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Sunscapes: subjectivity, creativity and the work of metaphor

Abstract:

In the wake of the 'linguistic turn', this paper argues, the twentieth century experienced a 'poetic turn', for which Julia Kristeva is partly responsible. The paper focuses on Kristeva's discussion of the *chora* in order to reappraise the encounter between Lacan's imaginary and real on the scene of writing. Kristeva's *chora,* I suggest, is the prototype of Lacan's *imaginary symbolic* (Lacan 2006 [1971], 67). Colluding with Lacan, Kristeva in *Revolution in poetic language* (1974) claims that the poetic text can potentially disrupt our tendency to take on fixed identities in language, by enhancing our capacity as subjects-in-process. In the process of decentring the subject, Kristeva's approach both subverts the Cartesian ego and celebrates Freud's plural subjectivity and therefore departs from Lacan by positing the primacy of the semiotic. Ironically, by doing so, Kristeva anticipates Lacan's shift from linguistics to topology, his return to literature and his elaboration of the concept of *suppléance* (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]). In line with the semiotic ordering principle deployed in the *chora*, therefore, Lacan's subject of the *imaginary symbolic* is comparable to the subject-in-process, one that would both articulate and undermine subjectivity in the act of writing. Yet it is not necessarily the case. This is due to the work of metaphor as organising principle of the unconscious, and hence as structural prototype of *suppléance.*

Biographical note:

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> Inasmuch as the 'I' is poetic, inasmuch as it wants to enunciate rhythm, to socialize it, to channel it into linguistic structure if only to break the structure, this 'I' is bound to the sun. – Julia Kristeva

In the 21st century the context for creative writing seems to both perpetuate debates about the unreliability of discourse initiated by the 'linguistic turn' of modern philosophy disputed in certain circles (Clemens 2001, 201), and recreate the conditions for a return to humanistic values. The first trend concerns the general awareness of a fundamental crisis with which our age is afflicted; while the second is driven by a reappraisal of the consequences of this crisis for human agency, and therefore, philosophy. Despite globalisation, or perhaps because of it, there is on the one hand an enduring postmodern paradigm highlighted by both philosophy and literature in the twentieth century which encourages fragmentation; and on the other hand a return to the humanist paradigm which embodies a teleological drive towards the achievement of a greater understanding of human subjectivity, including emotions (Cunningham, 2005; Harpham, 2005; Janicaid, 2002; Mousley 2010). Nowhere is this more evident in the way neuroscience is rethinking linguistic, philosophical and psychoanalytic models by focusing on operations of language, and metaphor as evidenced in the work of Antonio Damasio (1989) and Jim Hopkins (1999), for example. This, I want to argue, was heralded by a return to the poetic in the early1970s. While it would be unwise to credit any one thinker for a wider cultural movement in thought, especially as it occurs as a consequence of a global rethinking that incorporates many influences and voices in a progression to a new paradigm of thinking, I show here that Julia Kristeva inaugurated what might be called the 'poetic turn'.

With the 'linguistic turn', not only literature but also philosophy and psychoanalysis elaborated on the uncertainties of language. Structuralism and post-structuralism both centred around an analysis of this linguistic crisis, focusing on the formal structures of discourse. Here, language was frequently reduced to its basic operation, to binary oppositions and the ways in which these are combined and recombined.

With the 'poetic turn' – which I would suggest occurred in the aftermath of the 1968 Paris student upheaval – literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis, while continuing to draw on the uncertainties of language, return to some certainty, one whereby metaphor gathers to itself fragments and traces. Although Lacan may be said to be at the epicentre of this poetic turn, it is Kristeva who is to be credited with restoring the primacy of the poetic in the realm of the linguistic with *Σημειωτική: recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1968) and, more forcefully with *La révolution du language poétique* (1974) which appeared in an abridged version in English in 1984, as well as subsequent works on the idea of revolution and revolt (2002a; 2002b). Whereas Lacan's early work demonstrates that Freud was in fact the first to identify the important role that language played in the psychic life of human beings, Kristeva argues for the critical role of pre-linguistic affectivity and perception in the human subject, two vital factors for the development of the creative imagination. In *Revolution in poetic language* (1984), for example, she disputes Lacan's privileging of the symbolic over the imaginary. Borrowing from Plato's *Timaeus and Critias*, she alters the notion of *chora*, to denote an imaginary space where subjectivity begins

