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“Revolution in Religious Language”:  
The Relevance of Julia Kristeva’s Theory of *Signifiante* for Theology

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD  
Program  
University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Timothy O. Inman  
June 2017  
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Title: "Revolution in Religious Language": The Relevance of Julia Kristeva's Theory of *Signifiance* for Theology

Advisor: Jere Surber

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation applies Julia Kristeva's theory of revolution in the practice of *signifiance* to religious discourse. In particular, it argues that the salient features of *signifiance* are present and active in religious speech acts as well as poetic language, the subject of Kristeva's doctoral thesis *Revolution in Poetic Language*. *Signifiance* describes the process in which meaning is produced in linguistic utterance, and its intentional practice is subversive not only in terms of language but culture in general.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

My dissertation will explore the intersection of theology, language, and culture. I am interested in the nature of the speaking being, particularly the believer *qua* speaking being. I define “believer” as a religious body, a subject engaged in language and culture endowed, for whatever reason, with a sense of “calling” to something greater than culture can currently offer. I am interested, then, in the believer with a revolutionary purpose, and I am concerned with the theoretical apparatus by which that purpose can be enacted in the modern secular world, because the believer is “always already” a subject of the symbolic order. The believer holds a special place in the modern discourse of revolution. Her speech acts are particularly dangerous because they reside in the gray area between sense and nonsense, unless, of course, they are adopted by the culture at large, in which case they are formative of “sense” in the first place.

In the chapters that follow, I will claim that the salient features of revolutionary discourse, as understood in the sense of the Bulgarian-born French philosopher Julia Kristeva, are present and active in religious speech acts. I will argue that theology benefits from Kristeva’s idiosyncratic notion of revolution because the former currently lacks a theory of language as a dynamic interplay of body and culture. The religious body, in fact, participates in culture at the moment of enunciated speech acts, giving it the capacity to “inscript” religious ideas and feelings into the broader cultural order in which believers participate. Adopting Kristeva’s notion of revolution in the process of

*signifiante* allows for analytical readings of religious texts and speech acts that have, as yet, to be explored.

Modern and contemporary theological reflection on the proper standpoint of believers toward modern society falls, broadly, into at least two camps. On the one hand, theologians such as John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward have espoused a reactionary stance against what they perceive as a distancing of modern developments in thought and cultural practices from traditional, doctrinal tenets of the church. In contrast, “liberal” or progressive theologians—including Walter Rauschenbusch and Henry Wieman, among others—seek a more “cooperative” approach *vis-à-vis* these modern trends. For the doctrinal-orthodox camp, religious language stands as an alternative to what Milbank understands as the inherently “violent” discourse associated with modern secularism. For progressive theologians, religious language works with and informs modern secular cultural and linguistic practices on matters involving morality, ethics, social justice, etc. Reading Kristeva theologically, however, opens up a new frontier with regard to believers’ role in relation to modernity—namely that religious bodies always already interact with and transform linguistic and cultural practices at the moment of enunciated speech acts.

My argument will unfold in four parts. First, I will describe Kristeva’s theory of *signifiante*. Second, I will claim that the salient features of her theory are present and active in religious language as well as the “poetic language” that Kristeva privileges. Third, I will argue that theology benefits from accounting for Kristeva’s insights into revolutionary discourse, understood as an interaction between biological bodies and the

cultural forces that such bodies create and maintain, because theologians have yet to entertain the ways in which religious bodies, via the medium of language, interact with culture at the point of enunciation. Finally, I will place my observations in conversation with modern and contemporary theologians concerned with the intersection of language, theology, and cultural studies.

In her doctoral thesis, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva develops a notion of revolution as the effect of linguistic acts at the point of enunciation, acts that call into question the fixity of the speaker's status as a subject of language and culture. For Kristeva, then, the subject should not ultimately be viewed as a unified totality across time and space but rather as coming into being only at the point of enunciation within the context of a given speech act. Certain kinds of utterance, especially poetry, "point up" the subject—to adopt Kelly Oliver's phrasing—as the *provisional* result of cultural and linguistic processes. Language is revolutionary, finally, when the subject comes into being in what Kristeva terms the "thetic break," at which point she re-enters the realm of the symbolic order of language and culture after delving into the inner-depths of "the semiotic."

Kristeva laments the "necrophilic" nature of modern linguistic theory, which reduces language to "static thoughts, products of a leisurely cogitation removed from historical turmoil" (Kristeva 1984b, 13). For Kristeva, all theories of language up to this moment remove the body—its chaotic drives, its permutations, its general unruliness—from the equation. Language is viewed only in its final spoken or written form as an artifact of the process by which it was given birth. This process Kristeva terms



*signifiante*, referring to the biological and linguistic inscription of the body into the symbolic order of language. In order to re-introduce the speaking body into theoretical linguistics, Kristeva invokes the language of Freudian psychoanalysis, as interpreted by Jacques Lacan.

Kristeva is in general agreement with much of Lacan's theories of psychosexual development, emphasizing the child's subjective formation upon entry into the symbolic order of language and culture. For Lacan as for Freud, the infant begins life in a state of primary narcissism, as she has yet to acquire a distinct notion of self. Following self-recognition in the mirror stage, prior to the full actualization of control over bodily functions, the infant mind begins to understand herself as identical to her own self-contained bodily apparatus, an organic "whole" consisting of disjointed parts. Thus begins the child's first premonitions of the "I" function that will mark her as an individual self throughout the course of life (Lacan 2005, 79).

