the spectator’s detachment as a way to “give meaning and dignity to the human particulars that make up historical and political events” (146). By
interrupting the flow of time such judgment provides “a meaning that it would otherwise lose to the movement of time. Judgment thus anchors people in a world that would otherwise lack existential reality for them” (147). Feldman claims, however, that “this dignity comes with a price: the depoliticization of the act of judgment itself” (8). The emphasis on distance places the conflicts and instabilities of politics “out there” in the realm of appearances judged, “while the act of judgment itself performs a stabilizing function, anchoring the judging self in the world” (8). This effect limits the extent aesthetic/political events can “transform the selves who come to judge by exposing internal conflicts and involving those who judge in an event of being that challenges their settled self-understanding” (8). In her novels, Kristeva overcomes some of these difficulties by engaging the reader in a “writerly” text demanding involvement, and reaches an opposite conclusion from Arendt about the potential political effect of the aesthetic text. Unlike Arendt, she does not place conflicts “out there” but rather at the very core of subjectivity, as author, actor, and reader identify with each other’s roles, forming a political and aesthetic bond.

For Kristeva, in her novels, achieving the kind of representative thinking that Arendt talks about and the kind of ethical obligation and response-ability to another that Oliver proposes in her formulation of bearing witness, begins with the process of self-examination and putting into question one’s links with others. This entails the logic of return, of revolt, which is simultaneously “interrogation, recollection and thought” (2002c, 6). The subject-object divide is blurred, not only by putting oneself in the other’s shoes, but by acknowledging strangeness in the self. Narrative “play” creates the to-and-fro movement that allows for both involvement and distance, through self-estrangement. Ultimately, there is no clear distinction between actors and spectators, as in the carnivalesque. Unlike Arendt, Kristeva suggests that playing-acting is not something that the subject does occasionally as a diversion; rather performativity is part of the dynamic process of social relations that is always already there and draws the subject into its movement. The distance that Kristeva talks about is not disinterest, but a drawing back necessary
for self-reflection. In *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2000d), she states: “To write and/or to think can become, in this perspective, a constant calling into question of the psyche as well as of the world” (19). This is not in the Arendtian sense of abstracting one’s particular beliefs to arrive at a more universal level by considering the possible viewpoints of others, but rather “pushing the need for the universal and the need for singularity to the limit in each other, making the simultaneous movement the source of both thought and language” (2000d, 19).

The notion of adopting multiple roles or positions can also be framed in terms of “play,” as Kristeva brings out in her study of Melanie Klein (2001d), where she describes play as the necessary condition of an inner life that must be continuously recreated. For Kristeva, following Klein, to play means to be free, in the sense that one is able to resist both the “tyrants of external reality” and the “desires of the drive”: “After Klein, free means to internalize the outside (the mother to begin with) provided that this outside allows for play and allows itself to play” (2001d, 185). This emphasis on play brings to the forefront the formative role of the mother, which allows a negotiation between external (repressive) authority and the internal driftings of dreams, desires, fantasies. In *The Old Man and the Wolves*, Stephanie recollects her childhood memories: “If it hadn’t been for Mother, we might have been in danger of going off the rails altogether – the Professor, my father and I. Thanks to her, it was clear that this special speech of ours was only a game, a permissible curiosity” (166).

It is the maternal intervention that paves the way for the possibility of formulating (inner) life as a question, a curiosity to be investigated. It is this playful quality of thought as questioning, related to recognition of the maternal and the feminine, that characterizes Kristeva’s version of representative thinking, and ultimately her reformulation of Arendt’s notion of the political. Her version of the “enlarged mentality” involves taking into account repressed elements and marginal discourses that have been excluded or obscured, to arrive at a plurality of perspectives that grants women and foreigners the chance to “enlarge the thought” of the
European tradition. The women in Kristeva’s novels not only open up representative thinking to a sensorial universe, they also expose repressive ideologies and suggest alternative ways of thinking about the cultural and political crises in which they live. Detailed analysis of the novels will show that it is on the logic of revolt – return, displacement, change and transformation – that Kristeva builds this “enlargement” of thought, which is played out in subjective, cultural, and political arenas.
Chapter 2

The Samurai: Novel (of) Foreignness

“For since he belongs to nothing the foreigner can feel as appertaining to everything, to the entire tradition, and that weightlessness in the infinity of cultures and legacies gives him the extravagant ease to innovate.”

(Julia Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, 32)

Reactions to The Samurai

In the French announcements heralding the arrival of Les Samouraïs in 1990, critics wondered whether Kristeva would, or could, achieve as astounding a success on the literary scene as for her theoretical work. Many expected her first novel to offer a personal insight into the intimate lives of the Parisian intelligentsia of the ‘60s to the ‘90s. The title led some to believe it would be a response to the Sartre-Beauvoir generation, staging an encounter between fictionalized French intellectuals of Kristeva’s milieu as “Samurai” and those of an earlier period as “Mandarins.” Expectations were high, but the publication of the novel failed to fulfill many of them. One commentator for La Revue des Belles Lettres (J.-M.O. 1990, 157) complained that Kristeva offered, rather than a novel, a lamentation on “the collective suicide of thirty years of intellectual Parisian life.”

Yet he urged his readers to forgive her, since she was also the author “of the most interesting and fascinating theoretical books, such as Black Sun, Powers of Horror, Strangers to Ourselves” (157). Taking a more favourable position, Bernard Fouconnier (1990) also read the novel as an echo to Simone de Beauvoir’s roman à clef, Les Mandarins (1954), yet deplored Kristeva’s unfortunate choice of the “autobiographical genre” for her first work of fiction (64). Josyane Savigneau’s (1990) review replayed similar ideas, suggesting that Kristeva wanted to become the witness for her generation that de Beauvoir had been for hers. In 1997, Josiane Leclerc Riboni dedicated an entire book to the analogies and (dis)connections

21 My translation.
22 My translation.
23 My translation.
between *Les Mandarins* and *Les Samouraïs*, suggesting how both texts tried to “engage”
literature in order to present and defend the authors’ own specific social realities and intellectual
concerns.\(^\text{24}\)

The unfavourable French reception of Kristeva’s novel was particularly surprising when
compared to mostly positive responses to her theoretical works. On the other side of the Atlantic,
where her theories were even more popular, reactions ranged from biting irony and sarcasm to
restrained expressions of disappointment. Most of the Anglo-American reviewers used a similar
framework of comparison, finding her fiction unsatisfying as fiction and of interest only in
relation to her theories, although fewer emphasized the links to de Beauvoir’s novel. Michael
Levenson (1994), for instance, argued that Kristeva failed to live up to “her audacious theoretical
challenges,” and accused her of “all the time remembering the other, older incarnation of a
glistening intellectual” (7). Wendy Steiner (1992) launched a sarcastic attack against what she
described as “Europe’s academic super-heroes” (ranging from Louis Althusser to Kristeva and
Paul de Man), suggesting that Kristeva’s novel is nothing more than a reiteration of stereotypical
constructions of an “infamous” European intellectual past (2).\(^\text{25}\)

One exception to these negative reviews was Margaret Whitford’s (1992) thoughtful
analysis of Kristeva’s depiction of her generation of intellectuals living in Paris. Although
Whitford also uses Kristeva’s theoretical work to measure the success of her fiction, and finds it
lacking in some respects as a novel, she proposes a reading that is attentive to how the lives of
the thinkers depicted unfold in relation to their ideas. She urges readers to avoid the trap of

\(^{24}\) Two years before the publication of Riboni’s book, Marie-Paule Meda (1995) had already analyzed similarities
between de Beauvoir’s *The Mandarins* and Kristeva’s *The Samurai*, in a doctoral dissertation defended in the
French Department at the University of British Columbia. Meda also undertook a completely different approach,
calling for an interpretation of *The Samurai* as an “auto-fiction,” which she defines as a “homodiegetic narration
disguised in an extradiegetic story, where the author brushes the painting of the society, hers – [...] by assigning
herself the role of witness-narrator” (191-2). Riboni’s book, on the other hand, undertakes a detailed and rigorous
textual analysis of both novels, even comparing precisely the space occupied by the diaries in each novel.

\(^{25}\) In Steiner’s review, Althusser becomes “the insane and the criminal” who “forgot to read his Marx carefully
before strangling his wife,” while Paul de Man is reminded of his “Nazi past.” Kristeva does not fare better: she is
called “a semiotician of desire,” a “Maoist psychoanalyst,” and a “sentimentalist” whose heart “thrills to the
cadence of the Harlequin romance” (2).
reductionism by limiting their reading to a mere decoding of the “keys” of the text (i.e., names, situations, intrigues, analogies with “real” life characters). Rather, she sees the fictional format as lending itself well to showing how the events are interconnected with a world of ideas, language, and passions (140).

Overall, however, Kristeva’s *The Samurai* has not had a good press on any side of the Atlantic. While her theories have been praised, her novel has been condemned as ill-conceived, or a mere reiteration of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Mandarins*. Indeed, if we take the relationship between “the Mandarins” and “the Samurai” to be the only theme of the novel, then we have to concur with the critics. We would also have to agree with Margaret Atack’s (1997, 249) observation that the fictionalisation of the French intellectuals as “Samurai” represents a critique of the Mandarins and their ideologies. Atack pointedly concludes her analysis with the remark that Kristeva’s juxtaposition of “the Samurai” and “the Mandarins” takes the focus away from other important cultural and political events discussed in the novel, such as the May ’68 events. Such juxtaposition, Atack insists, minimizes the May ’68 events to the extent that they are turned into “a pale imitation” of the French Revolution (252).

One problem with the critiques based on the relationship between “the Mandarins” and “the Samurai” is that they tend to blur the broader contextual and political differences between Beauvoir’s and Kristeva’s novels. Another problem is the tendency to overlook what is specific to each novel. Carol Mastrangelo Bove (2006) provides a close reading of *The Samurai*, but also remains caught up in analogies with *The Mandarins*. She does address the controversy surrounding the publication of Kristeva’s book *About Chinese Women* (1986a), as does Chen (2008), whose engagement with Kristeva’s novel is more nuanced.\(^{26}\) The focus on Kristeva’s depiction of prominent intellectuals shared by most analysts tends to divert attention away from

---

\(^{26}\) Chen (2008) writes: “Over a twenty-five year period, the characters in the novel experience countless battles involving love, depression, maternity and disease, as they move from Paris to China to New York and back to Paris. Kristeva thus provides a study of the intellectual history of her generation in the form of a novel” (18).
some specific elements that will be central to my discussion, namely the role of women and of foreigners in her interrogation of the legacy of the French Revolution and of the events of May ‘68. Most existing studies also marginalize the importance she assigns to both literature and psychoanalysis in examining the relationship between psychic and political life, between the individual and collective experiences of revolt/revolution. These are the aspects I will concentrate on here.

The Role of Women and Foreigners in Re-Thinking the Legacy of the French Revolution

By overlooking the role of women and foreigners (and women as foreigners) in the novel, one risks side-stepping Kristeva’s contribution and originality in relation to her theoretical writing, as well as failing to address another issue raised in some reviews, namely the “autobiographical” aspects of this work of fiction. The Samurai not only provides a new framework for situating some of Kristeva’s main theoretical concepts in their intellectual and political context, but by adopting the perspective of women and foreigners and acknowledging their creative and intellectual insights, it enables the author to question the legacy of the French Revolution in a new way. The focus on the viewpoint of an “outsider” from Eastern Europe brings together two European intellectual traditions, and Kristeva’s valorisation of women’s viewpoints suggests that “feminine” inquiries, reflections, and personal writings have the potential to revive a culture of revolt. The latter is reframed by placing the emphasis on singular, unconventional or dissident perceptions and discourses, and on the aptitude to care for others associated with women.

Two stories unfold and intertwine in the novel, each involving a female protagonist with strong resemblances to certain aspects of Kristeva’s own life. The first, Olga Morena, is a literary student and journalist from “down there” (an Eastern European communist country), the second, Joëlle Cabarus, is a psychoanalyst. Olga arrives in Paris to conduct research on the nouveau roman, and goes on to achieve literary acclaim which takes her to Peking, then New
York, and back to Paris where her journey ends when she gives birth to a son, Alex. Olga’s story covers May ’68, and ends at the time of preparations for the bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989. Central to her story is the reflexive trope of a two-fold journey. On one hand, there is her intellectual voyage through the cultural and political struggles of the Parisian intelligentsia from the ‘60s to the late ‘80s, including glimpses of Maoist China and the underground avant-garde of New York. On the other hand, there is her inner journey of self-discovery, which culminates with the realization that her brief infatuation with the Chinese Cultural Revolution was part of an on-going effort to repress her own “foreign” and “Eastern” origins.

Kristeva uses the story of Olga, who finds it difficult once she is established in Paris to unproblematically claim a “European” identity, to investigate the status of the foreigner from a place of dissidence. Olga’s experiences provide a means to include femininity as part of a critical interrogation of two major features of cultural and political crisis in both Eastern and Western Europe: the rule of communism in the East, and the growth of a capitalist consumer society in the West. By presenting Olga as a young woman from Eastern Europe arriving to continue her studies in Paris, Kristeva is able to examine how the unique French intellectual milieu of the late ‘60s opened up to foreigners and particularly to dissident writers from the “East.” Simultaneously, she shows how intellectuals in the communist countries of Eastern Europe were threatened at that time with persecution for expressing any dissident ideas in public. Kristeva deploys fiction, which allows her to deal with individual cases without being overtly autobiographical, to individualize the pan-European context of this period and present examples of how foreigners and women call into question the purpose and effects of political revolution or revolt. At the same time, she suggests that other forms of more personalized revolt that rely on the aptitude for self-interrogation, recollection and thought can enable the individual to retain a sense of dignity and freedom in the face of exclusion or an oppressive regime.
Joëlle Cabarus, the female psychoanalyst, undertakes a more obviously introspective journey to unravel the meanings of her name, which takes her back to the time of the French Revolution. Her introspective journey takes her to the times and life of Thérésa Cabarrus (aka Madame Tallien, or “Our Lady of Thermidor”), a leading social figure during the French Revolution who became famous for influencing her husband (Jean Lambert Tallien) to join the conspiracy to oust Robespierre on July 27, 1794. The psychoanalytical reflections recorded in her journal open up a network of connections that link the events of May ‘68 to 1789. In Joëlle’s notes, Sade joins Freud to reflect on “the right to experience pleasure without killing anyone else” (136). These juxtapositions of the personal/sexual/private with the impersonal/political/public open up the meaning of “revolution” to an examination of the role of affect, desires, negativity, and various forms of violence. By drawing a tentative link between the logic of sadomasochism, which she sees as inherent in subject-formation, and the logic of collective violence inherent in political revolution, Joëlle brings into sharp focus the uneasy relationship between the disintegration of personal, private, psychic space and the transformation of shared, public, political space.

Since my reading of Kristeva’s novel will focus on notions of foreignness and the feminine, the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature, and the ways in which Kristeva uses both to address the legacy of the French Revolution and the post-war condition of the female intellectual dissident, some of her theoretical texts will be highly relevant to this discussion. These include Strangers to Ourselves (1991b) and Nations without Nationalism (1993b),27 where the theme of the foreigner is central. Here I will refer to both to demonstrate two points: first, that Kristeva attributes to women the role of rethinking the relationship between foreignness and the feminine; and second, that she opens up the legacy of the French Revolution

---

27 Further references to Strangers to Ourselves will appear as Strangers, and further references to Nations without Nationalism as Nations.
to an inquiry into the role played by affect, uncanny strangeness, and negativity in both the formation of psychic life and the transformation of social relations.

A critical examination of the legacy of the French Revolution is important to Kristeva, since it marked a radical break with the past, giving way to the rise of imperialism and capitalism, on the one hand, and on the other, to two totalitarian regimes, communism and Fascism. In tracing a tentative link between the Eastern European communist regime and the Western European consumer society, I will argue that Kristeva appeals to the Kantian notion of trans-national human dignity and symbolic value, an idea that shaped one aspect of the legacy of the French Revolution, to propose an alternative way of thinking about the cultural and political crisis faced by modern Europe.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the French Revolution made the citizen the foundation of the French Republic and its legislation, and in doing so it excluded foreigners and women from participation in the political scene. In other words, the social and political revolution of the 1793 French Terror betrayed the very principles that made the Revolution possible (liberty and equality), while suppressing all other types of revolt which take the form of individual expression and free questioning.28 A second point is that Kristeva uses the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis to advance possible ways of rethinking questions pertaining to “European” values. “Dissident thought” becomes a privileged place from which to rethink the European tradition, and psychoanalysis serves to promote a politics of care, stressing the importance of including the universal principle of human dignity and the right to be different/dissident in a notion of human rights that inherits the contradiction between the rights of “man” (implying all humans and therefore ultimately including women and people of other races/nationalities) and the rights of the (national, native-born, male) “citizen.”

---

28 Kristeva develops this argument in *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000a, 110-112).
In Strangers, Kristeva examines the condition of the foreigner along two lines: one historical, the other philosophical-psychoanalytical. The historical line re-constructs the figure of the foreigner during the formative course of Western tradition, beginning with the Greek tragedies, the Bible, the literature of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, up to Albert Camus’s L’Etranger (The Stranger/Outsider) published in 1942. We learn, among other things, about the origins of the notion of barbar(ian)ism, the status of foreigners in Homeric times, Hellenistic cosmopolitanism, the relationship between exile/migration, pilgrimage, and religion. We also learn about how the theme of the foreigner was used in Renaissance literature to represent the “good savage” (a term which Rousseau also used in the 18th century) and how it underwent a metamorphosis during the Enlightenment period when it entered into philosophical fiction, with Montesquieu’s Persian Letters and Voltaire’s Zadig and Candide. With Montesquieu and Voltaire, the theme of the foreigner became predominant in philosophical fiction, being used in a double sense. On the one hand, the theme of the foreigner invited the reader to leave one’s homeland in order to explore other cultures, mentalities and political climates; on the other hand, it was used only to stage the return to the homeland and to examine “as if” from a distance, one’s own cultural, political limitations, peculiarities and inadequacies. The foreigner thus became a metaphor of the distance at which one places oneself in order to critique and “revive the dynamics of ideological and social transformations” of their homeland (134).

In The Samurai Kristeva also uses the figure of the foreigner in a double sense: both as a metaphor of distance and as the one who makes a twofold journey. The twofold journey involves taking distance from herself and from the country of origin, as well as retaining a distance from the host country, to become better able to judge the limitations, peculiarities, and political ideologies and institutions of both places. The story of Olga Morena serves as a good example of
this twofold journey, opening up towards both a process of self-examination, self-estrangement, and to a critical interrogation of the cultural and political contexts through which she travels.

The theme of the foreigner is also suggested in the title of the novel, albeit differently. “The Samurai” of the title evokes a code of ethics and a practice that are foreign to the European tradition. The title is not only that of Kristeva’s novel, but also of a children’s book that Olga writes for her son, as well as the name of the game her son plays with his father. It connotes the imaginary and the exotic, elevating physical conflict to a spiritual level, and the term unfolds at the centre of the novel, “like some hybrid flower,” caught “between the lucidity of the West and the spirituality of the East” (43). Kristeva also introduces another fictional text, *Hagakure, and the Art of War*, written by Dan, another dissident intellectual from Eastern Europe and Olga’s former lover, as a commentary on hybridity between Eastern and Western cultures. “European” culture is exposed as far from unified or immune to “contamination.”

By inserting the “foreign” ethical code of the Samurai into the European tradition, Kristeva recognizes the centrality of death and violence, as the result of repression of the “foreignness within” by any exclusive grouping. By learning how to confront and deal with the excluded other and the return of the repressed, it is possible, Kristeva suggests, to reconfigure the relationship between “East” and “West” in terms of another politics, one that she calls “permanent conflictuality” (2002c, 11). A politics of “permanent conflictuality” in *The Samurai* calls for the recognition that cultural, economic, spiritual and psychological contradictions exist and that they are not “solvable.” Or as Kristeva explains later (2000d): “When one recognizes that the contradictions of thought and society are not soluble, then revolt – with its risks – appears as a continuous necessity for keeping alive the psyche, thought, and the social link itself” (144). In *The Samurai*, such politics of “permanent conflictuality” brings into sharp focus the fact that “East” and “West” are not homogeneous categories that can be defined only in terms of historical constructs, or unproblematically conflated with “Eastern” or “Western” Europe. The
emphasis on the “Samurai” code, which Kristeva uses to define both the dissident intellectuals from communist Eastern Europe and the avant-garde Parisian intellectuals, presents European identity as a heterogeneous process that insists, on the one hand, on the contamination and pluralization of the meanings of “East” and “West,” and on the other hand, on the recognition of foreign elements and ideas as central to the formation of “European” identity. At the same time, Kristeva’s reworking of the code of Samurai in such a way as to define the variants of revolt of both Eastern European dissidents and Western European avant-garde intellectuals draws attention to the dangers of appropriation of the “other” and their ideas, and how such appropriation risks erasing their context or specificity. In order to make visible this process of appropriation and exclusion, Kristeva’s politics of “permanent conflictuality” calls for bringing to the fore the logic of violence and desire for death, destructiveness, and everything that puts the very possibility of unitary meanings to the test. Kristeva’s “Samurai” call on Yamamoto, Freud, Sade, Marx, Proust, Mallarmé, Mao and others to suggest that it is only through writing, thought and representation that the logic of one’s desires and violence can be exposed, examined and interrogated.

By alluding to foreignness in her title, Kristeva evokes three things: first, an investigation into the situation of the foreigner in the European context, since the cultural specificity of the French Revolution cannot be adequately addressed unless one opens up European culture to “other” forms of cultural interaction; second, that such an opening requires an examination of the ways in which one reworks or appropriates “other” cultural models in order to give a name to certain types of experience that have been excluded or repressed in the European tradition (i.e. the participation of women in the cultural and political realms), and therefore lack a discourse to represent them; third, that an investigation of foreignness at both discursive and inter-subjective levels needs to take a particular type of temporality into account, one that includes the time of childhood and the child’s relationship with the mother (and the mother-tongue). It is by
acknowledging various types of appropriation of the other and diverse experiences of temporality that the theme of the foreigner in Kristeva’s novel engages with the problem of self-reflexivity, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In *Strangers* Kristeva reminds us that the first foreigners represented in classical Greek literature were women, the Danaides, whose adventures Aeschylus recounted in *The Supplicants* (17), advancing the idea that women were already associated with foreignness. 

In *The Samurai*, Kristeva makes a direct link between Olga, the foreign woman from Eastern Europe, and the Danaides in Aeschylus’s play. It is Joëlle Cabarus who formulates the connection: “In Greek, ‘lousy foreigner’ is Barbara Kaka – I assure you, I’m not making it up, my dear lady. Aeschylus said it, and Benserade quoted it as recently as yesterday. Perhaps you knew that already, and I’m wasting my time here. Wasting, losing myself. Barbara Kaka” (69). The word “barbarian,” Kristeva explains in *Strangers*, was used to refer to non-Greeks, denoting their language as inarticulate and incomprehensible babble: foreigners’ speech emerged as a counterpart to the Greek *logos*, seen as the intelligible principle in the order of things (51). In *The Samurai*, Kristeva also turns the question of the foreigner into a language issue, as the non-native speaker introduces difference into the logos of the natives, slowing down by clumsiness and dissonance the fluidity and ease of the native language. The link between the extraneous position of women and foreigners in relation to language proves to be a productive place from which to rethink the European tradition in general. Kristeva uses the woman-as-foreigner to re-claim dignity and difference, in a context where the frontier between Eastern and Western Europe played an

---

29 By stressing the link between foreigners and women at the starting point of Greek thought, Kristeva also challenges some of the existing literature on the relationship between foreigners and the European cultural heritage. For instance, Derrida, in *Of Hospitality* (2000), also reflects on the question of the foreigner, reminding us that with the arrival of the foreigner, the first question was born. It is the foreigner, in Plato’s Sophist, Derrida tells us, that asks the first question. In other words, the very possibility of formulating a “question” is premised on the figure of the foreigner. Derrida establishes the question of the foreigner as a question of hospitality and hostility, in a complex discussion on the possibility or impossibility for the foreigner to participate in the life of the polis. Yet Derrida’s analysis of the foreigner leaves the question of the foreign woman unaddressed, overlooking the fact that in ancient Greece, traveling and participation in the political realm were a male privilege. Kristeva’s insistence on the link between the first foreigners and women challenges the views invoked by Derrida.
essential role in the definition of freedom and rights, obscuring the role of women and their participation in the cultural and political scene.

In *The Samurai* Kristeva also uses the story of Ruth Dalloway, a Jewish mother who left the United States to help found the state of Israel, in order to suggest the idea that unity can be achieved only if a “foreign” element is recognized as an integral part of the “same.” This is a direct reference to the Biblical story of Ruth the Moabite, which Kristeva cites in *Strangers* as representing a woman as both a foreigner and an ancestor of the royal house of David, the founder of Judaic tradition: “Thus at the heart of sovereignty there is an inscription of a foreign femininity” (75). In *The Samurai*, the parallel story of Ruth Dalloway inserts the feminine as foreign at the very root of the newly formed Jewish state, providing an example of what Kristeva calls a “constant quest for welcoming and going beyond the other in oneself” (1991b, 76). It also reminds us that one aspect of the European tradition, namely its cosmopolitanism, is based on the recognition (and acceptance) of foreignness.

A second line of investigation in *Strangers* engages with eighteenth-century philosophical, legal, and political reflections on cosmopolitanism by Montesquieu, Diderot and Kant, bringing them together with Freud’s notion of the uncanny to show how types of exclusion that are necessary to the formation of subjectivity and of nation-states can be reconsidered, when one recognizes the foreigner within as part of our own identity. Oliver (1993b) offers a clear explanation of why Freud’s theory enables Kristeva to explain exclusion at both the subjective and cultural/national levels:

Kristeva argues that what we exclude as a society or a nation – in order to be a society or a nation – is interior to our very identity. It is our own unconscious which is projected onto those whom we exclude from our society/nation. In this way we protect our own proper and stable identity both as individual subjects and as nation-states. Kristeva argues that when we flee or combat strangers or

30 In *Strangers*, Kristeva argues that Montesquieu’s cosmopolitanism can be seen as the “metaphor of political thought itself” (131). Kant’s cosmopolitanism is inseparable, in her view, from a political ethics that bases the status of the foreigner on the acknowledgement of difference inscribed “at the very heart of the universal republic” (173). In other words, Kant formulates the idea of cosmopolitics on “the notion of separation combined with union,” which Kristeva explains as a “coexistence of differences” (173).
foreigners, we are struggling with our own unconscious. The stranger or foreigner is within us (14).

In *The Samurai*, Kristeva links Kant’s notion of cosmopolitanism with Freud’s notion of the uncanny in the story of Olga, to provide an example of how the foreigner can be integrated at a cultural and political level, and how such a *cosmopolitics* depends on the recognition of foreignness within as well as on learning how to deal with the return of the repressed (in Olga’s case the repression of her origins and of the maternal). Thus, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Kristeva explores the relationship between individual narcissism and national identity in her novel, as she did in *Strangers*. Freud’s notion of the uncanny acquires a political dimension when aligned with Kant’s notion of cosmopolitanism based on a universal principle of human dignity. Kant’s universalism, in turn becomes individualized through the creation of fictional characters.

**Writing as Thought**

*The Samurai* does not simply reiterate the ideas developed by Kristeva in her theoretical works. What the novel adds to *Strangers* is a focus on how the feminine and the role of women continue to remain repressed or obscured in both Freud’s notion of the uncanny and Kant’s notion of cosmopolitanism. In *The Samurai*, Kristeva attempts to reconstruct a genealogy of foreignness combined with femininity, by representing women as narrators, intellectual thinkers, and writers. Reading and writing are depicted as inseparable from thought, and when undertaken by these

---

31 Though I am aware that both Kant’s principle of universal dignity and Freud’s notion of a universal “uncanny” raise difficult questions, I argue that the principle of universality refers here only to a particular European context, with a paradoxical effect. On one hand, it helps to explain the cultural and political contexts that both Kant and Freud addressed, and the ways in which both accentuated the need for “universal” as a strategy to counteract the political forms of exclusion manifest in their times. Kant’s universal principle of human dignity was formulated in opposition to Herder’s idea of a *Volksgeist*, that led to the rise of nations and nationalism. For Freud, the “uncanny” tried to counteract the idea of an “other” or “otherness” as being on the outside, and thus, on the socio-political level, vulnerable to exclusion, discrimination and abuse. In short, both Kant and Freud tried to posit a philosophical and psychoanalytic principle of universality to counteract the socio-political realities of their times. On the other hand, if “universal” means only a “European universal” then it raises many complex questions about colonial heritage etc.
women they turn into creative, dissident thought about the status of the foreigner, the legacy of
the French Revolution, and the crisis of European identity. Two types of writing by a woman
play a central part in the narration: the first is produced by Olga, the journalist-critic who once in
Paris finds an immediate “kinship” in the intellectual milieu of the Now group; the other reveals
the reflections of Joëlle, who keeps a journal as an exercise in meditation and self-reflection as
well as to record fragments of everyday events. Extracts from Joëlle’s diary-writing, her
psychoanalytically inspired reflections, provide the beginning and the end of The Samurai,
framing the novel as a self-reflective interrogation of the relationship between the stories of
outsider women and their cultural and political realities. By projecting a dissident foreign woman
writer (Olga) and a female psychoanalyst as the main protagonists and narrators in the novel,
Kristeva further advances the idea that women’s writing/ thought can construct a narrative, a
language, for types of experience that formerly remained obscured in the European tradition.
These women characters return to the legacy of the French Revolution to examine its tenets,
expose its repressed elements, and reflect on how they continue to shape their personal
experiences intertwined with the cultural and political events of their times.

The concept of writing as thought provides a framework for the encounter between
literature and psychoanalysis, between Olga and Joëlle, who both emphasize feminine creativity
and illustrate dissident thought that aims to be ethical, seeking creative ways to achieve what
Olga calls “learning how to be different with different people” (319).

The Interaction between Literature and Psychoanalysis

Noelle McAfee (2004) argues that Kristeva’s dialogue between literature and psychoanalysis
casts literature (i.e. creative writing from both the writer’s or reader’s perspective) as a space for
“working through conflicts so that the subject [author] is not doomed to act them out” (50, italics
in original). It is this process of working through, of distancing conflicts through (fictional)
representation, that McAfee considers as central to the role of literature and to its ethical function. She claims that “in addition to displaying the symptoms of some kind of malady of the soul, literature can be cathartic. This is certainly true for abjection” (50).

Megan Becker-Leckrone (2006) also argues that the intersection of literature and psychoanalysis provides a privileged position from which to address the experience of abjection, “an experience of unmatched primordial horror, putting the subject in the most devastating kind of crisis imaginable” (20). Both Becker-Leckrone and McAfee believe that in her attempts to bring literature and psychoanalysis together around the notion of abjection, Kristeva provides a broader cultural framework for interpreting the relationship between individuals and society, in which conflicts are worked out through representation rather than acted out through violence.

In The Samurai, the encounter between literature and psychoanalysis represented by Olga and Joëlle enables Kristeva to emphasize two important transformations. For Olga, the foreign woman, the question of foreignness/abjection is transformed into acknowledgement of the value of dissident thought, and for Joëlle, the “native,” it is transformed into a politics of care. In Strangers Kristeva argues that “the ethic of psychoanalysis implies a politic,” involving a “cosmopolitanism of a new sort” founded on taking into account the “foreigner within” with its unconscious “desiring, destructive, fearful” logic (198). In The Samurai, Kristeva uses psychoanalysis to provide an example of a politics of care that arises out of Joëlle’s self-reflection and interactions with others, beginning with the search for the “other” in herself.

Central to the encounter between literature and psychoanalysis in The Samurai is the logic of revolt, whose movement of return, displacement and transformation implicates the two discourses in a relationship that engages the themes of the foreigner and the feminine in an open process of reflexivity and interrogation. Implication is a term that Shoshana Felman (1987) used to describe the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature, defining it as “being folded within” (17). For Felman, the aim of such an implication is to bring out the dynamic nature of
the text, as well as to challenge classical hermeneutic models of interpretation that set out to find “the meaning” of the text, when there is not one but many meanings. She writes:

the interpreter’s role would be here, not to apply to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to generate implications between literature and psychoanalysis – to explore, bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed implicate each other, each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced by the other (17-8).

While Felman’s definition of implication emphasizes the ways in which these two domains are engaged in an intertextual dialogue, expanding on and transforming each other, in *The Samurai* implication also involves a process of reflexivity, as Kristeva uses psychoanalysis to critique the limitations of the “revolutionary” literary ideals of Olga and her cosmopolitan intellectual group. Joëlle’s version of psychoanalysis as a politics of care emerges as a reflection on and alternative to Olga’s version of literature as a cosmopolitics of singularity. Pivotal to their interaction is the figure of the foreigner, and women play a central role in reconfiguring the foreigner’s place in European cultural memory.

**Feminist Interpretations of the Foreigner**

Kristeva’s ideas on the foreigner generated many critical responses particularly from Anglophone feminist critics. For instance, McAfee (1993) aligns Kristeva’s theories of foreignness in relation to abjection with Heidegger’s notion of *nothingness*, in order to propose a model for an ethics of difference and examine the ontological underpinnings of Kristeva’s formulation of an “ethics of respect.” McAfee effectively demonstrates that in Kristeva’s analysis the foreigner “performs a necessary function for subjectivity and political identity” (117). She nevertheless remains skeptical about Kristeva’s analysis of exclusion and proposals for change that involve the recognition of foreignness within, since they do not elaborate on how it can subvert nationalism or other forms of collective extremism. Yet McAfee concludes that it is positive to recognize that the foreigner “presents an opportunity and not an abyss” (132).
Norma Claire Moruzzi (1993) is less convinced by Kristeva’s theories about foreignness, and argues that Kristeva’s analyses blindly avoid any discussions of race and racism, although she refers to texts and contexts where race and colonialism are implicated at various levels. For instance, Kristeva’s psychoanalytic discussion of Camus’s *The Stranger*, in which the main protagonist, Meursault, is a “modern colonial,” a “pied noir in Algeria” (137), ignores the implications of Meursault’s political and social circumstances. Moruzzi writes:

> In her discussion of Meursault, Kristeva’s emphasis on the psychoanalytic (the person and the language of his story) elides the political; in her larger discussion, her choice of texts is surprisingly canonical, so that what is missing, estranged from her own texts, is not a discussion of formal politics, but an acknowledgement of racial configurations (138-9).

In Moruzzi’s view, part of the problem with Kristeva’s analysis lies in her return to an Enlightenment conception of the subject that poses a real challenge to her desire to valorize foreignness and heterogeneity.

There is certainly some justification for Moruzzi’s complaint that Kristeva leaves out specific discussion of race and racism in *Strangers*, and her return to the Enlightenment period does risk subverting the potential of her notion of the foreigner. However, I argue that it is precisely this return to the Enlightenment project and to the legacy of the French Revolution that allows Kristeva, in *The Samurai*, to anchor the theme of the foreigner to the Kantian transnational principle of universal dignity. By doing so, she challenges the perception of foreignness as primarily an issue of economic and political concern, and opens it up to the cultural realm, attributing a symbolic dignity to it.

Ziarek (1995) also argues for the importance of recognizing the liminal figure of the foreigner as having the potential to subvert the homogeneity of a national identity: “Fracturing the imagined unity of the national body, the figure of the foreigner – a supplementary double of the Enlightenment’s political rationality – anticipates the Freudian ‘logic’ of the uncanny” (2). She explains that the Freudian uncanny arises from a specific historical formation of the
Enlightenment, and emerges as “the obverse side of the modern subject and its scientific, secular rationality” (4). She claims that the uncanny can be understood as the obverse of another legacy of the Enlightenment: the dissolution of religious communities and subsequent formation of modern nation-states (4). In Ziarek’s view, this plural signification of the figure of the foreigner opens up a new understanding of the relationship between psychic space and the transformation of social space, in such a way as to take into consideration the political violence of nationalism and xenophobia. Ziarek’s analysis of Kristeva’s discussion of the uncanny emphasizes the ambivalent role of affectivity in the formation of nationality, arguing that “the national bond is inseparable from the negativity of the uncanny” (6). This emphasis on ambivalence and heterogeneity in the process of national identification is what Kristeva (1991b, 9) uses to posit an “ethics of respect” for alterity. In other words, the turn to ethics emerges as a call for “the transformation of this affect – of the political love haunted by the hatred of the other – into respect for alterity” (9).

Ziarek’s analysis of the uncanny is important since it allows us to understand the ambivalence and liminality of the figure of the foreigner in Kristeva’s work, while calling attention to the ambivalent role of affectivity and of negativity at work in the relationship between psychic and social space. In analyzing The Samurai, I will add an emphasis on how the uncanny emerges as a confrontation between the feminine and the death drive, which Kristeva employs in the story of Olga to rethink the condition of the foreigner in a cosmopolitan context. I suggest that by revealing repressed femininity as the basis of the relationship between the foreigner and cosmopolitics, Kristeva develops in The Samurai an ethics premised not only on respect for alterity but also on the recognition of the feminine (foreignness) within.

In the next section that begins my more detailed analysis of the novel, I argue that Olga’s experience of motherhood effects a shift away from the politics of engagement to the dynamics of subjective revolt; the latter emerges as an inquiry into the meaning of childhood as well as of
giving birth, of links with others. In the second section, “Foreigners Outside: The Paradoxical Logic of the French Revolution,” I trace a tentative line to connect Olga’s Eastern European intellectual formation with Kant’s notions of hospitality, cosmopolitics, and the principle of universal dignity, in order to argue that it is her intellectual adherence to this particular aspect of the Enlightenment project that allows Olga to find a spontaneous kinship with the Parisian members of the Now group (the thinly disguised Tel Quel group). Central to my analysis is the notion of revolt as dissident thought, which I see as offering a certain form of cohesion between the Eastern European Olga and the Western members of the Now group. However, although Olga’s belief in the principles of universal dignity, cosmopolitics, and dissident thought does allow her to find a space that accommodates both her condition as a foreigner and her intellectual contribution, it does not help her to come to terms with her “foreignness within.”

In “Psychoanalysis as a Politics of Care,” I consider the ways in which Kristeva uses psychoanalysis to address the paradoxical legacy of the French Revolution inherited from Enlightenment thinkers, and to reflect on Olga’s trip to China and her naïve belief in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. My underlying argument is that through Joëlle’s politics of care Kristeva offers an example of how psychoanalysis can be considered as contributing to the reconfiguration of the relationship between the personal and the political.

I. Foreignness Within: The Search for “Lost Time”

Kristeva proposes an understanding of the European context that includes recognition not only of the rights of foreigners in nation states but also of the continuous presence of the “other” within the individual or collective “self.” Olga’s story serves to illustrate the intersection of these two elements, linking the subjective (memory as personal, auto-bio-graphical, related to family dynamics and sexuality) and the cultural (memory as historical, political, European), with shifts in allegiance at both levels depending on language use as well as geographical mobility.
The Journey to China as a Quest for Anti-Origins/ Otherness in the Self

By telling Olga’s story, Kristeva finds a framework to explain her own journey to China as indicating a failure to acknowledge her intellectual adherence to France and French culture as part of an effort to free herself from her origins, from childhood memories, the communist regime, and her mother-tongue. In her reflections on her Chinese experience, Olga explains her flight from her origins in abstract philosophical terms that construe foreignness as only a symbolic construction:

In short, Olga's ultraphilosophical education seemed to have taught her that origins, roots, are a kind of inevitable atavism, and that a person is civilized to the extent that he can do away with them. This being so, her experience as a foreigner was an opportunity to cast off her origins, or even to forget them (147, my italics).

In Nations, Kristeva explains that our relationship to our origins can produce paradoxical effects. On one hand, it can lead to “hatred of those who do not share my origins and who affront me personally, economically and culturally” (2-3). On the other, the origins may be rejected, by those who “repress their roots, who do not know where they come from,” who think that “they can settle matters by fleeing” (3-4). Thus there are two opposite reactions to the state of being a foreigner, depending on a person’s attitude to detachment from a lost space/past. In Strangers, Kristeva posits two irreconcilable categories: the advocates of emptiness, who agonize between what has been lost and what will never be (10), and those who attempt to transcend their condition, living “neither before nor now but beyond,” and by doing so risk remaining forever unsatisfied (10). They tend to concentrate all their efforts on doing something that keeps them away from remembering their condition, such as pursuing “an occupation, a love, a child, a glory” (10). Olga belongs to this category, and China emerges for her as a quest for “anti-origins,” as she explains: “So China became a kind of antiorigin: the most profound and ancestral one possible with its slant-eyed forebears, but also utterly strange, and therefore
painless, impersonal, uncolored by childhood memories; *just a jigsaw made up of mirages*” (147, my italics).

This image evokes Olga's flight from her origins as an example of what Kristeva calls in *Strangers* “the actor's paradox”: multiplying masks and “false selves” without being “true” or “false” to anything but the performance itself (48). For Olga, China represents an opportunity to play out the actor’s paradox, the scene of “a theater of identities,” where she comes to realize that “she was a true actress: nothing was true but the play” (147). This acknowledgement leads to a questioning of her desire to be assimilated into French culture:

> For a long time France had been a China to her, and she knew exile could be liberation. She hadn’t become really integrated, though, and she knew she never would be, even if she became the mother of a dozen little Frenchmen. *But the events of May had revived her liking for the incongruous. And the incongruous, for Olga, was first and foremost Olga herself* (146, my italics).

As Olga begins to address her feelings of incongruity, she starts an inner journey of self-interrogation that turns into a search for “lost time:”

> (….) now this hunger was changing into self-questioning. Not 'Who am I?" but more meditatively, more intellectually: ‘What are the extravagances, the *chinoiseries*, I feel within myself but cannot formulate? How is it you can write things you can't say? How is it a woman may be invisible, ignored and repressed (by Confucius) and yet essential and even all-powerful (in the Tao)? Isn't a *mother always a kind of China – eternal and unknowable*?' (147, my italics).

What Olga is looking for, in her attempt to understand the experience of Chinese women, is a confrontation with the unnamable/unknowable feminine/maternal. In French, “Chinese” represents everything that is incomprehensible, strange or uncanny: “What can be more ‘Chinese’ – in the French sense of strange, absurd, quirky – than China?” (146). On realizing that it was repression of the feminine/ foreignness within her self that took her to China on a supposedly intellectual journey of discovery, Olga begins to formulate a way out from the “atavism of origins,” through a continuous interrogation of her narcissistic projections, of her desire to “connect” with others because of her internal “emptiness”.