through awareness of sounds, rhythms and bodily sensations with reference to the mother's body (Kristeva 1974, 25-26). This pre-linguistic 'semiotic' realm of experience is, she insists, not lost when the subject moves into the realm of language, and remains an essential part of meaning-making. It is particularly significant in poetic language, which Kristeva maintains, has the ability to disturb our tendency to take on fixed identities in language by enhancing our capacity as 'subjects-in-process' (Kristeva 1974, 28). In the process of decentring the subject, Kristeva's approach reveals her own subversion of the Cartesian ego paired with a celebration of Freud's plural subjectivity: 'our positing of the semiotic is obviously inseparable from a theory that takes into account the Freudian unconscious. We view the subject in language as decentring the transcendental ego cutting through it' (Kristeva 1974, 30). Thus on the one hand Kristeva espouses Lacan's revision of the Cartesian cogito as expounded in his eleventh seminar *The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis* (Lacan 1977 [1964], 29-41), and on the other she repudiates Lacan's own version of the unconscious by positing the primacy of the semiotic. Yet, ironically, by positing the primacy of the semiotic, Kristeva anticipates Lacan's shift from linguistics to topology and his overt return to poetry. She also anticipates his concept of *suppléance* as a new way of organising *jouissance* and propping up the ego (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]).

Kristeva's critique of Lacan, though begun in *Σημειωτική* (1968) is particularly vocal in *Revolution in poetic language* (1974), where she argues that Freudian theory is the key to the semiotic, and therefore to the negativity of poetic language repressed by Lacan's stubborn insistence on the symbolic. In particular, *Revolution in poetic language* refers to the capacity of poetic language to bring symbolic performance into an intimate engagement with its own process of production, namely what Kristeva calls *significance* – a performance that is not simply symbolic. Semiotic performance, though coupled with the symbolic function, is distinct. Yet as I have shown elsewhere (Hecq 2012), these two functions in fact meet at the heart of the Freudian drive.

For Kristeva, poetic language of the non-referential kind increasingly becomes the means by which the ideological notions of subject, structure and meaning can most readily be challenged (Kristeva 1974, 1975, 1986, 2002a, 2000b). In conceiving the text as a revolutionary practice whose operations cannot be recuperated by the linguistic sign, Kristeva understands the literary work 'as irreducible to the level of an object for normative linguistics' (Kristeva 1986, 86). Thus Kristeva establishes the specificity of the literary work by viewing it as different from other modes of discourse by emphasising its drive-driven (as opposed to communication-driven) dimension. Arguing that poetry's rhythmical patterns, rhyme schemes and intonations have already performed an opening in the linguistic sign, Kristeva suggests that poetic language is the means by which the notions of subject, structure, and meaning can most readily be disrupted. In a similar vein, although she insists that 'literature does not exist for semiotics' (Kristeva 1986, 86), that it is merely one productive practice among many others with no privileged status, she shows that the poetic text has the 'advantage' of 'making more accessible than others the *production of meaning*' (Kristeva 1986, 86, my emphasis). Crucially, despite her claiming in 1974 that the modern text (after the 'epistemological break' of the late 19th century) is most

successful in this respect, she states in 1975 that her thesis may be applied to all poetic texts (in Lucy 2000, 77-79).

Kristeva's argument focuses on what radically destabilises, disrupts and dissolves the sign into the metonymic relay of signifiers and hence what destabilises the unified subject before the symbolic, for as she maintains, 'all discourse simultaneously depends upon and refuses' meaning (Kristeva, 1984, 30). Thus it could be said that the poetic text makes incursions into the spaces which partake of the creative enigmas of the *chora* that other discourse refuses. As Kristeva points out she 'borrow[s] the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases' (Kristeva 1984, 25). Because the *chora* provides the substance for poetry and creativity, its mobility inscribes the linguistic sign with a pre-rational practice that puts origins into question by virtue of its own (pre-logical) logic. This motility gains access to a poetic emerging and becoming rather than a fixed practice. Yet the *chora* has an order: 'the mother's body [which] becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora'* (Kristeva 1984, 32). According to this ordering principle, the subject-in-process would both articulate and undermine subjectivity in the act of writing. The semiotic *chora* is indeed the space where the subject's originary split is *reiterated* again and again rather than smoothed out as in the early Lacan. This results in negativity, which is an interplay of contradictions and heterogeneous drives. When at work in the poetic text, this destabilising interplay leads to the proliferation of signifiers and, in extreme cases, the dissolution of subjectivity. In her later work Kristeva actually cautions against this movement of negativity and advocates the containment of the semiotic by the symbolic so as not to break into the realm of the psychotic (Kristeva 2002a, 54-57), that is, in Lacanian terms, the *imaginary symbolic* (Lacan 2006 [1971], 67) as opposed to the real encountered in psychosis. This would in fact suggest that there is a boundary space between the worlds of creativity and madness.