In time, the child enters the Oedipal drama. Hand-in-hand with the acquisition of language, separation from the primordial mother is requisite for the infant's attainment of the status of subject proper. In the pre-Oedipal situation, the infant mind imagines herself as embodying the desire of the mother, but when the paternal figure enters the scene, she realizes that she cannot *be* the mother's desire, which resides elsewhere in the father's possession. For boys, this means rejecting the notion of *being* desire in favor of *having* it; for girls, on the other hand, it means identification with the maternal figure (Dor 1998). Either identification necessitates the assumption of the status of subject within the

symbolic order<sup>1</sup>, identifiable with natural language (*la langue*) but referring also to the “customs, institutions, laws, mores, norms, practices, rituals, rules, traditions, and so on of cultures and societies” (Johnston 2013).

Kristeva is the first to posit a *pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic* “semiotic disposition” in which the signifying process is already at work. It should be noted here—to be more thoroughly elaborated—that Kristeva’s designation of the “semiotic” is not at all identical to Ferdinand de Saussure’s proposed “science of semiotics.” Kristeva draws on multiple sources, including Roland Barthes and Émile Benveniste in addition to Lacan, to elaborate a more or less idiosyncratic analytic approach to infantile, pre-Oedipal phases of psycho-linguistic experience. It is, indeed, this semiotic space that gives rise to the signifying process in general. The semiotic is that element of signification which has yet to take hold of the denotative meaning of signs and for that reason is associated with art, music, and the intonation and rhythms of the human voice. Kristeva characterizes the semiotic as intimately connected with bodily drives. The drives represent the “biological source of psychological activity” and are tied to the Id. For Kristeva, it is the “repeated shocks of drive activity,” seen as a literal “scission of matter” and tied to the idea of expulsion, of presence and absence, and of heterogeneity, that enable the initial functioning of the signifying apparatus (1984b, 167).

The drives, significantly, link the body to the signifying process in the motility of the semiotic, which acts as a disruptive force *vis-à-vis* the symbolic order. That is to say, the drives and their expression in the semiotic register point to the heterogeneity always

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<sup>1</sup> No discussion of Lacan’s register theory is complete without examining the relationship between the symbolic and its correlative registers, the imaginary and the real. I will, of course, go into greater detail in the chapters that follow.

present in the signifying process, rupturing the homogeneous “totalitarian” rule of symbolic law. For Kristeva, though, the semiotic and the symbolic are integral and interrelated aspects of language, and thus cultural experience. Without the one, signification would not be possible; without the other, culture could not exist as such. Even more importantly, without the semiotic, which is the source of all things new, the symbolic order of language and culture would remain more or less impermeable to change of any kind, whether in the realm of language or ideology.

This movement of the semiotic body in the process of *signifiance* not only exceeds and threatens the subject of language and culture; it threatens to undermine society itself. The subject, heretofore understood as the product of a homogeneous signifying process, is revealed to be “in process/on trial,” in the sense that its unity as a cultural and linguistic being is called into question. At the same time, this undermining of a fixed, unified subject not only pertains to the individual speaker in question but to the political, cultural, and linguistic totality in which the speaker finds herself. As Oliver writes, “Revolution in either sphere is brought about through the introduction of the semiotic that points up the process of production, whether it is linguistic or political or both” (1993, 96). The semiotic body, as the seat of the drives and the source of all that exceeds symbolic systems and “social apparatuses,” inserts itself into language and culture, potentially transforming both.

Because revolutionary discourse emerges from the process of *signifiance*—an “unlimited and unbounded generating process”—it not only has access to the generative elements associated with the semiotic body but also to the homogenizing agencies

associated with the subject of symbolic language and culture. The semiotic inscribes itself in the symbolic, but the symbolic ultimately wins out, albeit transformed in the process. For Kristeva, *signifiance* can be considered revolutionary only if process becomes practice, meaning the symbolic is intentionally challenged by the semiotic body. As she writes, “This instinctual operation becomes a *practice*—a transformation of natural and social resistances, limitations, and stagnations—if and only if it enters into a code of linguistic and social communication” (Kristeva 1984b, 17).

For Kristeva, certain kinds of language operate principally along this unstable boundary between the semiotic and symbolic. Poetic language, not only for its sonorous and musical qualities, but even more so for its transposition of meaning and de-centering of the semantic unity of the sign, operates preeminently in a revolutionary register. *Signifiance* is present in all language practices, to be sure, but Kristeva is clear that some have the capacity to be more revolutionary than others. The stakes here are high, as the dominant expression of modern Western society derives from a capitalist economy that actively “represses the *process* pervading the body and the subject” (Kristeva 1984b, 13). In other words, modern linguistic theories reflect the cultural and historical lens of capitalism in their insistence on silencing the body and obfuscating the intimate relation between body and subject. In capitalist society, the body is subsumed under its (largely socioeconomic) role as a subjective agent, effectively obliterating or else exploiting the semiotic body’s contribution to symbolic discourse.

Kristeva observes the revolutionary quality exemplified in poetry in *religious utterance*, particularly myth and ritual. In the Prolegomenon to *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she notes:

In the history of signifying systems and notably that of the arts, religion, and rites, there emerge, in retrospect, fragmentary phenomena which have been kept in the background or rapidly integrated into more communal signifying systems but point to the very process of *signifiance*. (1984b, 16)

She goes on to speculate, “Under what conditions does this ‘esoterism,’ in displacing the boundaries of socially established signifying practices, correspond to socioeconomic change, and, ultimately, even to revolution?” It should be noted here that Kristeva never explicitly attaches an ideological platform to her notion of “revolution.” Broadly speaking, any speech act is implicated in the process of *signifiance*. Speech acts or texts that point up the process of production are more revolutionary than those linguistic practices which do not do so in a direct fashion, as in poetic language, meaning that, from the perspective of theology, both reactionary and progressive enunciations on the part of religious bodies qualify as revolutionary speech acts, regardless of ideological persuasion. Kristeva thus hints at, though never explores fully, the capacity for revolutionary utterance within religious language.