82
Revolt as Heterogeneous Temporality

Kristeva describes Olga’s process of self-interrogation in terms of the logic of revolt, founded (as discussed earlier) on return, recollection, and thought. She invokes Nietzsche’s idea of an “eternal return” to advance the metaphor of a journey of retrospection and recollection that opens up a heterogeneous conception of temporality:

You may think you are going away, but a journey is always an eternal return. And while certain brief hallucinations make us think the place we’re in isn’t new but the recurrence of a landscape familiar to us from another life – an impossible life, delightful, stormy, and forgotten - with the exception of such experiences the eternal return operates in the dimension of time, not space. Thus, when a journey reaches a peak of pleasure or disgust, the time in which it operates becomes circular and turns you in upon yourself (193, my italics).

This heterogeneous experience of temporality evokes another time, associated with childhood memories and maternal space. By connecting Olga’s search for “lost time” to metaphysical and literary traditions that run from Heraclitus to Nietzsche, and include Borges as well as Proust, Kristeva suggests an analogous process of repression of the feminine/maternal in both individual/subjective and cultural/collective/ self-formation. As Olga reflects on the cyclical nature of “woman’s time,” she projects maternity into the future (of giving birth) as well as acknowledging her own childhood: “An eternal return that transforms the abjectness of hope and the pathos of despair into the brief equilibrium of childhood. And into adult's ordinary yet mysterious power to engender a child. What does that mean?” (194-5). It means, if we follow Kristeva’s later explanation (2002c, 29) that she formulates this other logic of temporality in contrast to the Greek conception of time as coextensive with consciousness and thought. Kristeva’s conception of time gives primacy to the role of language as essential to subjective consciousness in language, concluding that “there is time because there is language” (2002c, 29).

Olga recalls Heraclitus’s comments on time in relation to language:

Heraclitus encumbered posterity – and eternity – with thousands of translations of the same sentence, all of them possible and unsatisfactory. 'Time is a child who behaves like a child and plays.'... So time behaves like a child, and like a child it may throw away the dice, the pawns, the balls, the kites, the computers. And start all over again. But what else? (194).
By turning to a psychoanalytic conception of time, Olga goes on to challenge the logocentrism of the concept of consciousness/time (as) language and chronology by incorporating a pre-psychical/maternal time that evokes the semiotic and the presence of the death drive from the moment of birth. Olga proposes a conception of time that includes both the relationship with the maternal and the unbinding force of the death drive: “(...) in the supreme game where we play at being parents though deep down we're still children, we don't mention death even though it's implicitly in charge. For what matters is that the game should go on, and that should include death” (194-5, my italics). Heraclitus kept death and childhood separate, and his metaphor of time as a child that plays eliminates any maternal presence. Olga asks: “Was Heraclitus haunted by matriarchy? But the idea of the eternal return as a child’s play engendering children removes the tragic aspects of procreation and, without either degrading or glorifying it, gives it the serious insignificance of all children’s games” (195, my italics).

Through Olga’s reflections Kristeva conveys a revalorization of foreignness and femininity in relation to time, from the perspective of a woman-foreigner preoccupied with maternity in relation to death. Like Freud, Kristeva uses confrontation with death to reveal the mechanism of repression and the way uncanny strangeness is generated. In Strangers, Kristeva explains that the representation of this confrontation is “initially imperative, for our unconscious refuses the fatality of death” (185). She writes:

The fear of death dictates an ambivalent attitude: we imagine ourselves surviving (religions promise immortality), but death just the same remains the survivor’s enemy, and it accompanies him in his new existence. Apparitions and ghosts represent that ambiguity and fill with uncanny strangeness our confrontations with the image of death (185, my italics).

In The Samurai, Kristeva writes something similar: “the dead accompany the generations and urge them on” (194), but goes further to suggest that the recognition of this confrontation with death and its integration into collective cultural memory is what creates “civilization”: “Death,”
Armand (alias Barthes) says, is what “makes civilizations” (170). Moreover, Kristeva links the confrontation of death with the feminine, suggesting that at both subjective and cultural levels, reconsideration of the condition of being a foreigner relies on recognition of the feminine/foreignness within.

Kristeva concludes Olga’s journey of investigation into the question of foreignness with Olga’s giving birth to a baby boy, Alex. This evocation of the experience of maternity allows Kristeva to return to her earlier elaboration of the Kantian notion of freedom as a “spontaneous beginning.” Parturition as a transitory space between the biological and the cultural opens up the Kantian notion of the universal principle of dignity and freedom to the symbolic importance of maternity: giving birth can be seen as the basis for an ethic of respect for the unnamable foreignness within, a subjective and cultural manifestation of the other-in-the-self.

Kristeva also links Olga’s experience of maternity to the logic of revolt, not in the form examined elsewhere as resistance and subversion of totalitarian and ideological regimes, but in the form of continuing movement between the self-as-mother and the other-as-child. This movement engenders a corporeal and sensorial transformation which amounts to a veritable transubstantiation, as Olga tells us in reflecting on her experience as a mother:

*Time recovered.* You have opened the present to me: events have no more weight since you've existed... (317)...*My own childhood only comes back* if you give me signs of it, your reminders only *revive my memory* in order to please you, there are two of us in my story now, and that's the very reason it exists, and I give it to you if it can help you to come toward me, hear me, speak to me. And you've turned *the future into a riddle:* it's not a plan anymore. ... *the future takes the form of a life* that I accompany with *trust and anguish.* ... *you've reconciled me with another future:* to slowness, surprise, to the strange and so brief happiness... to the awaiting that awakens and cures (318). I'm not in a hurry. I'm not going anywhere. We're going to take all the time that's necessary to solve *the riddle of life* together. We will continue it in our own way.... (318)... I myself don't move anymore, *my migration has a new meaning.* Thanks to you I travel in the time of a memory looking back and forward, I'm not even sure it's mine, for your smell, your cries, your tastes graft unknown worlds on me. ... I inhabit the fantasies of another, *you reshape my memories and my words just as you reshaped my body,* I'm learning now how to be different with different people, *starting with you*... (319, my italics).
Olga’s reflection on the experience of maternity emerges in contrast to the European philosophical tradition since Heraclitus, whose conception of childhood excluded both the maternal and any confrontation with death. At the same time, it adds to the Kantian formulation of cosmopolitics the logic of introspection, an aptitude for interrogation, recollection and re/volt (turning around) that looks “back and forth” in an attempt to learn “to be different with different people” (319). Giving birth illustrates the emergence of the individual other from within the individual self, the need for the mother to let go of part of oneself as it becomes separate. Migration represents a reverse phenomenon, a collective reaction to the insertion of foreign others who may be more or less assimilatable into the collective self. The individual foreigner abandons his/her maternal origins and faces a demand to become something else by wearing a mask, or risks remaining abject, the unacceptable outsider within the collective whole.

II. The Foreigner Outside: The Paradoxical Logic of the French Revolution

In *The Samurai* Kristeva uses the story of Olga to reflect on the condition of being a woman intellectual/mother and a foreigner in France, while at the same time examining the legacy of the French Revolution and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*. Here I will consider more closely the paradoxical tenets of the French Revolution through Olga’s projective identification with Kant’s trans-national principle of universal dignity. Obviously, Kristeva incorporates many autobiographical elements into her depiction of Olga’s fascination with the Chinese Cultural Revolution, including her relationship with the militant feminist group *psych & po*, which led to the publication of her controversial book *About Chinese Women*. Negative Anglo-American feminist reactions to that text, in particular Spivak’s charge of Eurocentrism, must be seen as part of a critique not only of Western colonialism but of a French intellectual dominance that Kristeva is seen to have chosen although in fact she felt excluded.

---

32 Further references to the *Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen* will appear as *Declaration*. 
The Paradoxical Tenets of the French Revolution

As already mentioned, in *Strangers* Kristeva analyses the terminological slippage from “man” to (male, native-born) “citizen” that excluded foreigners and women from participating in the political scene: with the result that, “The spreading of the French Revolution’s ideas over the continent triggered the demand for the national rights of peoples, not the universality of mankind” (151). Yet this result was opposed to the principles of respect for universal dignity, personal freedom, and the singularity of individual experience, which gave rise to parallel efforts to accommodate foreigners and foreignness at the heart of institutions which legally threatened to exclude them. In *The Samurai*, Kristeva turns to this aspect of the French Revolution that emphasizes Kant’s principle of universal dignity, hospitality and cosmopolitics, to provide a framework for understanding Olga’s story. It is Olga’s belief in the principle of universal dignity that allows her initially to experience a sense of belonging to French cultural memory, of sharing a “spontaneous kinship” with the members of the Parisian group *Now*. Yet her previous reading of French books in her Eastern European homeland had produced a textual/imaginary cultural memory that proved to be at odds with the material and political reality of the City of Lights. As a result, upon her arrival in Paris, Olga is confronted by an incongruity between her expectations and what she sees, which brings out the two conflicting aspects of the legacy of the French Revolution and of the “universal” Enlightenment project.

One of the implications of Olga’s criticism of the City of Lights, which has been reduced to “nothing more now than merchandise being contemplated by the deification of merchandise” (13), is that the society of consumption has led to the homogenization of individual and collective differences, stifling the capacity for singular forms of expression. Olga is presented as a young journalist, who “down there” had the courage to publish “passionate and severe” articles, seen as threatening in the eyes of the communist regime. Such rebellious acts were
punished by long hours of interrogation or even incarceration, and Olga remembers how her family feared for her safety: “Her parents began to be frightened again, and to listen anxiously for the sound of the elevator in the small hours. Was it ‘them,’ the officials, coming to haul them off to some interrogation or – who knows – some camp?” (8-9). For Olga, living in a repressive totalitarian regime, the only way to maintain a margin of freedom and create connections with others across geographic boundaries and national ideologies was through textual connections. This margin of freedom became synonymous with dignity, when freedom of movement and expression was suspended and replaced by fear and anxiety.

Dissidence as Revolt

In her depiction of Olga as a foreign woman and dissident intellectual, Kristeva invokes some of the main arguments developed in her 1977 article “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident.” In her brief introduction to Kristeva’s article, Toril Moi (1986) considers it an important example of Kristeva’s political thought in the late 1970s, arguing that her description of a new politics of marginality, exemplified in the figure of the intellectual dissident, has the potential to “spearhead a certain kind of subversion of Western bourgeois society” (292). A re-examination of some of Kristeva’s main arguments in that article may help to clarify the connections she proposes in The Samurai between exile, dissidence, criticism of the society of consumption, and recourse to the principle of universal dignity.

Kristeva (1986b) argues that a breakdown in the value system that formed the backbone of the European tradition before the French Revolution led to the advent of both Fascism and Stalinism, as well as contemporary consumerism. In other words, Kristeva laments the crisis of the European tradition that since the French Revolution led to what she later (2002c) called the “normalizing and falsifiable” new world order (4). In her opinion, this crisis can be addressed only if an essential component of European culture – whose “antecedents lie in Cartesian doubt
and Hegelian negativity, the Freudian unconscious and the avant-garde” (2000d, 7) – is re-examined and revived. For that to happen, one needs to take into account the role of the intellectual:

So far, only bitterness and regret have been felt over the crisis in social groups, the decline of the family and the nation, or religion and the State (as seen in the difficulties seen in the paternal function), or the codes of sublimation and law, and the ensuing advent of Fascism and Stalinism. There has been no radical analysis of the symbolic and political causes of these phenomena, let alone a fundamental questioning of the relationship of the individual to the masses, and a fortiori, of the intellectual to society (1986b, 293, italics in original).

For Kristeva, the intellectual has a responsibility to take on a response to this crisis of the European tradition and analysis of its causes, by spearheading a type of political and cultural dissidence. She claims that “A spectre haunts Europe: the dissident” (1986b, 295), whose task is to defend the political value of individual forms of expression and call into question the identity and language of individuals and groups in a “fight against all power, beliefs and institutions” (295). She distinguishes three types of dissident: 1) the rebel who attacks political power; 2) the psychoanalyst who, through his/her analysis of the dialectic of law and desire, tries to distance himself/herself from religion; and 3) the experimental writer who puts into question the law of the symbolic order (295). Kristeva adds that exile or migration is itself a form of dissidence, since “it involves uprooting oneself from a family, a country or a language” (298). In addition to these three groups, there is the dissidence of the feminine, of women, who from their marginal positions are well placed to challenge the symbolic order and assess the crisis of tradition: “This female exile in relation to the General and to Meaning is such that a woman is always singular, to the point where she comes to represent the singularity of the singular – the fragmentation, the drive, the unnameable” (296). In commenting on Kristeva’s views on dissidence, Sjoholm (2004) argues that, by claiming femininity as dissidence, Kristeva presents “her extreme view of the political as singularity, rejecting all formations of negotiated bonds as sacrificial and as alienating for political subjectivity” (47). Sjoholm’s point is important since it reinforces the
political value of the female intellectual, while at the same time stressing femininity itself as
dissidence, as a form of singularity, of non-conformity to a male model, and capable of
undermining ossified socio-political bonds.

For Kristeva, the kind of dissidence she is calling for may be “singular,” but it is never
possible in isolation. It requires “ceaseless analysis, vigilance and will to subversion, and
therefore necessarily enters into complicity with other dissident practices in the modern Western
world” (1986b, 299). What distinguishes intellectual dissidence is the imperative of adopting an
analytical position, “For true dissidence today is perhaps simply what it has always been:
thought.” She adds, “Now that Reason has become absorbed by technology, thought is tenable
only as an ‘analytic position’ that affirms dissolution and works through differences” (299,
italics in the original). We can see that Kristeva’s analysis of intellectual dissidence prefigures
her notion of revolt, which she later (2002c, 6) defines as the aptitude for thought as a re-turn,
simultaneously recollection of the past and interrogation of the present and future. Her emphasis
on the singularity of individual experience, in her analysis of both dissidence and revolt, further
reinforces analogies that become evident in Kristeva’s construction of Olga’s story.

The Cosmopolitics of the Now Group

Kristeva’s representation and analysis of dissidence reveals two important aspects: first, that
Olga’s dissidence is a form of thought that has political implications; and second, that her form
of dissidence as thought is attuned to other dissident practices that call into question a rationalist,
universalist concept of Europe. It is their common engagement with revolt as dissident thought
that produces a form of cohesion between the Eastern European Olga and the Western members
of the Now group. In so far as this cohesion lasts, it provides an example of the formulation of a
pan-“European” identity, not in terms of national and geographic belonging or border-crossing,
but as a shared interrogation based on self-reflection, self-estrangement, and intellectual
nomadism. A sense of belonging across national boundaries and different ideological and political regimes arises from their cosmopolitan reading practices. As Olga observes: “They’d all read the same books” (18), with the result that they feel “as if they’d all lived together since they were children” (18), and she can temporarily forget her uprootedness.

Olga’s integration into the Now group (like Kristeva’s into Tel Quel) is possible because of a very specific French context. The French participants are interested in her because she comes from Eastern Europe, rather than in spite of that fact, at a time when interest in socialist models was high, and the communist experience (especially in China) was dangerously elevated to a utopian myth. As Olga remarks, “they [the Now group] were less interested in the ‘Stalinist error’ than in what they called the ‘groundswell,’ the ‘wind from the East’, which they tended to elevate into a myth” (18). Their interest arises from a desire for an alternative to the French consumer society’s increasing pursuit of the accumulation of goods to the exclusion of all else, as suggested by Olga’s observation of people’s preparations for Christmas: “Gift-wrapped packages politely following automatic trajectories, slumped like shapeless old raincoats” (17). The critique of a capitalist society that turns citizens into amorphous and anonymous consumers is reinforced at meetings of the group, where they draw inspiration from the “origins of the Revolution” (18). Olga remains sceptical: “They made idols out of the ‘origins of the Revolution’ and ‘aesthetic avant-gardes,’ probably to bring out the contrast with the gift-wrapped packages they saw all around them” (18). Her personal experience of an absence of consumer goods and ominous presence of communist control ensures a certain distance from the thinking of the French intellectuals, in spite of their “kinship.” She is an outsider within, a dissident among dissidents.

Olga also refers positively to the “origins of the Revolution,” acknowledging that aspect of the Enlightenment that tended towards an internationalist spirit based on the principles of hospitality and universal dignity. The Kantian notion of cosmopolitics as an example of “just
political action” (19) appears in contrast to both consumerism and the totalitarian regime “down there.” The group’s “clandestine space” is presented as a challenge to all norms, a “port or haven that was cosmopolitan and yet uniquely French, perhaps simply Parisian in its liveliness, casualness, and gaiety” (19). It becomes a kind of political laboratory where the Now group test the ideas of the “idols of the origins of Revolution” (19). However it soon becomes apparent that their forms of contestation are somewhat artificial, as Olga remarks, creating a temporary utopia “in the midst of incomprehension, indifference, and hostility….” (19). At the same time, this haven provides a space for Olga’s projective identification, which emerges initially as an expression of free subjectivity, only to be later questioned, doubted and re-examined.

Olga’s self-reflection and interrogation bring her face-to-face with her denial of her origins and of her difference. A few days after her arrival in Paris, Olga believes that all she has is “white pages to be offered to all sorts of experiences” (18). She erases her past and her mother-tongue and undergoes a transformation that she describes as bordering on complete emptiness, on an absolute sense of freedom: “She doesn’t have consciousness or sensation (of being brutal or greedy). Free. Empty…. Her memory started to tone down… She was ready to translate it. To betray it. The agility of the body and soul without weight” (18). She feels totally free from her ties to her family and from her former lover, Dan, and yet this sense of freedom is short-lived and soon appears as a kind of mirage. She begins to feel a profound sense of solitude, of discomfort, that becomes a litmus test for her capacity to engage with her intellectual work. It is at this point that Olga learns how to transform her solitary freedom and feelings of unease into reading, writing, and learning (57). Yet she continues to remain dis-engaged from her past, a denial which betrays a failure to question the foundation and implications of her “spontaneous” relationships with the Now group, and to examine her own intellectual and cultural bonds.
Maoism: A Failed Revolt?

Olga’s refusal to engage in retrospective thought and acknowledge her own negative experience of communism allows her to share the Now group’s fascination with the Chinese Cultural Revolution, in the period following the events of May ’68. Those events contributed to the end of a purely intellectual interest in socialism and Marxist theory, and turned towards questions of human rights and anti-totalitarian discourses. The Maoist Cultural Revolution emerged as a counterbalance to the failures of communism in the Eastern European countries, as we learn from Olga’s reflections:

The wind from the East was sweeping away bureaucracy and urging the young to oppose all the ossified establishments. The whole world was turning in the same direction: the Taoist anarchism now advocated by hundreds of millions of Chinese was being seen by the Paris rebels as an example for the next millennium. Were they rioters? Dogmatists? ... The Maoists are spontaneists who want everything – in other words, the impossible (96, my italics).

There is a striking similarity between what the Now group sees as Mao’s focus on spontaneity and Kant’s notion of freedom, characterized by the capacity to spontaneously begin something anew. In her discussion of the turn to Maoism, Kristeva gives us a sense not only of the political climate of the early ‘70s, but also a framework for understanding the background to her earlier work, most notably “The Atomistic Subject of Practice in Marxism.” That essay’s main arguments are replayed in Olga’s efforts to frame Maoism in terms of a theory of subjectivity that emphasizes personal experience. It is Maoism’s conception of a subject caught up in continuous contradictions that shape social history that provided the inspiration for Kristeva’s own formulation of the “subject-in-process”:

‘Direct’ and ‘personal’ experience is perhaps stressed in Mao’s writings more than anywhere else in Marxist theory and Mao’s emphasis on it tends to bring to the fore a subjectivity that has become the place of the ‘highest contradiction’… Maoism, it would seem, summons and produces above all this kind of subjectivity, one that it views as the driving force behind the practice of social change and revolution ((1984b, 200-1).

33 “The Atomistic Subject of Practice in Marxism” is a chapter in Revolution in Poetic Language (1984b).
It is this formulation of personal subjective experience as the basis for social and political transformation that is attractive to Olga. As a foreigner, despite her intellectual ties to the members of the Now group she remains painfully aware that her inner experience, her subjectivity, does not count in the eyes of the others except as an object of “intellectual curiosity.” In Olga’s view, which reiterates Kristeva’s own position, Maoism presented itself as an opportunity to continue her critique of repressive ideologies, which began “down there.” Her criticism is aimed at both communism and the consumer capitalism she discovers in Paris, since both stifle the singularity of individual experience. At the same time, supporting Maoism was also seen as an opportunity to further the political value of dissidence as thought, while incorporating personal experience into what Kristeva (1986b, 293) called the “fundamental questioning” of a the rationalist, universalist concept of Europe as a whole.

Olga’s fascination with Maoism takes her and a few other members of the Now group on a three-week journey to China, in an attempt to better understand how Maoist theories are put into practice, and in her case specifically how this practice foregrounds and affects women’s lives. Olga believes that the Maoist focus on inner experience as the motor of social transformation included openness towards women’s contributions, and intertwined with a revaluing of the personal, including women’s experiences. Like Kristeva, Olga privileges the role of women in her own critique of the crisis facing the European tradition, and brings together the feminine and foreignness to question the foundation of that tradition. In seeking to assert the political value of the feminine, and especially of the inner experience of motherhood, as well as foreignness (within or without) as essential to dissidence and critical thought, Olga as narrator/character asserts the authority of personal, subjective experience, author-ized by Kristeva in her non-fictional writings.
**Feminism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution**

As for Kristeva, Olga’s interest in feminism emerges at the same time as her fascination with Maoism, and can be explained in terms of her continuing desire to assert the political value of the feminine. Olga’s visit to China has a specific purpose, to fulfill a commission from a militant feminist group (based on *psych & po*) to write a book on Chinese women. The outcome proves to be a failure, since Olga’s heterogeneous representation of Chinese women conflicts with the demands of the militant feminist group, who want to confirm a feminine essence as revolutionary *per se*. The divergence becomes manifest in a dialogue between Olga and the feminist leader:

> I put in different points of view on the subject. I'm not competent to give a final opinion.’ ‘That's what I mean -you don't commit yourself!’ ‘What about intellectual integrity,’ Olga inquired. ‘That's nothing to do with it: if you are a woman you feel these things inside you’ (181).

Despite Olga’s declared intention to offer a range of views on and of Chinese women, her efforts are subverted because of her projective identification with the cosmopolitan Parisian milieu on one hand, and with the Chinese Cultural Revolution on the other. Since Olga’s experience is emblematic of Kristeva’s, in what follows, I will address some of the Anglo-American responses to her book, *About Chinese Women* (1986a), to ask whether or not the charge of Eurocentrism can be justifiably applied to Kristeva’s/Olga’s perception and representation of Chinese women.

Oliver (1993a) correctly observed that Kristeva, in her representation of the image of Chinese women, offered in fact a subjective reflection of herself: “she sees herself in those little red guards and those high cheekbones of the silent women of China because it was only herself for whom she was looking” (135, my italics). In a compelling manner, Oliver argues that Kristeva uses her own foreignness (Bulgarian) to better allow her to foreground the Parisian voice: “when we do see the shadow of the Bulgarian it is only to more distinctly foreground the Parisian voice. In her account of Chinese women, when Kristeva recognizes herself in them, she also recognizes herself superior to them” (135). Oliver’s argument brings us to Spivak’s (1981)
well-known critique of Kristeva's representation of Chinese women in relation to foreignness as a form of “naturalization transformed into privilege” (163).

Not only does Spivak question Kristeva's epistemic privilege in her investigation of Chinese women, which she sees as a first-world feminist intervention and appropriation of Third World women (164), but she also claims that Kristeva relies on the binary logic of opposition between East (in this case China) and West (Europe). According to Spivak, Kristeva reproduces Orientalist stereotypes, offering a generalized view of history, and her attitude can at best be understood as “colonial benevolence” (161). While Spivak asks whether Kristeva's representation of Chinese women is the product of a specifically French intellectual context, and doubts whether the doctrines of French “High Feminism” are applicable outside that context (164), she also insists in the end that the difference between “French” and “Anglo-American” feminism is “superficial” (179). Instead, she argues, we need to shift the focus away from formulating the differences between Western feminists, to ask the question “Who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?” (179). In Spivak's view, Kristeva fails to let the “other” woman speak.

Ironically, Spivak ultimately seems to re-enact precisely what she blames Kristeva for: decontextualization, and an unproblematic appropriation of the “other” woman's position. In other words, Spivak chooses to ignore Kristeva's own explanations that precede the question cited above, which is criticized at length in her essay. In her Introductory Note to About Chinese Women, Kristeva does in fact call attention to the impossibility of writing about Chinese women in a manner that is free of colonial condescension, and the risk of appropriation, of stereotyping the other's image. She addresses the pitfalls of speaking “with” or “against” China, of “proving that the Chinese are like us, against us, or to be ignored” (12). She comments: “To write “for” or “against”: the old trick of the militant committed to maintaining his position.... what is lost is the chance that the discovery of ‘the other’ may make us question ourselves about what, here and
now, is new, scarcely audible, disturbing” (12-3). Further, Kristeva also casts a critical glance at her own position as a first-world intellectual on a journey to investigate and represent Chinese women’s experiences: “…. molded as I am by universalist humanism, proletarian brotherhood, and (why not) false colonial civility” (13). Drawing attention to the dangers of the desire to analyze or even exhaust the meaning of “China,” Kristeva acknowledges the need to reflect on her own position, her own epistemic privilege, to interrogate her own form of investigation, and she demonstrates an ethical concern for the “knowledge” she may produce about the Chinese women she sees. She forestalls Spivak’s accusation, when she writes: “Rather it is a vigilance, call it ethical, that keeps us on guard not to project onto the women of China thoughts which they may evoke but which, in fact, are the products of western experience and concern that alone” (16). Warning that such an approach will convey only a “western vision,” Kristeva insists that her study of Chinese women is characterized by “refusing, therefore, to know more than they do; and refusing, as well, to endow them with a knowledge that would hold the answer to our own problems” (16). After a concise survey of religious, literary, philosophical, and psychoanalytic conceptualizations of “woman,” Kristeva reminds her readers, yet again:

Could those be the lenses that keep us from seeing China? The same lenses which, if adjusted, might bring it into our field of vision? But understanding China will involve much more than fitting these lenses over the reality of China as it is given to us by sinology, by contemporary history, or by our own observations. To do so during our own journey through China would mean that the reality of China is accessible through our models, our habits; that it lends itself to our way of seeing. I'm not saying that this reality is invisible to the Westerner, who is condemned forever to the relativity of his knowledge. I'm saying that we must adjust our glasses before trying to look close up at what's going on on the other side. In the meantime, the notes that follow are nothing but a first hesitant step in that direction (42).

Though Kristeva’s description of Chinese women has provoked much controversy among many postcolonial feminists, of which Spivak is just one representative, other feminists have tried to situate Kristeva’s analysis in more complex ways. I tend to agree with Lisa Lowe (1993), who argues that Kristeva's text occupies a rather paradoxical position which is at once “both
strikingly different from the earlier French colonial orientalism and yet disturbingly reminiscent of its postures and rhetoric” (150). This paradoxical position is manifest in *The Samurai* as well, where Kristeva, in her attempt to revive the Kantian notion of cosmopolitics and universal principle of human dignity, used Olga’s experiences in China as a foreigner to raise questions about the condition of Chinese women in relation to Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, suggesting that the Chinese women (like “European” women) are “foreign” to the patriarchal order that continues to repress them. Yet by so doing, Kristeva also uncritically made assumptions about Chinese women, sometimes erasing the specificity of their social and cultural context.

Olga’s experience in China leads her to reconfigure the question of foreignness, shifting it from a focus on the situation of the foreigner as migrant/exile in relation to a collective nation/society, seen from the perspective of political philosophy, to a consideration of foreignness within, seen through the psychoanalytic tradition. It is a move that leads her from a naïve belief in the value of “cultural revolution” as a collective enterprise based on political dissidence, to recognition of the value of subjective revolt, which entails a movement of return, self-interrogation, and confrontation with her origins. For Olga, this revolt includes a confrontation with the unnamable/repressed feminine-maternal, and with death. By providing Joëlle Cabarus’ journal notes on her patients, including Olga, Kristeva’s novel develops this concept of subjective revolt in relation to a concern for the comparable crises experienced by other individuals.

**III. Psychoanalysis as a Politics of Care**

In *Strangers*, Kristeva argues that the French Revolution left behind “a tradition that is as complex as it is paradoxical, with its emphasis on dignity, liberty and equality, along with the image of the guillotine, of terror and persecution” (127). In *The Samurai*, Kristeva places Joëlle
Cabarus’ psychoanalytically inspired reflections at the centre of her investigation into some of the aspects of the Revolution that led to the Terror and the guillotine. Through Joëlle’s eyes, we observe the revolutionary barricades of May ’68, located “where Dr. Guillotine tried out – on sheep – his famous and aptly named ‘philanthropic’ beheading machine” (132). Reflecting on the acting out of violence in the streets, Joëlle suggests that not only is the French Revolution unfinished, but it is an anachronistic, recurring process that continues to have an impact, at various times, on different social and cultural structures:

But are our own barricades being put up for the sake of an ideal? *What if the Revolution of 1789 finished only yesterday, at the end of May 1968?* Young rioters are breaking up the last remains of the terror of ideologies and parties. *They claim the right to pleasure, desire, imagination...* And so, after the explosion of the last few days, will there be a new Directory, a new Empire? - a new Ego – just like Thérésa [Cabarrus]? (136, my italics).

By reframing the unfinished process and legacy of the French Revolution through Joëlle’s psychoanalytical lens, Kristeva proposes two ideas: first, that there is a certain continuity between its paradoxical legacy (the contradiction between the rights of man and the rights of citizens) and psychoanalysis; second, that psychoanalysis acquires a political function through the very act of interpretation. By tracing a tentative connection between the Enlightenment project and psychoanalysis, Kristeva reiterates some of the arguments made in *Strangers* that link psychoanalysis to ethics. This enables her to develop a notion of trans-historical dignity and to open up the question of rights to include the logic of desires and symbolic values. She explains:

(...) the distinction set forth in the Declaration between ‘humanity’ and ‘citizenry’ maintains the requirement of a human, trans-historical dignity, whose content nevertheless needs to be made more complex, beyond the eighteenth-century optimistic naïveté. Such a transformation is not within the competence of the courts of law alone: *it implies not only rights but desires and symbolic values.* It falls within the province of *ethics and psychoanalysis* (153, my italics).

The version of psychoanalysis that Kristeva advances in both *Strangers* and *The Samurai* is not the kind that is ahistorical, universalist, or deterministic, as Spivak (1981), Nancy Fraser
(1992), and Judith Butler (1993) have all claimed. In fact, we could turn the universalist criticism around, and argue with Oliver (1993a) that psychoanalysis, for Kristeva, provides a “new way of identifying the other, the stranger, not in order to reify it and exclude it, but in order to welcome it” (8). This process requires taking into account both the specificity of the other and the historical context. In other words, the ethical and political value of psychoanalysis lies in its attempt to analyze the processes through which we exercise exclusions, opening up the possibility of learning how to become more receptive to the excluded elements. It is this emphasis on the ability to learn how to live differently with different people that Kristeva advances as the symbolic value that can constitute the basis of new community bonds and the transformation of social relations. It therefore reconfigures the radical break marked by the French Revolution that ended in the loss of values, authority, and laws. The kind of symbolic value that Kristeva advances is not a set of moral codes imposed from the outside, but rather internally constituted, in which responsibility for others emerges as an inner condition of psychic life. In the conclusion to Strangers, Kristeva argues that this symbolic value offered by psychoanalysis is founded on the aptitude to recognize frailty and foreignness within, and by so doing, to transform them into an openness to and caring for others:

In the absence of a new community bond – a saving religion that would integrate the bulk of wanderers and different people within a new consensus, other than ‘more money and goods for everyone’- we are, for the first time in history, confronted with the following situation: we must live with different people while relying on our personal moral codes, without the assistance of a set that would include our particularities while transcending them. A paradoxical community is emerging, made up of foreigners who are reconciled with themselves to the extent that they recognize themselves as foreigners. The multinational society would thus be the consequence of an extreme individualism, but conscious of its discontents and limits, knowing only indomitable people ready-to-help-themselves in their weakness, a weakness whose other name is our radical strangeness (195, my italics).

The version of psychoanalysis that Kristeva promotes in The Samurai echoes the main tenets of the one put forward in Strangers. Yet Kristeva ended the latter without elaborating on how to help others in their weakness (as opposed to helping ourselves), while in The Samurai
Joëlle’s analytic sessions and psychoanalytically inspired writings offer an example of how to transform pain and anxious thinking into tenderness and caring for others. What emerges from Joëlle’s reflections is the question of how to take into account the singularity of each individual without sacrificing it to the common goal of the masses, which appears to have been the case in the two political revolutions (1789 and May ‘68). In other words, the task is to show that the right to be unique, to claim pleasure, desire, and imagination, is not incompatible with the happiness of others. It is this idea that Joëlle emphasizes at various times in the novel, articulating it clearly in one conversation that she has with some American psychiatrists: “I looked as serious as I could and said that if human rights didn’t include the right to be an exception, a unique individual, they’d be in danger of collapsing into Terror or Empire. Of course, no one understood what I was talking about” (141, my italics). For Joëlle, the recognition of this right to be an exception begins with an examination of the logic of political revolution, demystifying the idea that the only thing at stake in a political revolution is the desire to overthrow the power of a repressive regime. In Joëlle’s opinion, revolution is not merely the medium that manifests or overthrows power, it is also the object of desire: “The power of desire comes down in the streets, and I ask myself what these rebels will think when they realize that they also desire the power” (175). She invokes Kant’s notion of “asocial sociability” to suggest that the relationship between desire and power, between the individual and the political, still remains to be thought out as a relation of non-exclusive opposites, in order to avoid the illusion of “being free of all law” that permits the acting out of violence: “They [rebels] seek an asocial happiness…They chop off reactionaries’ heads. Only verbally, of course” (131).

I have already noted that in the story of Olga, Kristeva traces a tentative line connecting Kant and Freud in order to stress the importance of acknowledging foreignness within, so as to be able to accommodate better the foreigner “outside.” This enables her to reconfigure the notion of cosmopolitics by including the feminine and foreignness inside. Through Joëlle, Kristeva adds
Sade to Kant and Freud. By so doing, she emphasizes the logic of sadomasochism at the core of both subjectivity and cultural formation, positing the death drive as integral to both the pleasure principle and the logic of power. Joëlle remarks: “As for Sade – a Freudian before Freud, a natural researcher in the laboratory of eroticism – he was well aware of both the pleasures of evil and the perversions of murder” (133-4, my italics). For Joëlle, there is an emphasis on the logic of violence as integral to the right to pleasure, to desire, and to political revolution. A process of reflexivity emerges, aimed at analyzing conflict and crisis in order to better understand the uneasy relationship between the disintegration of psychic space and social transformation. It is this emphasis on the analysis of crisis that Oliver (1993a), for instance, sees as constituting the ethical and political function of psychoanalysis. Calling attention to the fact that Kristeva’s ethics of psychoanalysis is premised on the structure of the relationship between the unconscious and the conscious, Oliver writes: “Real political dissidence is not waging one fundamental ideal against another. It is neither taking up a position nor absorbing conflict. Rather, for Kristeva, it is analyzing conflict in an ‘attempt to bring about multiple sublations of the unnamable, the unrepresentable, the void’” (8). Oliver goes on to explain that this elaboration of crisis sets up an ethics which respects the irreconcilable foreignness within (8).

A similar effort to bring out and analyze the crisis and conflict between individual dissidence as revolt and political revolution is manifest in Joëlle’s reflections. It is through Joëlle’s psychoanalytic lens that Kristeva also casts a critical glance at Olga’s and the Now group’s infatuation with the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Just before Olga and the group leave for China, Joëlle suggests that their engagement with Maoism, and its emphasis on inner experience, is nothing but an expression of a pretentious belief in the universality of human rights. She claims that what is absent from their belief is an interrogation of their own logic of desire in relation to power, noting in her journal:
How many deaths have been caused by the Cultural Revolution? We don't know yet. In Paris, people don't even ask the question. The question they do ask is: How can one become unique, an exception? Mao is regarded as an exception who has carried a nation with him. A billion Chinese may be a uniform and manageable mass, but in comparison with our Western tradition, what an exception he is, how unique, with that lunar linguistic elegance combined with acts, with strokes, with pictures (140).

Thus, for Joëlle, psychoanalysis emerges as an invitation to introspection and reflexivity, in an attempt to reduce the violent acting out in the streets by shifting the focus on the analysis of conflict and aggression to the inside. This is mirrored by Joëlle when she contemplates some change within herself: “Have I become less aggressive through contemplating the darkness of others?” (281).

As a psychoanalyst, Joëlle offers another form of revolt through a type of reading and writing which, unlike Olga’s, begins with a quest for the meaning of her origins, an analysis of her self and her relationships with others. Kristeva invites us to an imaginary return to the time of the French Revolution with Joëlle, as she searches for the meaning of her name through the archives of the French national library that take her back to the life and times of Thérésa Cabarrus (Tallien). We learn that Thérésa Cabarrus was a courtesan, who played a major role in the conspiracy to oust Robespierre and put an end to the Terror and the guillotine. Yet her role remains largely unacknowledged, Kristeva explains, because she was a courtesan who thought of “revolution through Eroticism, unbridled Sex versus the Reason of the goddess Terror” (337). In Joëlle’s journal, Thérésa is portrayed as “that undistinguished but successful seductress,” who “decapitated several myths: the myth of Great Ideas and the romantic myth of Love,” and sought through the pleasures of the body the right to be an exception. By tying Joëlle’s search for the meaning of her surname to Thérésa Cabarrus, Kristeva suggests that the process of introspection, recollection, and interrogation of the relationship between subjective and political crises cannot be adequately addressed unless one considers the logic of desire, including sexuality. “Myths” about the neat separation between body and mind, desire and power, past and present, personal
and political, must all be demystified in order to better understand the individual and collective dimensions of revolution, as Joëlle notes:

I was interested enough to read up on the revolutionary press in the *enfer* – the 'inferno' or forbidden books department – at the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the license our predecessors allowed themselves leaves us standing! .... To pursue my fantasy about the link between Thérésa and the Cabarus family ... I look for myself in books, ...I look for witnesses of Thérésa Cabarus....a pretext to relive 1789 (175, my italics).

Joëlle’s politics of care contrasts with and challenges the politics of individualism predominant in the consumer society. Joëlle’s reflections on caring constitute a direct attack on the notion of a stable and selfish “self” advanced by the positivist scientific claims that emerged after the French Revolution. Nor does this type of care for others depend on a religious kind of devotion: “Caring mustn’t be confused with devotion: devotion is egotistic, and self-love has never done anything but conceal self-hate. But caring comes from an abolition of the self” (286). Joëlle conceives of care as a space of transition, of transfusion, as she explains in her journal, drawing on the psychoanalytic notion of transference: “That’s it: in caring I use the knowledge in order to do away with myself, but quietly. A constant transfusion of what I might have been but am not and never shall be, I leave it to the others to try, in their regeneration, to become it” (286). Joëlle associates care with the capacity for understanding pain in the other and the self, which also involves taking into account the movement of negativity, of the death drive, and its potential for rupture and transformation. As such, care is a way of “making the unbearable bearable,” as Joëlle explains, of transforming pain or the threat of suicide into a question, a thought, a fragile bond to be shared with others:

*I substitute caring for care*. I refuse to refuse. I play the game…. I go even further: I bet that the ‘pure within’ of death-dealing rays can be swept away too… And this results in a detachment from life that has neither the fine gravitas of Stoic suicide nor the insouciance of a freethinker, who regards himself as outside the game, refuses the wager, and makes his own rules. On the contrary, caring gives back the ability to enter into it all. The simple happiness of shared facts like the happiness of breathing (284, my italics).
Care constitutes a way of life for Joëlle, it becomes the basis on which she builds her relations with others. Care also emerges as a necessary precondition in her analytical sessions, as the ability to transfuse herself into the place of another enables and to give meaning to an experience of suffering. This form of self-estrangement, of putting one’s self into the shoes of another, gives way to the possibility of giving those in suffering another life, as Joëlle records in her journal:

Tried to live through their words, reading them over and over, trying to give these people another life. Not mine, theirs, but made new. I didn’t put down anything about myself, except insofar as my interpretations of others are my links with them, or rather the space between me and what they think is the meaning of what they say (280).

Joëlle’s politics of individualized care also offers an alternative model for thinking about the relationship between the foreigner and the native. In Strangers, Kristeva advances an “optimal model,” in which their relationship is based on a movement of transition, on the ability to put oneself into the place of another. She writes: “Living with the other, the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other. It is not simply – humanistically – a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of being in his place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself” (14, italics in original). In a similar manner, in Joëlle’s reflections on care, cosmopolitanism emerges reconfigured, by placing the responsibility for others as a symbolic value at the very core of its foundation.

Kristeva’s originality in The Samurai lies in her ability to bring to the fore the critical aptitude and role of women and/as foreigners in analyzing and putting into question the meaning of a universalist, homogenous “Europe,” as well as the purpose and effects of some of the major political revolutions that have shaped or impacted the European tradition. Though her first novel had been eagerly awaited by critics, curious about the autobiographical elements which Kristeva herself indicated, and hoping to find compelling insights into the intimate lives of the Parisian intelligentsia of the 60s to 90s, it failed to live up to the critics’ initial high expectations. This
was partly due to the fact that many read it as a dialogue between “the Samurai” and “the Mandarins,” the Parisian intellectuals of Sartre-Beauvoir’s generation, in which case the novel did not have much to offer. Yet the novel’s failure to satisfy the critics’ curiosity might also have something to do with the ways in which Kristeva weaves together, in the events described, some of her difficult and/or controversial ideas (as it was her depiction of the Chinese women) without further clarifying her (previous) theoretical positions. Although there is some justification in the critics’ negative reaction, I think that Kristeva’s turn to fiction enabled her to present in more concrete ways her ideas and personal experience as a woman, foreigner, dissident intellectual, psychoanalyst and mother in relation to the broader social, political and cultural contexts that took place in Europe from the 60s to the 90s. This allowed her to raise questions about European identity, the differences and similarities between Eastern and Western Europe in relation to a shared past, the relationship of Eastern Europe to “East,” in particular China and Japan, and to integrate aspects associated with the feminine and the maternal into accounts of the European tradition that abjected them.