While the semiotic is at first understood as what drives creative work, it must nonetheless be taken in its dynamic relation with the symbolic. One of the two key writers Kristeva focuses on in the first half of *Revolution in poetic language* (1984) is Mallarmé, who wrote of his own experimentation that there needs to be a guarantee against the dissolution of all meaning, that is *syntax* (Kristeva 1984)**.** In her analyses of Mallarmé, Kristeva looks at negativity working in terms of sound (paranomastic play, or the sound chains which she, after Saussure's 'anagrams' calls 'paragrams'). The paragram, running through an avant-garde text such as Mallarmé's, tends to dissolve the boundaries of signifiers, and thus pulverise the subject implied in the text in what Lacan called *jouissance*, which as the term denotes in French, is a form of excessive enjoyment of the (death) drive. Interestingly though, the gaps in the poetic text, and therefore the abolition of syntax, as in Céline's uses of ellipsis or Barthes' fragments, do fulfil a similar function to syntax (Hecq 2010), that is as stop gaps against subjective dissolution. How, then, can *both* syntax *and* its abolition fulfil the same function?

In order to answer this question, we need to look at the infant/mother dyad before the advent of the Oedipus Complex, which Lacan equates with the establishment of the

Paternal Metaphor. For Kristeva, the early life of the drive consists essentially of instinctual activity. As such it is a primordial registering of the infant's encounter with the symbolic through the (m)Other upon whom she entirely relies for survival. Kristeva conceives of the semiotic *chora* on the principle that the infant's life before the appearance of linguistic competencies is entirely dependent on the symbolic of the mother. Thus the *chora* denotes 'an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases' (Kristeva 1984, 25-26). This is of critical importance for creative writing as in this light, all discourse, that is, everything within the field supported by the distinction between the symbolic and the real, depends on *and* refuses this realm of the not-yet-symbolised in which the inside versus outside, and hence subject versus object, are not yet established.

Revolution in poetic language (1984) elucidates the concept of the drives as an economy that takes into account the primordial impact of the symbolic encounter as regards the emergence of the sign itself and the subsequent organisation of the death drive. As discussed elsewhere (Hecq 2012), the primordial and therefore defining moment in Kristeva's logic of the drives can be captured in a metaphor, thus showing how conceptual work is performed by metaphor. The logic of this movement is likened to the formation, breaking off and moving of wave patterns on a shoreline, conveying that drives and their vicissitudes are *both* corporeal *and* psychic inscriptions. Kristeva thus lays emphasis on the meaning of the drive as an articulation, more particularly in terms of 'rhythmic totality' (Kristeva 1984, 68), which connects the infant's body to the mother's body. This 'rhythmic totality' of the *chora,* however, though conceived of as a preliminary space only manifests itself at the symbolic level, assuming a 'break' which determines the signifier/signified articulation, as well as the positions of object (outside) and subject (absent from the signifier). Semiotic functioning in the symbolic field is an activation of 'the heterogeneous contradiction of semiotic and symbolic' (Kristeva 1984, 171), which denotes Kristeva's signifying process (*signifiance*). Thus the affirmation of art, and more specifically a modern non-referential kind of literature, rests on the contention that the heterogeneous contradiction of the semiotic and symbolic is recovered when significations are dismantled and thereby returned to their non-signifying, drive-invested components, which are then set for reorganising in the unconscious.

Of critical importance here is that signifiers are drive-invested fragments – such as rhythm, tone, inflection, colour, or words – which tend to return to non-symbolic negativity, which is to say, semiotic functioning *by association*, and therefore register on the metaphorical axis of language. Although the return to the signifying elements brings the subject and meaning to the threshold of drive-rejection, in poetic language the fragments are equally subject to a combinatory moment – 'fitting together, detaching, including, and building up "parts" into some kind of ''totality''' (Kristeva 1984, 102) – which prevents symbolic dissolution. As Beardsworth puts it: 'the poetic text is rhythm made intelligible by a *symbolic barrier'* (Beardsworth 2004, 47). However, she adds, 'given that the semiotic network is more or less integrated in the signifier, non-symbolic functioning is always in excess of intelligible translation' (Beardsworth 2004, 47). This would suggest that with regard to the prevention of

subjective dissolution, both syntax and its abolition can fulfil the same function – as would any trope, in fact.

That the poetic text is made intelligible by a symbolic barrier has significant repercussions on the way Lacan's concept of *suppléance* as both device and process may be understood on the scene of writing (see how it is tackled from a creative writing research point of view, for example Hecq 2011; 2010; 2008). It may also shed light on the very mechanism that prevents, rather than precipitates, subjective dissolution. To come back to Kristeva's seeming paradox, though, whereby on the one hand, the heterogeneous contradiction of the semiotic and symbolic never goes so far as the complete loss of symbolic functioning, and on the other hand, symbolic functioning can never fulfil the abstraction from semiotic functioning, it should be stressed that symbolic functioning as such involves a refusal of the semiotic. This may be especially beneficial to the stabilisation of the ego, as Kristeva's discussion of poetic craft in a section from *Desire in language* titled 'The struggle between poet and sun' with reference to the Russian poet Mayakovsky suggests, 'Two tendencies seem to dominate [his] poetic craft: *rhythmic* rapture and the simultaneous affirmation of the '*ego'* (Kristeva 1980 [1969], 28). In fact, there are traces of this idea whereby rhythmic rapture and affirmation of the ego coalesce in the countless footnotes colliding with Lacan's privileging of the symbolic throughout *Σημειωτική* (Kristeva 1969).