Theology has yet to account for the language practices of religious bodies at the point of enunciated speech acts. My dissertation will introduce Kristeva’s notions of *signifiance* and revolutionary language into the realm of religion and theology. The believer is always already implicated in cultural and linguistic practices, and her participation in language and culture allows for subversive inscriptions of religious

insights and feelings into the broader symbolic order. In my dissertation, I will provide “proof-texts” to illustrate the revolutionary nature of religious language. Anselm of Canterbury’s “ontological proof” for the existence of God, when analyzed in light of Kristeva’s insights into revolutionary discourse, reveals the process of *signifiance* at work in the religious body, which fluctuates between semiotic heterogeneity and thetic homogeneity. The speeches and sermons of Martin Luther King reveal the same while also highlighting the inscription of religious ideals into the broader symbolic order of language and culture.

Much of *Revolution in Poetic Language* consists of literary analysis of poems to illustrate Kristeva’s understanding of poetry as not only participating in but highlighting the process of *signifiance*. It is difficult, if not impossible, to come to an understanding of the notion of *signifiance* outside of what I will call proof-texts, or analyses of religious utterance that clearly show the concept at work. Anselm’s ontological argument is one of those proof-texts. Christian prayer, due to the undermining of the subject in giving herself over to God, points up the subject-in-process in the act of *signifiance*. As Schleiermacher observed, the “Christian thing” is most closely associated with a feeling of utter dependence on God. When the practice of prayer is understood in its linguistic dimensions, it can be viewed as challenging the status of the subject as a cultural being. In my dissertation, I will provide an analysis of Anselm of Canterbury’s *Proslogion*, in which his famous “ontological proof” for the existence of God too often overshadows the prayerful exhortations introducing the various sections of the proof itself. Prayerful language breaks down the symbolic subject in the motility of the semiotic, which is then

re-inscribed into the realm of the symbolic at the point at which the thetic break is reached<sup>2</sup>. In each section of Anselm's text, his status as subject is challenged in his prayerful submission to God, only to re-emerge in the form of the various points of his unfolding, rationalistic proofs. In other words, his theses (or thetic breaks) repeatedly give way to the semiotic (the undermining of the subject in the dependence on God), and vice versa.

The language practices related to homiletics further underscores the revolutionary potential of religious discourse. In Chapter Three, I will analyze some sermons and speeches of Martin Luther King, which helped to mobilize believers at the peak of racial tensions in the United States at midcentury. The overtly poetic qualities evident in much of King's homiletics, such as the frequent use of anaphora, not to mention the spontaneously and cleverly intonated delivery itself, a product of his formation in the black church, only tell part of the story. King was most effective when he transposed meanings, casting the tired Biblical symbolism used by white Christians to subjugate Southern blacks in a new light. The imagery from the Book of Amos of "justice flowing down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" has thus become, for many Americans, synonymous with the struggle for human rights. The progressive successes of the "civil rights revolution"—King's words—attest not only to the hard work of political activism but to the overt deployment of religious language.

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<sup>2</sup> The practice of ecstatic echolalia, or speaking in tongues, encapsulates this process. The practitioner effectively leaves the realm of denotative discourse only to "come back" again after allowing the divine to "speak through" her.

Consider just a few lines from King's sermon "The Drum Major Instinct":

God didn't call America to do what she's doing in the world now. God didn't call America to engage in a senseless, unjust war as the war in Vietnam. *And we are criminals in that war.* We've committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world, and I'm going to continue to say it. (1986, 265; emphasis mine)

The italicized words indicate the thesis—and thus the thetic break—of this passage. Prior to the (denotative) statement condemning the American public for allowing Cold War atrocities to take place, King entices his listeners using a series of (connotative) references to an understanding of the nature of God as a lover of peace and good will. King employs anaphora, as he often does in his most stirring sermons, a poetic device meant to defer the full articulation of the idea being referred to, which is here revealed subsequently in the passage's climax. The lines beginning with "God didn't call" can be interpreted, then, as semiotic "moments" in the process of *signifiance*, leading up to the thetic break. These moments, which occur frequently in King's sermons, are intensified in the audio recordings due to the intervention of listeners' acclamations—"Preach it!"—punctuating his delivery.

While scholars across the board—especially those interested in feminism, literary criticism, cultural studies, and political theory—have studied Kristeva's writings at length and pointed to her relevance in their respective fields, there is, sadly, a lack of recognition of her work in the discipline of religious studies, and particularly theology. To my knowledge, there have been no sustained theological accounts of Kristeva's most important contributions to contemporary thought, including but not limited to, the process of *signifiance* and the subject-in-process/on-trial. There have been quite a few books and



papers published in the last three decades on Kristeva's views on religion, including volumes of essays (Crownfield 1992) as well as various journal articles (DiCenso 1995; Young III 2005; Bradley 2008) and books (Beardsworth 2004a). However, as David Koloszyc notes in his 2010 doctoral thesis, many of these studies do not originate in the discipline of religious studies and fail to account for the multi-dimensional aspects of the field. Furthermore, Koloszyc's own approach is not theological in nature but draws from the academic discipline of religious studies, as divorced from the realm of theology. There have been several essays and books on Kristeva's relevance for pastoral theology, notably Carol L. Schnabl Schweitzer's *The Stranger's Voice* (2010b). Others (Tomas 2013; Koloszyc 2010; Bradley 2008) have pointed to the implications of Kristeva's understanding of revolution for negative theology and mysticism. But my approach, while drawing on Koloszyc's and others work, will be from the perspective of cultural theory *vis-à-vis* theology. Thus, I hope to fill a hole in modern theological scholarship by addressing this impasse. At the same time, I will try to provide a theoretical account of the speaking subject, especially as framed in terms of the believing subject.