By staging the stories of Olga and Joëlle in dialogue with each other, Kristeva has also managed not only to reveal the conflictual aspects of her own intellectual trajectory, but also to poke fun at and probe the limits of her own theories. Her first novel also enabled her to introduce and develop her ideas associated with the notion of revolt, six years before it appeared in The Sense and Non Sense of Revolt.\(^{34}\) In the next novel, revolt is also central to the way in which Kristeva relates personal experience to the political crises that marked the European tradition, but the focus of her inquiry is very different. In The Old Man and the Wolves, the focus shifts from dissident thought and critical inquiry of the legacy of the French Revolution in both Eastern and Western Europe to the effects of totalitarian rule on individual lives. Communism (its ideologies and totalitarian rule), which appeared in The Samurai as the regime from “down

\(^{34}\) The novel was first published in French in 1990, and Le sense et non-sense de la révolte was published in 1996.
occupies a central place in the second novel, where the emphasis is placed not on the right to be an exception but on the affirmation of the singularity of individual experience.
Kristeva’s first novel, *The Samurai* (1992), provoked a great deal of interest because of its depiction of a whole generation of Parisian intellectuals, about whom readers were curious. As it was her first work of fiction, critics were also eager to see how well she would perform in this genre. The generally negative reactions did not deter her from continuing to pursue fiction as an alternative to theory or autobiography as a means to convey her ideas in relation to her own personal experiences. When her second novel, *The Old Man and the Wolves* \(^{21}\) (1994) appeared a year later,\(^ {22}\) it received much less attention, and was disregarded by some as a diversion from critical thought, a therapeutic attempt by the author to come to terms with the death of her father and her memories of the communist regime in Bulgaria, which she had earlier suppressed. Her development in this second novel of ideas relating subjectivity to the political sphere and, in particular, the evolution of her notion of personal revolt in relation to reconciliation and “forgiveness,” did not receive the attention it deserves.

\(^{21}\) Further references to *The Old Man and the Wolves* will appear as *The Old Man*.

\(^{22}\) *Les Samouraïs* was published in French in 1990, and *Le vieil homme et les loups* was published in 1991. I use the dates of publication of the English translations to avoid any confusions, since I refer to them throughout this chapter.
Reactions to *The Old Man*

*The Old Man* was considered by some to be an “unreadable” detective novel, but it can be approached as a novel of ideas dealing with concepts that the author was developing in her other writings. In it Kristeva evokes two totalitarian regimes – the end of the Roman Empire and communism in Eastern Europe – to examine possible ways of reviving a culture of revolt, placing the emphasis on the preservation of the uniqueness of each individual and the aptitude for interrogation, recollection and thought that had been associated in *The Samurai* with dissidence. The setting is Santa Varvara, an imaginary global village that could be anywhere. In this case it serves as an example of any “barbaric” totalitarian regime, in which corruption and the absence of respect for the law and authority have led to fear, violence, and mass murder. The wolves that roam around the city embody the degradation of the rule of law and authority into terror and bureaucracy. A concrete example of “wolfish” behavior is provided by the story of Vespasian, a surgeon who takes it upon himself to decide which patients in his care will live or die. His disdain for his patients also extends to his wife, Alba Ram, whom he despises, particularly when she becomes ill. Their marriage emerges as an individualized parallel to general social breakdown, a prototype of hatred, fear, and domestic violence, as both partners concoct plans to murder each other. Both find a source of inspiration for their plans in the tyrannical rule of Vespasian, Augustus, Caligula, and Nero at the end of the Roman Empire. Neither succeeds in carrying out their murderous plans, but their hatred for each other persists.

In contrast with the barbarity of these individuals who have succumbed to the influence of the “wolves,” Kristeva offers the story of the “Old Man” as an example of virtue, generosity, and love. A former teacher of Latin, and passionate about the works of Ovid, Tibullus, Goya, and Dostoyevsky, the Old Man tries to encourage anyone who listens to him not to give in to the paralyzing fear caused by the wolves. He urges his students to live life in the mind, and to continue to create imaginary communities as an alternative to their horrific and meaningless
everyday experiences. Also known as Septicius Clarus (meaning Septicius “the clear, the bright”), aka the Professor, aka the Father, the Old Man becomes a father figure for both Alba, his former student, and Stephanie Delacour, a political journalist who comes to Santa Varvara from France to investigate allegations of corruption, human rights abuse, and mass murder. Stephanie learns from the Old Man about the many forms of violence committed by the wolves, and how people “disappear” if they speak up against the regime. Intrigued by the long absence of Alba, who the Old Man fears has “vanished,” Stephanie investigates her background and uncovers Alba’s murderous plans against Vespasian. Meanwhile the Old Man, who suffers from an ulcer, is taken to hospital where he dies under mysterious circumstances. This event reminds Stephanie of the death of her own father, which also occurred in suspicious circumstances. Mourning the death of the Old Man as well as that of her own father, Stephanie is determined to bring those responsible to justice, but before she can investigate further, the Old Man is cremated against his expressed wishes. Realizing that there is little she can do in a world where fear and murder rule in the absence of effective laws, Stephanie goes back to Paris. She promises to return to Santa Varvara to continue to investigate future crimes, a task she pursues in Kristeva’s next novel, Possessions.

Contrary to the reception of The Samurai, where reviewers from both sides of the Atlantic focused mostly on Kristeva’s depiction of her milieu and (lack of) talent for writing fiction, reactions to The Old Man paid more critical attention to the novel’s style and composition as well as its supposed therapeutic role for the author. Whereas The Samurai was analyzed as a roman à clef, this text was perceived as an allegory. One French reviewer, F.C. (1991) for Lire, situated it between “legend and cruel realism,” seeing the wolves’ invasion as a metaphor for the ruthless regimes and widespread crime in Eastern Europe (108). Others focused on the novel’s intertextuality with Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Sartre’s No Exit, Camus’ The Plague
and Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* (Donadey 1993; Montgomery 1996) or read it as an unsuccessful psychological thriller (Swartwout 1996).

More academic analyses have been proposed by Anna Smith (1996), Anne-Marie Smith (1998), Maria Margaroni (2005), Carol Mastrangelo Bove (2006), and Chen (2008). Anna Smith (1996) argues that the novel centres on Stephanie’s idealization of her father, establishing a polarization between two kinds of love: *eros*, attributed to a devouring Mother, and *agape*, identified with a loving Father (195). According to Anna Smith, this polarization forecloses the possibility of answering some of the novel’s provocative questions, especially those concerning the relationship between spirituality and sexuality. Smith concludes that these questions are impossible to answer because they are always asked “against the backdrop of a perfect father” (194). Challenging Anna Smith’s (1996) analysis of the novel as based on this polarization, Anne-Marie Smith (1998) argues that such a distinction is “fundamentally symbolic” (35), rather than acted out in personal relationships. She proposes a reading of the novel as a “work of mourning,” in which autobiographical and fictional elements blend to create an imaginary setting for “the death and dreams of a dying man” (59). Invoking the death of Kristeva’s own father as a result of a medical experiment in an Eastern European hospital, Smith (1998) argues that it is possible to read the novel as an imaginary inquest into that death. She concludes that Kristeva undertakes a “search for truth against a background of criminality and loss of meaning” (35).

Sharing Smith’s (1998) focus on the ambivalent role of the father in the construction of *The Old Man*, Margaroni (2005) argues persuasively that Kristeva’s novel re-stages the patricide placed by Freud at the beginning of civilization, with a twist. While in Freud’s case it is the murder of the father that marks the beginning of civilization, in Kristeva’s novel the father is already dead and his murder symbolizes the end of civilization. According to Margaroni, in Kristeva’s scenario what is represented is not the family rivalry between father and son, but a “scission *within* the symbolic site of the father” (55, italics in original). In her view, the Old Man
clearly stands for the “Imaginary Father in Stephanie’s prehistory,” and creating this character opens up an alternative symbolic space where the author, along with the character, tries to work through the death of her father (53). However, this configuration of the imaginary father as a site of mourning is not enough to allow Stephanie to come to terms with the loss of her own father, Margaroni concludes, since the paternal function is itself in crisis and Stephanie realizes that she is complicit in the barbarity of the wolves that killed him (54).

Bove (2006) also reads the novel as a “familial drama,” but presents the loss of the father in its social context (123). Her analysis offers a detailed description of characters and situations, while paying little attention to the symbolism of the novel. More recently, Chen (2008) has also examined this work of fiction as an allegory of the “uncivilized East,” in which the wolves that inhabit Santa Varvara are seen as an example of “Eastern barbarians” (4). This aspect of the novel certainly echoes some elements of The Samurai, where “East” evoked both Eastern Europe and China as “foreign” in relation to Western Europe. However, Eastern Europe has a different relationship to the “European” tradition from that of “the Orient.”

Building on the critical reactions that focus on patricide and the work of mourning, but also considering the political implications of a crisis in the patriarchal function and bearing in mind the novel’s allegorical aspects, my reading of The Old Man looks at how Kristeva’s construction of a fictional narrative space allows her to examine the conditions that can produce a culture of revolt – revolt as individual dissidence and thought in the face of totalitarianism. Before embarking on a detailed discussion of the novel, I will review the ideas drawn from Arendt’s political philosophy that provide a framework for Kristeva’s depiction of totalitarianism. The latter entails not only terror and barbarity in the form of moral and physical violence, but as well, the destruction of human bonds and of the individual’s capacity to act and think independently.
In my discussion of the novel I will focus first on the variants of revolt illustrated by the Old Man, who has recourse to the life of the mind and takes refuge in an imaginary realm that contrasts starkly with the terrifying everyday invasion of the “wolves.” This relates to Kristeva’s emphasis on the notion of singularity, on the uniqueness of each individual, and its potential to counteract the terror and hatred produced by totalitarianism. Duns Scotus’ principle of individuation and Giorgio Agamben’s notion of *quodlibet* (“whatever singularity”) will be central to this discussion.

In their depiction of being incapable of nurturing an inner life or independent thought, the story of Vespasian and Alba Ram illustrates what prevents revolt. Their situation reflects Arendt’s argument that totalitarianism implies the destruction of thinking, and is set in motion and sustained by the fabrication of “soulless men,” whose psyche “is destroyed before their bodies are destroyed” (Kristeva 2001b, 139). Unlike the Old Man’s story, theirs does not reflect the power of narration in relation to reconciliation or forgiveness. Stephanie’s fictional investigation allows Kristeva to mourn the death of her own father, by attributing meaning to her own experience of suffering and creating a memorial to him in the novel. For Kristeva, the aesthetic act of imaginatively shaping a story to give meaning to suffering, is tantamount to reconciliation, but she differentiates between the intimate and public dimensions of forgiveness.

The future of revolt-as-forgiveness is closely connected to the role of women (as daughters), who inherit the ideals embodied by the loving/lovable father figure. They can see the evolution of totalitarian regimes from an insider/outsider perspective that enables them to “investigate” political and historical events, as Stephanie does, without losing a concern for the singularity of each individual, preserving an ethics of care as proposed by Joëlle, the psychoanalyst in *The Samurai*.  

113
Arendt on Totalitarianism and Authority

Arendt’s work provides Kristeva with a framework for examining the relationship between totalitarianism and the loss of respect for authority, laws, and tradition. Arendt (1961) claims that “authority has vanished from the modern world,” arguing that its disappearance has resulted in “the loss of worldly permanence and reliability” (90). She goes on to explain that in pre-modern societies authority served to stabilize the world by preserving the foundations of the body politic and tying the people back to its beginning: “Authority, resting on a foundation in the past as its unshaken cornerstone, gave the world the permanence and durability which human beings need precisely because they are mortals…” (95). The disintegration of authority in the modern age, which Arendt traces back to the French Revolution (as discussed earlier), was

tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world, which indeed since then has begun to shift, to change and transform itself with ever increasing rapidity from one shape to another, as though we were living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else (95, my italics).

This insight is important to Kristeva’s representation of the breakdown of authority in The Old Man, which opens with a quotation from Ovid’s Metamorphoses: “I resolved to tell of creatures being metamorphosed into new forms.” This reference emphasizes, from the outset, that the totalitarian state depicted in the fictional world evoked is the result of a violent process of change in which everything can become transformed into something else. This idea is repeated later in a reference to Rome: “No, Rome was not dead – it had undergone a metamorphosis and taken on new forms. Barbaric ones, you say? Perhaps. New, at all events” (18). In this Protean universe, the loss of a sense of permanence and reliability coincides with the loss of respect for authority, respect for the law, and common values. In Santa Varvara, laws “were made to be ignored,” and judgments “resembled hatred and folly” (126). In other words, “when everything is forbidden, nothing is prohibited,” with the result that chaos, corruption and barbarism prevail (126).
For Kristeva the loss of authority and respect for the law is symbolized by the figure of the “dead” father: “In Santa Varvara they had killed the ‘dead’ father…When there’s no father, the wolves prowl, metamorphoses multiply and cancel one another out, canine jaws invade the fashionable parts of town, and the suburbs too” (140, my italics). In contrast, the Old Man is presented as an embodiment of the respect-able old “law,” representing criticism of the totalitarian regime and resistance to it. The position adopted by Kristeva, following Arendt’s analysis, that the collapse of authority and respect for tradition and law has a negative effect, might initially seem puzzling, since in other contexts authority, law, and tradition are often seen by Kristeva, as by many feminists, as oppressive and needing to be challenged. Totalitarian regimes are notorious for their abuse of authority and power, including unjust laws and surveillance enforced by violent means. What Arendt and Kristeva refer to as “authority, law, and tradition,” which the Old Man represents and defends, evokes a positive and necessary type of authority granted with the people’s consent and implemented to protect them, precisely the framework that totalitarian regimes suppress.

Arendt (1961) insists that we have to distinguish between different kinds of authority and different methods of political coordination: “Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed” (466). The type of authority that Arendt emphasizes and favors was specifically Roman in origin and foundation. She claims that “the word [authority] and the concept are Roman in origin” (104), and that the binding force of authority is closely connected with the preservation of the foundation of a community:

At the heart of Roman politics, from the beginning of the republic until virtually the end of the imperial era, stands the conviction of the sacredness of foundation, in the sense that once something has been founded it remains binding for all future generations. To be engaged in politics meant first and foremost to preserve the founding of the city of Rome (120).
In other words, creating a community and its public space was understood to be constitutive of all subsequent actions, to the point that all political acts thereafter had to be tied back to that initial act of foundation. The binding power of the foundation itself was religious, with religion in this case meaning literally *re-ligare*, “to be tied back, obligated, to the enormous, almost superhuman and hence always legendary effort to lay the foundations, to build the cornerstone, to found for eternity” (121). Thus, to be religious meant “to be tied to the past,” in which case religious and political activities were considered as almost identical (121). Drawing on the etymology of the word “authority” (*auctoritas*) which she links to *augere*, meaning “augment,” Arendt argues that what those in legitimate authority “constantly augment is the foundation” (121-2). She goes on to explain that the Romans distinguished between *auctoritas* and *potestas*, authority and power, and that *auctoritas* consisted in giving advice or counsel to those vested with the formal power (*potestas*) as to whether the laws proposed conformed to the foundation or constitution of the city (122). *Auctoritas*, Arendt (1990) explains, was lodged in a specific institution, the Senate, composed of the fathers of the republic (*patres*), and they held their authority because they represented, or rather reincarnated, the ancestors whose only claim to authority in the body politic was precisely that they had founded it, that they were the ‘founding fathers’. Through the Roman Senators, the founders of the city of Rome were present, and with them the spirit of foundation was present, the *principium* and principle (200-1, italics in original).

It is important to emphasize the fact that Arendt links the notion of authority (*auctoritas*) to the figure of the father (*pater*) and to the act of foundation, including the creation of community bonds. She argues that the specific function of the authorities (or the “founding fathers”) was to give advice about how the community could adapt to changing circumstances, yet remain true to its founding principles. Since change is inherent in the human condition, calling for new laws and institutions, the task of those in authority was to ensure that any changes would be an augmentation of the original founding act. In this way, “by virtue of
*Auctoritas*, permanence and change were tied together, whereby... change could only mean increase and enlargement of the old” (201). In other words, the role of the Roman authorities was to provide a certain stability in the public realm by the preservation of tradition, connecting the present to the past.

Arendt (2005) explains that to remember the past became customary for the Romans, and was tantamount to the manifestation of “common sense” in the public realm: “Historically, common sense is as much Roman in origin as tradition ... With the Romans, remembering the past became a matter of tradition, and it is in the sense of tradition that the development of common sense found its politically most important expression” (42, my italics). “Common sense” is another “traditional value” that was derided and critiqued by French and other intellectuals of Kristeva’s generation, who wanted to deconstruct everything that is taken for granted and look at who benefits from unquestioned assumptions in terms of power. For Arendt, common sense, like remembrance of the past, conservation of tradition, and (justified) respect for authority, are all values related to knowledge and experience transmitted by the (fore)fathers, and are demolished or ignored with disastrous results. It is for this reason that the figure of the father-professor is particularly important in *The Old Man*.

In her novel, Kristeva reinforces Arendt’s notion of the links between authority, the figure of the father, and the creation and preservation of community bonds. She portrays the Old Man as a professor of Latin, who despite the terror and violence of the “wolves” tries to keep alive the Roman tradition of Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, reciting verses from Ovid, Tibullus and Suetonius. His continuous efforts to revive the Roman culture admired by Arendt constitute his only form of revolt against the communist regime. The Old Man, aka the Professor, aka Septicius Clarus, is described as never reading anything but Latin: “Books in early Latin, late Latin, ecclesiastical Latin...” (10). For him, Kristeva goes on to explain,
these verses belonged to the end of a world, the end of the Roman world, which existed before us just as we exist now before some new barbarism or some mere metamorphosis: whatever it was, the Professor was trying to face up to it… No doubt, he would always belong to that world of long ago that he called civilization (14).

As an academic and above all a Classical scholar, this paternal figure appears to be the epitome of “conservative” values, yet he is also constructed as the most effective rebel against the totalitarian system around him, because he is a free thinker, and thought is not only the ultimate sanctuary of privacy and freedom but also has the power to change both individuals and communities.

**Thought as Action**

In *The Old Man*, paternal authority is not associated with the misuse of power and coercive violence, but rather with loving support and the aptitude to conserve and pass on thoughts and recollections as well to interrogate the past, on which the future depends. This idea is clearly expressed several times by the Old Man, aka Septicius Clarus, when he explains that his continuous efforts to revive the period of Roman civilization before the fall of the Roman Empire are motivated by a desire to find possible solutions to the present situation of crisis, violence, and barbarity, in the hope that things will change: “Septicius knew the present was a period of transition. So he looked at Santa Varvara through the eyes of Ovid and Tibullus” (17, my italics). A similar idea is emphasized earlier:

> Whereas what his contemporaries liked about Rome moving toward decline was its rank atmosphere of unconscious decay, its languid indulgence in squalid display, insipid debauch, and unsated lust for pleasure, Septicius Clarus was interested in any pointers the period might contain to its problematic future (16, my italics).

Like Arendt, who regards thought and life as one (1958), Kristeva formulates the Old Man’s aptitude for thought as coextensive with life, and as a metaphor for the endurance of an inner resistance that allows him to ward off fear of the “wolves” and the hatred they provoke.
Thought allows him to maintain a form of autonomy and independence in a context where movement is curtailed. His reading replaces social interaction, which is forbidden. While thought as action might appear as an artificial kind of existence or resistance, it is the only possible self-defense in times of decadence, barbarity, and fear:

(…) he was now autonomous, detached from his departing body because of the artificial existence he had created for himself, from childhood onward, by learning how to speak, read, write, and even identify with a dead language. Dead for his contemporaries, but for him a source of revelation, showing that there was such a thing as the happy chance of being able to live in the mind (113, my italics).

The aptitude for thought is premised on having an inner life. While for Arendt (1958) action and speech constitute the specificity of human life, making it inseparable from the conception of the political as a “living relationship” (187), for Kristeva the specificity of being human is having a psychic life. She combines Arendt’s thought with that of Freud in such a way as to emphasize psychic life as integral to political life. Her (1995) definition of psychic life connects it to the ability to have a “soul.” For her, the “soul” is a “structure of meaning” that represents “the bond between the speaking being and the other, a bond that endows it with a therapeutic and moral value” (4). She goes on to explain that “because of the soul, you are capable of action. Your psychic life is a discourse that acts” (1995, 6, my italics). Kristeva’s definition of psychic life resonates with the Arendtian conception of life in relation to politics, a formulation which she also uses in her description of the Old Man’s revolt against the totalitarian regime. Yet Kristeva adds aspects which Arendt’s emphasis on the life of the mind does not adequately address; through her engagement with Freud, she articulates psychic life not only in the aptitude for thought, recollection, and interrogation, but also in the context of embodiment and the unconscious. The variants of revolt illustrated by the Old Man take both these dimensions into account, as inseparable from thought and memory.
Variants of Revolt: The Story of the Old Man

In *The Old Man*, Kristeva emphasizes the need for a culture of revolt, if life is not to become a “life of death.” This idea is also clearly expressed in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2000d, 7), where she explains that this culture of revolt needs to begin with an examination of the aesthetic and intellectual heritage of European civilization, as well as historical memory, in order to create new variants of that civilization. By endowing civilization with a critical conscience able to assess the past through collective memory, Kristeva also leaves open the possibility of adding an unconscious dimension to that memory. This possibility is explicitly addressed in *Intimate Revolt*, where she claims that “memory is unconscious” (2002c, 34). Moreover, because memory is situated where psychic energy and representation meet, it is “indestructible and yet displaceable, because it is intra- and intersystemic” (34). Kristeva's comments on the unconscious memory of civilization resonate with Freud's (1989) representation of the collective psyche, which Kristeva draws on in *The Old Man* in order to make the idea of a conscious and unconscious memory of civilization part of her attempt to formulate a culture of mental resistance and revolt.

Such a culture of revolt depends on singular forms of expression, on the subjective capacity to create an inner life where various forms of cultural representation are revisited and renewed. Memory becomes a montage where subjective and cultural layers are organized in a heterogeneous fashion, through “scraps of ancient poetry” and “bits of forgotten paintings” (115), in a process that is always incomplete, unfinished yet ready to be started anew. When fear paralyzes any other form of action, as in Santa Varvara, the psychic space of memory and creativity becomes the only space where revolt is possible. In the case of the Old Man, this domain where he can communicate with others across space and time is the only thing that enables him to survive.
To confront the tangible and palpable terror caused by the “wolves,” the Old Man has recourse to the imaginary realm, not as something which removes fear from day-to-day existence, but as a way of tuning it down, through the hope of freedom created by his dreams. Through his reading, he also has the “strange feeling” that his experience of suffering has been shared by others who managed to survive without giving in to compromise, paralysis, or fear (13). The Old Man turns back to Ovid, Tibullus, and Goya, as guides to lead him out of the problematic future shaped by the regime. They also provide him with examples of how to transform pain and suffering into communicable narratives, stories that he conveys in the lectures he gives to his students.

Freud's representation of the psyche, constructed by analogy with the historical site of Rome, “the Eternal City,” is invoked by Kristeva in her description of the Old Man's references to Roman civilization:

Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similar and copious past – an entity, this is to say, in which nothing that has come once in existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one (34, my italics).

Similarly, Kristeva insists that past layers of memory, psychic and cultural, are not lost, but displaced and transformed. In their efforts to keep the memory of Rome alive, to unearth its mnemonic traces and imagine its metamorphoses in new present-day forms, the Old Man and his students turn their attention to Tibullus' elegies and Ovid's Metamorphoses, reading or reciting them aloud: “they repeated those dreamy, inspired verses as if the language of Rome had never been forgotten” (18, my italics). Like Freud before her, Kristeva uses Latin as a metonymy for the archaeological excavation of Rome/the past, which the Old Man tries to unearth and revive. She switches to the Latin variant of the many pseudonyms of the Old Man, calling him Septicius Clarus to emphasize the fact that he is in search of the “lost time” of civilization, which he finds echoed in
Some lines of Latin poetry... Their resonance reconciled Septicius with lost time... These verses belonged to the end of a world, the end of the Roman world, which existed before us just as we exist now before some new barbarism or some mere metamorphosis... No doubt about it, he would always belong to that world of long ago that he called civilization (14-15, my italics).

The period of Roman history that the Old Man likes to recall is, significantly, before the barbarity of the final years of the Roman Empire, when the actions of the supposedly “civilized” Romans became more horrific than those of the colonized/uncivilized barbarians. The situation in Santa Varvara is closer to the barbaric version of Rome, but for the Old Man hope for the future can be found in remembering that Rome’s decline brought about its fall, and newly civilized successors sought their model in Rome’s foundation. Civilization, like the Phoenix, can rise from its ashes, if thinkers recall how it began. Such a renewal does not occur, however, without revolt, implying the necessity for suffering and sacrifice, mental or physical.

**Sadomasochism as Part of the Logic of Revolt**

In his search for pointers that might contain alternative solutions to the problematic future of Santa Varvara, Septicius turns to the stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which indicate the ambiguity of the pleasure inherent in acts of transformation. Septicius remarks:

> For a while, the changes that took place in Ovid were punishments - or, at the very least, tokens of disapproval – the being who imposed them seemed to take as much pleasure in the obloquy of the offense as in its chastisement. Was his intention to wipe out the sin, or to immortalize it? (17, my italics)

This ambiguity is reflected in some elements of Septicius' revolt against the totalitarian regime, which confirm Kristeva’s insight that revolt (even when it takes the form of thought) has sadomasochistic aspects. His research into the past and preoccupation with the ambivalent history of Rome is not entirely innocent. It begins with a process of self-examination that makes him aware of his own potential for violence and the force of his own desires. In reading Ovid’s text, Septicius is searching for a way to understand his own indecision, his own ambivalence regarding possible ways of transforming pain into pleasure, and vice versa. It is in this interval
between pleasure and punishment, immortalization or annihilation of sin, that Kristeva situates the similarity between Ovid and Septicius: “Ovid and Septicius hovered somewhere between the two [pleasure and punishment], on the edge of indecision, of the baleful human condition that hadn't yet chosen its cross but already overflowed with passion” (17, my italics). Ovid’s painful exile in Tomis (where he eventually died) and his ability to transform brutal events, human suffering and conflicts (his own included), into narratives that recount the story of human civilization until the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, offers the Old Man the example of how to transform his own pain, and feelings of anger and violence against the injustice and terror of “wolves” into inner monologues and lectures he shares with his students.

The Old Man “bears his cross,” accepting pain and suffering as martyrdom seeking, like Tibullus in his elegies, to sublimate subjective horror at mass murder into an aesthetic and elegiac contemplation of death. Loneliness and his own approaching end lead to a paradoxical connection to others, including Tibullus:

As for Tibullus, steeped in love, he fed Septicius sweetness like a ripe fruit that knows it must rot but still gorges itself to bursting on the sunshine. The elegies sing of infinite death. They drink deep of death, they grow drunk on it, but they don't believe in it; for them, there is no quietus (17, my italics)

Shifting between repulsion and fascination with death, his in-between position forces the Old Man to remain alert and vigilant to the truths as well as the dangers revealed by the turmoil inside and outside himself: “[he] saw himself as standing on a dividing line: as a bone between two cavities, a boat between two waves, always eager for the turmoil that affords a glimpse of the worst, the vortex that throws up the strange images in which philosophers may later read truths” (17, my italics).

Fascinated by the past, and fearful of the future, for the Old Man the present is seen as an interval between “then” and “not yet”: “Septicius knew the present was a period of transition. So he looked at Santa Varvara through the eyes of Ovid and Tibullus” (17, my italics). For Septicius, this period of transition can only be lived as a form of intellectual nomadism, which is
temporal rather than spatial, as the wandering of his thoughts becomes tantamount to being free to roam. This mental nomadism is also a way to keep the memory of civilization alive, by connecting with others across time and space. Reflecting on Septicius's search for the “lost time” of civilization, Kristeva explains that his decision to be a nomadic thinker, not to be fixed in any one place, especially not the “here and now,” is not simply a critique of the current regime or a “sign of crisis,” but rather a choice, an option, an attitude, taking the form of a quest for what is the best, for what sets out from what has been, without a fixed plan, but free to open up all kinds of avenues. For example, the avenues of memory, which once made Santa Varvara one of the capitals of metamorphosis, as Ovid and Tibullus and even Suetonius could confirm (150, my italics).

Just as there is something “artificial” about dissident thought as equivalent to political revolt, there is also something artificial about this concept of mental nomadism being equivalent to the freedom of physical mobility. Connections with others across time and space are in this case only possible in the life of the mind, and the communication or movement is only one-way. Aware of this artificiality, Kristeva defends it by suggesting that under extreme circumstances, having recourse to artificial solutions may be the only way to remain sane and alive. For Septicius, the artificial life of his mind provides an escape, and is the only means available to survive the “transmogrifications” taking place around him (150). It is also his only source of pleasure: “(…) because of the artificial existence that he created for himself (…) there was such a thing as the happy chance of being able to live in the mind” (113, my italics).

**Meaning as Making Connections**

Recollection, imagination, and interrogation allow Septicius the freedom to make connections with other thinkers, to construct links between times and places that make his present incomprehensible circumstances meaningful. As he explains to Stephanie “meaning is always a kind of connection... There used to be links between people then, and yet they weren't bound.
Freedom – neither passion nor indifference – is a link, perhaps” (58, my italics). This paradoxical formulation of freedom as a link, with its Arendtian overtones, also draws on what Kristeva (2001b) claims to be a Christian definition of freedom as rebirth through living thought (128). In tracing the genealogy of Arendt's notion of freedom to Christian thought, Kristeva states: “This 'other beginning' is a life of the mind… it carves out a space for the interior man, and it becomes a will-to-power, which is essentially a will-to-live” (203).

While Kristeva in this instance relates freedom to Christian thought, she remains critical of other aspects of religion, and in The Old Man she differentiates between religion as adherence to a dominant faith and religious belief or practice as an act of transgression based on freedom of dissident thought, in an anti-religious totalitarian system. In Santa Varvara, any expression of religious belief is forbidden, and the Old Man, who is deeply religious, is considered a dangerous rebel by authorities. So great is the regime’s fear of religion's potential for resistance, that they shut down churches, and even demolish them or turn them into museums (76), as occurred in communist Bulgaria. They develop various methods for persecuting those who continue to express their religious faith, and harassment extends to the entire family, including children. When the Old Man becomes a persona non grata, the whole family is forced to leave Santa Varvara (153). The Old Man's daughter cannot attend the school of her choice, as her application is rejected on the basis of his father's non-adherence to the Party and his non-conformist religious beliefs, as the letter of refusal explains:

Comrade Ambassador…. Your daughter…. you are not a member of the Party… and, let me remind you, you are a believer and very involved with certain local believers. You will agree that this, quite objectively, places you among the enemies of Santa Varvara…. I am amazed you should have thought your daughter worthy of such a distinguished establishment… can only reiterate our categorical refusal (155, my italics).

Thus, for the Old Man, religious belief emerges as a way of transforming his anguish into “the humility of a faith that was hidden but not in the least craven” (151), and part of the mental
freedom that enables him to resist oppression. Elsewhere Kristeva (1995) explains that Christian thought may allow the displacement of hatred into thought by devising a logic that prevents one from participating in murder and madness (120). In the case of the Old Man, Christian thought allows him to work through the hatred that he feels towards the officials by sublimating it into inner visions that he calls his “active monsters” (51): “Like some mad painter, the dying dreamer made pictures out of the hatred that was killing him, yet whose impact he was taming by absorbing into his vision the horror of which he was the victim” (113, my italics).

As Septicius learns to transform hatred and horror by giving them aesthetic form and meaning, he looks at other periods in the history of civilization for examples of how others managed to transform their own inner monsters into cultural representations. He feels particularly close to Goya, who chronicled Spanish history. While Goya deplored the “bestiary carnival” of human passions, and the “grotesque” and deceitful practices of the supposedly civilized Spanish society, he transformed his contempt and hatred into compelling paintings (115). By linking Septicius to Goya, as well as to Ovid and Tibullus, Kristeva suggests the “eternal return” of common elements in different periods of moral decadence, violence, and corruption, as well as the on-going desire to narrate/represent such experiences. There is relatively little variation, other than the increasing sophistication of technologies of murder:

(....) my dear Ovid. I borrow old Goya's palette to translate into dream what you once wrote by the Black Sea. For the Spanish painter, though deaf, was not blind to the stupidities, corruptions, and revolutions of his contemporaries, nor to anything else in the whole range of their rather unimaginative cruelties.... nothing has changed... The dreams of dying men all paraphrase the same theme: consider the persecuted old age of Goya, the lewd old age of Picasso, the crazy old age of Septicius. Abductions, kidnappings, murders, swindles, violations of international law, invasions of sovereign territory, poison gas, germ warfare. Holy war! Terrorism offered up as a sacrifice to God! (115-6, my italics)

The similarities of these different periods of violence and corruption are so striking, they erase the specificity of the historical period, turning the present into an eternal reliving of the past, to the extent that the Old Man can no longer recognize what century he lives in:
What century was it? *Was he in the first century*, in exile on the shores of the Black Sea, dreaming of the metamorphoses that took place in human beings as they entered upon a new era, a new age just as steeped in brutishness as the old? Or *was he in the present*, in Santa Varvara, where a Bogeyman would soon come to disconnect the artificial lung that was still keeping the Ovid-haunted ancient alive? (120, my italics)

Although the experience of horror and oppression and desire to give them meaning through artistic form are similar over time and across space, collective and political resistance and revolt may take various forms, including revolutions. When open revolt is not possible, freedom of individual thought and artistic expression has always provided a last recourse for personal, individual revolt. The power of such thought lies in the uniqueness of each life, in a “singularity” that makes a life like the Old Man’s worth living.

“Whatever Singularity”

The Old Man’s story emerges as a tribute to the singularity and uniqueness of human life, to the capacity to make a new beginning, premised on the aptitude for thought which is tantamount to that of acting. Kristeva uses the notion of *quodlibet* as a plea for human uniqueness, whose very meaning “whatever singularity” invokes a desire to appreciate that life matters “no matter what,” as Stephanie explains: “So I go on telling you about my whims and fancies, because, like the Professor, I persist in thinking that *quodlibet ens* means not ‘no matter what being’ but ‘*a being that matters, no matter what*’” (145, my italics). Kristeva’s notion of *quodlibet* resonates well with that of Giorgio Agamben’s, developed in *The Coming Community* (1993). It is useful to juxtapose their interpretations of the term, to look at how Kristeva’s association of *quodlibet* with that of Arendt, Agamben defines the “coming community” in opposition to any sovereign regime that reduces human life to “bare life,” that is a life deprived of any rights. In making the distinction between “bare life” (*zoe*) and “qualified life” (*bios*), Agamben invokes Arendt’s distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, which Kristeva, in *Hannah Arendt*, explains as a difference between a life that acquires meaning through narration and interrogation (*bios*) and a life without questions (*zoe*). Though Agamben’s book was originally published in Italian in 1990, a year before Kristeva published *The Old Man*, it is possible that Kristeva read the book in the original, since there are striking similarities between Kristeva’s description of the notion of *quodlibet* and Agamben’s analysis.

---

23 A close reader of Arendt, Agamben defines the “coming community” in opposition to any sovereign regime that reduces human life to “bare life,” that is a life deprived of any rights. In making the distinction between “bare life” (*zoe*) and “qualified life” (*bios*), Agamben invokes Arendt’s distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, which Kristeva, in *Hannah Arendt*, explains as a difference between a life that acquires meaning through narration and interrogation (*bios*) and a life without questions (*zoe*). Though Agamben’s book was originally published in Italian in 1990, a year before Kristeva published *The Old Man*, it is possible that Kristeva read the book in the original, since there are striking similarities between Kristeva’s description of the notion of *quodlibet* and Agamben’s analysis.
with a beloved father figure enables her to rethink Arendt’s ideas on authority and the rule of law, as mentioned earlier.

Agamben (1993) argues that the common translation of *quodlibet* as “whatever” in the sense of “it does not matter which, indifferently” is inaccurate or incomplete, for its use in the Latin phrase “*quodlibet ens*” conveys the opposite. He claims that this phrase does not mean, as is often assumed, “being, it does not matter which,” but rather “*being, such that it always matters*” (1, my italics). As quoted above, Kristeva uses similar terms, rejecting the translation “no matter what being” in favor of “*a being that matters, no matter what*” (145, my italics). For Agamben, the basis of the coming community is the singular being, “whatever being,” in the sense that “I care for you 'such as you are’” (2). In *The Old Man*, Stephanie defines her relationship with her father in similar terms: “*Father mattered to me, no matter what*, despite the difference we both affected” (145, my italics).

The singularity of human identity, for Agamben, is not mediated by a person’s belonging to a set or class (1). Kristeva also emphasizes that the singularity of the father cannot be circumscribed by ascribing him to any category. She describes him as “not belonging to the category of fathers in general, of ambassadors, foreigners, Santa Varvarians, Frenchmen, friends, or enemies of the Professors, or any other classifications whatsoever, human, inhuman, or superhuman” (145). This refusal to classify the individual simply as representative of some group does not imply, for either Agamben or Kristeva, a negation of all forms of belonging. For Agamben, the singular being occupies a “space of appearance” that is not rooted in a “here” or “there,” but belongs “everywhere” and “nowhere” (2). Rather, he places the focus on the singularity of “being-such,” beyond the notion of belonging: “Thus being-such, which remains constantly hidden in the conditions of belonging,” as in the example “there is *an X as it belongs to Y,*” is in no way “a real predicate” of the singular being (2). Agamben insists that the singularity exposed “as such” is “whatever you want, that is, *lovable*” (2, my italics). Similarly,
in *The Old Man* Kristeva also uses “X” and “Y” to describe the relationship between Stephanie and her father as a loving space, situated everywhere and anywhere:

> for me [Stephanie], his virtue consisted in being *an X who was such...* and in being content to *appear as such*, just as he was, and therefore thinkable and *lovable* by others who were the same as he, other ordinary beings. By me, for example, who am *a Y to his X*, and so *appear to him in all my ordinariness* (145, my italics).

For Kristeva, the singularity of *quodlibet* is not determined by any belonging, but resides in the ability to expose oneself “anywhere” and “anytime,” to transgress cultural and social identity markers. Referring again to Stephanie’s father, Kristeva writes: “He was really *exposing himself*, with trusting gentleness, with a kind of shattered tension of eye and skin, in permanent prayer” (163, my italics). Kristeva’s horror at the mass murders of totalitarianism is expressed as a plea for the uniqueness of “whatever life,” and Kristeva also makes reference to Duns Scotus’ principle of individuation in order to emphasize this idea. This type of individuation is, paradoxically, associated with “ordinariness” rather than “greatness,” if each “ordinary” person has unique value, rather than value being assigned only to the extraordinary person:

> Father and the Old Man both had the simplicity of ordinary men, no matter who, and that was why they mattered, no matter what. Yes, amid the darkness of great men, my light, my argument is based on the *principium individuationis*, the principle of individuation. And that’s what would need to be saved if ever there were another Noah’s Ark, since it was by its abolition that Santa Varvara set out on the downward path. Yes, what needs preserving is the principle of individuation, the *quodlibet*, the Old Man, and my father (146, italics in original).

Duns Scotus (whom Stephanie quotes in her plea of the singularity of her father) offers Kristeva a chance to refine her meditation on the *quodlibet*, by calling attention to the co-presence of thinking, action, and love. Commenting on the principle of individuation, Kristeva argues later (2001b) that Scotus “not only individualizes the power of mind, but he also adorns this power with desire and reasoning and endows the unique man with an untold freedom…” (176). This freedom resides in the capacity to recognize that willing and loving have primacy over the intellect and are at the root of thought. The singularity of individual experience is based
on a dynamic between thought and sensory perception, and as a result freedom consists in the internal ability to initiate something, to begin something anew in the life of the mind. In a context where totalitarianism destroys the individual capacity for thought and therefore for life, simultaneously suppressing the common space and loving family ties, it is only the capacity for beginning something anew that “guarantees spontaneous uniqueness” (2001b, 141). In *The Old Man*, this capacity to make a new beginning is what defines the singularity of the Old Man’s experience, his own “manner” of being happy:

You are, we are, completely ordinary; examples of the being that does not belong to us and yet by which, by making use of it in our own ordinary manner, we make ourselves happy. Being created by one’s own manner is the only happiness possible. It is the happiness of simple folk, of ordinary people (146).

By making the learned and respected father figure loving and “ordinary,” a “simple” person who believes that life matters no matter what, Kristeva proposes an alternative way of thinking about authority and law. As discussed earlier, like Arendt, Kristeva links the notion of authority to the figure of the father and to the possibility of creating community bonds. But while Arendt reconfigures paternal or patriarchal authority and tradition in transcendental terms, Kristeva turns to psychoanalysis to provide a different framework. By associating the Old Man with a loving fatherliness, Kristeva also challenges traditional psychoanalytic conceptions of the paternal function as stern and tyrannical. Without denying Freud’s or Lacan’s models of authoritarian fathers, she suggests that there are also various other paternal functions. In *Tales of Love* (1987b), Kristeva had already advanced the notion of the imaginary father, which she defines in clear contrast to Lacan’s Father of the Law:

Maintaining against the winds and high tides of our modern civilization the requirement of a stern father who, through his Name, brings about separation, judgment and identity, constitutes a necessity, a more or less pious wish. But we can only note that jarring such sternness, far from leaving us orphaned or inexorably psychotic, reveals multiple and varied destinies for paternity - notably archaic, imaginary paternity (46).
Later, in *Contre la dépression nationale* (1998a), Kristeva outlines some of the many other facets of the father, including his femininity, passion, and desire, making the paternal figure a much more complex authority than the one represented by Lacan (29), closer to the “beloved authority” illustrated by the Old Man in her novel.

In *The Sense and Non Sense of Revolt* (2000d), Kristeva argues that the imaginary father, or the “father of the individual prehistory,” is the “keystone of our loves and imagination,” and incorporates characteristics usually associated with both parents (53). Oliver (1993a) demonstrates that Kristeva had already set up this formulation of the imaginary (combined) parent as a primary identification in subject formation: “The identification with this conglomerate is the vortex of primary identification within what Kristeva calls the ‘narcissistic structure.’ This identification is the originary identification that sets up all subsequent identifications, including the ego’s identification with itself” (77). Oliver also provides a useful explanation of how the paternal and maternal functions are embodied in the notion of the imaginary father:

> This identification with the imaginary father is a transference between the semiotic body and an ideal other who lacks nothing. It is called a father in spite of the fact that it is also a mother because, following Lacan, Kristeva identifies the Symbolic with the Father. She explains this curiosity by arguing that even though the child’s first affectations are directed toward the mother, these archaic ‘object’ relations are already ‘symbolic’ and therefore associated with the father. This is to say that the logic of the Symbolic is already within the maternal body. Although it seems strange, this combination is called a father because it is a metonymic relationship-in-the-making (78).