Lacan's lifelong interest in literature, particularly in Chinese poetry and Joyce's writings, adumbrates his formal return to the poetic; an interest that was to determine his theoretical shift from linguistics to topology and also influence his clinical practice. This shift is announced in 1971 with an essay titled 'Lituraterre' (Lacan 1987 [1971]), itself discussed that year in his eightieth seminar (Lacan 2006 [1971]) and affirmed in 1975-76 with a whole year's seminar dedicated to James Joyce *Le sinthome* (2005 [1975-76]). In the latter, he suggests that although Joyce may have had a psychotic structure he never went mad thanks to the deployment of his art. Writing, Lacan argues here, may have been Joyce's guarantee against subjective dissolution. This device and practice referred to as *suppléance* is called, in Joyce's particular case, *sinthome* to signify that this is a wholly self-made symptom. Lacan focuses on Joyce's 'epiphanies', which he conceives of as 'events of the body' and instances of foreclosure of meaning of an hallucinatory nature that are recorded in fragments. From epiphany to *Finnegans wake*, Lacan argues, the Joycian text entails a special relation to language: a destructive refashioning of it as *suppléance* and an invasion of the symbolic by the subject's *jouissance* which is, however, paired with a propping up of the ego. In Lacan's theory, Joyce becomes an exemplary *saint homme* (saintly man) who, by refusing an imaginary solution to his symptom, was able to craft a new language to organise his *jouissance.* Lacan's thesis is reminiscent of Kristeva's metaphor of the 'struggle between poet and sun' in the epigraph to this paper. In a hypothetical exchange with Lacan, she may have said that Joyce's craft was an *art-y-fils* (literally 'art-y-son' *qua* artifice) conceived in the saint home of the *chora*. In any case, with Kristeva's concept of the semiotic in mind, what is striking is that Lacan's *suppléance* as both trace and embodiment of the symptom has the structure of metaphor.

In Seminar XXIV (Lacan unpublished [1976-77]), Lacan proceeds with his incursion into poetry with two extended general references and one directly concerned with Chinese poetry. It is in this seminar that he expands on his concept of the *imaginary symbolic*, a concept that is reminiscent of Kristeva's semiotic. What is particularly remarkable here is the way in which metaphor has evolved compared with Lacan's earlier views. In a virtual conversation with a Chinese poet focused on the operation of metaphor in the analytic context, Lacan states: 'Metaphor and metonymy only have an impact with regard to interpretation in so far as they are capable of making something else function, and this something else is precisely *that through which sound and meaning come to be tightly united*' (Lacan unpublished [1976-77, 16, my emphasis). As we have seen, this is at the core of Kristevan thought regarding the semiotic impact on the symbolic referred to above with respect to the poetic text. However, as any practitioner will recognise, syntax in Chinese poetry is highly unstable. This means that the boundary between the metaphorical and metonymical axes of language is blurred, as Lacan acknowledges, echoing Kristeva's earlier work.

For the late Lacan, the poetic text does not aim at an isomorphic interpretation of reality; it is resolutely associative, and privileges line-breaks over punctuation, the implied subject of enunciation over the grammatical subject of the statement, compression over expansion, thus highlighting the revolutionary nature of the poetic text. It foregrounds the gap between the written, with its capacity to shake up the reader, and writing systems such as spelling and syntax, which aim at smoothing out language. The poetic text is no less grammatically correct, yet it accommodates the violence of language and demonstrates a determined handling of the associative imagination. Most remarkably, it is at this point that Lacan abandons the procedure of interpretation in his clinical practice in favour of a reading of the symptom. Tropes, he will argue, are figures of speech that nonetheless produce effects of the real.

Poetry is now seen as a vehicle in the search for the truth of the subject: it is a discourse that, like that of Lacan, probes the meanings of language and subjectivity. The 'I' of poetry and the 'I' of Lacanian discourse are coeval in that they are both complex, multifaceted and located at the intersection of the imaginary and symbolic while squirting the real. Both discourses realise the complexity and opacity of the subject, and while realising that full knowledge is probably impossible, through their disparate but parallel hermeneutic processes, they both develop the cultural conversation of humanity Kristeva has sustained in her revolutionary work.

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