In Chapter One, I will try to bring to light the salient features of Kristeva's notion of revolution through the practice of *signifiance*, with an eye to countering common criticisms leveled against Kristeva for not offering a recognizable theory of social agency. In Chapter Two, I will argue that the salient features of Kristeva's theory of *signifiance* hold true for religious utterance, while critiquing other scholars' approaches toward the application of her theory to the revolutionary potential of religious language. I will also offer a comparative study of poetic language and religious language through the

lens of semanalysis (more on this later). This comparative approach includes a poetic text by T.S. Eliot and the liturgical recitation of the Nicene Creed, in order to show that “Kristeva’s revolution” applies in a direct and literal way to religious utterance. Chapter Three provides two extensive analyses of proof-texts to address the practical application of the “revolution in religious language.” The proof-texts include Anselm of Canterbury’s prayerful discourse in his *Proslogion* as well as the homiletic practice of Martin Luther King. Chapter Four includes a summary of the dissertation as a whole, followed by an exploration of the implications of my research in the field of theology, especially as it relates to modern theological approaches to the intersection of theology, language, and culture.

## CHAPTER ONE: KRISTEVA'S REVOLUTION

### **The Question of Agency**

Julia Kristeva's theory of revolution, like many of the terms and concepts appearing in her writing, has spawned a wide range of competing interpretations, many of which are concerned with its political efficacy—or lack thereof. Some have argued that her theory is essentially reactionary, while others contend that it opens up the possibility for progressive action (Oliver 1993). At the root of this debate is the question of agency. Eléonor Kuykendall (1989) and Nancy Fraser (1990), along with Kristeva's fiercest critic Judith Butler (1989; Wunker 2005), reject her theory out of hand as apolitical, due to its apparent failure to provide for agency, whether it be individual or collective actors working for change in the world. Notably, Jacqueline Rose (1986) and Alice Jardine (1986) disagree, but many scholars, even defenders of Kristeva's project, conclude that her theory is little more than an attempt to reconfigure the notion of revolution in the wake of the failure of socialist movements in France and throughout the world in the late 1960s. As Nouri Gana writes, Kristeva's "whole *oeuvre* reveals her continually rediscovering the same entelechy, the same impasse of political revolution, always trying to inventory a new language of salvaging it, always trying to displace it into other realms of experience, be they poetic [...] or psychic" (2004, 192). For Gana, *Revolution in Poetic Language* and other works "seem to me to be Kristeva's idiosyncratic way of working through the demise of socialist revolution, her way, in other words [...] of

mourning revolution in its lost political sense: rediscovering and reinventing it anew in poetic and psychic locales.”

For writers like Gana, Kristeva’s early involvement with the *Tel Quel* group soured her enthusiasm for direct political action, though her subsequent theorization of revolution in the process of *signifiance* points to a new way of conceiving revolution by locating it within realms of human experience not otherwise known as hotbeds of political resistance, namely poetry and psychology. However, as this chapter will show, Kristeva’s theory of revolution need not be considered a *displacement* of social activism into other “locales” but an *extension* of the very notion of revolt. *Signifiance*, a process involving not only language but culture and human biology, is not limited to literary forms like poetry any more than language itself is the exclusive right of the novelist, playwright, or public speaker. All linguistic practice, every utterance—from the sonnets of Shakespeare to the mundane chatter of a supermarket cashier and a gabby shopper—participates in *signifiance*. Poetic language only exemplifies or “points up” the process, meaning that while all language is potentially revolutionary, certain linguistic practices have the potential to be more revolutionary than others.

Kristeva privileges poetic language, particularly when it is deployed in the context of capitalist societies, because it points up its own production in the process of *signifiance* (1984b, 15). Literary production is implicated in capitalist production because the texts are themselves products of economic systems. As Kristeva’s most prolific English translator notes, literature “is an object that our culture consumes; it is viewed as

a finished product and the process of its productivity is usually ignored” (Roudiez 1984,

7). When this process is taken into account, however,

one realizes that what makes a work interesting or significant does not depend on its having been accepted in (or rejected from) the “literary” corpus; that latter judgment is both ethical and esthetic, hence a function of dominant ideology (in the Marxian sense of the phrase).

Instead, for Kristeva, it is the “textual presence” itself that makes literature, and particularly poetry, interesting, because poetic language exposes its own productivity, standing as it does at the juncture of biology and society. Poetic language, lying at the interstices of the pre-linguistic body and the full-fledged subject of language and culture, thus participates in capitalist economies while undermining them from within, at the site of linguistic utterance.

For Kristeva, revolution is a property of the signifying process that structures human experience through the medium of language. Culture, considered as an extension of the same process, acts as a nexus for revolutionary discourses. It is for this reason that traditional theories of political agency begin to fall apart, at least from the perspective of Kristeva’s idiosyncratic understanding of revolution. Social change is thus the result not necessarily of activism, community organizing, and political advocacy on the part of individuals, constituencies, and coalitions—although Kristeva never actually rules out the efficacy of such strategies—but as an effect of the process that she terms *signifiance*, or the dynamic interplay of the semiotic body and the symbolic subject of language and culture. While this chapter will go into more detail concerning this interplay, it suffices to say here that Kristeva adopts the psychoanalytic subject as the platform on which this

process plays out. It is a mistake, however, to view the subject as a cultural agent; Kristeva's theory of *signifiance* makes it clear that subjectivity is always "in-process/on-trial." Constantly challenged by the primordial disposition of the semiotic body, the speaking subject is in a state of flux, and revolution ultimately springs from this oscillation between culture and biology at the moment of enunciated speech acts. Kristeva's notion of revolution, then, essentially brackets the question of agency, but this does not entail that the effects of such revolutionary discourses are any less "real."