Oliver (2002) emphasizes the fact that this loving imaginary father plays a primary role in the subject’s psychic development, making creativity and love possible, and also providing the guarantee of communal meaning as the element that can “supply the missing link between social and psychic space” (82). In *The Old Man*, the loving father figure serves precisely as a link between psychic and social space, and Kristeva insists on the *quodlibet* aspects of this imaginary parent as necessary to a loving identification not only with the father but with others, as well as a
condition for becoming an autonomous, thinking subject. The role of this bond in nurturing an inner life capable of adaptation and change is conveyed by Stephanie’s relationship with her father:

But he [my father] believed in things for me …. But I, Stephie Delacour, was there, he said, to stir up the ebb and flow, and perhaps to get some happiness out of it one of these days…. Why me? No reason at all. Wasn’t I programmed for the low tide too: to contemplate the mud, to be a part of it? But no – come, come! Stephie wasn’t like all the rest, she’d come through, she’d go far….What a hope! But he had a reason: he loved me. It was a reason so unassuming it made the chivalrous, protective expression on his face unbearable to contemplate (162-3, my italics).

The beloved authority of the father emerges not only as a support for Stephanie’s elaboration of an inner psychic life, stimulating her capacity for thought and interrogation, but also as necessary for the possibility of individual resistance and revolt. The Old Man’s continuous efforts to revive Roman culture also reflect the notion of a beloved and respected type of authority as integral to the possibility of collective revolt. Personal forms of attachment to individuals, and intellectual attachment to certain types of thought and aesthetic expression, are antidotes to any totalitarian regime and may be as, or more, effective than other types of resistance and revolt in maintaining some kind of freedom. In some cases they may be all that makes life worth living, and their absence can produce monsters, as illustrated by the parallel story of Vespasian and Alba Ram.

What Makes Revolt Impossible: The Story of Vespasian and Alba Ram

Since revolt as thought depends on the ability to have a psychic life, a reduced private life, which suspends interrogation, reflection, and recollection, eliminates the possibility of this type of revolt. This is exemplified in the case of Vespasian, a surgeon whose lack of a psychic life precludes the ability to act or think on his own. Vespasian is a man entirely preoccupied with his own image, with how others perceive him, with little or no concern for any form of inner experience. This character can be seen as a forerunner of the individual cases that Kristeva later (1995) analyzed as suffering from “new maladies of the soul.” Published in translation in 1995,
two years after *The Old Man*, the book with that title examines the consequences of the absence of an inner life, especially in the context of the “society of the image.” Vespasian shows similar symptoms of psychological poverty resulting in an inability to revolt against or even to be revolted by the horrors happening around him.

Vespasian’s lack of a satisfactory personal or interpersonal psychic life is disguised by his fabrication of various masks to suit the roles he performs solely for his own benefit. This form of masquerade manifests itself as a complete absorption in the contemplation of his own image, accompanied by a total lack of interest in or care for others, who serve only to confirm the image he projects of himself. The negative effects on others of this narcissistic behavior are even more striking since Vespasian is a doctor, and therefore professionally obligated to care for others. Vespasian is unable to care for or about others, even within the confines of his medical duties, and expresses little respect for the medical procedures that constitute treatment as an essential aspect of care in a medical context:

> In his view, *caring for patients involved* not only sentimentality but also — worse still — *hypocrisy, inevitably fueled by morbid pity...*. Vespasian, ruthless and brusque, considered his time too precious for that sort of thing, and as for charity - his term for caring and all that it entailed - it only made people weak by depriving them of what little power or resistance they still possessed (38, my italics).

Vespasian’s complaint that his patients fail to “resist” their illness is ironic, in view of his own failure to resist the ruthless totalitarian regime in any way. Rather, his lack of care or respect for individual human life blurs any distinction between the physical and moral violence of the “wolves” and his own form of unfeeling barbarity. So profound is his dislike and contempt for those who are ill that Vespasian undertakes the mechanical application of various methods and technologies of treatment, which he performs in a robotic fashion, oblivious of the fact that “he

---

was ever dealing with an actual man or woman” (38). In Santa Varvara, this kind of performance is admired as a great achievement, whatever the result:

Thus all Vespasian's operations were exploits of the greatest virtuosity, and his way of thinking so prevailed in Santa Varvara that if, as was often the case, his patient happened to die, instead of blaming the surgeon everyone put the mishap down to chance or fate or the patient's 'nonviability’” (38, my italics).

Vespasian’s treatment of people as objects, his lack of an ethics of care, illustrates what Arendt (1994a), in her analysis of totalitarianism, called “the banality of evil.” In her analysis of the Eichmann trial Arendt associated this with the inability to think and take decisions for oneself (24). Commenting on Arendt’s definition, Kristeva (2001b) notes that evil can become “banal,” when the individual’s capacity to think and aptitude for judgment are imperceptibly destroyed, prefiguring the “scandalous annihilation of life” (144). Arendt (1994a) regarded this gradual dehumanization and banalization of what would otherwise be considered horrific as the “worst offense of totalitarianism,” as it produces “soulless men” (Kristeva (2001b, 139). In Vespasian’s case, indifference towards his patients literally leads to their death, as occurs when the Old Man is left to die in the hospital without any medical attention or other form of care. Kristeva associates totalitarianism’s destruction of thinking, of the inability to act and judge on one’s own, not only with the lack of care manifest in the story of Vespasian but also with the destruction of all social bonds based on mutual recognition and respect, a destruction that leads to moral and physical violence and makes hatred commonplace.

**Hatred and the Misdirection of Revolt**

Hatred leads to the cultivation of fear in Santa Varvara, manifesting the annihilation of empathy and a sense of responsibility for the other, to the point that each person has the capacity to engage in “a potential Hiroshima – a war motivated by the ego, without frontiers, and without such paltry refinements as ‘good’ and ‘evil’” (97). Hatred and fear are used by the “wolves” as
techniques to paralyze and dehumanize people, making them turn on each other like “beasts”: “people quarreled and shouted at one another in the subway and on the buses, their faces fierce and distorted; famished crowds waited in line outside the stores, exchanging insults” (82).

Hatred also defines the relationship between Vespasian and Alba Ram, making the word “together” “unthinkable” (56). Reflecting on her feelings towards Vespasian, whom she married because she felt lonely and vulnerable after her parents suddenly “disappeared,” Alba describes her own inner existence as dominated by hatred: “When I look inside myself, I find nothing but hatred” (103, my italics). So powerful is Alba’s hatred that it becomes the only thing that gives coherence and stability to her life, as she explains to Stephanie, her former friend who has come to Santa Varvara to document human rights abuse and visits her there. She describes herself as “Hating in silence, paralyzed with humiliation and yet at the same time ecstatic. For hatred is painless when you think it’s justified …. Did I catch it from Vespasian, or had I gotten it already? Like perfect love, invulnerable hatred is uneventful – it contains no surprises” (103, my italics). For Alba and Vespasian, hatred emerges as the only thing the couple shares. So profound is Vespasian’s hatred of Alba that the mere thought of her falling ill and requiring care angers him to the utmost: “She didn’t dare fall ill any more…. For it is possible to stay well out of sheer terror. Alba did so for fear that Vespasian might explode…. If Alba actually got influenza, it only made Vespasian even less sympathetic: wasn’t a wilting wife simply asking to be disliked?” (74).

The hateful and hurtful relationship between Alba and Vespasian serves to demonstrate that totalitarianism not only entails the destruction of public spaces and of social bonds, but also diverts any power to resist and act to the wrong target - against others who are also victims of dehumanization, rather than against the system that produces and maintains that dehumanization. Instead of directing her anger against the state or the “wolves,” Alba directs it against her husband. This echoes Arendt’s (2001) argument that there are three key elements of
totalitarianism: total terror, the destruction of thinking, and the destruction of natural bonds, chiefly those of the family (474). Arendt writes: “We know that the iron band of total terror leaves no space for such private life and that the self-coercion of totalitarian logic destroys man’s capacity for experience and thought just as certainly as his capacity for action” (474, my italics). The result is “loneliness,” which cuts individuals off from others and makes them more easily manipulable. As Arendt puts it, totalitarian domination “bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of men” (475). Loneliness, as distinct from solitude, is a feeling of abandonment, of an absence of companionship, of being deserted by others even while in their presence (477). What results is the loss of the capacity for intersubjective experience, and along with it, a sense of the value of human life (477). Alba and Vespasian supposedly form a couple, but the process of dehumanization and Vespasian’s contempt for the value of human life make them separate and alone, enemies rather than lovers or companions.

In Alba’s case, her loneliness becomes hatred and a desire for revenge against Vespasian. Like the Old Man, she takes up an interest in the history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, particularly Suetonius’ The Lives of the Twelve Caesars. There she finds stories of “poisoning and lust, treachery and repression” (21) that feed her desire to get rid of Vespasian by poisoning him. While looking for clues in Alba’s apartment as part of her efforts to find out the truth about the death of the Old Man, Stephanie is shocked to discover that Alba, his student, has an extensive collection of books on the fall of the Roman Empire, including instructions on concocting poisons. Stephanie, the outsider who has not been caught up in the terrorized state, is amazed that the effect of this reading on Alba could be so different from what the Old Man found in it: “I’d never have dreamed that Alba’s devotion to Imperial Rome and its perversions would fuel her hatred to such an extent, and turn her disillusion into so squalid a revenge” (105, my italics).
Vespasian’s hatred for his wife also becomes murderous, though when Stephanie questions him about Alba’s whereabouts, since she seems to have suddenly disappeared, he claims not yet to have done anything to harm her physically:

I’m capable of killing that Alba of yours. Do you think I’ve done it already? Oh no, not yet. But nothing will stop me. I’m ready. And if you ever hear that your sad and gracious pal is dead, don’t waste your energy looking for the murderer. It’ll be me (94).

Alba and Vespasian both fail to carry out their murderous plans, and continue until the end to hate and terrorize each other, each being both victim and criminal at the same time. As Stephanie notes when she concludes her mission and returns to Paris to mourn the death of the Old Man, far from the barbarity of the “wolves” in Santa Varvara: “Santa Varvara is everywhere. Alba and Vespasian haven’t said their last word. Suppose they were still committing their crime at this very moment? But which crime? Perhaps it’s a double crime – the simultaneous and reciprocal crime of victim and murderer, who are interchangeable?” (183).

Both Vespasian and Alba are engrossed in their own drama; neither has a psychic inner life that would lead to self-reflection, recollection, or critical analysis of why they hate each other and how the regime has dehumanized them. They may each be potentially both victim and murderer, but neither is capable of being the detective, as is Stephanie, or of recording what is going on, as Stephanie does in her role of journalist. They would be even less capable of transforming their experience into a more-or-less aesthetic account that would bring out its potential meaning, as the Old Man does in his imagination and Kristeva does as the novelist. The “detective novel” aspects of some of Kristeva’s fiction will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, on Possessions, as Kristeva comments herself on the conventions of the “roman policier” in that work. In The Old Man, writing is more closely connected to Arendt’s ideas on “forgiveness,” in a context of totalitarian terror, rather than the dysfunctional family being the main scene of a murder. Although the relationship between Alba and Vespasian introduces
murderous intentions, they are not fulfilled, and the death at the centre of Stephanie’s investigation remains that of the intellectual, the Old Man.

**Narration as a Means to Finding Meaning**

In *The Old Man*, Kristeva presents intersecting, complex acts of narration as necessary to the emergence of the Old Man’s story and the disclosure of its meaning as a form of revolt that leads to forgiveness. To give meaning in this context does not mean to intellectualize, or to understand in the sense of decoding a single, clear and precise message (Kristeva 2002c, 19). When meaning-making implies the act of making sense of an incomprehensible and intolerable experience of suffering, it forms part of a different logic which, for Kristeva, is integral to the logic of forgiveness. Forgiveness, for her, is inseparable from the logic of revolt; it has nothing to do with the theological notion of absolution, but emerges rather as an affirmation and inscription of the value of the experience, premised on the loving support of another that enables an individual to become reconciled to their own feelings of guilt or blaming of others: “This forgiveness does not absolve acts. Under the act, it raises the unconscious and makes it encounter another, in love, another who does not judge but hears ‘my’ truth in the availability of love and for this very reason allows rebirth” (Kristeva 2002c, 20). Forgiveness (of the self and/or others) is what allows a person who has suffered to continue living by beginning again. This kind of forgiveness applies to both Stephanie and the Old Man. Stephanie is able to come to terms with her own feelings of guilt and self-blame for her father’s death by beginning to write the story of the Old Man and of his Father, while also documenting human rights abuses in Santa Varvara. For the Old Man, forgiveness entails the ability to give meaning to his experiences of suffering and marginalization, a process which allows him to live his life anew in his imagination (until his sudden death).
Kristeva has elaborated on her notion of forgiveness in three texts: first, before writing *The Old Man*, in the chapter on “Dostoyevsky, the Writing of Suffering, and Forgiveness” in *Black Sun* (1989a); then, after publishing this novel, in *Intimate Revolt* (2002c), in the chapter “Can Forgiveness Heal?” (where she rethinks some of the main theoretical tenets developed in *Black Sun*, but shifts the focus away from artistic representations to introduce a psychoanalytic angle into the notion of forgiveness); and lastly, in an exchange entitled “Forgiveness: An Interview” (2002a), where she approaches the notion of forgiveness from a philosophical angle, following Arendt’s interpretation of forgiveness in relation to “promise.” Here I will draw on all three texts to evoke the relationship of the notion of forgiveness as it is developed in this novel to the ideas she has expressed elsewhere. Tracing Kristeva’s development of this concept reveals how forgiveness introduces affect into the interpretation of suffering, proposing a new ethical conception dependent on the recognition of experiences that may have *meaning* (in French *sens*) but not *signification*. For Kristeva, *signification* is a term used to denote a “univocal meaning,” related to “rationality (.....), at the surface of consciousness,” while the type of attribution of meaning/sens entailed in forgiveness implies connotation, and engages the unconscious: “intonations, metaphors, affects, the entire panoply of the psychic life” (2002a, 282).

My reading of Kristeva’s concept of forgiveness builds on its analysis by Oliver (2005) and Sjoholm (2004). On a psychoanalytic level, Oliver departs from Kristeva, expanding on the concept by introducing matricidal anguish and the importance of its sublimation into words. For Oliver, forgiveness (of self and/or others) “forestalls matricide and forges a 'third way between dejection and murder,' between becoming abject oneself by identifying with a silent abject maternal body and violently killing it off in order to live” (2005, 87). Integral to this notion of forgiveness is the role of the imaginary father, who provides the loving support for identification, idealization and sublimation, all of which, Oliver argues, are necessary for “love and meaning” (86). The capacity to revolt is thus dependent on the loving imaginary father who “beyond the
punishing father of the law accepts the individual/infant into the social through forgiveness” (86). In other words, “killing off the (maternal) thing requires the support of a loving third who will forgive this transgression and accept the individual back into the community” (86-7).

Sjoholm (2004) sees Kristeva’s notion of forgiveness as constituting a “new ethics of psychoanalysis,” albeit one that can be approached through the Christian tradition (84). She argues that the notion of forgiveness allows us to displace political issues from a locus of universality to one of singularity, claiming that one can read psychoanalysis as a practice of forgiveness because of its capacity to give meaning to otherwise meaningless experiences (84). Like Oliver, she recognizes that Kristeva's concept of forgiveness cannot be restricted only to the imaginary domain, but requires taking into consideration the relation with the maternal body, and how that relation is translated into the social realm. While I agree with both of these analyses, what they omit is an emphasis on the relationship between forgiveness and narration/writing. This can be taken into account by including Kristeva’s studies of Arendt, Freud, and Dostoyevsky as major influences on her rethinking of the notion of forgiveness. It is also necessary to maintain the distinction Kristeva makes (2002a) between intimate and public forgiveness. What I find interesting in The Old Man is Kristeva’s construction of the fictional and autobiographical narrative as a site of reflection that makes the attribution of meaning to a personal event involving suffering dependent on its public exposure to a reader. The reader is asked, like the psychoanalyst, to participate in an act of forgiveness, understood as the experience of giving meaning to an experience of suffering. The fictionalisation of a personal experience and creation of an imaginary Santa Varvara enable the author, through her characters, to project a private, intimate, therapeutic endeavor into the public and political domain.

Although forgiveness is not a psychoanalytic concept, Kristeva sees it as a secular version of psychoanalytic interpretation insofar as it assumes the function of assigning meaning to suffering (2002c, 12). Tracing the genealogy of forgiveness to Christianity, she argues that
both psychoanalysis and philosophy draw on Christian thought in their notions of forgiveness. Arendt elaborates on the etymology of the term, noting that for the Greeks to “forgive” meant to “dismiss,” “change one's mind,” “return,” or “retrace one's steps” (Kristeva 2002c, 16). The Greeks addressed a specific kind of psychical experience, one which was separate from guilt and judgment, and linked forgiveness to rebirth and new beginnings (16). According to Kristeva, psychoanalysis adds to this philosophical tradition an emphasis on the act of interpretation, which involves suspension of “the time of punishment and debt” (16), and can only be carried out with a loving support (which in the case of narration is that of the implied reader).

In differentiating between intimate forgiveness and public forgiveness in psychoanalytic terms, Kristeva (2002a) defines intimate forgiveness as sublimation of the desire for vengeance of a murderous unconscious, aware of its potential violence. For Kristeva, the unconscious is “like all the imprints of the Other, including and most particularly those that are most archaic, 'semiotic’” (2002a, 205). Forgiveness allows renewal of the unconscious, because it inscribes “the right to narcissistic regression within History and Speech” (Kristeva 2002a, 205). It provides a means to go back, to retrace one’s steps and begin again, and in that sense forgiveness entails an understanding of subjectivity as in process, in permanent (re)creation (Kristeva 2002c, 284). In The Old Man, Kristeva explicitly links the act of narration/writing to the notion of forgiveness, and presents the novel as her own “admission of guilt and incompleteness” (64, my italics). The exteriorization of guilt feelings, their exposure to others (listeners/readers), allows their resolution/sublimation for the characters and by implication for the author herself.

In this novel forgiveness is an important dimension of intersecting acts of narration (within the fiction and the writing of the novel) that bear witness to the process of transformation of suffering, even as they serve as a means to that transformation. As in The Samurai, the mediation of fictional characters as narrators allows Kristeva to maintain the distance necessary to transform her own experience of suffering into a narrative form that gives it meaning.
Since *The Old Man* was written shortly after the death of Kristeva's father, it is reasonable to assume that the act of narration in this case allowed the author to work through a personal process of mourning. At the same time, this novel also allows the distance necessary to provide a parallel political critique of totalitarian regimes, as exemplified by the one that she blames for her father’s death. By projecting her experience of losing her father onto Stephanie and allowing her to tell her story, and making the Old Man a father figure who tells a parallel story from his perspective, Kristeva brings together notions of intimate and public forgiveness in a complex interplay between the subjective, individual experience of suffering and loss, and the collective, political experience of loss of individuation and civilization in a totalitarian context. On the one hand, the novel emerges as an attempt to reconstruct a personal inner psychic space as a “space of reconciliation” (Kristeva 1993c, 28), in which painful experiences are worked through and transformed into narrative acts to be shared, while on the other it conveys a powerful critique and condemnation of the political abuse of power that calls for assessment of the possibility of public forgiveness and reconciliation.

Through Stephanie's story, Kristeva links forgiveness to writing and memory, as is illustrated in Stephanie's account of the death of the Old Man and of her own father:

> For the time being I needed to think about the Old Man. I suddenly felt like *writing up my memories* of my old man, my father – yes, really! - which were now coming back to me.... *This was my way of feeling guilty*; or, even more pretentiously, *of being sensitive* (130, my italics).

For Stephanie, writing is a means to sublimate suffering into a narrative able to recount the life of the Old Man, and of her father. It is the alternative to being submerged by suffering, the antidote to the urge to “bury herself” in mindless pursuits: “(...) when he [Stephanie’s father] died I collapsed and tried to *bury myself* in a ceaseless, stupid round of work that was punctuated by continual colds and sore throats” (134, my italics). In *Black Sun*, adopting a psychoanalytical approach to sublimation Kristeva describes it as coextensive with forgiveness, to the extent that
the “potential melancholia is not frozen as an affective withdrawal from the world but traverses the representation of aggressive and threatening bonds with the other” (1989a, 184). In Stephanie’s case, not only is she able to sublimate suffering into words, she is also able to reinvest the death drive, which threatened the disintegration of her bonds with others and led to her collapse, her desire to “bury herself”; her telling of the Old Man’s story for others not only creates links between herself and them, but also between him and them, keeping him alive as well as herself:

But he wasn't dead. He couldn't die any more than words can. Just try! You can silence everyone, burn all the books, cut their pages to pieces with scissors, do anything you like, and you'll find that if someone has heard something even once its meaning will survive. Its meaning will depend on the someone who heard it. And I heard it, and continue to live on, a dream of immortality, of death denied (134, my italics).

Thus, on the psychoanalytic level, writing emerges as a means to transform the death drive into a life bond, one that enables not only Stephanie herself but the meaning of the story of the Old Man to survive. On the literary level, this form of writing begins with an invitation to return to the past, to search for “lost time,” in the Proustian manner, to follow a retrospective path. For Stephanie, the search for “lost time” begins with an examination of her feelings of guilt and remorse, as she is haunted by the idea that she did not do much to help her father, maybe even “nothing,” as she agonizes many times: “he had thousands of visions of his own, different visions.... And it's my fault. I didn't do anything for the Old Man” (159, my italics). She also tries to deal with the memory of feelings of jealousy and anger as a child, when she heard her parents making love in the poorly isolated room of a holiday hotel: “I wanted to shriek out, smash everything, say nothing, melt away with embarrassment, kill them” (138, my italics). For a long time her violent desires emerge in “Stephie’s dream” in which “A train was tearing along ... and it ran over Father's throat and cut his head off... Anyway, his head come unstuck from his body – severed was the word. No blood. I kept that to myself” (138-9, my italics). While this nightmare
may evoke decapitation as a displacement of castration, along with traumatic memories of the “primal scene” in which the father is with the mother to the exclusion of the child, it definitely denotes the imagined death of the father in vengeful terms, and to that extent explains her sense of responsibility for his death. She remembers with regret having mocked his religious faith, particularly when he sang in church: “... sometimes I would start to laugh. A diabolical counterpart of his angelism. I was shattered by my inability to share that surreptitious burning eroticism, and felt even more worthless and rejected than before” (152, my italics). This remark recalls Kristeva’s statement in *Proust and the Sense of Time* (1993c) that the past of childhood can be “truly regained only if it rediscovers the particular form of violence – the violence that is, initially, one of archaic loss and vengeance” (14, my italics). Stephanie has to acknowledge the existence of violence, of sadomasochistic elements, in her past and present self, in order to be able to forgive herself for mocking or not doing enough to help her father escape the totalitarian regime. For Stephanie, the recognition of sadomasochism in herself enables her “put herself into the shoes of others” and empathize with their feelings. It is this ability to put one’s self into the place of another, which recognizes sadomasochism as integral to it, that ultimately defines Stephanie’s role as a political journalist turned detective: “All I had was the adaptability and nerve to put myself in someone else’s place” (143).

Stephanie’s efforts to give meaning to an experience of suffering, to come to terms with her feelings of guilt and remorse, emerge as inseparable from the logic of revolt, which also rests on the aptitude for recollection, self-interrogation, and questioning of the past and links with others. The relationship between Stephanie and the Old Man, which enables her to tell her own story in parallel with his, adds social and political dimensions to the act of narration in relation to forgiveness, moving out of the private realm of psychoanalysis, which concerns a search for a personal lost past, to the realm of literary narration as a form of public testimony to collective experience, whose effectiveness depends on the reader(s).
Public Forgiveness

Kristeva makes an important distinction between intimate forgiveness and public forgiveness, which is that intimate forgiveness is ahistorical, whereas public forgiveness refers to the linear time of history (2002a, 205). The lost ahistorical time of a personal past may be regained if the subject follows a retrospective path, as illustrated in the case of Stephanie in *The Old Man* or Olga in *The Samurai*. Public forgiveness, on the other hand, follows a linear order of time that is part of history and of collective consciousness. It is situated in the social space where laws should be enforced, because public discourse must be maintained as “a discourse of condemnation, of settling accounts” (2002a, 283). As discussed earlier, Kristeva insists, following Arendt, that the social sphere is that of judgment and must be reinforced by prohibitions and (legitimate) authority (2002a, 282). By differentiating between intimate forgiveness and public forgiveness, Kristeva prepares the terrain to answer potential questions concerning the possibility, or impossibility, of forgiving war criminals, murderers, or anyone who has committed physical or psychological violence against others. It may be impossible and undesirable to “forgive” such crimes, since the perpetrators must be held responsible and accountable. According to Kristeva it is possible, however, to forgive the person concerned, if that individual shows remorse and asks for forgiveness, while continuing to judge and punish the acts committed by that person. This is why Kristeva insists that intimate forgiveness is ahistorical, as it addresses a time “outside time,” one that pertains to a different logic of temporality (as discussed in relation to origins in *The Samurai*).

Echoing Arendt, Kristeva states that public discourse must remain a discourse of condemnation and of settling accounts, because a community “cannot maintain itself unless it gives itself laws that are impossible to transgress; for it is founded on law and punishment”
(2002a, 282). In *The Old Man*, Kristeva illustrates what happens when limits, laws, and prohibitions are non-existent, as in Santa Varvara. Punishment and prosecution remain impossible. For instance, in the case of Stephanie's father, a religious man is refused the right of burial and is cremated against his written will and the will of the family. Stephanie sorrowfully and angrily remarks: “Now that the people of Santa Varvara have incinerated him, I tell myself that, after all, fire suits him better than earth. But *I'll never forgive* the wolves for refusing him the right of burial” (168, my italics). In contrast to the absence of respect for the law and appropriate punishment that characterizes Santa Varvara, Kristeva posits the imaginary realm as a place where judgment and condemnation can take place, as is illustrated in Stephanie's recounting of the burial scene: “In Santa Varvara, where *laws* were made to be ignored and *judgments*, whether first or last, resembled hatred and folly, the church, full of flowers and musk and incantation, was secretly changing into a *courtroom*” (126, my italics).

Without laws or courtrooms, the church emerges as the only place in Santa Varvara that signifies any form of authority or law. Without a proper courtroom, the criminals cannot be held accountable or responsible for their acts, as Stephanie complains: “'criminals', I almost called them to myself, but as you cannot have a crime without a proof, I dubbed them merely 'suspects'” (127). Reflecting on her reasons for becoming a detective, Stephanie explains: “Judging by my own experience, you become a *detective* when, having no place of your own, you appoint yourself an *ambassador of the law* and spend your life trying to solve the mystery that is really a murder” (140, my italics). In equating the detective with an “ambassador of the law,” Kristeva suggests that the function of her detective story is not (only) to solve the mystery of a murder, but rather to enact a public forum, in which, through the act of narration, murder and abuse are taken into account and recognized. The novel thus becomes an acknowledgement or recognition of the experience of suffering, and a commemoration of those who, like the Old Man, resist and revolt against tyranny, even if it is only by recourse to thought and imagination.
The act of narration as an act of revolt and forgiveness also implicates and complicates the act of interpretation by the reader. As forgiveness, writing emerges for the writer/narrator as a continuing process of self-transformation, of putting suffering into words, and ascribing meaning to a painful experience, as occurs in the case of Stephanie's self-examination. As revolt, writing appears as a process of self-reflexive literary production and analysis that opens up the space between the author and narrator to a continuing process of scrutiny, laying bare the dynamics of the writing experience. This form of writing does not favor coherence in terms of the structure of the plot, nor linearity in the telling of the story. In *The Old Man*, repeated movements of return and transformation occur not only in terms of intersecting characters and their narratives, but also in the historical realm (from the fall of the Roman Empire to the fall of the Berlin wall), creating an effect of constant temporal and narrative dislocation. The reader is invited to participate in the co-production of a “texte scriptable,” to become part of the exchange of stories, as “Our goings hence and our coming hither all take place in the form of stories” (66). Readers who prefer a “texte lisible,” and like to have the meaning revealed to them with less effort on their part, may give up. The effectiveness of Kristeva’s novel as an act of forgiveness and reconciliation depends on the imaginary support of implied readers. Such support implies identification and willingness to love and forgive, and without it the meaning of the Old Man's and Stephanie's stories is lost, as Kristeva/Stephanie tells “us”: “The only way I could mourn was by making their ordinariness seem lovable to you. I plead for a truce in our fascination with murder, though I haven't forgotten about it and promise to get back to it in due course” (146, my italics).
Kristeva seems to have a particular audience in mind, made up of women, as she regards them as the only ones capable of paying attention to the personal, to the ordinary, to the “whatever singularity”:

It won't be long now till women are the only ones who still believe in the personal, still think—for women know how very ordinary they are themselves—that an ordinary individual may be of interest. So I go on and tell you about my whims and fancies because, like the Professor, I persist in thinking that quodlibet ens means not ‘no matter what being’ but a ‘being that matters, no matter what’ (144-5, my italics).

In attributing to women the capacity to preserve the meaning of life as a life that “matters no matter what,” Kristeva suggests an alternative way of valuing life in relation to culture, that depends on women’s (supposed) preoccupation with the personal or subjective, rather than the general or objective dimensions of life. This positions women at the forefront of the social and ethical scene that Kristeva (2000d, 5) later associates with a culture of revolt. The subjective experience that Kristeva has in mind has meaning rather than signification and relates to the pre-linguistic, corporeal and semiotic aspects of subjectivity and revolt. The emphasis on subjectivity and personal thought is essential to political revolt, as an antidote to a totalitarian regime that considers individual life “superfluous,” to recall Arendt's (1994a) term. Kristeva positions women as capable of preserving both life in its biological sense, and the meaning of life in its “ordinariness.” This revalorization of “feminine” experience constitutes the basis of an ethics that includes the recognition of “whatever” forms of life that have been neglected.

In her next novel, Possessions, Kristeva reintroduces Santa Varvara as the scene of a murder, and Stephanie as the political journalist-cum-detective, but the circumstances of her inquiry are very different. The focus shifts from the effects of totalitarian rule on individual lives (and the reverse in terms of revolt) to the dynamics within a family, rivalry between women, and the relative importance of biological mothering and the acquisition of speech. Decapitation, which appeared in The Samurai (in references to the guillotine) and The Old Man (in Stephanie’s
dream of her father), occupies a central place in this third novel, where the focus shifts from the father to the mother.
Chapter 4

Possessions: A Novel of Intimate Revolt

“The intimate is where we end up when we question apparent meanings and values.”

(Julia Kristeva, Intimate Revolt, 43)

Like The Samurai (1992) and The Old Man (1994), Kristeva’s third novel, Possessions (1998b), enables her to situate her personal experience as a woman, foreigner, mother of a disabled child, in relation this time to the history of representations of decapitations in both Eastern and Western European art and culture. As in her previous novels, the stories of the main characters are underpinned by her own experience and interpretation of the events described. In Possessions, the story of Gloria Harrison—a mother of a deaf child, who is eventually murdered and decapitated—depicts the difficulty of being a woman, a foreigner and a mother of a child with disability. These are conditions that Kristeva sees as her own. Two years after the publication of the novel, in Intimate Revolt (2002c), Kristeva writes: “In this image of female and maternal suffering that sums up the difficulty of being a woman I have put much of my personal experience: the decapitated woman is me” (4, my italics). Kristeva’s identification with Gloria, the decapitated woman in Possessions, continues the series of identifications with the other female characters in the previous novels, to the point that Gloria retains many of their major characteristics. Like Olga Morena in The Samurai, Gloria is a foreign woman whose interests focus on language and translation, and like Joëlle Cabarus, the psychoanalyst in The Samurai, whose ability to put herself into the shoes of her patients in order to be better able to understand and care for their suffering, Gloria needs to put herself into the shoes of her deaf son.

39 In La haine et le pardon (2005), in the introduction to one of her articles, “Liberté, égalité, fraternité et… vulnérabilité,” Kristeva explains that her interest in and involvement with social, economic and cultural issues related to disability is also partly due because of her personal experience as a mother of a son with some “neurological disability” (95). She writes: “Si je fais cependant le pari de partager cette situation, ce n’est pas seulement parce que les difficultés neurologiques de mon fils lui ont fait suivre un enseignement atypique ou j’ai découvert la singularité de chaque personne handicapée” (95).

40 Possessions was published in French in 1996 and La révolte intime in 1998.
to be better able to teach him how to translate his sensory universe into images or signs that both mother and son can share together.

There are other similarities that connect *Possessions* to the previous novels: as in *The Old Man*, the location is Santa Varvara, an imaginary place, as long as it seen as representing an epitome of the new world order, characterized by the absence of authority, laws and values. As well, Stephanie Delacour reappears as a political journalist-turned-detective, in order to investigate, as she did in *The Old Man*, allegations of corruption and human rights abuses.

This time the novel is self-consciously situated in relation to the detective novel, and raises the relationship of the psychoanalyst to the detective is. Whereas the first novel concerned a single woman who ends up becoming a mother, and the second, a woman’s relationship to her father, this novel focuses on the foreign woman as mother to a son with a disability related to language, and the teacher’s role associated with the male Father-Professor in *The Old Man*, is assigned in *Possessions* to a woman. While both earlier novels openly deal with political and historical issues in relation to revolt and collective violence, this one focuses on intimate relationships within families.

**Possessions: An Overview**

*Possessions* opens with the sight of the decapitated body of Gloria Harrison, whose head is nowhere to be found. The search for the missing head generates another search into European cultural archives, with a focus this time not on revolutions (as in *The Samurai*) or Rome (as in *The Old Man*), but artistic representations of decapitation. Rilsky Northrop, a police detective

---

41 The name Rilsky Northrop echoes that of the literary critic Northrop Frye, whose *Anatomy of Criticism* Kristeva critiqued in her *Le texte du roman* (1970). Kristeva also uses other names in the novel that echo those of famous thinkers or artists, such as Pascal and Bellini. Hester Bellini, Gloria’s maid, with her massages and bathing of Gloria reminds us of some of Bellini’s paintings, such as *Naked Young Woman in Front of the Mirror*. Through this “strange familiarity,” operated by means of names, Kristeva exposes the reader to a wide spectrum of temporal experiences. She intersects linear time (the time of events, of the investigation, and of the search for the murderer) with the timelessness of death, opening up the investigation to transcultural representations of decapitation in the
working in Santa Varvara, is assigned to investigate the murder, while Stephanie Delacour leads her own investigation into Gloria’s life. Her references to various artistic representations of decapitation help clarify some aspects of what lead to Gloria’s death and her decapitation, which in the end are revealed not to be the same thing, since Gloria is murdered by one person and decapitated by another. Stephanie doesn’t actually “discover” the murderer, but solves the “puzzle” that constitutes the enigma of Gloria’s decapitation. Both Rilsky and Stephanie are highly critical of the “society of the spectacle,” including the way journalists sensationalize crime stories while some novelists turn them into cheap entertainment.

As the parallel investigations begin, so does the unwinding of time in Gloria’s life story. Various details are amassed, juxtaposed or interspersed with political or cultural events of the periods involved. Gloria is presented as a foreigner who works as a translator, and a single mother who has experienced a great deal of humiliation. Her professional interest in language and communication overlaps with her most important personal project, which is to enable her deaf son, Jerry, to express in words what he sees only as images. Their first medium of communication is painting, and we learn that Jerry’s father, Stan Novak, was a painter. Stan is presented as an absent father, who failed to be present even at Jerry’s birth and died soon after, estranged from both Gloria and Jerry. After his death Gloria became involved with an abusive, controlling and arrogant lover, Michael Fish, who is the main suspect in her death. Whether or not he did kill her, he ends up in prison.

Another woman central to the plot is Jerry’s speech therapist, Pauline Gadeau. We learn that Pauline had cared for her younger brother, Aimeric, since he was a baby, as their mother was absent at work. They became inseparable, to the point that their intimacy was suspected of verging on incestuous desire and some people took them for lovers. When Aimeric drowned in
the sea Pauline experienced a severe breakdown, and refused to speak or eat for months. Only a change of location and of language saved her.

Stephanie’s investigation unearths the details of Gloria’s life, which for her constitute the singularity of Gloria’s existence, but such details are considered insignificant by the police in general and are not of any interest to journalists. As in The Old Man, Stephanie’s inquiry into the life of another woman is also an opportunity to delve into her own life, including her nightmares related to a therapeutic abortion which she sees as her own form of amputation or “decapitation.” While Rilsky’s police investigation collects the evidence the “outside” world provides about Gloria’s life, Stephanie’s search concentrates on the “inner” world of Gloria’s personal experiences. Humiliation, pain, depression, and isolation are aspects brought to light by Stephanie’s interrogation of Gloria’s friends, neighbours, and enemies. Gloria appears to have been a woman who managed to turn suffering into a continuous quest for meaning, and who cared for her son above all.

In the end, Stephanie’s investigation appears to draw no conclusions, and legally it amounts to nothing but “piles of details” (178). Since crime is still rising dramatically in Santa Varvara, and there are fears (as at the end of The Old Man) that a serial killer may be on the loose, Stephanie returns to Paris. It is there, far away from the chaos of Santa Varvara, that she learns about Pauline’s earlier painful experience of losing her brother, and begins to suspect that it was Pauline who decapitated Gloria. She had a reason to do so, because she feared that Gloria was about to give in to Michael’s demands that Jerry be sent away to a boarding school. Stephanie, who knows how to “put herself into somebody else’s shoes” (59), realizes that Pauline must have feared losing Jerry, as she had lost her brother. In Pauline’s mind, her mother was responsible for Aimeric’s death, and she sees Gloria as another mother about to take a child away from her. By decapitating Gloria, Pauline could be seen as aiming a blow at her own mother. Yet we find out that at the time of her decapitation, Gloria was in fact already dead,
implying that the murder and the decapitation were two separate acts, not necessarily by the same person. The case ends with the incarceration of Michael, yet we are left with the feeling that he may not have been the “real” murderer. Ultimately, who the “real” murderer is does not really matter in one sense, since Gloria seems to have been stifled long before, by the humiliations, pettiness, and meanness she had suffered. The novel ends with Jerry being entrusted to the care of Pauline, and Stephanie’s unravelling, in Paris, of the enigma of Gloria’s decapitation. She promises to return to Santa Varvara to continue her investigations.

**Reactions to Possessions**

When the novel was first published in France in 1996, a critic in the *French Review*, Laurence Enjolras, reproached Kristeva for digressing from the classical detective genre, suggesting that she has little in common with writers like Agatha Christie. Bettina Knapp (1997) voiced similar concerns, suggesting that Kristeva’s many digressions turn the novel into one “big question mark” (1). Baffled by Kristeva’s decision to introduce allusions to mythical, literary, and pictorial beheadings, Knapp claims that it is hard to understand why “such heteroclite appendages” have made their way into this story, turning it from a promising, exciting mystery into one that “induces drowsiness” (1). Enjolras and Knapp both focused on the digressions that form part of the novel and its failure to maintain interest and suspense until the end, aspects that were echoed by many other critics (such as Kincaid, 1998; Weidova, 1998).

By contrast, Anne Irvine (1998) offered a short yet enthusiastic account of the novel, which she sees as a “gripping mystery,” full of sensuality and psychological insights (74). Similarly, Mark Edmundson (1998) applauded Kristeva for her efforts to branch out from theory to fiction. He reads the novel not just as a mystery story but also as a series of reflections on Kristeva’s favourite themes: depression, language, the struggle between the sexes, the powers of horror, psychoanalysis, and motherhood. He concludes by arguing that the strength of the novel
lies not in the construction of the facts of the murder, but rather in the mother-child scenes, which he considers passionate, tender, and subtle.

Though *Possessions* initially received mixed reviews, they were followed by some academic analyses that examine the novel in greater depth. Looking at *Possessions* in relation to feminist psychoanalytic theories, Valerie Raoul (2001) reads it in juxtaposition with another novel published in France in the same year, *Instruments of Darkness* by Nancy Huston, who is also a foreign woman writing in her second language. Both novels include the destruction of a woman’s head and references to abortion. Raoul refers to Hélène Cixous’s influential article translated as “Castration or Decapitation?” (1981) to look at the problematic relationship for women, in psychoanalytic terms, between various types of amputation (the head, the sex, the foetus). She sees *Possessions* as illustrating Kristeva’s challenge to the Lacanian division of mother/father functions in terms of biological reproduction and symbolic representation, since it is another woman rather than a man who is Gloria’s rival for control of Jerry, both physically and verbally. Raoul also discusses the parallels suggested in both novels between biological and textual “giving birth,” and the role of writing in another language for women characters who abandon the “mother tongue.” In exile or escape from their own mother they produce texts that compete with their own children, while both texts and children represent foreignness in the self.

Adopting a different approach, Juliana de Nooy (2003) uses Kristeva’s notion of revolt to explore some similarities between the function of the detective story model in her fiction and her use of psychoanalytic case studies in her theoretical work. She suggests that case studies constitute a “point of overlap,” making comparisons between those recounted in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (the stories of Armelle, Dominique, and Florence), and the fictional portraits of Gloria, Stephanie, and Pauline in *Possessions*. For de Nooy, the difference between the two types of text lies in their driving force: while in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* it is the notion of revolt and the possibility of rebelling when there is no authority figure to confront
(de Nooy 2003, 115), in Possessions the driving question is rather, following the detective story convention, who has acted and to what effect; who is responsible for the murder/decapitation and why (116)? In de Nooy’s view, Possessions can be better read as a “whodunit” story, in which murder is seen as a sign of revolt against all forms of conventions and standardization of authority and law prevalent in the corrupt new world order of Santa Varvara.

Departing from the psychoanalytic framework, Bove (2006) reads Possessions as a mixture of detective story and philosophical-political tale (127). She sees Gloria's death as part of the fabric of Santa Varvara, “an Eastern European city wallowing in corruption after the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall” (128), and concludes that the novel offers a critique of the Western powers as well as of the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe (129). Emphasizing the Eastern-Western European connections in the novel, Chen (2008) takes a position contrary to that of Bove, arguing that Kristeva replicates stereotypical images of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, while at the same time imposing a Western European imperialist perspective (42). Like Bove and Chen, I will also focus on some of the Eastern-Western European connections in the novel, but unlike both Bove and Chen I focus on the ways in which Kristeva draws on the Eastern and Western European modalities of representation in order to propose a new way of looking at decapitations.