Criticism relying on the question of agency often fails to articulate the dynamic interaction between culture and subject—viewed as a body with access to linguistic or symbolic forms of expression. In order to better understand the process of *signifiance* in its relation to revolutionary discourses, it is necessary to examine the problem, the methodology, and ultimately the theorization at work in Kristeva's project. In breaking down some of the more difficult and subtle issues at stake in this project, this chapter primarily utilizes the tradition of scholarship developed by the American feminist Kelly Oliver.

### **Kristeva's Project**

At its heart, *Revolution in Poetic Language* is an effort to eschew conventional approaches to the study of linguistics that relegate language to a domain of "static thoughts, products of a leisurely cogitation removed from historical turmoil" (Kristeva 1984b, 13). Both classical and modern conceptions of language are thus the province of "archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs." In their fixation with language in its final written or spoken form, linguists have essentially fetishized the product of a *process*

which they wholly ignore. Kristeva seeks to “revive” the very notion of language, giving it new life by examining its process of production. Modern linguists, in particular, caving to the “scientific imperative,” see language as a “systemizable given” or an “observable object” upon which to base their empirical arguments concerning its phenomenological status. Approaching the study of language in this way closes it off from the living process that gives it birth in the first place. As Kristeva puts it, these modern linguists “persist in seeking the truth of language by formalizing utterances that hang in midair.”

Consigning language to the status of an object to be studied is symptomatic of modernity’s reliance on empirical, scientific methodologies in its approach to research, but for Kristeva, it is also indicative of the ubiquity of capitalist influence: “These methods show that the capitalist mode of production has stratified language into ideolects and divided it into self-contained, isolated islands” (Kristeva 1984b, 13). The stratification of language is more than some innocuous, modernist impulse to classify things but is an expression of the ascendancy of capitalist economic systems that work to commodify discourse itself. Kristeva writes, “If there exists a ‘discourse’ which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers [...] or the testimony of a withdrawn body [...] it is ‘literature’” (16). It is for this reason that “the text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution” (17). But Kristeva is not concerned with the peculiar status of literary texts to subvert linguistic norms as much as she is with the inseparability of literature and the cultural and economic contexts out of which it is produced. Assigning literature this special status cuts off the very real threat that it poses to society-at-large;

the text is dangerous, but naming it as such allows for its commodification, rendering it harmless, at least for the most part. Kristeva's approach, rather, is to bring into the foreground what is dangerous about the literary text in an effort to expose the process at work in all linguistic utterance.

This process, which Kristeva terms *signifiance* in order to distinguish it from conventional notions of signification, involves “the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction—productive violence, in short” (1984b, 16). Kristeva's methodology is thus to analyze literary texts—in particular those of contemporary French and British authors—in hopes of reinvigorating the study of language itself, revealing its roots in a primordial process that both gives shape to and revolts against cultural and linguistic norms. In doing so, Kristeva turns to Freudian psychoanalysis, especially as interpreted by Jacques Lacan. *Signifiance* is a process in which both the biological body and speaking subject of language and culture are implicated in an explicitly dialectical relationship, and Lacan's “return to Freud” is an indispensable theoretical apparatus by which this relationship is ultimately disclosed in Kristeva's early writings.

The implications of Kristeva's approach are apparent for the study of linguistics. Introducing the body—its drives, its urges, its unruliness—into the equation, language is lifted up from the catatonic state assigned to it by the theories of language that Kristeva criticizes in her Prolegomenon to *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Doing so also challenges the normative approach of capitalist economies that share with such theories an emphasis on the dormancy of language, seeing in it an opportunity not only to



objectify but to commodify. In her attempt to rectify conceptions of language as “formalizing utterances that hang in midair,” Kristeva thus stumbles upon a notion of revolution that defies traditional understandings of political agency. Linguistic utterance, viewed not as the result of a kind of Cartesian agency, but as the ongoing process of biological bodies interacting with the world of language and culture, becomes the seat of revolutionary practice. It is this notion of revolution that I will appropriate in my analysis of religious texts.

First, though, it is necessary to explore in more depth Kristeva’s theory of *signifiante* and its most famous consequence—the idea of the subject-in-process/on-trial. As noted in the Introduction and alluded to above, Kristeva relies on Lacan’s reading of Freudian models of psychosexual development and language acquisition as a jumping-off point, so it makes sense to begin there. Lacan’s thought is much too sophisticated and far-reaching to discuss here in any more than a general sort of way. For the purposes of this chapter, it suffices to focus on two themes in his writing that are the most relevant for understanding Kristeva’s theoretical approach—namely, the mirror stage and Oedipal drama.

### **The Mirror Stage**

Classical psychoanalytic theory holds that human beings are born into a state of primary narcissism, in which the infant has yet to distinguish between itself and the outside world. In other words, it cannot recognize its body as distinct from the persons, objects, sights, sounds, etc., flooding its sensory experience. The infant literally “comprises all of its universe” (Oliver 1993, 71). According the Freudian model, the

narcissistic child, over time, begins to form a notion of itself as a separate being. This budding notion of selfhood will develop into its full-fledged ego or “I” function ordinarily by the time the child reaches the age of six. This gradual shift from primary narcissism to selfhood is spurred by the intrusion of outside influences into the primordial psychic experience of the child. The most impactful of these early influences are the interactions between the child and its parents or other guardians. This model of early childhood development, of course, hinges on the Freudian supposition that people are essentially like ion batteries, in constant need of releasing libidinal energies building up inside their bodies. For Freud, this energy was sexual in nature and as much psychic as it was anatomical. It is the task of parental figures to help the child learn to redirect this libidinal overflow, through the institution of regulations and expectations, so as not to upset social norms. In the process, the child not only develops a distinct notion of itself as different from its parents and other objects and people in the outside world, it learns what it takes to function as a member of society.