Like de Nooy’s, my analysis emphasizes Kristeva’s notion of intimate revolt, and like Raoul I see the theme of motherhood in relation to language as central to the novel. I will connect these two themes by looking at how Kristeva invokes Klein’s notion of “phantasmatic matricide”42 as both the necessary condition of individuation and the organizing principle for the

---

42 Kristeva (2001d) explains that the spelling “phantasy” denotes the psychic activity preceding the repression and differentiates the Kleinian phantasy from the traditional psychoanalytic notion of “fantasy,” such as daydreams, conscious or repressed (138). Unlike Freud who “conceived of fantasies in terms of his model of the dream,” believing that fantasies began with the second or third year of life (138), Klein sees phantasy as always already part of the psychic apparatus. As Kristeva writes, quoting Susan Isaac’s opinion: “phantasy is (in the first instance) the mental corollary, the psychic representative, of instinct. There is no impulse, no instinctual urge or response which is not experienced as unconscious phantasy” (138). Kristeva goes on to explain that Klein’s phantasy also differs
subject’s imaginary capacity. Kristeva draws on Klein’s notion of “phantasmatic matricide” to develop her notion of intimate revolt and to propose a new way of looking at representations of decapitations, a way which distances both her and Klein from Freud’s view of decapitation as a form of castration. In Kristeva’s (2001d) reading of Klein, the representation of decapitation (especially by a woman)\textsuperscript{43} has less to do with castration anxiety (though that also plays a part)\textsuperscript{44} and more with the representation of a successful phantasmatic matricide that places the relationship with the mother at the core of psychic life. Such approach to representations of decapitations further distances both Kristeva and Klein from the Freudian traditional views on psychoanalysis. Kristeva outlines the differences between Freud’s and Klein’s theories in her second volume on the female genius, *Melanie Klein* (2001d), yet her privileging of Klein’s theories over those of Freud was already articulated in *Possessions* (1998b). To understand what Kristeva’s ways of looking at decapitations invites “us” to see in *Possessions*, we first have to understand the major differences between Klein’s and Freud’s theories on psychic life. That would allow us to distance the representation of decapitation from castration anxiety, and to shift the focus on the relationship with the mother and the continuous process of working through and re-creating that relation in signs (images, words etc).

In *Melanie Klein*, Kristeva explains that while Freud sees the unconscious as being structured by desire and repression, Klein sees the unconscious as structured by the newborn’s psychic pain, his splitting processes from the mother and his early capacity for a limited form of sublimation (12). While Freud considered the repression of pleasure to be the one that generates anxiety and symptoms, Klein believed that the death drive is both “the primary agent for our distresses” and for “our capacity to become creatures of symbols” (14). In other words, if for\

---

\textsuperscript{43} I will return to this point in more detail later in the chapter.\
\textsuperscript{44} For the purpose of this chapter, I will mostly focus on decapitation as the representation of phantasmtic matricide and not as a form of castration (which is closer to Freud’s traditional views).
Freud, neither the unconscious nor the baby “knows death” (61), for Klein, the death drive exists from the moment of birth (61). In Klein’s view, the death drive manifests itself only through its relation to an object, a view which reinforces her distance from Freud, since for Freud the drive has “a source and an aim, but no object” (12). Yet for Klein, “the newborn’s drives are directed from the outset toward an object (the breast or the mother)” (12, italics in original). In other words, for Klein, the mother is always already there, along with the “dramas of the early bond between the object and an ego” (12). Klein’s privileging of the mother and her emphasis on the maternal bond at the onset of psychic life is what constitutes the main divergence from Freud’s theories, since Freud centred “the psychic life of the subject around the castration ordeal and the function of the father” (12). Yet Klein’s privileging of the mother does not amount, Kristeva explains, to “raising the mother into some sort of cult” (12), but rather to considering the necessary processes of separation from and sublimation of the maternal in order for the subject to become independent. For Klein, this process of separation, which she sees as a form of “matricide,” is at the origin of the subject’s capacity to think, along with envy and gratitude (13), as I explain in detail later.

Kristeva incorporates Klein’s views on psychic life in Possessions, when she considers decapitation in relation to the failed process of phantasmatic matricide, as in the case of Pauline, who acts out her universe of pain and violence by decapitating Gloria, or in relation to some of the artistic representations of decapitations in European art and culture. Thus when Kristeva talks about decapitations in Possessions, she does not talk about castration anxiety, as Freud did but, following Klein, she considers the inner workings of the death drive, and its transformation into thought and psychic interiority, which places phantasmatic matricide as the very precondition of having a psychic life. While I consider the narrative universe of Possessions by examining the meanings of decapitation in Pauline’s case, and its successful working through in Jerry’s relation with his mother, as he learns to contain his violence and that of his mother
through painting, I also suggest a different reading of the novel that takes into account Kristeva’s identification with the decapitated woman, Gloria, as well as her role as a detective writer, who performs her own form of decapitation in writing. For the analysis of the latter part, I draw a tentative link between Possessions and Visions Capitales (1998f), an arts catalogue on representations of decapitations in European art and culture, which Kristeva dedicates to her mother. The link between the two texts facilitates my reading of Possessions as a form of working through and representation of Kristeva’s own phantasmatic universe of pain, suffering and its transformation into a narrative that can be shared with others.

The emphasis on decapitation as a working through and representation of the inner universe of pain and phantasmatic matricide proposes a new way of looking at images (of decapitation) that brings into sharp focus the two distinct modalities of representation prevalent in Eastern and Western Europe. My analysis will show how Kristeva critiques the Western European modality of seeing which regards the image as a copy of an exterior object, and draws on the Eastern European modality of seeing which considers the image as an inscription, or a relationship between the viewer and the seen. Here I turn again to Visions Capitales, where Kristeva traces these two modalities of representation to the iconophiles-iconoclasts’ quarrel, that reinforced the split between the Orthodox (Eastern European) and Catholic, Protestant (Western European) churches, and examine the ways in which Kristeva incorporates these modalities of representation in Possessions.

First my discussion will bring together the logic of sadomasochism (already introduced in The Old Man in relation to the father) as inseparable from the idea of matricide and the functioning of the imaginary (related to the mother), which will lead me to what Kristeva terms “thought specular” as a form of intimate revolt. Here revolt is no longer defined in terms of

45 Visions Capitales was published two years after Possessions, in French in 1996.
46 Visions Capitales is the only text that Kristeva dedicates to her mother.
47 The French version is “le spéculaire pensé” (1998c, 110), which has been translated into English as “thought
dissident thought and as a right to be an exception in the context of the political revolutions discussed in *The Samurai*, or in terms of the preservation of the singularity of individual experience when coming up against totalitarian regimes, as in *The Old Man*, but rather as the revisiting, interrogation and representation of the intimacy of human experience. This revolt in terms of intimacy allows for a better examination of one’s own logic of violence, universe of pain, and links with others, beginning with the first other, the mother -- an examination which has the potential to transform the acting out of violence into representation. This intimate revolt promotes a vision of individual experience that is founded on responsibility and respect for the m/other. The ethical function of Kristeva’s intimate revolt lies in her concern for the dynamics of social relations, which begin with a careful examination of the individual’s universe of object (maternal) relations.

All the women characters in the novel have had traumatic experiences that give them an intimate understanding of suffering, and illustrate how feminine reactions to psychic pain can suggest an alternative to what Kristeva (2002c) calls “the robotizing and spectacular society” (5). In *Possessions* she proposes a way of seeing that refuses to allow the maternal “head” (or function) to be reduced to patriarchal dogma. The “beheading” of the mother, in the context of the “society of the image” represented by Santa Varvara, forces the other protagonists into a process of reflexivity that reveals the violence underlying one’s fantasies. The Freudian logic of dreams illuminates the role of the detective in decoding displacements and condensations, as the motives and the objects of love or hate shift from one suspect to the other. As in *The Old Man*, the ethics of interpretation and individual revolt in relation to a crime-ridden society are central to the resolution of the mystery surrounding a death; the death drive, related to sadomasochism, plays a role for all those involved.

---

specular” (2002c, 74). Though a more appropriate translation would be “specular thought,” I retain the English version to minimize confusion.
On Matricide, “Thought Specular,” and the Role of the Imaginary

Very little has been written on Kristeva’s analyses of artistic representations, and of paintings in particular, but there seems to be a consensus in existing studies that Kristeva’s approach to art deals with the relationship between the viewer and the image, rather than with representation per se. Commenting on Kristeva’s analyses of Bellini’s paintings, Mary Bittner Wiseman (1993) claims that she uses Freudian psychoanalysis to illustrate the visual representation of the maternal bond, by positing the mother not as an “object of desire” but as a “function” (97). Taking a psychoanalytic approach as well, Lechte (1990a) argues that for Kristeva art (in this case painting) is “the means of identifying with suffering” or of “putting suffering into the symbolic” (346). Lechte analyses this process through the Lacanian notion of the “real,” whereas I see Possessions as illustrating Kristeva’s version of the “imaginary,” as she focuses on phantasmatic matricide in order to show that the capacity for psychic activity and thought depends on a primary identification with maternal femininity. Departing from Wiseman’s attention to Freudian psychoanalysis, I situate the maternal function in the novel within a Kleinian framework. By so doing, I want to draw attention to the fact that Kristeva develops her notion of intimate revolt and the theme of decapitation against the background of the normalizing order of the society of the spectacle. To that end, I situate Kristeva’s reinterpretation of Klein’s notion of matricide in contrast to the imaginary of the society of the spectacle. I argue that imaginary matricide paves the way to thought and creative freedom; failure of the imaginary matricide is manifest in crimes or other aggressive forms of acting out, and the “new maladies of the soul” (Kristeva 1995) seen as specific to the society of the spectacle.

As already discussed, Kristeva (2000d) poses the notion of revolt as an antidote to the threat of the loss of cultural memory imposed by the new world order. This normalizing order, which has led on the one hand to the society of the image, and on the other to Stalinism
and Fascism, affects both the status of political power and the status of the individual in relation to that power (4-5). In terms of the society of the image, it results in a media theatricalization of non-punitive legislation, in which crime becomes “theatrically media-friendly,” and law and authority are replaced by delaying tactics and invisible manipulations (5). This aspect of the society of the image is important in Possessions, where Kristeva describes the regime of Santa Varvara as an example of the “new world order that was increasingly corrupt and hard to pin down” (72). One of the implications of this society of the image is that it imposes standardized, stereotypical types of representation that stifle individual imagination and creativity. As McAfee (2004) explains, Kristeva provides a framework for understanding the ways in which reality is inverted in the society of the spectacle, to such an extent that images are experienced as real, instead of becoming sites of exploration of the meaninglessness of capitalist consumer society (109). At an individual level it results in a loss of touch with “reality,” as loss of touch with the semiotic (106). Though McAfee does not develop this argument further, it has important implications for the role of the imaginary in Possessions, where the images of murder commodified in a consumer society that thrives on crime stories are juxtaposed with artistic representations of decapitation.

Kristeva (2002c) explains that fantasy is “the nucleus of our imaginary,” heir to “a long evolution of our capacities for archaic, prejudicative representations (hallucination, transitionality, and so on) and, even more fundamentally representations dependent on the primary processes, the semiotic, pictograms” (179). In other words, fantasy and the imaginary are ways of gaining access to more archaic affective representations than those that are realized “in thought and language” (179). The problem is, according to Kristeva (2002c), that the society of the image is “hardly favourable” to the analysis of fantasies or their formation. On the contrary, it facilitates the destruction of the phantasmatic faculty because, as she states, “We are inundated with images, some of which resonate with our fantasies and appease us, but which, for
lack of interpretative words, do not liberate us” (67). She goes on to explain that if everything is imaginary, then there is no margin left for individual creative freedom, since the stereotypical images around us deprive us of the possibility of creating our own imagery, by “evacuating the singular fantasies of the independent mental act” (127). If McAfee is right that the society of the image leads to a loss of touch with the semiotic, then what is annihilated is not only the individual phantasmatic imaginary but its underlying logic, its relationship to the feminine and the maternal.

For Kristeva, fantasy and the imaginary are bound up with maternal femininity, which is the foundation for the birth of both physical and psychic life. Their loss therefore has even more profound implications than the loss of authority, laws, and values discussed in my analysis of The Old Man in relation to Arendt’s ideas. Possessions, which relates more closely to her study of Melanie Klein, illustrates how repression of the feminine and the maternal reinforces a false dichotomy between body and mind, sexuality and thought. Yet Kristeva’s revalorization of the maternal bond includes an understanding of the maternal as a source of both creativity and distress.

For Kristeva, following Klein, phantasmatic matricide is necessary for individuation and subject formation. Loss and separation often appear in fantasy as death, and the emergence of psychic life and interiority is inseparable from an imaginary matricide (definitive separation from the mother) which paves the way to subjectivity and language. As Kristeva (2001d) writes: “The loss of the mother- which for the imaginary is tantamount to the death of the mother – becomes the organizing principle for the subject’s symbolic capacity” (129-30). This imaginary matricide is shared, although not in the same form, by both sexes. In Powers of Horror (1982), Kristeva explains matricide in terms of the abjection of the maternal, and argues that the

---

48 Kristeva does not specifically talk about matricide in Powers of Horror, but she uses abjection to discuss the violent process of separation from the maternal body, as well as to examine the reasons why rites of purification (religious, cultural) have been constructed to regulate and “explain” such separation. To a certain extent,
process of separation of the male child from the mother is relatively straightforward since, after
the splitting, he takes up his socially prescribed sexual identity (157). For the girl, the process is
much more complex and never complete, since she has to abject the mother as a love object in
order to access the symbolic order through identification with the father. Commenting on what
the process of abjection entails for women, Oliver (1993a) argues that there are two relations that
a woman can have with her mother: either she never manages to completely separate herself
from the mother, in which case she carries within herself “the living corpse” of the mother’s
body “that no longer nourishes” (62); or she forms a defence against the mother, devoting herself
to the symbolic order, which can be represented by anything from the arts to politics, feminism,
or science (62). This insight is important in analysing Possessions, as Pauline’s decapitation of
Gloria can be interpreted as a blow aimed at her own mother. This case illustrates a situation
where the failure of imaginary matricide is acted out in actual aggression, even murder, in the
individual’s attempt to become free from the maternal body and attain individuation.

Kristeva’s notion that girls do not fully separate from the maternal body, and therefore
remain attached, to a certain degree, to a pre-Oedipal stage, has been criticized by many
feminists. Elisabeth Grosz (1990) captures much of the essence of this criticism when she argues
that Kristeva’s abjection grants no autonomy to female sexuality or femininity (86). Noreen
O’Conner (1990) reinforces Grosz’s argument, claiming that Kristeva remains fixed upon a
normative model of heterosexuality that in fact signifies a biologization of the maternal and a
difficulty in separating from the symbolic father (44). Butler (1990) argues that Kristeva’s
discourse on abjection and matricide is problematic not only for its heteronormative assumptions
but also for its failure to present femininity as subversive. In Butler’s view, Kristeva’s emphasis

abjection and matricide are similar, in the sense that both focus on the separation from the maternal body. The
difference is that with abjection Kristeva focuses more on the violent process of individuation and the rites of
purification used to regulate the relationship with the maternal body, while with matricide Kristeva focuses more
on the aggression inside, on the logic of sadomasochism and its potential for being acted out either in
representation or in violent acts.
on the child’s dependence on the maternal body, and her insistence that the little girl is incapable of fully separating from her mother, leads to a pathologization of female sexuality. According to Butler, Kristeva’s notion of femininity, which initially emerges out of a homosexual attachment to the mother, is ultimately dependent on the symbolic and paternal law in which such sexual constructions are cast outside of culture: “Kristeva describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself. She thereby safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially precultural reality,” as “an effect of culture rather than its secret and primary cause” (103, italics in original).

Indeed, if we take Kristeva’s notion of the connection between the girl and the mother to be the only aspect of the relationship, leaving out the process of abjection and matricide, then such critiques of the lack of autonomy assigned to female sexuality or femininity would be justified. But this is not the only implication that emerges out of Kristeva’s theory. As Oliver (1993a) demonstrates, abjection and matricide are not simply about abjecting or killing the mother, or even casting her on the outside of culture: they do not represent the negation of the mother. Rather, Oliver argues, it is “the negation of the loss of the mother that signals proper entry into language” (62). In other words, the loss of the mother becomes recuperated in representation through language, as Kristeva (1987a) explains: “I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother… But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language” (Kristeva 1987a, quoted in Oliver 1993, 62). This argument challenges Butler’s criticism that Kristeva conceives of maternity as a “precultural reality” rather than as the primary cause of culture. On the contrary, we can argue that Kristeva poses, for both sexes, representation and the use of language as inseparable from the maternal, in which case the maternal bond becomes a source of cultural creation, a source of rebirth in language and representation. Furthermore, it also means that Kristeva sees the feminine as endemic to both
sexes, and the primary identification with maternal femininity as the precondition for all psychic activity, representation and thought. Kristeva’s interpretation of Klein’s concept of the “inner” mother is relevant to this argument.

Kristeva’s reading of Klein’s views on phantasmatic matricide is important for two reasons. First, because Klein’s analysis of the schizoid-paranoid and depressive positions advances the idea that anxiety, depression, envy, phantasies, hatred, in short all the manifestations of the death drive, prefigure the capacity for representation and thought. They are both a source of distress and a source of symbolization. Secondly, Klein’s analysis of the “inner” mother, of the archaic maternal power traditionally depicted as a terrifying phallic authority inducing castration anxiety (in the male imaginary), demystifies the imaginary power of the tyrannical mother by showing not only that it can be thought of in other terms, but that it is a necessary source of thought and imagination.

These insights are important to Kristeva in Possessions, where she explores an entire range of cultural representations of female decapitation, Gloria’s included, set against the backdrop of a decline in the power of the imaginary in a society dominated by images. In doing so she suggests that a revalorization of the signification of images depends on revisiting the drama of individuation, acknowledging the inner universe of pain, violence, phantasy. This does not mean that Kristeva proposes this focus as a solution to the loss of common values, respect for law, and legitimate authority characteristic of the society of the image. Rather, her rethinking of the imaginary power of the archaic mother is presented as a means of turning the inner suffering of phantasy into a source of thought, which (as discussed in the last chapter on The Old Man) is the first step towards individual or collective revolt. For Kristeva (2001d), “The point is not to deny authority,”

nor is it to adapt to reality in order to know it better: that authority and that reality are always already inside us, and we are what transports them. The only things that we can ever truly know are the violence of our death drive, the capacity for love that compensates for it, and the logic underlying our fantasies.
Knowledge and understanding of how the inner world functions can make it possible to expose the mechanisms of the society of the spectacle, revealing how its representations play on the most basic instincts. Awareness of this is necessary in order to interrogate and reflect on the effects of such representations and resist them. Kristeva’s attention to the construction of social bonds, through her examination of the subject’s inner universe and phantasmatic imaginary along with her interrogation of the mechanisms of the society of the spectacle, emerges as an ethics of care for the self and the other in the self.

In Possessions, Stephanie’s investigation revisits and reconstructs both Gloria’s universe of suffering and her own, in contrast with the type of investigation conducted by sensationalist journalists who produce images of a spectacle for an unthinking public, or the police, who are concerned only with “facts.” Unlike their inquiries, Stephanie’s investigation acknowledges the complex interplay of sadomasochistic elements that relate to the victim as well as the (potential or actual) murderers, and the problematic relationship of violence lived out in phantasy to actual physical murder or mutilation.

The Imaginary and Sadomasochism

Kristeva’s understanding of the imaginary (1995) and of the role of the semiotic in relation to identification with the mother changed after she adopted Klein’s analysis of matricide. Its inclusion enabled her to posit the death drive, as revealed in sadomasochistic elements, as key to the emergence of the imaginary and of psychic life. Kristeva (1995) initially defined the imaginary as “the representation of identification strategies (introjection and projection) that mobilize the image of the body as well as the ego and the other, and that make use of primary processes (condensation and displacement)” (103). Following Lacan, she sees the development
of the imaginary as contingent on the mirror stage, which provides the developing subject with “an image of himself by using the myriad representations of the child’s world to mobilize a whole array of identifications – narcissistic identification accompanied by a grasping of the mother’s image, or by a fusion with her” (103). In this earlier definition of the imaginary, there is no emphasis on the logic of violence or the death drive, which appear later, after her reading of Klein. The mother-child relationship depicted in Possessions illustrates her rethinking of the role of the semiotic, anchoring it in manifestations of the death drive (phantasies based on a defensive hatred emerging from anxiety) which, she claims, are “operative from the beginning and are indivisibly linked with object-relations” (2001d, 57). She also remarks that “by considering the drive to be more psychological than biological, Klein added that the death drive manifests itself only in relation to an object” (2001d, 29). Since the mother is the first “object,” this implies that the death drive exists from the moment of birth, and is inextricably linked to the maternal. Klein’s interpretation emphasizes the psychic pain of separation for the newborn, and the early capacity for sublimation that enables the child to deal with the splitting process (Kristeva 2001d, 12-3). Following Klein, Kristeva (2001d) explains that the transformation of pain into representation, the redirection of inner hostility into symbolization, depends on the capacity to rid oneself of envy towards the mother (131), to commit a phantasmatic matricide in order to think for oneself and acquire a margin of freedom:

> without matricide, the internal object cannot be formed, the fantasy cannot be constructed, and reparation, as well as the redirection of hostility into the introjection of the self, is foreclosed. Kleinian negativity, which guides the drive to intelligence by way of fantasy, chooses the mother as its target: in order to think, one must first lose the mother….The ‘beheading’ of the mother is a necessary precondition for the psychic freedom of the subject (131, my italics).

Yet, for both Klein and Kristeva, matricide does not involve casting the mother outside culture, or turning her into an “effect of culture,” as Butler (1990) claims; rather, matricide becomes the necessary precondition for recreating the mother in words and images, in
In order to stay in touch with the semiotic, with maternal femininity. It is a process that is required in order to turn envy or hatred into love and gratitude, sadomasochism into imagination and thought. As Kristeva (2001d) writes:

By forcing love and gratitude into envy…. at that point the self can rediscover the mother. But not as it once knew her. On the contrary, the self never stops recreating the mother through the very freedom it gained from being separated from her. The mother is a woman who is always renewed in images and in words, through a process of which ‘I’ am the creator simply because I am the one who restores her (131, my italics).

For Kristeva, Klein’s “genius” lies in this transformation of the negative, of the death drive that emerges through the maternal bond, into a necessary connection with the feminine condition and the life of the mind (2001d, 247). Kristeva recapitulates this process in Possessions, where the bond of love with the mother replaces matricide and takes on phantasy, the imaginary of violent decapitation, to represent it and reflect on it, as will be demonstrated in the Jerry-Gloria relationship. This representation is closely related to the notion of “thought specular” (“le spéculaire pensé”) that Kristeva develops in Intimate Revolt (2002c) to emphasize the relationship of thought to imaginary desires, aggressions, and anxieties

“Thought Specular”

For Kristeva (2002c), the “specular” marks the “earliest point of departure of the signs, narcissistic identifications, and phantasmatic traces of one identity speaking to another,” in which drives are transformed into desire and aggression into seduction (72). In other words, the specular represents a “knot of fear and seduction” (73), in which the imaginary is not a “reflection,” but a “subjective synthesis” of fear, affects, and drives (75), bearing the trace of invisible archaic affective representations of the maternal bond, and the dramas of individuation.

The specular is fascinating, Kristeva explains, because “it bears the trace – in the visible – of this

49 Both Klein and Kristeva consider maternal femininity not in terms of passivity, as Freud did, but both as a form of receptiveness and a terrifying maternal power (Kristeva 2001d, 235). Kristeva sees bisexuality as integral to psychic life, and considers both boy’s and girl’s successful phantasmatic matricide dependent on their ability to identify, through their feminine side, with the femininity of the mother.
aggression, of this nonsymbolized, nonverbalized, and thus nonrepresented drive” (74). The
difference between “the specular” and “thought specular” is that the latter requires the
recognition of the power of fantasies, “while at the same time mocking their fascinating power” (74).
Following this logic, Kristeva proposes the concept of “thought specular” to refer to “the
visible signs that designate fantasy and denounce it as such” (74). She then opens the term up to
include all sorts of representation, provided that “the visible signs” expose and explain the logic
of fantasy as such. In this context, as mentioned earlier, the emphasis falls not on the
representation or image per se, but on the “attitude of the subject vis-à-vis the object,” on the
relationship between the viewer and what is viewed. This distinction is important in Possessions,
where Kristeva revalorizes a kind of representation that is not seen in terms of mimesis, but
rather as a living relationship with the image represented, as I will later demonstrate in my
analysis of the two modalities of representation prevalent in Eastern and Western Europe.

It is this aspect of “thought specular” that underlies the narrative construction of
Possessions, bringing it closer to a pictorial logic, in which the act of writing a narrative of
decapitation and the evocation of artistic representations of decapitation together produce a
dynamic that is comparable to the ordeal of phantasmatic matricide, in which psychic survival
and freedom are guaranteed by the very capacity to imagine it, represent it, and reflect on it.
Furthermore, in Possessions Kristeva’s narrative relies on a preponderance of pictorial
metaphors, which not only transmit visual images but also appeal to hearing and touch, engaging
the entire body and mind. As Kristeva points out in the novel, “A decapitation marks the limit of
the visible…. There is nothing to see! Open your ears instead, if they are not too sensitive. The
deepest depths of horror can’t be seen, though perhaps they may be heard” (8). This depiction of
decapitation uses words to transmit visions of the felt, analogous to the inner universe of pain,

50 Though Kristeva draws on Klein’s notion of phantasy, she retains the spelling “fantasy.” That is also partly due
to the fact that Kristeva combines Klein’s and Freud’s views on fantasy, seeing them both as heterogeneous
drives and daydreams, unconscious or conscious, at the same time.
suffering, and aggression in which the imaginary can no longer be limited to the scopic but becomes a subjective synthesis of affects, desires, and thoughts. In other words, it relies on what Kristeva (2002c) calls the logic of intimate revolt, as previously discussed.

**The Logic of Intimate Revolt in Possessions**

*Possessions* can be read as a novel of intimate revolt, where the intimate is understood as that which is “most profound and singular in the human experience” (Kristeva 2002c, 49). In this novel, Kristeva uses the register of interiority alongside the domain of images to suggest that the representation of the intimate in Western art registers a matricidal anguish. Using images of decapitation from the advent of Christianity to the modern art of Picasso, Kristeva links intimacy to suffering, drawing attention to what she (2002c) calls a sadomasochistic intimacy (51). Although she has recourse to psychoanalytic terminology in the novel, Kristeva does not use the concepts of the intimate or the image in a strictly psychoanalytic sense. For her, the intimate is both a literary and a psychoanalytic notion, inseparable from political, social, or personal revolt (2002c, 43). In tracing the genealogy of the “intimate” to the Latin *intimus*, which is the superlative of “interior,” Kristeva (2002c) argues that although the intimate includes the unconscious, it cannot be reduced to it (43). Thus the intimate does not correspond to “an instinctual inside” placed in opposition to “an external outside” (43), but is closer to the “life of the mind” discussed earlier, defined in line with Kant and Arendt (44).

According to Kristeva, this philosophical line of thought poses the life of the mind in opposition to the notion of a *soul*, when the soul is defined by its proximity to both the organic body and preverbal sensations (44). Kristeva argues that the soul acquired for the Greeks a redoubtable aspect that cannot be trusted because of its changing nature and inseparability from the corporeal and sensorial. It does not have the precision and reliability of the intellect (44-5). In relation to this, Arendt is highly critical of psychoanalysis, which she refuses to consider as a
science because of its concentration on the psyche, which is closer to the soul than to the intellect. According to Kristeva, Arendt sees the inner life, as defined by psychoanalysis, as nothing but a record of ever-changing moods, considered as a “general, nonindividualized interiority because it is organic and deprived of the specifying clarity of the intellect” (45).

Kristeva’s notion of the intimate retains from this philosophical tradition the equation of the intimate with the life of the mind, but reconfigures it by introducing the body and preverbal sensations into the activity of thinking. The latter can integrate what Kristeva calls the “singular,” representing drives and sensory perceptions, into individualized inner maps (45). The life of the mind, or the activity of thinking, is then perceived as inseparable from preverbal sensations related to the feminine/maternal. This conjunction allows her, in Possessions, to draw attention to what she calls the “unnameable feminine” or the archaic maternal as inherent in the activity of thinking and its representation. Drawing on the history of intimacy in Christian representations, Kristeva (2002c) makes significant links between image, thought, and sensations, which are integrated in Possessions. In particular, she calls attention to Saint Augustine’s formulation of the intimate as an “internal vision,” which she describes as a “vision in thought” (46), claiming that St. Augustine introduced the concept of the image as a third register between sensory perception and the intellect.

According to St. Augustine, interiority is synonymous with the imaginary, and it absorbs the sensory and the universe of desensorialized thought, which in turn become externalized, through images, as the life of the mind (46). As she maps out the history of “intimacy” in Christian thought, from St. Augustine to Loyola, Kristeva argues that Christian mysticism “unknowingly allowed the possibility of a dramatic formulation of intimacy in spite of the efforts of rationalist spirituality to dismantle the symbolism of the body and condemn it” (48). The philosophical tradition from Descartes to Kant and Arendt draws on Christian thought, and the result is a notion of intimacy “always already informed by thought,” with its own logic, different
from that of judgement (48). The missing element from this logic, both in Christian thought and the aforementioned philosophical tradition, was its dynamic. Kristeva argues that it was Sade who brought that to the fore, emphasizing the cohabitation between sensation and thought, affect and reason. Sade illustrates how intimacy engages passions and sensations, even when it is conditioned by reason and its capacity to desensorialize and unify the heterogeneity of sensations. This Sadian logic of intimacy is then condemned “to take pleasure from this constraint” (48).

This logic of intimacy produces another logic, similar to the Freudian “other scene,” that of “the pleasure of sensory meaning, or of the sensory in meaning, and beyond that, pain” (48). Kristeva places Sadian logic in a psychoanalytic context, and modulates the notion of the intimate at the juncture of philosophy and Christian thought. Hence she argues that “the entire panoply from the organic to the symbolic, via tears, images, loquela, and duality, is implicated in this intimacy” (49, italics in original). For Kristeva, intimacy necessarily replicates a sadomasochistic unconscious: “is the unconscious anything but sadomasochistic?” (49). The metamorphosis of the notion of the intimate in Kristeva’s work from “vision in thought” and the “other scene” into what she calls a “sadomasochistic intimacy,” reveals Kristeva to be eminently Kleinian. This Kleinian vision of psychic functioning is directly reflected in her analysis of paintings of decapitation in Possessions. Her allusions in the novel to Aristotle, St. Augustine, Kant, Sade, and Freud, all relate to a notion of intimacy that brings together the corporeal senses and the activity of thinking, without either biologizing or universalizing intimacy.

**Modes of Representation: Between Sensation and Thought**

The fusion of sensation and thought is clearly illustrated in Possessions, where on the opening page Gloria, a translator by profession, prides herself on calling her head “my sexual organ” and “the tool of [my] trade” (3). While she emphasizes the imagination/life of the mind over physical
sexuality, thought is also connected to physical pain: “My sexual organ’, as she laughingly used to call it, referring to the cerebral pleasure she got out of her work as a translator and the equally intense pain she suffered from her headaches” (3). Thought, here, is conditioned by its passage through eroticism and suffering.

The novel explores the heterogeneity of both registers – affect and thought – from two perspectives. Through Stephanie, Kristeva examines the existence of another scene, that of the sensory in meaning, or of sensation in thought. Through Gloria, for whom the birth of her deaf child became “a question of adding to human life the kind of other life that was her son’s” (54, my italics), Kristeva develops a similar theme. The examination of “another scene” or of “another logic” is not new, as Freud already explored it in his analysis of the unconscious. What is new in Possessions is Kristeva’s subtle way of bringing Freud and Klein together to illustrate her notion of intimate revolt. Juxtaposing Freud’s analyses of dreams in relation to language, and transference and love as pivotal in the formation of subjectivity, with Klein’s analyses of phantasy, envious sadism, and gratitude as the origins of the capacity for thought, Kristeva modulates her notion of intimate revolt to occupy precisely the space between affect, drives, sensations, fantasy, and dreams on one hand, and symbolization or language on the other.

Drawing on Klein’s analyses of the role of phantasy in the production of knowledge and Freud’s focus on the heterogeneity of psychical life, Kristeva includes three means of representation in the novel: language, images, and music. Language functions as the organizer of the other two and is seen as the medium with which all three female characters work - Gloria as translator, Pauline as speech therapist, and Stephanie as journalist. Second is the role of images, including virtual images, media images, images constituting various cultural/artistic representations of decapitation, and those constituting the intimate imaginary world of Jerry’s pictures. Music represents another dynamic that underlies the heterogeneity of signification, taking on the function of bringing together solitary intimacies. As Rilsky insists, “music ought to
Kristeva’s emphasis on the heterogeneity of various types of representation draws attention to the potential to accommodate different, often contradictory, meanings, in the same message or artefact. For instance, visual images can be a source of inspiration and transformation, as in Jerry’s case, or a medium where creation is stifled in favor of stereotypes, as in the media. Systems of representation are shown as functioning by contamination (marked by the intrusion of opposites or of different codes), leaving the novel itself open to different possible interpretations. Kristeva situates her fictional narrative in the transitional space between sensation and thought, underscoring the formulation of psychic life as dependent on both affect and discourse. The transition between the two makes both representation and intimate revolt possible, avoiding the twin pitfalls of supposedly detached objectivity or overwhelming sensitivity.

**Images of Decapitation**

The decapitation of Gloria is presented alongside an entire history of cultural representations of decapitation, from Dione and Aphrodite to John the Baptist and Madame Roland, by artists from Artemisia Gentileschi to Picasso. Kristeva suggests that visual and textual representations are analogous, in so far as the image is not seen as mimetic of an object or scene, but in relation to the receiver. In tracing the genealogy of cultural representations of decapitation, Kristeva comments on the proximity between literature and painting when it comes to the representation of macabre inner experiences. In explaining this she uses the personal pronoun “I” in a direct form of address to the reader of the novel: “I admit my pictorial reminiscences might strike some readers as literary and irrelevant... My purpose in remembering museum encounters with

---

51 Though an analysis of how music weaves together the other two forms of representation would compellingly bring into focus the relationship with the maternal and semiotic elements from a different perspective, for the purpose of this chapter I focus only on the first two forms of representation.
painters and sculptors is to be able to draw on them when I’m confronted with macabre experiences” (9, my italics). Writing, like art, provides a way to evoke an inner universe that includes images that invite us to confront our repressed fantasies and desires, in a dynamic comparable to that of psychic interiority, and such images can help us stare death in the face (5).

Accordingly, Kristeva explores Gloria’s psychic interiority simultaneously with the emergence of psychic interiority and its representation in Western art. She reminds us that the first representation of decapitation in Western art is that of the Medusa, whose head, she explains later (2001d), emerged “just as the West was discovering psychic interiority as well as the individual expressiveness of each person’s face” (130-1). The representation of the decapitated Medusa has been interpreted by Freud (1963), for instance, as a symbol of female castration, but Kristeva (2001d), following Klein’s understanding of phantasmatic matricide, argues that Medusa’s death can be seen as a representation of the loss of the archaic mother (130). This loss of the feminine/maternal is central to the imagery in Possessions, where severed female heads evoke the fascination and horror exerted by the murdered mother figure. Kristeva also draws a parallel between Gloria’s decapitation and that of John the Baptist, referring to a depiction of Salome’s “lascivious dance,” balancing the dish holding his severed head on her own (6). Chen (2008) interprets this analogy as an example of the reinvention of Western imperialism, arguing that both John the Baptist and Gloria replicate, albeit in different ways, stereotypical images of the East (including Eastern Europe) in Western European history. Both can be seen as implying that “Eastern Europe is monstrous in relation to its counterpart” (Chen, 42).

Unlike Chen, I see the decapitation of John the Baptist as signalling the intersection of two types of spirituality: paganism and the Christianity to come. My interpretation is that by suggesting an analogy between Gloria’s beheading and that of John the Baptist, Kristeva goes back to this moment between the decline of paganism and the advent of Christianity to offer a renewed model of Judeo-Christianity, where woman is placed at the centre and seen as a source
of creativity and new beginnings. In commenting on the decapitation of John the Baptist, Kristeva highlights the stark opposition between the two sexes that led to the exclusion of women from the scene of representation: “John the Baptist was a saint, and a man, and he began the Christian era before Christ himself.... But Gloria was a woman. Not a “mere” or “poor” woman.... but all the same she was just a woman, a translator living in Santa Varvara” (8, my italics).

With the story of Gloria’s decapitation, Kristeva offers an alternative version of Christianity, different from the one announced by John the Baptist that represses the body and sexuality in the name of spirituality. She laments that, “For two thousand years, the gory neck of St. John the Baptist, the Forerunner, has been advancing towards us, from the shores of the Dead Sea” (5). Instead she proposes a type of transubstantiation that privileges the body, drives, and passions, evoking Mallarmé’s determination to “put an end to ‘his former quarrel with the corporeal’ that would re-enact John the Baptist’s fate in his own body” (6). This reference to John the Baptist’s decapitation in relation to Gloria’s also allows Kristeva to revisit the schism between Eastern/Byzantine and Western art, and to propose a new modality of seeing. Though Kristeva does not address in Possessions the question of whether there is a difference if it is a man or a woman being decapitated or doing the decapitation, she seems to suggest that what is important in the representations of decapitation, by/of either sexes, is the emphasis on the revalorization of (maternal) femininity. In both John the Baptist’s and Gloria’s cases, Kristeva emphasizes their feminine side, an emphasis that requires a new way of looking at representations of decapitation, one that traces it back to the schism between Eastern/Byzantine and Western art.
Kristeva (1998f) claims that the representation of the decapitation of John the Baptist prefigures Western European art, as it depicts a reconciliation of sacrifice and resurrection in the same act (71). Yet in Possessions her insistence on the figure of Salomé, dancing with his head on hers, brings erotic dance and bloody mutilation together in one scene. “The horror of the feminine,” she writes, “comes from Salomé …. Fed by the guillotine, this feminine imaginary which haunts the religious crisis of the nineteenth century is at the core of an aesthetic of the impersonal and its spirituality” (18).52 The relationship of aesthetic images to the personal and to spirituality is, according to Kristeva, different in the Eastern tradition.

Kristeva (1998f) retraces the concept of the image to the Byzantine icon, which marked the new status of the image as inscription. The icon does not copy an exterior object, or even represent it, but inscribes the presence of a religious experience: “In truth, an icon is not to be looked at. It can be embraced, absorbed, or lived: it transfers an invisible world into its visible traces” (50, my italics).53 Kristeva’s (1998f) description of the icon is very similar to her recommendation about how to look at a scene of decapitation, or at any painting, in Possessions: “A decapitation is meant to be heard, not seen! All painting ought to be heard” (8, my italics). If we return to Kristeva’s definition of “thought specular,” we can see that, in her reformulation of the role of the imaginary in relation to intimate revolt, Kristeva draws on this Byzantine definition of the image as inscription, where the emphasis lies on the relationship between the felt and the represented, between the invisible and the visible. Clearly, Kristeva lends a pictorial logic to writing, in which the images used are meant to transmit “visions” that do not call on sight alone, but implicate the body and mind together. This invocation of the invisible, retraced to the Greek formulation of the experience of the visible, brings to the surface an entire inner

universe of pain, fear, and horror that cannot be seen otherwise. As Kristeva puts it: “A decapitation marks the limit of the visible... The deepest depths of horror can’t be seen, though perhaps they may be heard” (8, my italics).

The Eastern iconographic type of vision, in which traces of the invisible appear in the image, is contrasted with another way of looking at images, as mimetic copies of exterior objects. This other modality of visual representation, symptomatic of media coverage and of the “society of the spectacle,” can be traced back to Western iconoclasm, as Kristeva (1998f) explains, arguing that iconoclasm paved the way for the manipulation of images, not only by the modern media and reality TV shows, but also by politics (58). According to Kristeva, the difference between the image as “inscription” and the image as “mimesis” is that the former opens up towards a reconfigured model of freedom. Drawing this time on the Roman formulation of freedom as a new beginning and rebirth, and the Freudian notion of desire as that which is never satisfied, Kristeva suggests a modality of looking that sees the painting not as an object (telos), but as a passage between the invisible and the visible. Seeing, in this way, becomes a manner of learning how to be free, and it becomes inseparable from the intimate, in so far as it is aware of its sadomasochistic dynamic (1998f, 50).

Similarly, in Possessions, by suggesting a modality of seeing inseparable from the capacity for listening and hearing, Kristeva de-centres the primacy of sight in the epistemic field that has reinforced the separation between object and subject, female and male. Because the “eye” is phallic, Kristeva suggests a model of seeing that draws on the Eastern/Byzantine formulation of the image as inscription, but she eroticizes it to include the entire surface of the body. As such, the painter’s eye is no longer simply the “phallic” eye, but also the “mouth, skin, ear, penis, vagina, anus, throat, and all the rest: for a painter’s eye covers first the five senses, then the incalculable rest of the body, with a thin film that makes visible what cannot be seen” (6, my italics). Kristeva explains that some artists turn “the felt into the seen” (7, my italics), so
that representations of decapitation can convey what is not meant to be seen but felt or heard - the horror of an intense experience of suffering. Projected onto the surface of the canvas is a radical form of separation, one that is felt like a death.

If we follow Kristeva in her argument that images are a means of recording inner representations, not as mimetic of an object but in relation to the viewer (2002c, 49), then the question arises as to how far her comments on visual representation (as iconic or inconoclastic) apply to writing as representation, including the distinction between writing as recording (mimetically) or writing as fantasy (fiction). What do painting scenes of (historical or imagined) decapitation and writing about (fictional or phantasmatic) decapitation share in common and in what ways do they differ? In considering this comparison it is useful to juxtapose Possessions with another text by Kristeva, Visions Capitales (1998f), which deals with pictorial images of beheadings.

**Possessions and Visions Capitales**

*Visions Capitales* (1998f) is the title of an illustrated art catalogue prepared by Kristeva for a museum exhibit at Louvre on artistic representations on decapitations, dating from Palaeolithic to modern times. Many (but not all) of the scenes of decapitation included in the catalogue depict women as headless bodies, or bodiless heads, from paintings of the Medusa’s head to Picasso’s mutilated women, illustrating the fascination and horror associated with decapitated female figures. Appearing around the same time, *Visions Capitales* and *Possessions* extend into and draw on each other. *Visions Capitales* even includes an entire page from *Possessions*, depicting Pauline’s beheading of Gloria (1998b, 102). Both texts refer to a number of the same images and some paragraphs appear in both, for instance the following:

———

54 The Louvre exhibit took place between 27 April-27 July 1998.
Dione and Aphrodite, both beloved by Phidias, both lost their heads, though they did so when they left the pediment of the Parthenon for the cavernous recesses of the British Museum. I prefer them to the Winged Victory of Samothrace, another decapitee: she’ll never fly away from the Louvre. How could she without a head? (*Possessions*, 4-5; *Visions Capitales*, 18).

One reference of particular interest appears only in *Visions Capitales*: a picture of decapitation actually drawn by Kristeva’s mother. At the beginning of the catalogue, inserted among her reflections on artistic representations of decapitation, Kristeva recounts a childhood memory of the occasion of a radio contest that asked listeners to debate which was the fastest mode of transportation. The young Julia claimed it was a rocket, while her mother suggested it was “thought.” As the contest required the answer be accompanied by an illustration, her mother drew a melting snowman, with its head cut off as if by the invisible guillotine of the sun, while on the right, the terrestrial globe, in its interstellar orbit, pointed to an open space full of potential voyages (13).

Kristeva never forgot this drawing by her mother linking thought, words, image, and the body. This drawing of the decapitated snowman appears as the first recorder of Kristeva’s future anxieties: “My eyes can still see this decapitated head.... I can still see it, *it’s my symptom*. Depression, obsession with death, the fate of the feminine and human distress..... ” (13, my italics).55 She goes on to say (in an apparent allusion to *Possessions*, which she had recently completed) that her mother’s drawing continues to haunt her, to the point that “very recently, *I thought I recognized myself in the story of a decapitated woman*” (13, my italics).56 She deduces that her mother’s drawing taught her that “thought” is the only possible defence against the fragility of body and the anguish of death (13). That drawing on a postcard, signed and sent by her mother in Julia Kristeva’s name, won the first prize in the contest. This event and her reflections on it can be seen as a paradigm of Kristeva’s process of thinking: always between

55 My translation.
56 My translation.
past and present, between the maternal body and cerebral symbolization, which cannot be assigned only to the father/masculine since the feminine is also a source of representation, hovering between affect and rational deliberation. The name Julia Kristeva was, in this instance, inextricable from her mother rather than a sign of belonging to the father, conveying more than a symbolic debt to and identification with the mother. We might say that Kristeva’s future work does not collect itself in a signature marking sameness or identity, but marks the witnessing of a process of return, self-reinvention and transformation. Kristeva’s signature is thus always in question or process, a/n m/other to itself; it is the sign of self-reflexivity as well as the differential trait that prevents a finite sign/nature from closing in upon itself.

Possessions begins with the image of a decapitated woman, “Gloria was lying in a pool with her head cut off” (3), and Kristeva later acknowledged, as I mentioned earlier, echoing Flaubert, that “the decapitated woman is me” (2002c, 4). She performs and represents her own decapitation through this fictional scenario, exposing, through the novel, the violent sadomasochistic elements that she believes must be acknowledged as integral to thought as revolt. The novel’s epigraph from Dostoyevsky’s Demons (also translated as “The Possessed”) already indicates that she plans to address personal issues related to aspects of the psyche that are usually repressed:

And, you know, lowering your eyes is totally unbecoming to you: unnatural, ridiculous, and affected, and to give satisfaction for my rudeness, I will tell you seriously and brazenly: I believe in the demon, believe canonically in a personal demon, not an allegory, and I have no need to elicit anything from anyone, there you have it. You must be terribly glad (my italics).

Yet the violence acted out is distanced by the act of narration, which declares itself as fiction and therefore fantasy. While Kristeva declares “the decapitated woman, it’s me,” she also conveys the message that she is in control of this beheading. The dynamic of sadomasochism which,

57 The translation of Possessions retains the original spelling of Dostoyevsky (with an “y”), which I will so use here. The French version of Kristeva’s text uses the title Les démons.
according to Kristeva is linked by both sexes with the formulation of the “unnamable” feminine/maternal, allows her to explore the relationship between images (as records of inner representations or phantasies rather than external objects) and representations in words of attempts to disempower the thought that emerges from female/maternal heads. This dynamic relates directly to the concept of “otherness in the self” discussed previously.

One of the most challenging questions that Kristeva asks in *Visions Capitales* is, “Where does the desire to kill the other come from?” (138). The epigraph using the title of Dostoyevsky’s novel indicates that the (demonic) “possession” evoked is possession of the subject by something alien inside, rather than the fact that the subject may desire to possess someone or something else, an external other. The implication is that the desire to kill the other (whether acted out in violence or sublimated into representation) comes from the desire to rid oneself of an inner “demonic” possession. Kristeva sees this sense of needing to rid oneself of an other which is part of the self as inseparable from the relationship with the first (maternal) object. The story she told of her mother signing her name conveys maternal possession of the child’s identity, and pre-empting the daughter’s own capacity to represent her own thought. The telling of that story, and of the decapitated mother in *Possessions*, can be interpreted as taking back the power of representation, from the mother as well as from the tradition of European art.

In *Possessions* Kristeva is the executioner as well as the beheaded woman, the murderer and/or judge as well as the victim. She is also the detective/journalist who takes pleasure in exploring the reasons for this (self) decapitation. The detective novel format that she explicitly comments on in this novel enables her to represent a form of personal and psychoanalytic inquiry that she specifically connects to writing in this genre by women.

58 My Translation.
Detective Fiction by Women Writers

In her study of Melanie Klein (2001d) Kristeva makes the following statement:

> Perhaps the only people who truly understand Klein are the female authors of detective stories, though they neither read her, nor need to read her: such authors share her unconscious knowledge that when ‘I’ talk about murder, it is not because ‘I hold a grudge’ against men who carry the phallus or because ‘I’ wish to extricate myself from them (135-6, my italics).

Here she claims that representations of murder by women writers are not to be assumed to be about castration anxiety or penis envy. Kristeva insists elsewhere on dissociating the idea of feminine sensibility from the idea of penis envy, arguing that feminine sensibility is simply “foreign” to it, as she explains:

> Are we supposed to believe that women, eternal mourners over castrated corpses, can feel passion only for a guilty (sic) phallus? Maybe. I see what he [a shrink] means, but I must admit I doubt it. Whether seen from the point of view of the cutter or the cut, the guillotine and all that goes with it is foreign to feminine sensibility as I see it (1998b, 10, my italics).

Kristeva (2001d) proposes that female sadomasochistic fantasies have nothing to do with castration (of the self or the other), but reflect the anxiety surrounding the daughter-mother relationship, involving a separation that is necessary but painful, inducing a range of emotions from envy to sadistic aggression, followed by masochistic depression and melancholia. In order to overcome depression and acquire the freedom to think, that relationship must be distanced through acts of representation: “It is because as a daughter and mother (or daughter or mother), ‘I’ know the sort of envy of which I must rid myself – the overwhelmingly sadistic desire to work through, lose and in a sense kill – so that I must acquire a baseline of freedom to think” (2001d, 135-6, my italics).

In Possessions, Kristeva represents the sadomasochistic logic that she believes to be at the core of the daughter-mother relationship, when she examines the reasons behind Pauline’s beheading of Gloria:

> It’s easy to cut up a woman’s body if you’re a woman. Nothing to it. You know it all so well! …. You know what shame to awaken, what suffering to revive, what susceptibility to trample on, what jealousy to exacerbate, what longing to
thwart, what desire to frustrate, what death to repeat – to go on endlessly, not letting the pain ever ease (205, my italics).

In referring to women who write detective fiction, Kristeva (2001d) refers to what she calls “the queens of pulp fiction” (136), who present gruesome events with a sort of detachment that she relates to mourning:

Such queens of pulp fiction dive into a catastrophic psyche that is no longer a soul worthy of that name. Acts of splitting and dismembering (as Klein understands them), reversals, acts of envy and ingratitude, and incarnated phantoms that recall the concrete objects and tyrannical superego of Mother Melanie all haunt those spaces, which are exposed and then explored and exhibited with the sweetness of a relatively serene mourning process (2001d, 136, my italics).

According to Kristeva (in her study of Klein) the underlying motivation for these detective stories is the author’s desire to rid herself of a primary envious sadism relating to a maternal figure, which can never be cured once and for all. The ensuing depressive condition may, however, be sublimated into an “internal museum of words” (2001d, 130). Thus, for Kristeva, “the queens of pulp fiction” are “depressed women” who remember that in the beginning was an envious sadism, and who never stop curing themselves from the sadism they describe” (136). The turn to writing resulting from their depression sublimates their sadistic phantasies by turning them into something that can be thought, symbolized and represented. Kristeva makes a similar argument in the Possessions when she writes: “What might seem like a carnage is merely the act of a surgeon: quite impartial. The acting-out of a breakdown cancels out cruelty: it’s [the representation of carnage] merely a kind of thought, a substitute for thought....” (205-6, my italics).

In Possessions Kristeva illustrates the acting out of decapitation because of depression and also turns depression into a kind of thought, through Pauline’s story. In her analysis of this novel, Chen sees Pauline’s action generated by a sort of “nothingness” rooted in melancholia, a form of “narcissism which ends in murder” (51): “Pauline’s apathy in perpetrating the crime
conveys the presence of Kristeva’s concept of nothingness as an absolute, from her exploration of feminine depression in Soleil noir” (76). However, Stephanie concludes that Pauline did not in fact murder Gloria, who was already dead before she was beheaded. Unlike Chen, I see Pauline’s symbolic act as an example of the failure of phantasmatic matricide. Pauline’s original hostility to her own mother because she considers her responsible for her brother’s death is redirected towards another mother, Gloria, whom she sees as about to abandon her son, Jerry. If Jerry is sent away, Pauline will be thwarted for the second time in her desire to become the (surrogate) mother, replacing the bad mother. Only the removal of Gloria can ensure that she, Pauline, will be assigned that role:

She [Gloria] made Jerry, she took him away from me, she threatens him, she’s going to drag him away with her into her own crazy life. She’s going to drown him. Her or me, Aimeric or Jerry, a knife cleaves us; I hate her, I hate death. A mother destroying her son. Whose son? My mother’s? My mother’s? Aimeric or Jerry? Her son. My son. Aimeric wasn’t my brother, I carried him about in my arms when he was a baby, I fed him when Mother was at the lab, I taught him to talk, to read. Like Jerry. Her son. But Gloria is not fit to be a mother. No mother is (201, my italics).

Pauline directs her sadistic aggression at the mother figure, whom she holds responsible not only for her sibling’s death but for her own psychic annihilation, since her separation from the mother is lived out as a form of death, and she can only survive by reperforming it as an act of her own will:

A woman who’s helpless and depressed, that’s what a mother is, that’s where the mystery lies. Like me. I hate…. Hatred also decides, strikes, cuts the Gordian knot. The scalpel opens the flesh, the vertebrae are parted by its precision, the bones give way: I make the incision. I cut myself off from her, sever myself from the mother who drowns her son, detach myself from the corpse that I was but am no longer (202, my italics).

Like Klein, Kristeva poses matricide as a condition for acquiring freedom, and thus of staying alive, as illustrated in Pauline’s action: “The mindless energy of the speech therapist handling the corpse has just rid us of death, of her death” (204, my italics). By turning Pauline’s decapitation as act, into decapitation as representation in her novel, Kristeva provides a
meditation on sadomasochism as an integral part of the feminine psyche, because of the daughter’s relationship to the mother who must be cut off from the self in order that the daughter may take her place. Telling this fictional story is in itself a defense against acting out violence, as well as a means of survival for the narrator: “meaning communicated to someone else is a violence that temporarily shields us from death. The narrative of cruelty allows one to live, the body and soul reunited. Tenderness through narrative” (2002c, 239, my italics). To be “tender to oneself” echoes Kristeva’s ideas on the coexistence of writing as sublimation and forgiveness (of the self and others), as discussed earlier in relation to The Old Man. Pauline is able to take on responsibility for Jerry because she has acted out an ultimately harmless “murder” of an already dead mother. That someone else (a man) intervened to actually kill Gloria and why remains mysterious.

**Women’s Intimacy with Suffering and the Mother-Son Relationship**

In Possessions, Kristeva’s evocation of the intensity and intimacy of a sadomasochistic feminine universe is presented in contrast with the normalizing order of “showbiz” media culture, which presents suffering and death for popular consumption, “served up on the news by way of dessert, for a few seconds, perhaps a minute or two” (5). Gloria is described as a woman of great sensitivity, who believes that the core of a rich inner life is “the ability to suffer tactfully” (49). This attitude is opposed to the “zapping of images,” characteristic not only of the media but also of politics:

*Suffering? It’s out of place nowadays except in novels about the third world.... Take your pick, draw the curtains, zap from one channel to another. Politics, metaphysics, aesthetics, aerobics, robotics – anything but it! No proud scars, please; no pale dignities or clammy palms clutching the head of a child who’s different and gives you the impression, the false impression, that he holds the entire universe in an invisible, unshed tear. Anything but it! (57, italics in original).*

Kristeva explains that this formulation of suffering as central to her inner universe brings Gloria
closer to her Russian origins, placing her in the line of Russian writers, like Dostoyevsky, the author of *Demons* who was cited at the beginning of the novel:

> Whether because of the *atavistic Russian influence* that reached her by way of her mother or from the *hypnotic effect of reading Dostoyevsky* ... she also knew that pain can burn *infinite time* down to an infinitely small speck: pain is the *truth of time* and becomes identical with it by assuming the right to suspend it (44, my italics).

Leaning on Dostoyevsky, Kristeva invokes a certain conception of time linked to suffering. For Dostoyevsky, to suspend the time of suffering means, according to Kristeva (1989a), to suspend faith in Christ (189), which in Gloria’s case can be translated as an assertion of atheism. But where Dostoyevsky saw intimacy as a vision according to which “man’s humanity lies less in the quest for pleasure or profit.... than in longing for voluptuous suffering” (1989a, 179), in *Possessions*, Kristeva initially presents Gloria’s intimacy with suffering as a source of creativity, that enables her to better put herself into the place of her deaf child in order to teach him how to communicate with others. Later, when Gloria succumbs to depression and nervous breakdowns, almost giving in to the pleas of her abusive lover, Michael Fish, to send Jerry to a boarding school, Gloria’s intimacy with suffering is no longer seen as a source of creativity but as a form of madness. At that point, Gloria shuts herself off from the rest of the world, making communication even with Jerry very difficult. Yet her “madness” is short lived, as she is murdered soon after her breakdown episodes.

Gloria’s intimacy with suffering has a direct impact on her relationship with her deaf son. It is obviously significant that Kristeva chooses to make Jerry deaf (rather than blind or lame, for example), so that his main obstacle is the acquisition of language. It is also central that Gloria is a translator, whose professional life revolves around communicating in different languages, just as her personal life has been marked by abandoning her mother tongue in favour of another one. This combination of mother and son lends itself to a comparison between the symbolic (language) as a form of communication and the pictorial, which is closer to the pre-verbal
semiotic. Gloria has devised a way for Jerry to communicate through drawing, a vehicle that is closer to dreams and the imaginary than to the type of “thought” associated with the intellect. This “language” of images has to be developed and learned by both Gloria (who is an expert at deciphering new codes) and the child. In a sense, it is a language that is foreign to them both; they create it together. As a foreigner of Russian background living in Santa Varvara (where the language spoken is Santa Varvarois), Gloria has no “direct access” to Russian, her maternal language. Like Jerry, who is excluded from social interactions because of his deafness, her own difference has caused her to experienced xenophobia, humiliation, and petty meanness. Jerry’s paintings reflect the inner universe of both mother and son, their frustration and anger at being “cut off”: “Jerry painted his mother’s violence. His too, of course, but hers to begin with ... not forgetting Gloria’s girlish side: vulnerable, rather naive” (100, my italics).

Gloria has given up her successful career, and risks losing her lover, because her priority has been to care for her son. Gloria occupies the position of both mother and father in Jerry’s life, as his father is absent. Fulfilling both roles, she provides maternal comfort and non-verbal communication, but also seeks to transmit a language to Jerry that will enable him to communicate with others. In this respect both she and Pauline, as speech therapist, are initiating him into the outside (masculine) world of rules, of the symbolic. Painting serves as an intermediary stage, allowing him to be “born” into the world of representation in association with imagination and creativity. The maternal role, in this case, is therefore not located outside culture, in a “precultural reality,” as Butler (1990) has claimed, but is regarded as a transitional source of symbolization, creativity and rebirth. Painting becomes a “mother tongue” shared by Gloria and Jerry, “their German, their Russian, their Chinese” (46).

Since this language is based on visual images, it is clearly initially related more closely to the bodily senses than to “thought.” It implies a close identification of mother to child,

59 For a compelling analysis of this initiation, see Raoul 2001.
reminiscent of Kristeva’s own mother’s taking on her identity when she submitted her drawing under her daughter’s name:

Gloria realized he had to be taught everything. First it would be necessary to enter into his senses: his eyes and what they saw, his lips and what they tasted, his nostrils and what they smelled. Then this shared universe would have to be named, and spoken language constructed as if it were a foreign tongue. Translated (46)…. Every day, every minute, every second, she strove to create a bridge linking the hideout where Jerry went to earth and the sonorous light of human beings (118, my italics).

Jerry’s “hideout” might well be interpreted as a reluctance to leave the womb, to separate from his mother, although it risks excluding her as well as everyone else. Gloria ensures a contact between him and cultural symbolism by exposing him to other painters’ work, and Jerry manifests a curious interest in Picasso’s women. He becomes skilled at forging some of Picasso’s paintings, in particular his 1938 Woman with a Collar.60 “Young Jerry, fascinated by Picasso’s cubist women, had seen more clearly than the adults: faces crushed; identities mocked; shots and angles that attacked and receded; changing points of view; states of mind all in a whirl….” (160). His representations reveal his inner self as desiring, yet dominated by pain, suffering, and humiliation, interspersed with moments of violence directed at himself or others. The paintings convey endless variations of his relationship with his mother, simultaneously defending him against those experiences and celebrating their existence.

Through the Gloria-Jerry relationship Kristeva opens the novel up to various questions regarding the difficulty of being a foreign mother, and the difficulty of transmitting the intimate and personal to a child in a non-maternal language. How can we negotiate primary “possessions” in another language? For the child, it is only by distancing the mother in

60 The painting depicts, in a cubist manner, the face and neck of Marie Therese-Walter, one of Picasso’s lovers during his marriage with Olga Khokhlova. It is also worth noting that Picasso’s paintings are evoked in the previous novels as well, to convey abjection and fear: in The Samurai, Olga's fragmented image is reflected in Hervé's eyes: “The mirror in your eyes, in which I try to put myself together again, is in pieces. You give me back the image of a kaleidoscope, some horrible, sublime woman by Picasso” (198). In The Old Man Picasso and Goya convey the same images as Septicius Clarus of distress and despair at the collapse of social and cultural values: “The dreams of dying men all paraphrase the same theme: consider the persecuted old age of Goya, the lewd old age of Picasso, the crazy old age of Septicius” (116).
representation, by substituting images, words, or other forms of symbolic representation for pre-symbolic identification.

Kristeva (2001d) argues that human beings are “less ‘identities’ than journeys, as they are always in transit between a memory that is repressed to varying degrees and a conscience that dominates to varying degrees” (195, my italics). In Possessions, by introducing Jerry’s paintings alongside representations of decapitation from the history of western art, she examines the transition between a repressed memory and its conscious representation. She proposes that “human beings of all kinds are like museum pieces: unique, immemorial, and charged with memory” (164, my italics). This metaphor insists on the re-collection of internal objects that need to be returned to, revisited, interrogated from various angles and places, without the hope of being able to perfect a unitary vision of their composition. A museum (particularly an art gallery) suggests a temporal crossroads - past and present, death and life, come together for display, to be viewed by future visitors. In a sense, painting is timeless: “Painting is not only slow, it’s immobile, anachronistic, outside time, pure time incarnate, especially in dreams” (132, my italics). In this respect, painting resembles violence: “Violence belongs not to time but to desire: you have to be out of time to scheme someone out of life” (5, my italics). In this novel, she sets out to depict a violent act of mother-murder associated with decapitation, through words rather than images, in the hope of creating a similar, “museum-like” effect of timelessness: “Murder brings us together to wind the clock backward ... the strange things you feel when time stops, as if cut off by murder” (102, my italics). Timelessness is inseparable from the death drive, Kristeva argues (2002c), following Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, but for her “outside time” is not a “dead time” but a time that has “its own time” (2002c, 31).

With the metaphor of identity as a museum, and its timeless aspect, Kristeva suggests that the death drive is always already inscribed in the process of imagination and representation. In his paintings, Jerry learns to contain Gloria’s violence and distance himself from it by
representing it stroke by stroke (86). This brings us back to the earlier discussion of women writers of detective fiction, and in this case the role of women detectives, who counter depression by re-presenting death stroke-by-stroke, as the intricacies of mother-murder unfold.

The Role of the Detective in Possessions

Stephanie’s investigation into Gloria’s death begins not only in reaction to the normalizing and sensationalist media coverage, but also in contrast to the police investigation that compiles factual evidence and examines what is seen as just a “headless body,” devoid of what constituted Gloria’s uniqueness. Kristeva maximizes the differences between the three types of investigation, to draw attention to the importance of taking into account the singularity of individual experience, which brings together body and mind, thought and affect, the past and the present. Unlike the police, who are “indifferent, unfeeling, becoming stiff and theatrical” (60, my italics), Stephanie gathers all sorts of apparently insignificant details: “As detective work, it was necessarily irrelevant: what could they add up to, details like this, trivialities about a woman’s life?... Stephanie plugged away at the vague and uncertain reconstruction of the victim’s life and character” (123, my italics). Not only does she undertake detection while assuming the position of anti-detective, but her investigation as a journalist is also presented in contrast to that of the local press, which turns the event into a media circus: “What do they say?...how horrible showbiz society is. That’s a journalistic idea that journalists love, just as they love to be part of showbiz...” (84). They also turn narration into a spectacle, and find themselves “talking to journalists about journalists” (84) rather than looking at the specificities of a particular crime.

In contrast to this type of journalist who “plaster[s] death across the front page, or screen, preferably at meal times” (181), Kristeva presents Stephanie as an “oversensitive reporter,” who tries to nurture her inner self, which she calls her “secret garden,” as a way of taking a stand against the normalizing new order in the society of the spectacle: “It’s the secret garden I
withdraw to,” Stephanie tells us “when life disintegrates into an arbitrary zapping of images” (103). Kristeva uses a similar metaphor to lament the loss of the “inner garden” in a world of “accelerated space and time,” due to the production and consumption of images that are circulated as “needs” to be fulfilled, in New Maladies of the Soul: “Those who can and wish to preserve a lifestyle that downplays opulence as well as misery will need to create a space for an ‘inner zone’ – a secret garden, an intimate quarter, or more simply and ambitiously, a psychic life” (1995, 27, my italics). As was established earlier in discussing The Old Man, for Kristeva, “You are alive if and only if you have a psychic life. However distressing, unbearable, deadly or exhilarating it may be, this psychic life – which combines different systems of representation that involve language – allows you access to your body and to other people” (1995, 5-6, my italics).

The absence of an “inner space” implies a conception of the body that takes over “the invisible territory of the soul” (1995, 98). As a consequence, suffering may be exteriorized as an extension of the body rather than an inner state, and the remedy is as superficial as the mass media: “If drugs do not take over your life, your wounds are ‘healed’ with images, and before you can speak about the state of your soul, you drown in the world of mass media” (1995, 8, my italics).

Stephanie’s investigation into the “victim’s life and character” (123) begins with self-examination. In looking at her own experiences, she can better imagine someone else’s-- putting herself in their place. This entails a type of self-estrangement, a displacement that relies on an “other” logic, closer to the Freudian logic of dreams. Dreams allow us to project ourselves as other: “... you are not your ‘self’ when you are dreaming: another ‘self’ wakens beneath the closed eyelids. Dreaming, I am another; dreaming, I speak of her. ‘I’ is just one view of all the ‘shes’ assembled in my dreams” (127, my italics). This plurality of alterities is presented as a challenge to the formulation of self-other relationship circumscribed to a movement between “sameness” and “difference.” Kristeva (2000d) later went on to discusses the infinite potential of creativity in relation to what she calls an “interlocking of alterities,” arguing that only this
dynamic can
give subjectivity an infinite dimension, a dimension of creativity. For by gaining access to my other-being, I can gain access to the other-being of the other, and in this plural decentering, I have a chance to put into words-colours-sounds ... not a strategy of knowledge but a sort of advent of plural and heterogeneous potentialities that make 'my' psyche a life in being (67, my italics).

Stephanie’s reflection on self-projection and interjection of the other reflects a process close to that undertaken by the writer of fiction. In Possessions, Kristeva is not only the decapitated woman, as discussed earlier, but also identifies with Gloria and Pauline. The imagination associated with the creation of a fictional world has often been compared to dreaming. Fiction, like dreams, also allows the narrator to depict horrific events without judging them. Following Freud’s definition of dreams, Kristeva (2000d) later stated that dream-work “does not think, calculate or judge in any way at all” but “restricts itself to giving things new form” (36). Creativity acquires an ethical dimension, Kristeva suggests, as long as it imagines the heterogeneous aspects of others in their singularity, without erasing their potential for conflict within themselves or with others. The dynamic of self-estrangement can allow the novelist, like Stephanie the psychoanalytic detective, to work on her own inner self while representing that of imaginary others.

Dreams also relate to the comparison developed throughout this novel between images and words, pictorial representation and language. Dreams “are not language” (2000d, 39), but they can only be conveyed by language as intermediary. Stephanie sees language as a vehicle for manipulation, discrimination, and marginalization. Fearing that her own investigation will remain trapped within the language system, she conducts it at the interface between dreams and “reality,” admitting that her account of Gloria’s life has been shaped by her own dreams and desires. Language as a recording device (as for the police or media) gives way to a narrative that fulfills the function of artistic representation to convey not just “facts,” but the self-investment of the producer and receiver of the story. The images evoked are not mimetic (iconoclastic, see
earlier discussion) but iconic, involving a relationship to what is told.

Stephanie’s role in this novel extends her function as a detective-journalist in *The Old Man*, where the metaphor of “putting one’s self into somebody else’s shoes” constitutes a particular kind of revolt, with ethical and political connotations. In *Possessions*, Kristeva introduces into the movement of self-estrangement already central in *The Samurai* and *The Old Man* a relationship to the unconscious logic of dreams, where images indicate something else. In Stephanie’s case, her dreams convey the loss of a sense of being in one’s place, condemned to a nomadic condition mentally if not physically: “Some people sleep. I’m in transit. *Conscious of dreaming*, I have no definable place. The depths of our nights are unconsciously modeled on our lives” (21). The lost place represents an inaccessible one-ness with the mother, but Stephanie arrives at a “nonplace” where she can accept that separation, having put herself into the place of Gloria and of Pauline, and ‘dreamed” an imaginary matricide. She attains “the certainty of being nowhere, yet safe” (21), reconfiguring the maternal identification with other women as a transitional space.

**The Maternal as a Transitional Space**

The idea of the maternal as a transitional space echoes Winnicott (1971), who formulated the concept of transitional space as rooted in negotiation with the death drive, and necessary to the transformation of “reality” into thought processes. Kristeva conveys the idea of the transitional space as inseparable from the death drive by depicting Stephanie, who is dreaming and thinking through Gloria’s death, as sleeping in a coffin-like drawer: “So mine is a place of passage, I’m always passing through. This *drawer is also a coffin*” (21-2, my italics). Death is always already there in the tomb/womb encounter with the other/mother: “death has already taken place” (21-2).

Stephanie’s passage from one language to another, betraying the mother-tongue like

---

Gloria, and Olga in *The Samurai*, also illustrates how as an example of a transitional space associated with the maternal can be felt as a form of being “put to death,” a death that transforms the person concerned into someone else, in a kind of rebirth. For Stephanie, rebirth in another language includes an entire panoply of corporeal and psychical change, to the extent that it is comparable to a “transubstantiation”:

Stephanie was prepared to admit someone could *be born anew* in another language. Not only were her own voice and thoughts quite different in the two languages she inhabited, but it seemed to her that even her breasts, back, belly, thighs, and hands also changed when she passed from French into Santavarvaran. *A kind of death followed by resurrection* with which she trained herself to experiment every time she crossed the frontier, forgetting a deceased Stephanie on one side and *bringing a new one to life* again on the other (176-7, my italics).

This process of transubstantiation is not smooth, as it occurs in association with the death drive and sadomasochism, as Stephanie acknowledges: “To everyone his or her own *sadomasochism*. If I don’t actually feel pain I invent it. I live in a state of trauma. To me everything is trauma, shock, upheaval. *Starting with language itself*” (21, my italics). She seeks refuge not only in the coffin-like drawer but also in the womb-like couch that protects her dreams:

Like a rabbit in its warren, a mole digging its burrow below the surface in which humans think they can sleep. Our nightlife, that splendid negotiation between sleep and the umbilicus of dream, should never make do with exposed surfaces. My pullout couch transports me to the other side of innocence; I sink straight down into something better than the sleep of the just. In the damp warmth of my shell I feed on the russet smell of the wood, the variegated scents of my body, the certainty of being nowhere, yet safe (21).

Stephanie comments on this cave-like maternal transitional space, representing the archaic traces of non-differentiation: “I’m really more inclined to laugh at the cave I hide deep inside me and carry about with me and encounter in the form of a pullout bed all over the world, like one of the nest of Russian dolls. Immature Stephanie Delacour who imagines she’s left the womb!” (22). Stephanie’s attempt to create memory from archaic traces emerges as a desire to free herself from connivance with repression and nostalgia for the archaic mother: “like
everyone else, Stephanie needs a giantess to shelter, reassure or ultimately swallow her. Ah, there we have it, our intrepid globe-trotter’s fantasy: the folklore character with swarms of children coming from under her skirts” (22). In this commentary, Kristeva echoes Klein in positing fantasy as able to confront and divert death, in “hand-to-hand combat (particularly, hand-to-hand combat with the primordial idol, the mother)” bringing to life “this metabolized-negativized drive in indefinite, infinite psychical life” (2002c, 180). Fantasy retains a liberatory dimension, provided that it is recognized as fantasy, and can therefore prevent the “acting out” of aggression and/or depression: “... putting fantasies into verbal or pictorial form is our most subtle defence against acting out: to communicate one’s own fantasies by formulating them and commenting on them provides a jouissance that avoids the horror of translating them into actions” (2002c, 67, my italics).

For Stephanie, it is this recognition of fantasy as fantasy that allows her to engender meaning from her dreams, recovering what was “lost,” including the mother-tongue:

I’m on the brink of sleep or of a coma. For if lack of understanding doesn’t finish you off first, the lost language, the tongue you think you once knew but that has abandoned you, gradually recovers its power to embody meaning. And you wake up one day to find yourself in it, with another throat, different lips and stomach, and even a sex not quite the same as it is in your usual language, which only a few days ago possessed you entirely (20, my italics).

The allusion here to maternal language as possessing the speaker (rather than the reverse) is important in relation to the novel’s title. It suggests that such archaic traces, linked to the maternal/the corporeal, that “possess” or trap us because they are not yet distanced in representation, have significance even before symbolization. In Powers of Horror (1982), the notion of possession was associated with the process of abjection:

I experience abjection only if another has settled in place and stead of what will be ‘me’. Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such a possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody. Significance is indeed inherent in the human body (10, my italics).
In *Possessions*, significance is not restricted to the symbolic order, but positioned in the space of transition, alongside the death drive, associated with the mother rather than the father. According to Kristeva, “lost time must be retrieved through writing” (2002c, 57); bearing this in mind, *Possessions* can be read as an attempt on the author’s part to re-create a memory of the maternal transitional space, in which the process of “possession” (understood as a form of violence, as an inner universe of pain) is distanced through representation and fictionalization in the process of narration. Within the fiction, Stephanie’s representation of somebody else’s life begins with a process of self-reflection and examination of her own motives and desires, mirroring the novelist’s approach.

Kristeva’s originality in *Possessions* consists in the revalorization of the imaginary power of the archaic mother which is seen as both a source of suffering and a source of thought and creative freedom. This revalorization depends on revisiting the drama of individuation, on acknowledging the inner universe of pain, violence and phantasy and on the rethinking of the signification of image as inscription, rather than mimesis. Kristeva’s emphasis on the intimacy of individual experience proposes a model of revolt in which art (painting, writing, music etc) functions as a distancing mechanism of the inner universe into representation, thus offering an alternative to the acting out of the inner violence. Kristeva’s focus on intimate revolt also brings a new perspective to the variants of revolt presented in the previous novels. If in *The Samurai*, revolt was presented as a form of dissident thought in relation to “foreignness” outside and within, and in *The Old Man*, revolt took on thought as action, in a context where political revolt was not an option, in *Possessions*, intimate revolt uses the idea of “thought specular” to revalorize not only the maternal bond but also a new way of looking at decapitations which draws on a Eastern European modality of representation. The two modalities of representation prevalent in Eastern and Western Europe, along with the schism between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in 1054, constitute one of the major themes in the next novel, *Murder*.
in Byzantium. There revolt is seen as a form of freedom of thought, in a context of a European Union where its religious past, the secularism of the corrupt new world order of Santa Varvara, and the increasing threat of the rise of religious fundamentalism, stifle the capacity to think.
Chapter 5

*Murder in Byzantium: Novel Politics of Revolt*

“Europe doesn’t know the passion that is felt for it—then and now she has never even suspected how much. Europe does not imagine how much she is integrated into an imaginary realm criss-crossed by abstruse and gracious paths, paths that have made it fertile without its least knowledge or recognition.”

(Julia Kristeva, *Murder in Byzantium*, 174)

Like her previous novels, Kristeva’s fourth novel, *Murder in Byzantium*, blends personal experience with political events, related this time to the Constitution of the European Union, which Kristeva traces back to the times of the First Crusades. The effects of communism in Eastern Europe and of consumerism in Western Europe, which were examined in both *The Samurai* and *The Old Man*, are discussed in *Murder* in relation to Christianity, the dominant religion in Europe. The differences between Orthodox spirituality (in Eastern Europe) and Catholicism and Protestantism (in Western Europe), which appeared in *Possessions* in relation to the two modalities of representation that emerged out of the iconoclasm-iconophiles quarrel, occupy a central place in *Murder*. However, the focus of Kristeva’s inquiry shifts to an analysis of the impasses and variants of freedom offered by both religions. Pivotal to her inquiry into the European cultural and religious memory is the theme of motherhood. As in *Possessions*, where phantasmatic matricide was seen to pave the way to thought, and as in *The Samurai*, where motherhood finally reconciled Olga with her “foreignness within,” in *Murder*, the relationship with the (inner) mother is presented as that which paves the way to a free subjectivity and creative thought. Kristeva’s emphasis on and revalorization of the role of the mother, particularly in a religious context which obscured her formative role, was perhaps also a way of working through the loss of her own mother, who passed away as she was writing the novel. As in *The

---

62 Further references to *Murder in Byzantium* will appear as Murder.
Old Man, where Kristeva mourned the death of her father, Murder also provides her with a way of working through her loss, and Kristeva dedicates almost an entire chapter to remembering her relationship with her mother, and her mother’s instrumental role in her intellectual formation.

The investigations into the meanings of European identity, the role of religion on individual and collective behaviour, the serial murders that take place in Santa Varvara, which as in The Old Man and Possessions, appear as an epitome of the new world order, are again conducted by Stephanie Delacour, the political journalist-turned-detective, and Northrop Rilsky, the police detective, who first appeared in Possessions. Unlike all the other previous detective novels, “murder” now appears in the title, attributed to a place (Byzantium) that no longer exists as a geopolitical reality, but brings together historical, cultural, religious and imaginary constructs to re-map the European continent since the First Crusades.

Murder: An Overview

Published in French in 2004, Murder raises questions relating to the possibility of a European Union based solely on common economic and political interests rather than history and culture. In this novel Kristeva traces the issue of European unification back to the schism between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in 1054, an event that eventually led to the split between Eastern and Western Europe. She considers the First Crusades of 1094 as the first attempt at European unification on religious grounds, at a time when Europe did not even exist as a recognizable geopolitical entity. From the First Crusades to George W. Bush’s “crusades” against the “Axis of Evil” in the Middle East, Kristeva charts European territory from multiple perspectives: religious, historical, political, philosophical, and psychoanalytical. The main setting is once again the modern, secular “global village” of Santa Varvara, where corruption and the absence of any political direction have led to chaotic administration, violence, arms dealing, mafia control, and religious extremism. As in The Old Man and Possessions, but in a
more focused and explicit manner, this background allows Kristeva to examine the effects of secularism and capitalism in a society driven by images and consumerism, and to raise questions about whether or not religious extremism might be a direct consequence of the absence of authority, laws, and values characteristic of Santa Varvara. This time the human rights abuse that Stephanie Delacour has come to investigate involves a series of murders committed against some corrupt members of a religious sect called the New Pantheon. As Stephanie’s initial inquiry into who the serial killer might be does not produce much result, she once again begins another kind of investigation, this time into how rifts and conflicts between religion and secularism have shaped European politics in the past and continue to do so today. Her research leads back to Byzantium, and the time of the first Crusades. As she explains: “my wanderings have taken me today to another European era, nine centuries before the problematic 'Union' of the present day that still hesitates to extend its reach from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, with or without Turkey” (80). Stephanie’s reflection on how Judeo-Christianity has had an impact not only on politics and social relations in both Eastern and Western Europe but also on personal relations and individual subjectivity brings together the various stories that intertwine, merging history, philosophy, and psychoanalytical analysis of fictional “case studies,” as in her other novels but on a grander scale.

The main story interlaced with Stephanie’s investigation is that of Sebastian Chrest-Jones, a professor specializing in the history of world-wide migrations, who is conducting research on the role of the Crusades and considering their relevance to the current problems of the European Union. According to Sebastian, “it was the troubling times of the Crusades that inaugurated this Euro-Mediterranean project..., although they didn't conceive of it in the same way at the time and simply covered the whole thing with the unique symbol of the cross” (81). Sebastian’s research takes him back to Anna Comnena’s historical account of the First Crusades
in *The Alexiad*\(^{63}\), which he considers to be the most complex historical and political account of those times. The story of Anna Comnena also inspires Sebastian to embark on a personal crusade in search of his paternal great-great-great-grandfather, who, he believes, participated in the First Crusades. Sebastian begins writing a novel, inventing a love story between Anna Comnena and Ebrard Pagan, his imagined ancestor. This process sets him on a journey of self-examination and self-knowledge, parallel to his reconstruction of the itineraries of the First Crusades. As he examines various historical maps and documents, they lead him to reflect on modern migrations taking place in the same regions. Meanwhile his inner or personal self, also known as “C/J,” is engrossed in uncovering the “wrinkles of another time” (59) by an effort of the imagination that turns his research away from the grandfather figure to a quest for the image of an ideal mother. He profoundly dislikes his biological mother, Tracy Jones, because she conceived him out of wedlock. The European religious imaginary that he explores as part of his research focuses on the Virgin Mother, who is pure, asexual, and immortal. In Santa Varvara, Stephanie claims, “we’ve not invented anything to replace the Virgin Mary, unless it’s surrogate mothers and paediatric psychiatry” (235).

Sebastian, like the Old Man in her earlier novel, is designated by more than one name, indicating a split persona that conveys the lack of coherence between everyday public activities and the hidden dynamics of psychic life. As Sebastian the academic retraces the routes of the First Crusades, traversing the European continent from France to Bulgaria, he observes the political realities of a Europe that still feels the aftermath of the Kosovo war. At the same time, as C/J, he refers to a personal psychic map and rediscovers repressed memories from his own past, related to his double name (“Chrest” from his father, evoking Christ/the cross, as does “Kristeva” in Bulgarian, and the more prosaic “Jones” from his mother). Continuing her

---

63 *The Alexiad* offers a historical account of the life and reign of Anna Comnena’s father, Alexius I, between 1081-1118. She began writing the 15 tomes, at the age of 55, after her husband’s death, Nikephoros Bryennios- a historian who wanted to document the reign of Alexius I - left the work unfinished. At the time of his death, only one tome, “Material for History,” was finished.
reflection in *Possessions* on the role of the feminine/maternal and the effects of its exclusion, in this novel Kristeva suggests that the mother is central to both Europe’s collective historical and religious memory and C/J’s personal search for his roots.

It is Stephanie who reveals the intricate intersecting logic of Sebastian’s/ C/J’s trajectories, since her investigation into the serial killings in Santa Varvara leads her to Sebastian’s research on world migrations and his novel on Anna Comnena. Her investigation is prompted by Sebastian’s sudden disappearance following the murder of his pregnant Chinese mistress, Fa Chang, and the subsequent killing of one of his colleagues, who is found dead in Sebastian’s office. Stephanie’s detective work discovers that it was Sebastian who murdered Fa in a fit of rage, because she reminded him of his promiscuous mother. At the same time, she finds out that the serial killer of Santa Varvara is Xiao Chang, Fa’s twin brother, who has taken it upon himself to rid the city of its most corrupt and extremist religious zealots. He plans to avenge his sister’s death by killing Sebastian, but murders the colleague by mistake. Realizing that Sebastian is still alive and in Europe, Xiao Chang goes in search of him there. Helped by police detective Northrop Rilsky, Stephanie retraces Sebastian’s journey and arrives at the monastery in Le Puy-en-Velay, in France, just as the Chinese serial killer shoots Sebastian and is himself shot by Rilsky. Stephanie and Rilsky return to Santa Varvara, where Stephanie explains Sebastian’s story to her psychoanalyst friend, Estelle Pankow, making sense of it by relating it to the religious and political context of European history and culture. She argues that in both cases what is at stake is the repression, exclusion, and abjection of the feminine and the maternal, and the novel ends with Stephanie’s promise to continue to investigate this perspective.

**Reactions to Murder**

Unlike the previous novels, *Murder* was relatively well received in France. Bernard-Henry Levy (2004) even called it “the best novel” since Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*. Similarly,
Christine Rousseau (2004) considered it a “great Byzantine novel,” that promised a stimulating reading experience. Catherine Clement (2004) saw the blending of autobiographical and historical elements as a compelling combination that lends complexity to the fictional narrative structure, making the reading of the novel an experience to “be slowly savoured.” The Anglo-American reviews were not as complimentary. Sara Wajid (2006) described the novel in a half-mocking, half-serious tone, comparing it to a blockbuster movie and declaring Kristeva’s performance to be “on a par with Germaine Greer appearing on Celebrity Big Brother,” revealing a “comic gap” between “the populist genre and her public profile as an intellectual.” In her opinion this work has little to offer even to an audience of “hard core Kristeva fans.” Similarly, Celia Wren (2006) expressed disappointment that this novel is not even “hard-boiled sensationalism,” but very “ordinary.” It seems that, if Kristeva writes detective stories that are too difficult to read, as her earlier ones, they are condemned for not conforming to generic expectations, but if she does produce a more readable one, as in this case, for some critics she is not being difficult enough.