For Lacan, it is the mirror stage that marks the child’s first premonitions of and original entry into the “I” function, or the experience of selfhood (2005, 75-81). As one commentator sums it up, “The mirror stage is organized around a fundamental experience of identification in the course of which the child becomes master of his own body image” (Dor 1998). The watershed moment—in reality, a series of moments—involves the infant, as young as six months of age, seeing its own image in the mirror for the first time. (In the absence of a “mirror proper,” the child may catch a glimpse of its reflection in a metal kitchen utensil or its mother’s eyes.) Lacan stresses the importance of the

mirror stage for the ordinary psychosexual development of the child. In his words, this act of self-recognition

immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates—namely, the child’s own body. (75)

The child does not simply recognize its physical features, as such recognition would hardly be possible at such an early stage of cognitive development, and without any frame of reference besides. Rather, the infant, whose movements are involuntary up to this point—and for some time to come—inevitably makes some kind of gesture or other motion, which it then notices in the reflected image.

For the first time in the child’s life, it comes face to face, so to speak, with an image of its body as a self-contained totality. Prior to the mirror stage, the infant’s experience of its own body is one of disjointedness, as the child’s psyche has yet to recognize the body as a self-contained, unified vessel. Lacan refers to this condition as the “fantasy of the fragmented body,” which must be overcome if the child is to ever develop into an individual capable of functioning in society, although aspects of this fantasy still permeate the unconscious. As Joël Dor writes, “The mirror dialectic puts to the test this fantasy experience of a fragmented body, vestiges of which reappear in certain dreams and in the processes of psychotic breakdown” (1998). It is crucial, for Lacan, that the beginning of individualized human experience comes as the result of interacting with an image, as will become more clear shortly.

The mirror stage presents a challenge to the infant, prompting a number of conflicting psychic responses and feelings. The precocious infant's gradual recognition of itself as a "whole" is thwarted by the reality that the child's body has not yet developed the motor skills necessary for the conscious control of its own members. As Lacan writes:

[The] total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority in which, to be sure, this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all, it appears to him as the contour of his stature that freezes it and in a symmetry reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it. (2006, 76)

The child is thus set against this image of itself as something to "conquer." Even a nonhuman animal, upon seeing its reflection in a mirror, may attempt to reach out and grab the reflected image, as a child does, but a human being is distinctive precisely because she can recognize, at an elementary level, that the image is, in some way, her own. "The human child," Lacan says, "is for a short while [...] outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, [but] can already recognize his own image in a mirror" (75). This recognition sets in motion a process of individuation that plays out in at least three phases.

The first phase is characterized by a kind of "confusion between self and other" (Dor, 1998). The child, who initially believes its reflected image to be a real being, still retains something of the primary narcissism imparted at birth, although she is beginning, from the age of six months to two-and-a-half years, to form a distinct notion of self. Lacan invokes two examples of a young child who, having struck a playmate, claims to have herself been struck, or who cries when another child or adult experiences pain. This

phase coincides not only with a confusion as to the boundary between oneself and the outside world but to the kind of frustration that such confusion engenders. At the same time, as the child begins to form a notion of self, she is still developing her motor skills, adding to the confusion and frustration. This imago, this moment of recognition marked by an impossible anticipation, must nonetheless be consummated in the overcoming and even subjugation of the reflected image itself. In entomology, the imago is the last stage of development in insects that undergo metamorphosis, except in the case of human infants, the culmination of one's destiny is bestowed prematurely in the form of an image, as a promise the fulfillment of which presupposes an epic and ultimately open-ended struggle.

In the second phase of the mirror stage, the child is, as Dor writes, "surreptitiously led to discover that the other in the mirror is not a real being, but only an image" (1998). Through the gentle prodding of a parent or another authority figure, the child is taught that the reflected image is only imaginary, and Lacan notes that her behavior is modified in the process. No longer does she experience the pain or emotional turmoil of others as her own, and she stops attempting to grab hold of the image in the mirror. As Dor notes, she "now knows how to distinguish the image of the other from the reality of the other." Put another way, this change of behavior coincides with the child's initial transition from an imaginary understanding of the other—both her own reflection and the other in general—to one in which reality takes center stage. The child does not, however, enter into a straightforward experience of herself as an individual but into a dialectic between

the psychic registers comprising this early “imaginary” cognizance and a developing sense of “reality.”

It is the third phase of the mirror stage that solidifies the child’s entry into this dialectic, although it will take yet another stage of development, namely her initiation into the metaphor of the Oedipal triad—discussed below—to crystallize her sense of identity as a social and linguistic being. The third phase represents a dual achievement for the child: she “becomes certain that the mirror reflection is an image” and “acquires the conviction that this image is [her] own” (Dor 1998). As the child becomes aware that the image in the mirror is not only *not real* but a reproduction of *her own body*, she intuits, at least on an elementary level, that she is essentially an embodied being. In her identification—or internalization—of the image in the mirror, her fantasy of a fragmentary body, emblematic of her life experience thus far, begins to erode. Dor puts it best:

In *re-cognizing* himself through the image, [the child] is able to reassemble the scattered, fragmented body into a unified totality, the representation of his own body. The body image is therefore a structuring factor in the formation of the subject’s identity, since it is through this image that he achieves his primal identification.