The few more serious academic analyses of this novel provide some provocative insights. Margaroni (2007) argues that the novel offers Kristeva's “unique historical response” to key contemporary political and ethical challenges, such as immigration, violence, terrorism, the increasing tension between the United States and the Arab world, and the difficulties faced by Europe in the process of greater integration (795). According to Margaroni, Kristeva manages to introduce the imaginary dimension, to envisage an alternative European community, by basing the narrative structure on correspondences between the eleventh century and the twenty-first century, Byzantium and present-day Europe, Anna Comnena and Stephanie (797). Yet Margaroni goes on to demonstrate that these series of correspondences are problematic in assuming an analogy between a national ideal and an ego ideal (798). Drawing on Sarah

---

64 My translation.
Ahmed’s notion of the “skin of the community,” Margaroni concludes that such analogies should also address the “excluded other,” such as the figure of the Chinese woman, Fa Chang, or of the Muslim woman, who never appears much in Kristeva’s writings, and is absent from her novel.

Building on Margaroni’s analysis, I will focus on the ways in which Kristeva examines and re-maps the religious history and imaginary of the “European” community, in relation to the secular order established since the French Revolution, as addressed in The Samurai. I will begin by situating this novel in relation to Kristeva’s remapping of the European tradition, placing feminine creativity and sensibility at the core of her analysis. Once again, her ideas based on Freud’s theories on the social order in relation to female sexuality intersect with notions of the political from her reading of Arendt. The result, in this work of fiction, is an alternative model for an “eternal Europe” that contrasts with both the religious and secular orders of the past and present, by appearing as an illusion (or fiction) that needs to be endlessly reinvented.

I will go on to look more closely at how the ability to leave the identity of Europe open to continuous reinvention depends on a reconfiguration of the traditional model of motherhood, as an alternative model for political engagement that includes affect, the sensorial and the corporeal as well as thought. This aspect is illustrated by the mother-daughter relationship that develops between Stephanie and her own mother, Christine.

Finally, I will examine how Kristeva incorporates features from both Eastern and Western European traditions into Stephanie’s construction of her “own” Byzantium. This applies particularly to notions of freedom and its impasses in both Eastern and Western Europe, as well as revolt, in relation to Kristeva’s concept of freedom as thought, which adds an emphasis on free subjectivity to the concept of thought as action discussed in relation to The Old Man. Stephanie’s Byzantium re-envisages the process of European union, to integrate subjective dynamics and feminine creativity as necessary to its realization.
Re-Mapping “European” Cultural Memory

*Murder* is Kristeva's most overtly political novel. It can be read as responding to the political crisis of 2001 that threatened to delay the first Constitution proposed for the European Union, because of an unprecedented debate over whether there should be any religious references in the preamble. The version initially proposed omitted any allusion to God or to Christian values from the list of cultural forces considered to have shaped European identity. This provoked heated controversy, involving the Pope as well as politicians, intellectuals, and writers. In 2003, it was reported that the long-awaited revised preamble included the words “spiritual,” “religious,” and “humanistic,” but still made no reference to the deity. An article entitled “God Kept Out of EU Constitution” observed that an intense political debate was being carried out, quite literally, “in the name of God.” Those opposing the inclusion of religion argued that a modern, pluralistic Europe has no need to refer to religion in its Constitution, since it would make it difficult in the future for non-Christian countries, such as Turkey, to be integrated into an expanding Union. Those secular states opposing the inclusion of religion claimed that a reference to Christian values would amount to a “violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

On the other hand, those coming from countries where religion continues to play an important role, such as Spain, Italy, Poland, and some other Eastern European countries aspiring to join the EU, argued that it is impossible to understand the history of Europe without acknowledging the impact and influence of religion on people’s lives, in short, its contribution to the identity of Europe. Poland, a largely Roman Catholic country, decided in 2003 to hold a referendum on whether or not to join the EU. The Polish primate declared that Poland would join, “but only with God.” Likewise, Hungary's Roman Catholic primate claimed that without clear reference to Christianity, “the heart of Europe would be missing.” In the end, the final

Constitution resorted to making reference to Europe’s “cultural, religious and humanist inheritance.”

The relationship between religion and politics plays a central role in *Murder*. Kristeva uses Stephanie's investigation into human rights abuse and serial killings in Santa Varvara as a way of revisiting the role of religion in the collective memory that upholds “European” identity. Kristeva opens up the novel to a series of reflections based on her first-hand knowledge of the ways in which religious discourse has been used for political ends, as when Orthodox religion in some Eastern European countries fostered a submission to the Father that eventually led to despotic rulers under communism (54). She asks to what extent religion still plays an important role in the collective and/or individual behaviour of Europeans, and whether the secular order is better suited to address the current subjective and political crises of “European” identity. Political and social aspects of these issues merge with psychoanalytical concerns, as she addresses the role of sacrifice and murder in relation to images of the mother in the individual and collective imaginary, building on ideas introduced in her earlier works (1984b, 1986c, 1986e).

In *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995), expanding on her earlier ideas (1982), Kristeva argues that the Bible (the Book of Leviticus, in particular) replaces sacrifice with a system of rules, prohibitions and moral codes (117). One object that is always excluded by these rules is the mother. If in *Powers of Horror* (1982) Kristeva looked at the processes of exclusion that underpin the logic of taboos and codes that seek to eliminate ambiguity, in *New Maladies of the Soul*, she examines the semantic and pragmatic value of the excluded object. Suggesting an interpretation that compares the Book of Leviticus with the pre-oedipal dynamics of the subject’s separation from the mother, Kristeva argues, echoing the themes of phantasmatic matricide in *Possessions*, that religious discourses have, across the ages, used various forms of sacrifice to

---

“enunciate murder as a condition of Meaning” (120, italics in original). In other words, separating oneself from the mother, rejecting her, “abjecting” her and “killing” her is what guarantees access to the symbolic, as meaning making. Kristeva further explains that the Bible offers the best depiction of this transformation of sacrifice into language, of this “displacement of murder into a system of meanings:”

You will displace your hatred into thought; you will devise a logic that defends you from murder and madness, a logic whose arbitrary nature shall be your coronation…. In this way, this system which counterbalances murder, becomes the place where all our crises can be exploded and assimilated. In my view, the fulcrum of this biblical process can be located in its particular conception of the maternal: the maternal is a promised land if you are willing to leave it, an object of desire if you are willing to renounce and forbid it; the maternal is delight as well as murder, an inescapable “abject” whose awareness haunts you, or which may be very well the constitutive double of your own awareness (120, italics in original).

In counterpoint to this religious discourse, Kristeva (1984b) posits the ability of art in general to represent the death drive, on condition that it recognizes it as an inner boundary that needs to be traversed, in/through representation:

Opposite religion, or alongside it, 'art' takes on murder and moves through it. It assumes murder insofar as artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of the signifying process. Crossing that boundary is precisely what constitutes 'art.' In other words, it is as if death becomes interiorized by the subject of such practice; in order to function, he must make himself the bearer of death (70).

This argument, that echoes Kristeva’s view in Possessions that the representation of phantasmatic matricide in art (painting, writing, etc) is what enables one to prevent the acting out of inner violence, desire for death, onto the others, as well as to continuously create and re-create the “inner” mother, is also central to Murder. Here Kristeva’s investigation into the meaning of the death drive, represented by a series of murders, structures the action and ideas incorporated into the novel. In this scenario, writing (by the author and/or the character writing a novel within the text), as an act of narration, demystifies the death drive (the desire for death and the desire to murder) by showing that it can be thought, and that it is even a source of thought. This is a version of narrative “art” that calls on psychoanalysis to reveal and deploy the dynamics of
thought, and to stress the co-presence of sexuality, thought, and the death drive (fascination with death) at the core of subject formation, a co-presence which the religious imaginary tries to repress. In the context of the Constitution of the European Union, fragmented, on the one hand, by a return to religion or a rise in religious fundamentalism, in some countries, and on the other hand, by a revalorization of secularism, Kristeva’s examination of the role of religion and the religious imaginary is particularly relevant, as it brings into sharp focus the role of the mother in the constitution of European cultural memory, as I will discuss in more detail later.

Narration as a Link Between Politics and Psychic Life

Kristeva’s presentation of the novel as a polyphony of voices, effected by the proliferation of narrative acts and of mise-en-abîme techniques, resonates with both Arendt's emphasis on the importance of pluralizing the political space and Freud's insistence on polymorphism. As mentioned earlier, Kristeva’s narrative construction is indebted to Arendt’s conceptualization of storytelling, as discussed in Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative (2001c) published three years before Murder. For Arendt, storytelling, like historical narratives, has a political function which recasts the act of narration as a form of action. This model connecting aesthetics to politics responds to the ways in which modern technologies and consumerism threaten to destroy human life by abolishing any perception of life as having a meaning, a purpose, which can be reasserted through narrative acts (Kristeva 2001c, 13).

As in Possessions, in Murder Kristeva assigns to Stephanie, the political journalist-cum-detective, the role of revealing the connections between life, narratives, and politics. As Stephanie begins her investigation into the latest murders in Santa Varvara, while at the same time reading and interpreting Sebastian’s novel on the life and times of Anna Comnena, she herself also starts writing a detective novel that draws on her own experiences. Not intended for publication, and considered by Stephanie as an exercise in creative thought and self-reflection,
this novel adopts the same narrative structure as *Murder*, even the same title. For Stephanie, life and writing are inseparable and their relation reversible, as she explains: “Like a detective novel, life itself needs detours and subplots to be readable, livable” (110-1).

Echoing Arendt’s link between life, narrative, and action, Stephanie regards her writing as an open-ended process of interrogation that tells the story as she lives it, “with no conclusion” (231). Her account can therefore only provide a “road map,” “something hybrid” that combines different genres from different parts and periods of Europe, which she fears might not be understood or even readable (228). Yet this hybrid map has the potential to indicate an alternative way of rethinking the religious- versus- secular debates that mark the process of European unification. It also suggests the possibility of forming new communities, not defined by national, ethnic or religious markers, “Byzantine,” as Stephanie explains:

> My map of the world has been shaped by my trips, meetings, and the new networks that weave an open community around me and that has nothing crazy about it.... More than the beliefs of some and the States of others, it's really just a little International of Byzantines like me, Stephanie Delacour, trying to understand and sometimes coming up with some answers (79, my italics).

It is this emphasis on writing as a way of modifying the map of the world that prompts Stephanie to insist that what she is writing cannot be called a “novel”: “No, I don't think it's a novel, no” (236). If it is not a novel, what is it? Stephanie responds that her writing may be seen rather as “some kind of free association” (226). In contrast to the story-telling mode of the traditional novel that obscures the importance of self-interrogation and thought, the model of free association emphasizes the importance of self-questioning and reveals the complicity of the author in the construction of the narrative, conveying implied cultural meanings and so on. Similar to the *nouveau roman* or postmodern novel, which also call attention to the novel as a process of writing, even when the author is apparently absent from the text, Kristeva’s novel emphasizes free association in order to offer a narrative model that is in sharp contrast to some
of the racist and xenophobic literatures of the European tradition. Can this narrative model of free association, then, offer the possibility for Kristeva to bring into focus the inner logic of violence and desire for death, which, in her opinion, as we have seen in Possessions, underlies artistic representation? I believe her answer is in the affirmative, and it is perhaps for that reason that Kristeva depicts Stephanie’s writing process as a “diagonal passing through” which relies on free association and the “optimistic model” of language.

**Free Association and the “Optimistic Model” of Language**

For Stephanie, the choice of free association underscores the transitory movement between and across genres that she seeks to achieve, her refusal to be anchored down by well-structured stories that produce stable territories of meaning and signification. Free association paves the way for writing what is “hardly said at all,” only hinted at, which relates to the death drive:

Newspaper lingo, memories, pamphlet prose, stories, essays, free association, dream, study – who cares? No genre, only a diagonal passing through. My words are only circumstantial companions to me – a transparent film, a momentary obligation, an absolute necessity and yet somehow disloyal – my means by which I am determined to make public that which is hardly said at all, or, if it exists then only with the help of figures, allusions, nonsense, and stories (67-8, my italics).

One of the implications here is that the desire for death can be avoided only by exposing it, by being aware of its dynamic and drawing the attention of others to it. Stephanie’s meditation on the death drive illustrates this idea clearly. In trying to answer the question that she repeatedly asks herself: “if the desire is a desire for death, how shall it be written?” (67), she suggests that it is only by representing it, in her case by writing it, that one can demystify it: “It’s in writing that one avoids it, in transcending the appearances, undoing the ties, the suspense” (78). “Undoing the ties, the suspense” seems to imply an anti-detective novel, but Stephanie converts the

---

68 A few examples of novels, that rely on “free association” which are racist are worth noting. For instance, Céline’s fascist anti-Semitic novels, on which Kristeva also wrote extensively, particularly in her *Powers of Horror* (1982).
Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” into “I investigate, therefore I am,” adding “that’s my motto as a complicit player” (78). By choosing to focus on looking at murder rather than denying or avoiding it, even if no “solution” is to be found, she acknowledges not only the importance of thought as (self)interrogation, but also that it is inseparable from the desire to see what is not meant to be seen (like murder), because it conveys the normally hidden or unconscious fear of and desire for death. She becomes “complicit” in murder because she enjoys investigating deaths: “[m]y own little surplus enjoyment – nothing more, child’s play, the thinking person’s Hallowe’en” (78). Like Kristeva, she is not so much writing a murder mystery as demystifying both murder and the nature of a meaning-making investigation into death.

The concept of free association in the construction of a novel relies on what Kristeva called in discussing Freud’s classification of types of language use (2000d, 38), the “optimistic model” illustrated in The Interpretation of Dreams (1999). According to Kristeva, Freud's invitation to the patient to “tell a story profoundly modified the traditional conception of language” (2000d, 38, italics in original). Here story is not used in the sense of a structure of signs conveying an immediately meaningful narrative with a shape, but refers to the capacity to associate, displace, and translate the unconscious and conscious traumatic elements of memory or dreams (2000d, 38). Language is seen as an “interface” between the unconscious and the conscious, constituting the intermediary zone that picks out the memory trace and the unconscious libidinal charge, allowing them to surface (39). Thus, when conveying thought by free association, the patient tells a story that “reveals not his biological surface or his libidinal surface,” but rather “his mental surface, from instant to instant,” through the use of language (39). For Kristeva, following Lacan’s claim that “the unconscious is articulated like a language,” this model is optimistic because “‘I’ [the psychoanalyst and eventually the analysand] can decipher it, ‘I’ can discover its rules.” Free association acts as an intermediary position, allowing access “to the unknowable, that is, to trauma” (2000d, 40).
The type of free association that Stephanie proposes for writing a detective story does not try to replicate the analyst-analysand relationship, or suggest that it is as a possible model for the reader-writer relationship. Rather, in this novel, the concept of free association points to an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between the personal and the political. It is a way of taking the unconscious into account, including the death drive, and of acknowledging the revolt that is part of psychic life as politically relevant. The “optimistic model of language” proposed in Murder suggests the triumph of meaning over senseless killing, the possibility of working through the death drive rather than acting it out. In Murder, free association not only reveals the intricate connections between the various murders involved, but also opens up an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between the psychic and the social, in which conflict, violence, and the death drive are turned into sources of investigation, interrogation, and thought, as steps towards personal and/or collective revolt against a society that fosters murderous impulses. That interrogation includes questioning some of the premises of psychoanalysis, as well as a critique of present-day society in relation to history, and to the history of religion in Europe in particular.

**A Critique of Freudian Psychoanalysis**

In this novel Kristeva uses psychoanalysis to propose an optimistic model for the construction of a narrative investigation by free association, but also draws critical attention to the role of Freudian psychoanalysis in obscuring the formative maternal function. Freud’s representation of the feminine as a mystery is another enigma to be deciphered. Juxtaposing Freud with Saint Augustine, she suggests a Christocentric reformulation of the Freudian abject or unknowable feminine-maternal, re-evaluating the role of the mother:

*Much more than the human female, the male is a mammal that depends on his mother from start to finish.... Freud pretended to minimize this indelible passion*
Kristeva's critique of Freud's theory of female sexuality and the maternal is connected to her questioning of his belief that the foundation of the social order is “fundamentally religious” (Kristeva 2000d, 20). Freud considers the oedipal structure to be the permanent “major organizer of the psyche of the speaking being” (Kristeva 2000d, 29). The “speaking being” is perceived as male, and the “religious man is a rebellious man” (2000d, 29) because of the prohibition necessary to religion (which creates and satisfies the desire for transgression). The question posed in *Murder* is not whether the religious man is capable of revolt, of transgressing the prohibitions imposed by religion, but what happens to the social order if it is no longer a religious order, and there are no prohibitions to rebel against.

In stark opposition to the Freudian formulation of the social order as based on a religious order, Kristeva presents the global village of Santa Varvara as trapped in a stage of economic and political transition that standardizes, and eventually destroys, individual psychic life through a “nonstop exhibition of intimacy, televising of values, and execution of our passions” (65). As in *The Old Man*, the absence of respect for the law and lack of political direction that characterise Santa Varvara are seen as destroying the kind of inner psychic life that retains the aptitude for revolt. The question Kristeva asks, with Freud's analysis of the social order in mind, is whether it is enough, in order to provide the conditions for an inner life and free subjectivity, to replace the oedipal structure, and specifically the religious symbolic Father, with what she calls the secular imaginary Mother of the society of the spectacle (76). If the social order is no longer a religious order, and the oedipal father is dead, on what basis can a European identity be (re)defined?

The result is what Stephanie calls “Byzantine” questions (65), convoluted and devious interrogations that create a fertile space for rethinking European identity from the perspective of
the “stranger within,” especially the foreign woman-as-mother, as in *The Samurai*. By staging a confrontation not only between religion and secularism, but between patriarchal religion and the feminine imaginary, and insisting on the effects and impasses of both as well as their interaction and mutual contamination, she envisages the possibility of a new beginning, of renewal and rebirth for Europe.

**The Spectacle of the “Desirable, Impossible Europe”**

To emphasize the possibility of new beginnings, Kristeva constructs the narrative space as a staged encounter between various traditions, to create the illusion of a different form of spectacle, the obverse of both the society of the spectacle and the religious imaginary. This is a spectacle that is aware of the illusion it creates, and of the fact that the only way out is by playing the game:

> There is no way out of the spectacle, Stephanie, no exit…. My boss at the *Événement de Paris* lectures me…. It was precisely because I knew there was no way out that I joined the team of this little cynic. Or rather because I believed *there was in fact a way out, one that passed through the interior*, through the underside of all the cards, and through the cards themselves – in other words, *through playing the game*….” (77, my italics).

Kristeva draws on Baroque theatre to construct the novel as a stage where Saint Augustine, Anna Comnena, Freud, Arendt, Colette, Joyce, Proust, Nabokov, Paul Ricoeur, Philippe Sollers and other major European thinkers are brought together to create an illusory space of a “European” imaginary realm made “fertile without its least knowledge or recognition” (173). This scene evokes what Stephanie calls “the desirable, the impossible Europe,” a Europe that “doesn't know the passion that is felt for it” (173). This “show” induces the audience to dream, to desire, to hallucinate, while at the same time calling attention to the fact that the scenic illusion is only a game, not to be confused with reality. As in a game, Kristeva reveals the *mise-en scène* and the actors, and through Stephanie explains why the Baroque model is appropriate to imagine this desirable yet still impossible Europe: “It is not the Revolution… nor is it the libertine spirit with
its daring sadism, nor the appetite of Gargantua ....,” but rather the “volatile, mobile, playful and vagabond inconsistency” of the Baroque man. This Baroque man “practiced liberty as a comfortable illusion, never as a birthright or absolute claim,” knowing he was an actor “without interiority, skilful at changing masks and burning the sets of his spectacles, which were only enchanted islands, dreams, or wonderlands never to be confused with reality” (229, my italics).

This triumph of the illusory gives prominence to the ability to be aware (like foreigners and women) that freedom is not a “birthright or absolute claim,” and that one needs to wear various masks, creating a kaleidoscope of perspectives, daring to “be inessential” (229). As spectators, actors, and producers of the show, participants can constantly reinvent it. As Stephanie explains:

When the actors of Ile enchantée burned the set of their show, they meant to say that all was inessential, including their fire, just as the fire in which Don Juan burns is inessential. And that it's up to them, up to all of us, in fact, to renew the show, to reinvent it, nothing more, nothing less (231, my italics).

This imaginary spectacle evokes a political space where plural identities are recognized and shared, and conflicting ideas can emerge without cancelling each other out, by playing with narratives that incorporate prepolitical inner elements through free association, bringing together ideas from Arendt and Freud. Both are relevant, because for Arendt the political is incomplete without the transformational function of narrative, while for Freud narrative renders the unconscious, feelings, and affect political. Arendt argues that it is narrated action that lies at the basis of politics, while Freud believes that it is narration by free association that profoundly modifies the psychic map and allows the crisis of subjectivity to be addressed through language. Kristeva echoes Freud's opinion in The Future of an Illusion (1975) when Stephanie insists that the only way out of the spectacle is by passing through the interior, by playing the game.

Arendt conceptualizes the political as a site of inter-esse, as Kristeva (2000a) explains, meaning that the political is a space of “between-two,” founded on nothing else but “action and speech” (14); whereas for Freud it is language that occupies the intermediary space. In Murder
the political is exposed as part of the illusion, but is saved by becoming aware of its illusory character, to the extent that it is able to practice “liberty as a comfortable illusion, never as a birthright or absolute claim” (2006, 229). Kristeva, like Freud, believes religion is an illusion (2000d, 35), but she tries to expose its logic and stage its dynamics, to show it up as an illusion that can be analysed and declared “inessential.” Beyond this, Kristeva seems to suggest that the economic and political grounds of the current European Union can be rethought in terms of Arendt's concept of inter-est, as an intermediary space where apparently homogeneous European identity can be staged as an illusion, aware that is never a “birthright or absolute claim” (2006, 229).

**Feminine Creativity and the “Illusory” Nature of Women**

The role of investigator and interpreter is assigned to Stephanie in the three “detective” novels, and to Olga and Joëlle in *The Samurai*, and brings the role of women and feminine creativity to the forefront in this face-to-face encounter with religion and politics in an imaginary new Europe. Women can see themselves as both inside and outside society, and recognize the other within the self. They can therefore potentially be the source of a kind of ethics that is not governed by the traditional forms of Judeo-Christian morality, but celebrates women’s ability to revolt and demystify the fascination with death intrinsic to both the religious imaginary and the society of the spectacle.

Echoing Cixous’s “Rire de la Méduse,” Kristeva emphasizes the role of feminine creativity, sensibility, and especially laughter, in imagining the new, desirable Europe. Irony emerges as a contestation of the current political reality, as a form of resistance, as exemplified in Stephanie’s dialogue with Estelle, where Estelle asks: “So irony is your way of opposing yourself to the discord of the world?,” and Stephanie answers: “I undo the reality of my opposition” (243):
What I say is not what I think, *my words describe an illusion* that is the opposite of my sincere conviction, and I enjoy savoring this discrepancy, which I've made up on my own. An impostor? Not really. Suffice it to say that misunderstanding is rife within contemporary language... (243, my italics).

Stephanie even ironically makes an allusion to the expertise of “Kristeva,” the psychoanalyst, to reflect on her relationship with Audry, a colleague who is supposedly in love with her: “I think she likes me when she's not resenting my not being like her, a woman who only likes women; but one never knows – *according to Kristeva, feminine homosexuality is supposedly endogenous*...” (228, my italics). This seems to refer to “Some Observations on Female Sexuality” (2004e), an essay where Kristeva argues that it is female psychical bisexuality that maintains the cult of the phallus as “illusory.” She traces the etymology of this word to the Latin *ludere* = “to play,” and hence *i llude re*, “to make fun of” or “to mock,” claiming that “everything the phallus gives the female subject access to (namely: the law, power, and a certain pleasure) is ultimately, for her, but a game” (40). Kristeva explains: “It’s not entirely nothing, but it’s not the be-all, either, even were this to be veiled, as the Phallic mysteries claim it to be” (40). Because it is an illusion, women are more inclined to participate in the game of make-believe, to find out if there is something more to the “phallic mystery.” This is not to say, Kristeva argues, that women necessarily have a playful attitude to life, for when they are not under an illusion, they are disillusioned, “which is to say that the seeming ‘realism’ of women is based on this illusion: women are able to keep on going, to do all that needs to be done, *because they don’t believe* in it [the phallus], they believe it’s an illusion” (40, italics in original).

Furthermore in the same essay, Kristeva also positions female bisexuality in relation to aesthetic experience, and argues that this relation underpins a form of atheism that does not entail, on the part of the subject, a militant anti-religious cathexis. In this case, atheism is not defined as a form of secularism, understood as a “battle against religion” (2004e, 60), but as a critical attitude that relies on feminine sensibility to keep open the investigation of the “logos-
phallus” logic. As Kristeva (2000d) writes: “I claim that that distance, that irony, that placing in doubt of the Phallus-Word via the Minoan-Mycenaean intimacy of the sensible, is the true path of atheism” (60).

In *Murder*, Kristeva also links female bisexuality to atheism, since it represents a critical attitude that relies on feminine sensibility to pursue an investigation into monological practices of signification. On the political level, this form of atheism emerges as a way of displacing, questioning, and analyzing the religious past that has marked European memory. Without stigmatizing that memory, it takes a critical attitude towards the religious orders of both Eastern and Western Europe. Moving from memory of the past, evoking the political instrumentalization of religion, to a present secular setting seen as if from a distance, from the global village Santa Varvara, European identity is redefined in terms of heterogeneity. The pluralization of shifting subjective dynamics and changing narratives takes precedence over the immovable economic and political grounds on which unification is assumed to be taking place. It is women's creativity and their ability to think beyond rigidly constructed borders, questioning religious, epistemic, and geopolitical frontiers, that can problematize the economic and political dimensions of who counts as European. This contestation could continuously transform and reinvent the meanings of East and West, keeping the definition of a European identity from closing up.

**The Maternal: Another Model of Politics**

In *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000a), Kristeva proposes an alternative to the crisis of “European” identity. It is a model that redefines the meaning of the maternal contribution to culture and politics:

> It is not impossible that in strengthening this [maternal] bond, in becoming aware of its risks and depths, women will transfer it from private intimacy to esthetics, to which tradition has confined it, and adapt their speech in the civic sphere to its measure. This would not be their least contribution to a politics that remains to be constructed, as a regime not of authority and domination but of harmonization of differences…. (106, my italics).
In the section entitled “Silence, my mother is dead” dealing with Stephanie’s reaction to her mother’s death Kristeva illustrates what this new conception of motherhood might look like. Stephanie considers some of the most important maternal contributions to her formation as an independent woman with an intellectual career. Some of the aspects she highlights are Christine's capacity to love “without grasping,” without weighing on others, as well as her ability to listen to everything that concerned the soul, whether it be Slavic or Jewish (185). She also mentions her mental acuity, which opened up to others with generosity; her capacity to be alone in the presence of others, which for Stephanie signified the ability to express independent thinking (185); and her discretion, as she never intruded into the sentimental or sexual life of others (including her daughter’s) (185). This relationship between Stephanie and Christine represents an optimal version of the maternal bond. It is a model that insists on the transitory role embodied by the mother in the construction of the child's subjectivity. Stephanie describes her mother as “a woman [who] let us believe that she was content to open a path for us.... that she gave nothing but a caress. ‘I didn't tie you down, I gave you wings.’ That was her modest motto” (185, my italics).

Kristeva uses the metaphor of “silence” to define the transitory maternal role, and to point to the terrain of meaning that lies “outside” the logos, but that does not rule out language, since “it is after all words that it uses to point to the interval that words are unable to grasp” (183). Stephanie's representation of the mother’s mode of communication, evoking extra-linguistic features such as silence, caresses, or music, can be read as a displacement and repositioning of the religious representation of motherhood that uses “silence” to signify woman's “ability” to make sacrifices. Her form of “silence” is in contrast to traditional religious and philosophical discourses that have assigned women to the realm of silence, of non-speech. In trying to find a name for this type of “silence,” Stephanie makes sure that she clearly distances
herself from those traditions, as she ponders:

What name shall we give 'it'? It's a challenge to find one, but I'm still trying. *Nothingness* is too melancholic. It well evokes the death of the fusional pretension that lovers are usually seeking... *Ecstasy* is too pompous and too weighed down with red marble saints.... *Serenity* is ... too philosophical.... *Silence*, it's an alert word that takes me beyond my borders, my glance, my skin, my sex.... (183, italics in original).

For Stephanie, her mother's silence was a “complicit silence” without the “bitterness of sacrifice” (186). It was a silence that conveyed surprise, curiosity, and alertness (185). Interestingly, she acknowledges the space left open by her mother’s silence as grounding her own intellectual formation. In tracing her genealogy to Christine's Slavic and Jewish roots, Stephanie suggests that her own capacity for interrogation and thought stems from this maternal line. In the same letter in which she announces her mother's death to Rilsky, she writes:

If I may indulge in a *wild psychoanalysis*, I suspect this *pre-communist cradle with Orthodox cupolas is the only Byzantine magnet that pulls me to follow the footsteps of your Sebastian*. Curiously from the mixture of Slavic blond Ivan and the anthracite Semite Sarah, there came a daughter, Christine, who most resembled those proud Greek figures on urns – red profiles against a black background. Since neither of my grandparents practiced the religion of their ancestors, they turned their daughter to the unique god of universal Reason. It was a respectable program that had been pursued ... ever since Diderot and Catherine the Great, in other words, long before the revolution...In short, the Republic was what mattered, along with Darwin, the only 'great man' my mother respected, her 'mentor' in the natural sciences, which she had taught before giving up to devote all her time to me and my sister and especially to my father, with his overly erratic diplomatic career (184, my italics).

Condensed in this paragraph, we have many of the major preoccupations of Kristeva's theoretical work: the maternal in relation to the father and to foreignness; psychoanalysis in relation to religion and atheism; revolt, revolution, and the French Republic. Stephanie's compensates for her mother’s death by undertaking a search for various ways to represent the maternal bond.

This is one of the more compelling examples that Kristeva offers in *Murder* to link feminine creativity to free subjectivity and independent thought, since it is the life of the mind that the mother is capable of nurturing and renewing. Stephanie's ability to formulate questions of any sort is based on the self-interrogation nurtured by her relationship with her mother.
Christine leaves to Stephanie the example of how to keep the possibility of revolt open:

my mother didn't set out to find her Russian relatives, Jews and Orthodox...She looked instead for historical documents about pre-Revolutionary Moscow: postcards, handbills, chronicles, and various other testimonies. It was the same magnet that pulls me toward orthodoxy, just like Sebastian, as I've already said. The nostalgia of my scientific mother could only come through documents and well organized files that wouldn't bother anyone... (186).

In Christine’s enthusiasm for inquiry, which Stephanie shares, Kristeva sees an antidote to the normalizing new world order of Santa Varvara. By linking the maternal bond to intimacy and love in the Stephanie-Christine relationship, Kristeva configures the maternal bond as a precondition for acquiring the ability to exercise independent thought, and thus to be able to revolt. Revolt is understood here as the aptitude for recollection, interrogation, self-examination, transformation and thought. The inability to think is tantamount to the absence of freedom, a link which Stephanie clearly emphasizes in referring to the social order of Santa Varvara: “I've felt I'm living in an occupied country for about the last two years. There is no film, television, show, newspaper, or magazine that doesn't try to pitch me a lifestyle of lowest common denominators.... And everything always 100 percent thought free!” (76, my italics).

If freedom is in crisis, Kristeva suggests, it is because it fails to consider its aspects defined through the relation with the first other, the mother. She insists on freedom as a concept related not only to the dynamics of power and politics, and their abuse, but also to how women are situated, shaped, and represented by the system in place. In order to understand better what Kristeva means by freedom, I will now turn to her analyses of two dominant notions of freedom in Western and Eastern Europe, before examining Stephanie’s understanding of freedom as embodied in the construction of her “own” Byzantium.

**Freedom: Personal, Religious, and Political Dimensions**

Kristeva (2002c) draws on psychoanalysis, religion, philosophy, and literature to develop her
notion of freedom in her theoretical writing. She employs a similar method in *Murder*, where the question of freedom emerges with subjective, religious, and political dimensions. Kristeva (2002c) argues that freedom is “not a psychoanalytic concept,” but that psychoanalysis has managed to advance, through its analysis of psychic life, the notion of freedom that has developed since ancient philosophy, pre-Christian thought and theology. According to Kristeva (2002c), it is the emergence of thought that opens up the notion of freedom. Insofar as it is *thought* and the spoken, “desire inscribes the urge of the drive first in a representation and then in the necessity to accept the death of the other as well as of oneself” (228). The ability to name one’s desires, to know one’s logic of violence and desire for death, is what paves the way to free subjectivity. Free subjectivity, in other words, depends on the capacity for self-reflection, interrogation and thought.

On the psychoanalytic level, Kristeva explains that the inscription of the death drive in symbolism preoccupied Freud when he placed psychoanalysis in the line of Aristotle, Saint Paul and Saint Augustine (228). In insisting on the Judeo-Christian aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis, Kristeva critiques Freud for what she believes to be his reductive understanding of freedom. She argues that for him the subject is “*free to die of desire*, to offer his flesh to the ideal of his father: the glory and hell of redemption, through which Judeo-Christian monotheism paroxysmally and therefore truly admits a universal structure of human desire, caught in the snare of meaning” (229, my italics). The emphasis on the father and absence of the mother stand out here.

To Freud’s notion of freedom, caught up in Judeo-Christianity, Kristeva adds the notion of revolt as freedom, with both psychoanalytic and literary connotations since she relates it to a Proustian sense of the term as return, displacement, and transformation. This linking of freedom to revolt *displaces* the Freudian dialectic, which is caught between prohibition and transgression. This enables her to describe not only the logic of “deadly desires” (233), but also the aspect of
freedom that comes from their interrogation. For Kristeva, questioning, as the act of putting into question, has little to do with conventional ways of asking questions or responding to them. Rather, formulating questions is “the quintessential mode of speech in analysis,” and a way of challenging identities and values. It is also a way of temporarily restructuring the subject “into a new rebirth,” of going beyond the “line of repression, to remobilize drives,” in order to allow “new creativities into the subsequent experiences of his life as a subject” (237). An aptitude for remaking connections is thus begun, Kristeva claims, “whose implicitly political impact is obvious, since the analysed subject is not a reconciled subject and must be a subject in revolt” (237, my italics). Thus this type of revolt involves a return to “the sense of the drive and vice versa, in order to reveal memory and to restart the subject. In short, to begin, endlessly, the questioning of value systems, which is neither belief nor nihilism” (237, my italics).

In Murder Kristeva elaborates on the variants of this notion of freedom as an important aspect of Western European culture. At the same time, she points to its impasses, by highlighting other variants of the notion of freedom, as developed in Eastern Europe, which emphasize the realm of the sensorial, before the logos dominates. The particular notion of freedom that she conveys through Stephanie's construction of her “own” Byzantium, is a combination of these two sets of variants of freedom, bringing together the (Western) capacity for renewal based on thought and the loving imaginary father, and the (Eastern) experience of a free subjectivity related to the sensorial (maternal) realm, to suggest new possibilities for revolt.

“Western” European Freedom and Its Impasses

In Murder Kristeva outlines the Western connotations of freedom as coextensive with the capacity to reinvent oneself, from Saint Augustine's insistence on rebirth to Kant's notion of “spontaneous beginning” and Freud's emphasis on the ability to renew psychic life. These variants of freedom place an emphasis on the singular being, on autonomous subjectivity and
independent thinking. The genealogy of the notion of freedom as coextensive with self-renewal is illustrated by the story of Sebastian Chrest-Jones, who is capable of reinventing himself, despite his “invisible psychic wounds,” by imagining a story of love between Ebrard and Anna, in which he “transfuses” himself into Anna: “Sebastian has transfused into Anna, he loves her for the memory she wills to him of the Crusades, especially her description of the First Crusade from 1095 to 1115….” (115-6). Estranging part of himself into a sub-self (C/J) allows Sebastian to start a process of return which is simultaneously recollection and interrogation. This questioning of the past that has afflicted him allows him to displace and transform it. Kristeva chooses to end Sebastian-C/J’s journey by making him come to understand the meaning of his journey, as a process of thought.

As already discussed, Kristeva follows Arendt when she draws a tentative connecting line between freedom, self-renewal, and thought. In talking to Estelle about Sebastian-C/J’s story, Stephanie asks herself: “Where is one when one is understanding? In history? Outside history?” (228). This reformulates Arendt's question, “Where are we when we think?” (193), which she discusses in *Hannah Arendt* (2001b). There she argues that understanding and thinking occupy not only a linear chronology, but are also “outside time” (193). This means that thinking can be “understood as the actualization of the original duality or the split between me and myself which is inherent in all consciousness” (193, my italics). In other words, there is a form of estrangement inherent in the process of thought, which at the same time highlights the conflict intrinsic to the ability to create a plurality of perspectives through the dialogue between “me and myself.” In *Murder*, this split is clearly illustrated through the dual stories of Sebastian and his sub-self, C/J.

It is through C/J that Kristeva traces Saint Augustine's notion of freedom as coextensive with self-renewal/rebirth, as Stephanie calls him “my Augustinian man” in her exposé of the logic of the novel (231). She claims that C/J is a survivor, because “this man of memory is the
man of the beginning” (231). Here Stephanie echoes Kristeva's (2002c) argument that Saint Augustine has added to the idea of biblical “beginning” the first revolution in interiority by formulating intimacy as dependent on memory and recollection (64). In Murder, Kristeva uses this Augustinian logic to describe C/J's process of anamnesis, taking Saint Augustine's formula “In via in patria” (meaning “Your homeland is in the pilgrimage/journey”) as a reference point for the story of C/J's, who wants to “make memory a fine art” (168). Augustine's conception of life as a journey, as mobility, defines C/J's process of anamnesis: “desire the homeland, be conscious of the pilgrimage.... join like a foreigner the wisdom that is not foreign… Someone was speaking inside Sebastian...maybe Augustine. It was impossible to silence him.… In via in patria” (217).

Saint Augustine's conception of life as a permanent journey, as a permanent uprooting, marks a shift in the definition of life, as Kristeva (2001b) explains, by adding to it the dimension of freedom as inner movement and constant self-renewal: “It is because there is a beginning that we can begin,” Kristeva (2001b) writes, commenting on Augustine's notion of life, “and by beginning with birth, we are destined for renewed births tantamount to acts of freedom” (35). In Murder this dimension of freedom defines C/J’s Christo-centric approach: “because this man of memory is the man of the beginning…. Again Augustine.... Occidentalist, worse, a Christian” (242). This reminder that Augustine is an Occidental/Western thinker, whose thought is inseparable from religion, leads Kristeva into a reflection on why religion has been and still is able to attract so many followers, particularly during times of economic and political crisis.

Kristeva reiterates, in Murder, some of the ideas on this topic that she had already developed elsewhere (1987b, 1991b). In Strangers to Ourselves (1991b), she argues that religion has been able to provide the locus of refuge for foreigners, who have been promised a space of inclusion: “The sense of exclusion that, in our day, is provoked by economic crisis, or the condition of foreignness, ethnic or otherwise, may be relieved (promised as relieved) in a
religious space where the individual thinks that he can benefit from identification through inclusion within a symbolic community” (23). Thus the foreigner, or others who feel excluded, may find temporary relief in religion, as identified in Augustine's insight into the role of the pilgrimage, involving both “psychic momentum and a community of social assistance.... with neither rejection nor national assimilation” (84). In this sense, Kristeva explains, the alienation of the foreigner ceases in religious discourse because, following Augustine, s/he can be “anybody,” as long as s/he identifies with Christly love (85). The downfall of this notion of freedom in pilgrimage occurred over time, as the absolute aspect of religious identification was subjected to the demands of the State and then of nations, with the result that since the Middle Ages the fate of the foreigner has “depended on a subtle, sometimes brutal play between caritas and the political jurisdiction” (85).

In *Murder*, Kristeva considers both aspects of this notion of freedom as pilgrimage, particularly as she contextualizes the circumstances that led to the First Crusades, looking at two individual crusaders. One is Adhemar the Vellave, a “papal legate, the first crusader, who was perhaps an atypical crusader” (97); the other is Ebrard Pagan, Adhemar's nephew, who in the end renounces the cross, abandons the Crusades, and chooses to settle down to “cultivate his garden” (135). Through Adhemar's story, Kristeva emphasizes the notion of pilgrimage as a permanent form of exile, as a form of self-estrangement and an openness towards others. Adhemar is described as a “singular, unique figure who stood out from the rest” (97), persuading his soldiers to return stolen goods and to be generous with the local people. He lives his life as if in permanent exile, and his many journeys open up possibilities of encountering other “exiles like him” (98). For him, this kind of life is the only way of insisting on new beginnings and on recreating plural links with others: “an exiled person among his own people, this Adhemar who wanted to conserve *his passion as an exile and share it with other exiles*, but who at the same time found himself on the road toward a general reconciliation of the One” (98, my italics).
While Kristeva emphasizes the benefits of this notion of freedom as a form of self-estrangement that produces a sense of responsibility and respect towards others, she also calls attention to its limitations. For instance, Adhemar is unable to question “the purity of the unified Christian faith, which is to say the European faith” (97). His inability to put his faith into question, to interrogate the logic of cruelty and violence behind the Crusades, makes him unable to revolt, or even to distance himself from the Crusaders, which eventually leads to his death.

It is through Ebrard Pagan's story that Kristeva articulates the possibility or impossibility of religious dissidence. As the name “Pagan” suggests, he represents a combination of pagan and Christian aspects that make Ebrard's variety of revolt possible. It is worth noting that the story of Ebrard is invented by Sebastian Chrest-Jones, who imagines a love story between Anna Comnena and Ebrard Pagan as a way of soothing his anguish for his “lost father.” Recounted by Stephanie, the imagined love between Ebrard and Anna masks Sebastian's disgust for his mother. It is therefore significant that it is from a woman's perspective that Ebrard's story is retold, as she counterbalances the masculine construction and appropriation of the ideal asexual femininity represented by Anna Comnena and her encounter with Ebrard, by pointing to its limitations.