The ramifications of this recognition cannot be overstated. Prior to the mirror stage, the child exists in what Lacan calls the imaginary register, an experience in which the child perceives her body, incorrectly and thus as an artifact of the infant’s primordial imagination, as fragmented. Through her gradual recognition of herself in the mirror, the precocious child enters into, in a preliminary sort of way, a different register of experience altogether, the symbolic, prefiguring the onset of language and initiation into

the broader cultural scene into which she is born. From the mirror stage onward, the child's life is governed by the dialectical interplay between the imaginary and symbolic registers. A third register, the real, exists prior to advent of the imaginary and symbolic. The real roughly correlates with the earliest infantile experience of undifferentiated heterogeneity and is characterized by Lacan as "impossible" to reimagine in any meaningful way. Because Kristeva's modifications of Lacan's psychosexual schema engage primarily with the subject's relation to the symbolic order, this dissertation will remain focused on the child's entry into this "latest" register, including reference to the imaginary when appropriate.

For Lacan, the human subject is ultimately defined by the *imago* rather than the *cogito*, founded upon an internalized image of an external representation of the self—in contrast to René Descartes' thinking man. But the image is more than a spectral anomaly; it is also a symbol. As Oliver writes, "The origin of the subject's construction in the mirror stage is dependent on a *representation* of the body. Here the symbol, through the image, of the body is the foundation for a realization about the body" (1993, 20). The cognized image, considered as a symbol, sets in motion a process of individuation the destiny of which is a subject that is always "split" and founded on a lack—that of the real, present, unified body. This lack is, in the end, a necessary component of language acquisition, as is implied in Lacan's somewhat cryptic dictum, "the thing must be lost in order to be represented."

To better understand the linguistic dimensions of the mirror stage—and Lacan's linkage of psychosexual development and language acquisition in general—it may be

advisable to give a brief sketch of a passage from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that particularly fascinated Lacan. Freud recounts a game his young grandson would play involving a reel attached to a string. The child would toss the reel out of sight, exclaiming "*fort!*" ("Gone!") before pulling the reel back by the string. As soon as the reel passed within his sight once again, he yelled "*da!*" ("There!"). Dor notes that the *fort-da* game described by Freud represents a "double metaphoric process" (1998). In other words, the reel stands in for the child's mother, while the game itself is symbolic of her presence and absence. From birth, the child relies on her mother for everything, and her comings and goings take a psychological toll on the child. Because the infant has yet to form a notion of her own body as distinct from her mother's, the goings invoke a feeling of profound, even catastrophic lack. However, as the child grows older, she learns to make up for that lack and ultimately to master it.

The *fort-da* game is thus illustrative of Lacan's theory of psychosexual development and language acquisition in two ways. First, the child learns to master her anxiety over her mother's absence by taking control over the dynamic interplay of presence and absence itself, by displacing the feeling of lack into an external object, in this case the reel-and-string contraption. Second, and most importantly, the child begins to learn that mastery over lack is accomplished through the corollary mastery of a symbol: "In this phonetic opposition, the child transcends, brings on to the symbolic plane, the phenomenon of presence and absence. He renders himself master of the thing, insofar as he destroys it" (Lacan 2006, 103-104). This "mastery" of absence through the medium of the reel-and-string toy—at once an external object as well as a symbol



standing in for the double metaphor of the mother and the presence/absence dyad— corresponds with the child’s entry into the linguistic and cultural register that Lacan will call the symbolic order. Dor concludes:

The child’s playful activity—and this is the most instructive part of Freud’s observation—proves that he has turned the situation [of his mother’s recurring absences] to his advantage. The child has indeed turned the situation around: from now on, it is he who leaves his mother, *symbolically*. (1998)

The first inklings of this accession into the symbolic order come about as a matter of dealing with lack—the naming of which grants the child control over it. For Lacan, it is this mastery of lack and ability to mobilize desire in the motility of displacement that mark the onset of the subject proper. However, taking on the mantle of a subject of language and culture requires passing through a second stage of psychosexual development borrowed from the classical Freudian schema, namely the Oedipus complex<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Oedipal Drama**

In classical Freudian psychology, it is the successful (and socially sanctioned) quelling of instinctual drives that marks the culmination of individual human development from infancy to maturity—or, put another way, from primitive life to full-

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<sup>3</sup> Much, of course, has been written decrying—and this is true throughout much of the history of psychoanalytic theory—Lacan’s seeming disregard for the female sex within his developmental schema. This dissertation will bracket those concerns. For a detailed critique of misogyny in the history and literature of psychoanalysis, the reader should refer to the writings of Lacan’s student and critic Luce Irigaray. As a sign of solidarity, I will continue to use female pronouns, in instances in which sexual difference is not explicitly invoked, to refer to the precocious child of Freud’s and Lacan’s respective psychosexual models—in spite of the fact that both likely had in mind, for the most part at least, a specifically male child. When it is appropriate to differentiate between sexes, I will indicate as much in the text itself.

fledged citizenship in civil society. The drives, largely sexual in nature for Freud and his followers, represent libidinal impulses—literally bursts of psychic energy—generated by the Id. Stephen Frosh defines the drives as the “biological source of psychological activity” (2002, 106). He summarizes Freud’s schema in the following way: “Drives have a ‘source’ (the bodily part to which they are attached, for example the ‘oral’ drives), an ‘aim’ (to reduce tension) and an ‘object’ (that entity which allows the aim to be achieved).” The infant experiences disquietude caused by the building up of these energy surges, which are centralized in different erogenous regions of the body depending on the stage of development that the child finds herself in—namely the oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital periods. During the oral period, for instance, the infant’s psychic energy derives from the sensation of hunger (the source), is intent on satisfying that hunger (the aim), and is directed toward the mother’s breast (the object).