Ebrard is Adhemar's nephew, and serves as a translator in the First Crusades, a function that shields him from participating directly in the brutalities and murders committed by the Crusaders. On arriving in Philippopolis, Sebastian imagines Ebrard meeting Anna Comnena, who has been sent by her parents to stay with her maternal grandmother, Maria of Bulgaria. Anna is described as sick with grief over the death of her fiancé, Constantinople. In Sebastian's novel Ebrard saves Anna, who is bathing in a lake, from an attack by some of his fellow Crusaders. Contact with Anna's body enacts a process of transformation in Ebrard, and her touch remains like “an invisible, intimate covering over the cross sewn onto his clothes...” (135). As a consequence of their meeting, Ebrard leaves the Crusaders and decides to settle down and cultivate the land: “Another man has taken over from the first Ebrard after he renounced both the
Crusade and Anna. Not a survivor but a man on the other side of death, open, empty and therefore receptive” (159). Ebrard, who becomes “free of God,” free to search for his own inner self (165), chooses to continue living “a life now set apart from life, another life,” belonging to a private “history that is not written down, to a nothingness” (159).

On the one hand Ebrard's story illustrates one possibility of revolt, by maintaining (like the Old Man) the ability to exercise independent thought and nurture a psychic life. On the other hand, Kristeva calls attention to the limitations of his choices, intriguingly writing that “the pacific choice of Ebrard was perhaps the first defeat of the West” (180). I understand this to be a critique of the tendency to place conflict and death only on the outside, to leave history to other people, to choose pacifism only to see this pacifist inaction thrown into crisis, shattered by more and more violent events. Kristeva suggests that Ebrard's “most radical renunciation of death” and refusal of war “so as to live on” opens up the possibility for others to capitalize on his “pacific choice”: “History sees in it the defeat of Byzantium, because the West recovered with the Renaissance and the expansion of technology, capital, industry, colonies and atomic bombs. Again the male monotheist fanaticism, but new and improved, or at least with pretentions of being new and improved” (180).

**Freedom and the Western Economy of Representation**

Another aspect of freedom highlighted in *Murder* is linked to the economy of representation, which Kristeva discusses in relation to two religious doctrines, “Filoloque” and “Per Filium” that led to the schism between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox (Byzantine) churches in 1054. Building on the topic of the two modalities of representation influenced in Western Europe by iconoclasm and in Eastern Europe by iconography already outlined in *Possessions*, Kristeva returns in *Murder* to lead an in-depth investigation of their genealogy. According to her, two modalities of representation exist, since the debate between the “iconodules” and “iconoclasts,”
between the “icon” and the “image.” She explains that for the “West” the image can be traced back to the Latin conception of the *figura* that favoured a proliferation of images, leading to the “society of the spectacle.” In *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000a), Kristeva argues that the *figura*, understood in Auerbach’s (2003) sense as a “prophecy in act,” represents historical events of the past and “interprets them as promises of an open meaning to come” (153). She sees this as a “more fruitful and freer means for the growth of representation” (153), since the past is perceived as pre-figuring the future, Eve prefigures Mary, Moses prefigures Christ, and so on (153). This form of representation culminated in the virtual effects of “*trompe l’œil*” in the Baroque age, where images were seen as part of the show, as illusions rather than imitating reality or identical to it. In the modern “society of the spectacle,” this form of freedom to create and recognize illusion has grown into a technological theatricalisation that destroys the illusion by making everything into a *performance*. In other words, the ability to recognize images as illusions has been lost in the “society of the spectacle” and performance is often confused with reality. In the novel, Kristeva identifies the “nonstop exhibition of intimacy” as one of the main dangers of modern culture as a constant “show.” She suggests that this kind of spectacle leads to a standardization of the intimate, but without the freedom that comes from seeing it as an illusion: “The flutterings of the heart have been taken over by the flutterings of the spectacle, and we spend our time distinguishing gradations of lesser and greater evil” (65).

This standardization of the intimate prevents freedom, since it implies the loss of the singularity of the inner life, and of the ability to begin anew by reinventing oneself in or through representation. In the novel Stephanie suggests that such images camouflage the death drive; they continuously subvert our capacity for free thinking by making death visible on the outside, rather than helping us to recognize it as always already there, on the inside. As Stephanie explains:

*I'm not going to tell you that the image is the devil and that it must be forbidden*
Kristeva presents the limitations of the variants of freedom in Western Europe, not in an attempt to stigmatize them but in order to better assess the possibilities of envisioning a “European” union that is aware of its limits and remains open to a continuous self-interrogation. She employs a similar strategy regarding the variants of freedom in Eastern Europe.

“Eastern” European Freedom and Its Impasses

Kristeva uses Anna’s story to think about the connotations of freedom that were nurtured in the “East” before and after the schism between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. In order to call attention to the complex layers that constituted “Byzantium” at the time of the First Crusades, she depicts it as a “multicultural empire” (177): the Greeks mixed with the Bulgarians, in a “skilful mosaic of wars and weddings between nobles and invaders, Greeks and Slavs, proud lines and insolent neighbours” (126). Despite the many wars and peace treaties that followed each other in rapid succession, “Byzantium” was also known for the ability of its inhabitants to find ways of coexisting: “Curiously, however, these Byzantines, like Ulysses, seem always to have an extra card up their sleeve to undo these upstart Latins” (124). In Stephanie's reflections on Anna Comnena's story, Kristeva emphasizes as characteristic of Eastern Europe the freedom that lies in finding ways of living with others and renewing connections even in times of conflict.

Kristeva attributes this ability to the fact that the Orthodox faith and Greek philosophy existed in a close intertextual dialogue, modulating and transforming each other. Ancient Greek thought influenced Byzantine faith, offering a model of subjectivity based on formulating relations with others. At the same time this influence fashioned an Orthodox subjectivity strikingly different from the one nurtured by Catholicism. Kristeva (1989a) had already
commented on these differences, arguing that from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries the Byzantine theologians were preoccupied with describing a “new postclassical subjectivity rather than subjecting it to reason in existence” (210). On the other hand, the theologians of the Latin Church, who were “more logically inclined,” having just discovered Aristotle at a time when the East had long been influenced by him, “logicized the Trinity by seeing God as a simple intellectual essence that could be articulated as dyads – the Father engenders the Son; Father and Son as a set cause the Spirit to come forth” (210-1). In other words, Kristeva explains, it is impossible to combine faith with reason in the Orthodox tradition, something which favours a sense of dependency rather than independence, of mysticism rather than comprehension (211).

It is these differences that Kristeva also brings out in *Murder*, in Stephanie's account of Anna Comnena's story. In her efforts to understand the historical and political context that defined and influenced Anna Comnena's life and work, Stephanie tries to put herself in Anna Comnena's place and look at the Crusaders from Anna's perspective. She notes that the “Byzantines are quite different from people in western Christendom,” enjoying a style of life that “mixes peasant simplicity and theological disputes,” in a manner that sometimes appears to be “suspicious, proud, and often hostile toward these conceited Latin barons who don't even know how to read” (125-6). For Stephanie, Anna Comnena who illustrates this capacity to mix simple pleasures with theological disputes.

Raised on Homer, Plato, and Aristotle (19), Anna not only has a very inquisitive mind, but also a solid understanding of Byzantine political life. Greek thought has offered her the model of a polis that is formed by acting and speaking together, and as such is freed from any precise physical location. This is in contrast to the Roman city, founded by law and circumscribed to a clearly delineated place (as evoked in *The Old Man*). For Anna, “words were things” (120), and as a reader of Aristotle she considered (like Arendt) the act of narration as a form of political action, as Sebastian explains, noting that her political opinion “comes through
her storytelling” (21).

Through Anna’s story Kristeva also emphasizes the embodiment of a politics that has the capacity to incorporate sensory knowledge, because it manifests itself through the act of narration. In *The Alexiad*, Anna’s historical biography of her father’s reign, Anna describes the difficulty of being a woman who is excluded from power simply because she is a woman. Sent into exile, she wrote the entire fifteen tomes of *The Alexiad* in a monastery. Reflecting on Anna's position and the difficulty of being a woman who had the courage to think for herself and write her political views, Stephanie notes: “History passed through her very body – her tears, her moods, the intrigues of the palace, the battle with her brother John, the future basileus, who would snatch the throne from her even though she could have had it herself” (19). Stephanie explains that because she was a woman, Anna was able to describe events from the perspective of both a military strategist and a depressed psychologist. She told of the harsh battles, the twists of fate, the stakes for this and that group, the confrontation of different habits and ways of thinking. She examined every thread and knot of this ongoing set of conflicts that were endlessly breaking down and reconstructing themselves; but she did it in a way that also revealed things about her own Byzantine soul” (81, my italics).

Orthodox spirituality, according to Kristeva (1989a), defines the “soul” as the capacity to withdraw into intimacy and mysticism (212). In *Murder* Kristeva suggests that this form of subjectivity can be seen as a type of freedom, since it brings out the richness of the sensory and the intimate, and can emerge as a form of openness towards others. On the other hand, it encourages withdrawal and passivity, and may produce a subject incapable of autonomy and therefore more easily dominated and controlled. Clearly, the “Byzantine soul” is a paradoxical construction: a source of inspiration and of intimacy, favouring openness towards others, yet also a model of experience that paves the way to submission and dependency.

This paradoxical logic also defines Anna Comnena's experience as a daughter, writer, and politician, a woman who, according to Sebastian, was “in love with her father,” but knew “how
to combine her melancholic admiration for the great man with a Byzantine taste for intrigue” (18). This first woman intellectual knew, like Germaine de Staël and Simone de Beauvoir, how to defy “the laws of the uterus to participate in those of the mind” (115), but was unable to revolt against the “mirage” and influence of her father and never freed herself from her father's authority. On the contrary, as Sebastian writes in his novel, Anna “adopted very often the father's point of view” (20), to the extent that he asks himself whether *The Alexiad* should be read as “a Chronicle of a Princess or as a ‘Search for the Lost Father’” (20).

The paradoxical logic of the “Byzantine soul,” that combines openness to others with submission to the patriarchal cult, also defines the realm of representation. While Orthodox spirituality defines the soul as having the capacity to withdraw into intimacy, it also proposes a different way of seeing the external, a new way of looking at the image that is “not sign but sense” (173). Kristeva presents Byzantium as a crossroads, the location of many debates “between the invisible and the visible, about making images or not making images,” where people are “crazy about seeing and being seen, while others claim that the invisible can only be felt, that one must only inhale it, taste it with the heart by immersing first one’s face and eventually one’s whole body…. ” (127). It was in Byzantium, as Sebastian's visit to Boyana church reveals, that a new way of seeing was inaugurated. Kristeva explains that the artists of Boyana were faithful to the aesthetic canon announced in Nicaea in 787 that put an end to iconoclasm (the destruction of representational images) and “authorized the figurative representation of the emperor and his court as well as of Christ and the Virgin,” giving rise to “many Virgins, crucifixions, annunciations, and pietas throughout Italy and France” (172). For the painters of Boyana, Kristeva explains, the image meant “nothing less than being in a living relationship with the person or thing” (173). Echoing the construction of the “Byzantine soul,” the Byzantine image emerges as an invitation to turn the gaze inward, thus insisting on the pluralization of the intimate space through the creation of plural links with others.
However, like the “Byzantine soul” this new way of seeing remains entrapped in a certain type of representation, which favours the sanctification of suffering and sorrow and the concealment of sexuality. This is clearly illustrated in representations of the Virgin Mary that require a “boundless immersion in suffering” (172). The Marian cult, which encourages feminine masochism, also entails man's complete submission to the Father, evoking a certain homo-eroticism also bordering on (sado)masochism. Rather than depicting a family with parents of both sexes, this intimate story takes place between Father and Son:

For the profane, the intimacy in question is that of man and woman, what is called sexual commerce, but you understand that in this kind of incarnation, the one Sebastian observes on the walls of Byzantium, the term designates the passion between two men, God the Father and his Son... There is a whole history of love between Father and Son no less than between model and image (173, my italics).

As mentioned earlier, Kristeva see this type of representation as fostering a submissive attitude that paved the way for communism in the Orthodox Eastern European countries. In Orthodoxy, man is not called to “free himself from God,” or to be independent, but to “unite freely with Him” (139), and this makes the Son “a sentimental servant, potentially masochist, and homosexual, and necessarily a worshipper of the (little) Fathers of the people” (167). According to Kristeva, this doctrine, known as Per Filiuim, led in Eastern Europe to “violence, anarchy, terrorism, revolution, murder, mafia, Stalin [and] Putin....” (167).

As part of the self-reflexivity that permeates this novel, these remarks are attributed to a psychoanalyst character called “Julia Kristeva,” who offers a psychoanalytic perspective on faith. An ironic statement by the omniscient narrator claims that this theorist’s views are far from popular in Paris, because “faith is a lot more twisted than the successors of Dr. Freud imagine and that can tie you into Borromean knots for sure” (167). This submission of Eastern Orthodoxy to psychoanalysis by “Julia Kristeva” adds a further layer to Sebastian's historical reflections, which include a condensed genealogy of the history of Byzantium in relation to the political
implications of the Orthodox faith. One impasse that blocks freedom in this context is the failure of the Orthodox church to recognize the singularity of human individuality. Stephanie, comparing Byzantium to Stalin's “Third Rome” in Moscow, states, “you will also hear that this Oriental Church does not recognize the human person” (84-5, my italics). Stephanie’s Byzantium can be seen as an example of freedom as thought, in response to Orthodoxy’s valorization of the sensorial and the intimate on one hand, and the entrapments that the Per Filium doctrine represents on the other. Her model draws on the variants of freedom in both Western and Eastern European traditions, to reveal revolt against the denial of feminine sensibility and the maternal at its core.

**Stephanie's “own” Byzantium**

There are many Byzantions in the novel, to the extent that Stephanie claims, “To each his own Byzantium” (82). So what is specific about Stephanie's “own” Byzantium, and what does it mean to be a “Byzantine”? To answer this question we first have to identify the “real” Byzantium to which Stephanie reacts, and why Kristeva resorts to imaginary Byzantions. Stephanie claims that “today Byzantium is nowhere; it is noplace” (83), but the “Byzantium” that Kristeva vehemently critiques did exist, as the one that gave rise to “never-ending debates about the sex of the angels.” It is also the place where “the damage wrought by iconoclasts and the sanctification of images carried out by icon lovers” made the present day “society of the spectacle” possible, along with the likes of “Guy Debord, Survivor, and all the Bin Ladens on Al Jazeera” (64). In short, for Kristeva “Byzantium,” in the past and the present, represents what remains “most precious, refined and painful about Europe”:

The first religious war in the Old World, those legendary Crusades that later inspired President Bush with a duplicate set of pogroms, looting of local treasures, failed (already) attempts at European unification and globalization beyond Europe – yes, 'globalization' since the Crusaders went beyond Europe to the tomb of Christ invaded by the miscreants.... all that still always happens via Byzantium (64, my italics).
To this “Byzantium” Kristeva opposes Stephanie's “own” Byzantium. The latter suggests an imaginary, mental space, implying a distance from other “Byzantiums” but without excluding their parallel existence, or even their interweaving. For Stephanie, being a “Byzantine” means being “a foreigner and a woman.” As such, she is aware that her “Byzantium” is vulnerable to distortions, manipulations, and abuse, but at the same time it is open to renewal and reinvention. She insists that it is “neither Roman nor Koran-based,” and is not embedded in any “orgy of frescoes” (alluding to the Boyana church, the birthplace of the flourishing Marian figurations). What is specific about her “own” Byzantium is that it tries to offer “human passions their political incarnation as the permanent crisis of power” (84, my italics). Stephanie's Byzantium offers an example of the construction of the political as a “transubstantiation” of passions, of the transformation of the “theatre of interiority” into manifestations of power. It subjects the relationship between passion and politics, between desire and power, to what she calls “a lacerating rethinking” (84). This rethinking calls attention to the effects of the acting out of a crisis involving interiority on the exterior, political scene, in the form of crusades or other “holy wars.”

Stephanie's conception of the political is revealed not only by the retelling of history through the telling of personal stories, but also by her attention to an entire panoply of factors related to psychic life (passions, affects, and emotions) that are intrinsic to the formation of identity politics, yet generally considered to be prepolitical. Stephanie's “own” (inner) Byzantium relocates the question of the prepolitical to the political realm, and reads the political as itself also simultaneously prepolitical, suggesting a logic of contamination rather than a sequential relation. Her Byzantium combines the connotations of freedom in both “Eastern” and “Western” European traditions, emphasizing the sensorial, the intimate, the preoedipal. She combines what Kristeva considers to be important aspects of freedom in Eastern Europe with an
insistence on the aptitude for self-estrangement and self-reinvention characteristic of Western European variants of freedom. Stephanie's descriptions of her own process of writing and the meaning that she assigns to language comes close to the Byzantine economy of the image as an invisible trace, which places the viewer in a “living relationship” with the model: “always held back by the vowels, consonants and syllables, I go to meet the ungraspable little flame underneath the outer covering of signs” (64, my italics). The Western variant of freedom, perhaps best formulated in the metaphor of life as a journey, is captured by Stephanie at the end of the novel in the ungrammatical transitive statement, “I travel myself”\(^69\) (240). This calls attention to a meaning that normal syntax cannot capture, and the emphatic personal pronoun “myself,” with its reflexive inflection\(^70\), conveys a type of self-estrangement, a searching for the “self” by passing through the self. This expression borrows from the Baroque spectacle of interiority the idea of the stage as an interplay of self-positionings, retaining the ironic twist that self-estrangement (or self-distancing), like freedom, is only illusory, in other words, temporary, and not permanent or a “birth right.” Yet it is precisely the awareness that it is an illusion that offers women, already aware of the illusory nature of the phallus, a fertile place from which to question the unity of meaning, identity, and politics. It is a place where the possibility of freedom lies in the in-between that refuses to be rooted in any either/or dogma or culture. As Stephanie forcefully insists: “No, don't look for me on the map, my Byzantium is a matter of time, the very question that time asks itself when it doesn't want to choose between two places, two dogmas, two crises, two identities, two continents, two religions, two sexes, two plots” (88, my italics).

By problematizing the “either/or” logic of a Byzantium that is at the root of so many historical, religious, and political controversies, wars, and debates, Stephanie's “own” Byzantium

\(^{69}\) The French original is “Je me voyage.” (page ref.) The published English translation reads “I am a journeywoman.” (249), which loses the ungrammatical structure and the reflexive pronoun.

\(^{70}\) In French the direct and indirect personal object pronouns corresponding to “Je,” as well as the reflexive pronoun, are all “me.”
tries to demystify its rigid (and tragic) construction. She stages a Byzantium aware that the only way out is by playing the game of illusions and passing through it: “my Byzantium [is] [n]either hesitation, nor uncertainty, nothing but the wisdom of what happens, of time passing and knowing it's passing, a passing passenger, future anterior” (88, my italics).

The emphasis on the “future anterior” of Byzantium recalls some other instances where the “future perfect” has been used by Kristeva. However, Byzantium's “future perfect” is not that of “Women's Time” (1986e), where it calls attention to a particular kind of memory in which “the mostly repressed past gives a distinct character to a logical and sociological distribution of the most modern type” (189). Nor does it have the same sense as in Tales of Love (1987b), where the future perfect defines the “nontime of love that both past and future fulfils me, abolishes me and yet leaves me unsated” (6). In Stephanie's Byzantium, “future perfect” is not simply synonymous with recollection of a past to be remembered differently, but used in the sense of revolt. Stephanie's insistence that her novel is “something hybrid,” a “minor genre,” a “diagonal passing through” brings out this idea of the “future perfect” as a form of revolt. By being a “diagonal passing through,” Stephanie explains that her novel leaves all questions open and “time as well” (88), emphasizing what is important in her novel is the continuous interrogation, examination of the past in order to allow for more accountable future actions. While reflecting on the status of the novel in a culture of revolt, Kristeva (2002c) argues that it is no longer the utopian dream of a better future, as conceptualized by communism and providential religions, that makes sense today, but revolt, in the sense of “the questioning and displacement of the past” (5). Moreover, as previously quoted, she argues that the future “if it exists, depends on it” (5).

Mother Tongues and National Texts

Kristeva uses the example of Stephanie's “own” Byzantium also as a way of rethinking the gap between “mother tongues” and “national texts.” By so doing, she reacts to the model of the
Orthodox Eastern European countries, where the political instrumentalization of religion led to
the identification of the church with ethnic nations, giving rise to conflicts such as the one in the
former Yugoslavia. Sebastian bears witness to its aftermath as he is driving “across the
Dalmatian coast, Serbia, Kosovo, and through the Macedonian region devastated by the allied
bombardments in 2000 [in] Philippopolis” (94). At the same time, Kristeva posits Stephanie's
Byzantium in counterpoint to the secular tendency in the West to conflate literature with
nationalism. In a context where “humanity in transit has sought to express itself burdened by its
no man's language” (68), Kristeva associates Stephanie’s Byzantium with a number of writers
capable of surmounting the abyss created by the interval between languages, as Stephanie
explains:

Nabokov was fully capable of leaving Russian, passing now and then through
French and taking up permanent residence in a comfortable English that was
saturated with Slavic vibrations. Did Beckett not achieve his matricide by
parachuting into the language of Voltaire – a language that he never ceased
emptying of its substance as a way of taking revenge on Joyce and waiting for
Godot within the narrow confines of - take your pick – Protestant or Catholic
doubt? Finally Naipaul, who translates the Indian continent into an English that
resonates like a cosmopolitan code quite beyond any Shakespearean pathos or
music (68, my italics).

These bilingual writers, “globalization's lost rap artists,” as Stephanie calls them (68), have used
the intimate as a way of transforming pain and foreignness into openness and rebirth in a
international text. They were capable (like Kristeva) of turning a passionate attachment to their
“mother tongue” into a certain detachment that expressed the plurality of their experiences.

Another exemplar of self-transformation and crossing a linguistic and geographical
divide, this time between Eastern and Western Europe, is provided in Stephanie's description of
the portrait of Dessislava, Anna Comnena’s grandmother, in the Boyana church which forms the
missing link between Constantinopole and Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice. Interpreting the
meaning of the portrait, Stephanie comments: “It's Venice in the middle of Bulgaria, it's the high
sea, the desirable, the impossible Europe” (174). Dessislava's hand, open in a welcoming gesture
of hospitality and sharing, embodies the connotations of freedom and singularity that define the “West” and the “East” of Europe, as Kristeva suggests: “The maturity of the East and the illuminations of the Latins intermingled and sometimes produced a graceful result such as the gothic left hand of Dessislava” (170-2). The gesture of the open hand, located between “here” and “there,” is a powerful metaphor to convey the transitory condition of a subjectivity always at a crossroads. Dessislava represents the strangeness inside, the feminine and the maternal condition, which carries with it an ethical reconsideration of what it means to be a foreigner. As Stephanie suggests: “I am even inclined to think that it is precisely from the transitory beings that we are – we vulnerable Byzantines and recorders of the modern Crusades – that the question of the future, if not the future, will come” (56).

In Murder, Kristeva proposes a narrative model that configures the relationship between Eastern and Western Europe as a hybrid space of interaction and contamination. Her vision of the “desirable, impossible Europe,” premised on the revalorization of feminine creativity and maternal bond, as well as on women’s capacity to question the apparent unity of all meaning, language or systems of knowledge, calls into question European cultural and religious memory, since the First Crusades to the modern times, in an attempt to reveal its mechanisms of repression and oppression. While Kristeva brings into sharp focus the ways in which femininity and the maternal have been repressed in both Orthodoxy and Catholicism, she seems to also perform her own mechanisms of repression when it comes to the history of Europe in relation to what is not Europe: Turkey, or the Near East. As well, the differences between Christianity and Islam, as well as between the Eastern European countries, that vary a great deal particularly after the fall of communist regimes, remain largely unaddressed. The notion of revolt, that Kristeva integrates at the core of her novel, emphasizing the aptitude for thought as creative freedom, has the potential to propose a new model of European Union, one that configures the identity of the “eternal” Europe as a question to be endlessly interrogated and reinvented, yet not before
considering the “excluded others” in the history of Europe. Until then, Kristeva’s vision risks remaining utopian.
Conclusion

This study thesis has examined the ways in which Kristeva’s novels reflect on and respond to the cultural and political crises of European identity and the urgency of assuming responsibility for Europe’s heritage and its future. Kristeva’s notion of revolt has been central to my examination of the ways in which she attributes to women as/and foreigners the role of interrogating the “new world order,” revalorizing feminine creative thought and sensibility as crucial to the reconfiguration of European cultural memory. Through her central female characters (Olga Morena, Joëlle Cabarrus, Stephanie Delacour, Gloria Harrison, Anna Comnena), who all share a love of words (as writer, psychoanalyst, political journalist, translator, and chronicler, respectively), Kristeva deploys her logic of revolt to establish feminine creativity to the very core of the traditions that repressed, obscured, or even severed its vital bond to the European tradition.

This emphasis on the link between revolt and feminine creative thought has entailed a rethinking of the function of Kristeva’s novels. Shifting the focus away from readers’ responses to their form and content fiction (which many critics considered “too cerebral” if not “utterly bad”) onto Kristeva’s definition of the novel as inseparable from the evolution of European (comm)union and its dissolution, this study has considered her use of the novel as both a witness and accomplice to the transition and the crises evoked. It began by demonstrating the ways in which Kristeva incorporates elements from the tradition of Greek Menippean discourse, with its inherent dialogical nature, along with a Bakhtinian understanding of the carnivalesque, to construct the kind of narratives Kristeva ascribes to Arendt’s conceptualization of storytelling. Arendt’s connection of aesthetics and politics provided a model for Kristeva’s narratives to engage individual and political stories of personal and collective crises in a process of interrogation of the (im)possibility of revolt in the new world order. This Arendtian model
partakes in another kind of politics, that of an “open memory” (Kristeva 2001c, 43) of plural inter-actions that challenge the equation of aesthetics and politics with national languages and national belonging. This emphasis on the Arendtian narrative model as central to Kristeva’s novels challenges some feminist critiques (in particular those of Nancy Fraser (1992) and Diane Coole (2000)) that charge Kristeva with the aestheticization of the political and the politicization of national aestheticism. In contrast to these perspectives, I have tried to show that Kristeva’s novels insist on the subjectivization of the political, offering the example of an aesthetics in which both subjective and political meanings are re-created through acts of remembering that depend on leaving open the plurality of their inter-actions.

Countering McAfee’s (2004) argument that Kristeva’s theories of language do not illustrate how the personal becomes political, this study suggests that Kristeva’s novels in fact do provide a very good example of how to turn the personal into the political, provided we reframe the act of narration through Arendt’s connection of narration to politics. Arendt’s understanding of narration as action and action as narration, a dynamic that entails a second (narrative) rebirth, is integral to Kristeva’s construction of her novels. Her decision to open her first novel, *The Samurai*, with a date (24 June 1989) that marks both her birthday and twenty-four years since her arrival in France, can be seen as a good illustration of this second narrative rebirth. This focus on how the personal and the political are intertwined in these novels entails reassessing her use of fiction, to show how life, writing, and thought are inextricably interconnected for Kristeva.

This interconnectedness of life-writing-thought is considered by Kristeva (2002c) to be central to her logic of revolt as well as integral to her novels, theories, and psychoanalytic practice (2007b). She recognized a similar refusal to separate them in the work of Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Colette, the three women she chose to interpret. Her novels are in an intertextual relationship with her studies of them, as well as with her own theories. While Chen
(2008) saw Kristeva’s fiction as exemplifying some of her theories and examined her first three novels in relation to the interaction between French feminist theory and Anglo-American feminism, my aim has been to demonstrate that for Kristeva fiction-writing conveys the inseparability of both theoretical thought and lived experience (as it is remembered) from the imaginary realm. Clearly, Kristeva’s novels incorporate many of the theoretical ideas she develops elsewhere, but her use of fiction enables her to add personal and historical elements that add to their political dimension.

*The Samurai* (1992), for instance, which was published at around the same time as *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991b) and *Nations without Nationalism* (1993b), incorporates many of the ideas she developed in those texts. This is particularly evident in the way she illustrates the notion of “foreignness within” through the story of the dissident intellectual Olga Morena, while examining the legacy of the French Revolution in relation to the treatment of foreigners as well as the relationship between Eastern European communism and Western European consumerism. It is also evident in *The Old Man* (1994), published at around the time of her work on Proust (1993c), which draws on the ideas developed in the latter to propose recollection and psychic time as the only “surviving imaginative value” (Kristeva 1993c, 5) possible in a totalitarian context.

The inseparability of thought-writing-life is also evident in cases where one of the novels develops ideas which Kristeva later incorporated into her theoretical writings. Published two years before *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995), *The Old Man* already introduces her ideas on the symptomatologies of these maladies, as exemplified by Vespasian’s story. Both *The Old Man* and *The Samurai* preceded Kristeva’s theoretical work on revolt (2000d, 2002c), but raise ideas and concepts developed in those works. This is particularly evident in *The Samurai*, in the construction of Olga’s story as a two-fold journey. One is primarily temporal and involves a self-
examination that takes her back to the time of her childhood, revealing her repression of the maternal and reconciling her with her “foreignness within,” as well as preparing her to become a mother herself. The other is spatial and takes her through Eastern and Western Europe, to China and North America. In The Old Man, the notion of revolt develops in relation to the Old Man’s story which evokes an aptitude for interrogation, recollection and thought as action, a sequence which Kristeva later (2002c) considered to be the essential aspects of revolt. The emphasis on the sensory intimacy of women in Possessions (1996) reappears two years later, to revalorize her notion of intimate revolt in her book with that title. That work (2002c) also incorporates ideas developed in other texts, in particular Visions Capitales (1998f) and Melanie Klein (2001d). Kristeva’s treatment in both Possessions and Visions Capitales of the notions of phantasmatic matricide, the role of the imaginary, and the two modalities of representation that she associates with Eastern and Western Europe, - all essential to the development of her notion of intimate revolt, - also paved the way for one of the main arguments in her study on Klein, namely that phantasmatic matricide is both a source of distress and a precondition for the emergence of thought and psychic life.

In Murder in Byzantium, Kristeva followed a similar path, re-working some of the ideas that preoccupied her at that time. The crisis of European identity and the problematic nature of a unification based solely on economic and political grounds, which she examined in Crisis of the European Subject (2000a), became one of the main themes in Murder, where Kristeva inquires into whether or not religion should be taken into account and to what extent it still has a role in influencing individual and collective behaviour. Some of the ideas developed in her studies on Arendt and Klein, published around the same time as Murder, serve to propose a new way of looking at European identity and union, based on a reconfigured model of politics that places the maternal bond at its centre.
Kristeva’s (2007b) conceptualization of fiction as a mode of thinking similar to her theories and psychoanalytic practice, in which critical thought is inseparable from lived experience (as it is remembered) and the imaginary realm, also allows for an interpretation attentive to the ways in which she re-works her own auto-biographical memory in relation to European cultural memory and its heritage. The movement of return to the past, its recollection, interrogation, and transformation into a narrative construction is also central to the logic of revolt. Looking at the ways in which Kristeva translates personal experience and sensory intimacy into expressions of narrative revolt, this study also demonstrates that telling stories in this form has a therapeutic function for her, providing a means to work through the melancholia arising from separation from her roots and the loss of both her parents as well as her mother tongue.

This is evident in all four novels. In The Samurai, she weaves auto-biographical elements into the stories of Olga Morena, a young intellectual dissident from Eastern European who comes to Paris on a scholarship to continue her studies, and of Joëlle Cabarus, a psychoanalyst. Her second novel, The Old Man, published only a year later, provided a way to work through mourning the death of her father, which occurred under mysterious circumstances in a hospital in then communist Bulgaria. In Possessions, the therapeutic function may be linked to the difficulty of being the mother of a child with a disability, as well as dealing with the pain of separation from her mother through a phantasmatic matricide. Her relationship with her mother also occupies a central place in Murder, where Kristeva pays tribute to the mother’s capacity to nurture her psychic life through independent thought and free subjectivity. Written at the time of her mother’s death, Murder, unlike The Old Man, is less a work of mourning and more a celebration of her mother’s life and a revalorization of the maternal bond.

The translation of personal and sensory experience into/through writing also takes on an
ethical aspect in Kristeva’s novels, in the sense that it calls attention to Kristeva’s own “implications” in narrating the cultural and political crises of the European tradition. This study has defined the ethical function of Kristeva’s novels in contrast to the traditional notion of ethics, by emphasizing a new conception of ethics that takes into account heterogeneous representations that aim at pluralizing meanings offered as “truths.” This new ethics is central to Kristeva’s notion of revolt, and integral to both her fiction and theoretical writings. The ethical dimension of her novels also lies in the ways in which Kristeva incorporates and reveals her personal experience in relation to the difficult issues discussed, in terms of psychoanalytic theory: the logic of the death drive and of sadomasochism.

The emphasis on questioning her “selves,” on returning to her past to examine it and reveal repressed elements, constitutes the basis of Kristeva’s own intimate revolt and of the ethical function of her novels. At the same time, her ethical concerns are also evident in the treatment of the subjects discussed: the status of the foreigner in a cosmopolitan Europe, and the mother as the first other, both marked by the logic of violence and the death drive. My examination of the latter (in relation to heterogeneous temporality in *The Samurai*; to totalitarianism in *The Old Man*; to phantasmatic matricide in *Possessions*; to the religious and secular imaginary in *Murder*) reveals the mechanisms that threaten the integrity of individual and social bonds. Kristeva’s attention to the death drive, to what threatens the possibility of “living differently with different others” (1992), constitutes, in my opinion, the most important ethical contribution of her fiction. More than her theoretical writings, her novels demonstrate how the mechanisms of the death drive work, at both the individual (including her own) and collective levels. Since for Kristeva, following Klein, the death drive is always already linked to the mother and present from the onset of life, the examination of its the mechanisms entails revealing the repression of the maternal and of the (unnameable) feminine. The demystification of the death
drive, by showing that it can be thought, also leads to a revalorization of the maternal and the feminine, which emerge as essential elements of the ability to transform the death drive into a source of thought.

The capacity to think is central to Kristeva’s notion of revolt, and therefore I chose to focus in each chapter on one particular aspect of revolt as thought. The relationship between Eastern and Western Europe is also central in all the novels. In my analysis of *The Samurai*, the emphasis on dissident thought enabled me to trace the (dis)connections between Eastern European communism and Western European consumerism. At the same time, it allowed me to focus on how Kristeva uses the creative and intellectual capacity of women as/and foreigners to stimulate a return to the legacy of the French Revolution in order to examine its tenets, expose its repressed elements and reflect on how they continue to shape their personal experiences intertwined with the cultural and political events of their times. In *The Samurai*, revolt as dissident thought was defined in relation to three political revolutions that marked, directly or indirectly, the European tradition (the French Revolution, May ’68, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution), whereas in *The Old Man* revolt took on the aspect of thought as action to define the only possibility of staying alive in the context of a totalitarian regime. The story of the Old Man emphasizes the possibility of revolt in a communist (Eastern European) regime by nurturing an intense psychic life, based on an aptitude for interrogation, recollection and thought, while the story of Vespasian and Alba provides an example of the impossibility of revolt due to the absence of independent thought and psychic life, accelerated by consumerism and the corruption of laws and authority in the context of the new world order of Santa Varvara.

In my analysis of *Possessions*, the emphasis on Kristeva’s notion of intimate revolt in relation to “thought specular” added a new dimension to the variants of revolt developed in her previous novels. It added a focus on how maternal femininity and phantasmatic matricide are the
precondition for the emergence of thought and creative freedom and thus of the very possibility of revolt. Drawing on the two modalities of representation prevalent in Eastern and Western Europe, I suggest that Kristeva’s notion of intimate revolt as “thought specular” proposes a new way of looking at artistic representations of decapitation, one that revalorizes the relationship with the mother and the sensory intimacy of women. In the analysis of Murder, the change of focus to thought as freedom enabled me to examine the variants of revolt still possible in the context of a new world order and a European Union premised solely on economic and political grounds. Tracing back the process of the European Union to the schism between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in 1054 and to the times of the First Crusades, when the first attempt to unify what would later become known as Eastern and Western Europe was made, the focus on thought as freedom allowed me to consider the benefits and impasses of freedom in both Eastern and Western Europe.

The emphasis on the aptitude for thought, interrogation, and recollection, central to Kristeva’s notion of revolt, allows for a new interpretation of the role of the psychoanalyst Joëlle Cabarus (in The Samurai), and of the political journalist turned detective (Stephanie Delacour in The Old Man, Possessions, and Murder), as well as of the Old Man (in The Old Man), through Arendt’s notion of “representative thinking,” understood as the ability to put oneself into someone else’s shoes in order to take a plurality of viewpoints into account. For Kristeva “representative thinking” must pay attention to the way in which subjectivities are formed, and to how the boundaries between the self and others are constituted, implying the need to open up the time evoked by Arendt’s political imagination to a more heterogeneous temporality. Drawing on Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysis, this kind of temporality takes into account the time of recollection and new beginnings enacted through each new participation in the plurality of human relations, as well as the time of desires, of the death drive, and of women’s bodies, female
sexuality, pregnancy, and maternity.

Considered within the framework of the Arendtian model of aesthetics and politics and Kristeva’s reworking of Arendt’s notion of “representative thinking,” Kristeva’s fiction helps us to see that efforts to think like (as if) another involve a more complex understanding of alterity than the plurality of viewpoints needed to move from the particular to the impartial/universal. One first needs to put one’s self into question, to make the central role of the mother visible in the construction of one’s identity, and to pay attention to what animates the connections between the personal and the political: namely the logic of violence, the death drive, and sadomasochism. Kristeva’s fiction proceeds by examining the exclusions that secure one’s identity, in particular how the process of abjection relies on the exclusion of the feminine and the maternal. As an extreme example of abjection, Kristeva uses murder to examine various forms of the exclusion of the m/other. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), she identifies the corpse as what disturbs identity and coherence, creating borders that exclude and expel that which signifies death. In her novels, the corpse takes on a particular significance. It allows Kristeva to make the link between abjection, narrative, and politics, and to examine how violence and fear are linked to the m/other from the start. Kristeva’s novels reveal how fear and violence constitute essential dimensions of object relations, and carry through to language and representation. Creating an imaginary context representing the new world order, Santa Varvara where the loss of authority, values and respect for the law has stimulated a return to faith in the hope of finding some sense of morality and stability in a “higher authority,” Kristeva insists on the importance of examining the mechanisms underlying the religious and secular orders of European tradition, in order to better understand what animates the political bond. I have argued that it is by engaging in this imaginary return which interrogates, examines, and analyzes all identity, all bonds, that one can dissolve rigidified socio-symbolic structures, and through their displacement, open them up to new interpretations.
and hence new meanings. I hope to have demonstrated that Kristeva’s rethinking of the political lies precisely in this movement of revolt, in the sense that it is through the process of thought as return that one can both expose the conflicts animating individual and political bonds and distance them through representation.

This approach also presents an alternative reading to Chanter and Ziarek’s (2005) interpretation of Kristeva’s connection of revolt, art and narratives as an “aesthetics of malady” (8). It proposes that we look at Kristeva’s fiction as an optimist genre. Her detective novels not only reveal the logic of abjection, violence and sadomasochism, nor do they only search for corpses, or a missing head in the case of Possessions. They also invite us to take imaginary forays through individual, cultural, and political “memories” of the European tradition, in such a way as to force us to keep our distance, making us take on multiple positions from which to question the plurality of views offered. This propensity for questioning leads Kristeva to declare, through Stephanie at the end of Murder, that “detective fiction is an optimistic genre” (249). In Intimate Revolt (2002c), Kristeva advances a similar idea when she argues that detective fiction “keeps the possibility of knowing alive,” by telling the reader, “You can know” (4). In other words, detective fiction offers “the degree zero of this aptitude for judgement that is the interrogation, our only remaining defence against the ‘banality of evil’” (4). This idea of keeping the possibility of questioning alive emerges from all of Kristeva’s novels, and is best illustrated by the conversation in Murder between police detective Rilsky Northrop and Stephanie. To Northrop’s question, “Can you know where the evil comes from?”, Stephanie responds that “no one knows,” but “the investigation is starting up again” (249).

My decision to analyze Kristeva’s novels through her notion of revolt and to emphasize the connection between of life, writing, and thought as integral to both her fiction and her theories necessarily entailed sacrificing the pursuit of other avenues of research. In particular it
ruled out a more in-depth analysis of the narrative construction of her novels. I also had to abandon the question which I originally intended to address, as to whether Kristeva’s novels challenge any of the feminist interpretations of her theoretical work, and to what extent her novels may propose an alternative form of “écriture féminine,” comparable to that of Hélène Cixous or Luce Irigaray. It also implied that less attention than I would have wished was paid to how Kristeva’s vision of the relationship between the East and the West in the context of Europe is sometimes blind to the “others” of non-European traditions. In future research, I hope to return to the question of the relationship between Eastern and Western Europe in Kristeva’s work, and to examine in greater detail the way in which this use of East and West marks Kristeva’s re-mapping of European cultural memory in relation to excluded others. Other areas deserving exploration are the differences (or/and similarities) between the role of phantasmatic matricide and patricide, as well as masculinity and femininity in Kristeva’s version of bisexuality. Her representation of sons, lovers, husbands, and fathers in her novels certainly deserves more attention.

This research was driven by the belief that rather than being “too cerebral” or “obscure,” Kristeva’s novels provide an immense reservoir of theoretical, aesthetic and political insight that has yet to be fully tapped. In counterpoint to the “new world order” of globalization or of standardization of the imaginary, imposed by the “society of the spectacle,” Kristeva offers a complex universe that never stops questioning itself. Her novels interrogate the binding and unbinding of human connections, in complex temporal and spatial dimensions. Her fictional universe is continuously reinventing itself, beginning again, sometimes involving a repetition that follows the logic of the “eternal return,” yet it emerges again, reinvigorated, reinvented, differently, indefinitely. From the first novel, The Samurai, where the legacy of the French Revolution and of the Enlightenment is opened up to interrogation and reinvention, to the last
novel, *Murder*, where a “desirable, impossible Europe” is recreated in Stephanie's “own” Byzantium, Kristeva emphasizes the possibility of reinvention and new beginnings that resides in narrative space.
Bibliography

Works by Julia Kristeva:

University Press.
_____ 2001c. *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
_____ 2004b. “Holberg Award Acceptance Speech: Thinking about Liberty in Dark Times.” 
_____ 2004e. “Some Observations on Female Sexuality.” *The Annual of Psychoanalysis*
32: 59-68.


Works on Julia Kristeva:


Chase, Cynthia. 1990. “Primary Narcissism and the Giving of Figure: Kristeva with Hertz and de Man.” In Fletcher and Benjamin 1990, 124-137.


De Nooy, Juliana. 2003. “How to Keep Your Head when All about You are losing Theirs: Translating *Possession* into Revolt in Kristeva.” In Lechte and Zournazi 2003, 113-129.


**Other Relevant Works:**