The building up of energy from the drives is a source of extreme tension and psychic discomfort for the child, as it is for adults whose coping mechanisms are not highly developed. At the same time, the release of libidinal impulses in a direct manner may be deemed socially inappropriate, making it necessary to deal with them in indirect ways. During the course of normal development, human beings learn various defense strategies with the purpose of redirecting psychic impulses. These include repression, in which the subject attempts to negate unwanted impulses; displacement, in which the impulse is directed toward a different person or object than the one it normally “goes with”; and sublimation, a more mature form of displacement that channels psychic energies toward artistic and intellectual endeavors. Of the three, Freud favored

sublimation, which he considered the psychological foundation for high culture and the development of civilization.

Freud understood, however, that human beings, by nature, would never be absolutely satisfied with a condition in which they are prohibited from expressing their instinctual drives freely and unreservedly, hence the title of his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*. He writes, “The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed” (1961, 29). Nonetheless, the taming of the drives is the price to be paid for successful admittance into civil, adult life. Civilization as we know it cannot be sustained in the absence of individual defense mechanisms allowing for the safe diffusion of instinctual drives.

Just as, from birth, infants exist in a state of primary narcissism, they also succumb to what Freud called “polymorphous perversity,” meaning their entire anatomical and psychic apparatuses are sexualized. Such a state would, of course, be incompatible with life in even the most “primitive” of societies. In the same manner as the quelling of the drives, this polymorphously perverse state must be overcome and transformed into a condition more amenable to the collective life of individuals coming into maturity in a structured social context. The infant will pass through a series of stages, corresponding to the maturation periods discussed above, in which different parts of the body bear the brunt of this primordial sexualization—namely the mouth (oral), rectum (anal), and genitalia (genital). The two additional periods include the latent phase, in which sexuality is effectively shut off on a temporary basis, and the phallic phase. It is

the phallic period that leads to the playing out of the Oedipal drama. Young children who enter into the phallic period, according to Freud and his followers, begin to experience attraction to the parent of the opposite sex. This incestuous desire is all a part of a natural process, centered around the male appendage—the Phallus—and its overcoming is necessary for the child’s subsequent identity as a social being.

From the ages of three to six years, children notice anatomical differences between their mother and father—or corresponding male and female authority figures. Boys, on the one hand, experience castration anxiety, in which they fear that the mother’s lack of a penis is a condition that might befall them if they, for instance, misbehave. The boy begins to realize that his desire for his mother places him in direct competition with his father, and the threat of castration is a very real one, if understood only in an immature and preconscious way. The experience of girls in the phallic stage, on the other hand, is one characterized by the famous Freudian term “penis envy”; they desire what they cannot have for themselves, namely the penis. Clearly, incestual desire for one’s parents is neither a socially acceptable nor a realistic expression of sexuality from a biological perspective. The taboo against incest is, for Freud, one of the foremost foundational restrictions of all societies, whether primitive or advanced.

The Oedipal drama experienced by the child and her two parents is resolved differently for girls and boys. For girls, identification with the maternal figure is necessary for full integration into the process of normative socialization. The boy, conversely, must identify with his father or other male guardian or authority figure. Failure to fully identify with a guardian of the same sex may result in neurosis and

homosexuality<sup>4</sup>. The outcome of the Oedipal drama, for girls and boys alike, ultimately lays the foundation for the formation of individual women and men who are able to direct their libidinal impulses “safely” according to prescribed social norms. As they enter puberty, the site of their libidinal discharges becomes localized in their own genitals and can be displaced or even sublimated in the context of normalized institutions such as marriage.

It is clear from Freud’s rendering of the Oedipal triad that adult human subjects are formed through a process involving familial triangulation, but just as with the mirror stage, Lacan adds a linguistic dimension to the scenario<sup>5</sup>. Crucially, Lacan denies that the Phallus is equivalent to the anatomical penis. Instead, it is symbolic of the mother’s desire. It is, in other words, the *signifier* for gratification, and—at first anyway—the child seeks to *be* the Phallus in order to actualize gratification. This is due, of course, to the highly intimate relationship between a mother and her child in the earliest years of infancy, an intimacy that Kristeva will pick up on in constructing her own psycho-linguistic model of early childhood development and language acquisition. As Lacan writes, “By his dependence on her love, that is to say, by the desire for her desire, [the child] identifies himself with the imaginary object of this desire insofar as the mother herself symbolizes it in the Phallus” (1977, 198). As the symbol for gratification, the

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, though, that Freud was one of the first to recognize the ineffectiveness as well as the potentially detrimental consequences of therapies attempting to “cure” homosexual desire and rarely recommended such therapy for his own clients.

<sup>5</sup> Lacan might say that his re-visioning of the Oedipal stage is merely a reclaiming of the founder of modern psychology from those who ignore Freud’s concern with language, but this dissertation will bracket such concerns in the interest of preserving overall coherence.

Phallus is originally identified with the mother, and the child believes that in order to initiate the reciprocation of her own desire for her mother, the child must herself become the Phallus. Because Freudian psychosexual development necessitates the infant's eventual separation from the maternal figure in order to inaugurate the child's subjective formation as an individual capable of full participation in the social order, the child must be "weaned"—in both a literal and metaphorical sense—from her reliance on this relational dyad.

It is the successful resolution of the Oedipal situation that spurs the child's separation from the mother and carries out the work of individuation begun during the mirror stage. Scholar Anika Lemaire sees the Oedipal drama unfolding in three distinct phases. In the first, as we have seen, the child seeks to be the mother's desire, the Phallus (1977, 82). Second, upon intuiting that the mother's desire ultimately resides elsewhere—that is, in the possession of the father—the child finds herself at a crossroads. As in Freud's model, males experience castration anxiety, except for Lacan, it is not a literal castration that is to be feared, but a symbolic one, in which a feeling of inadequacy permeates the boy's psyche. Girls similarly experience a kind of metaphorical penis envy. As Oliver writes, "The child learns that the Phallus is imaginary, that its desire to be the mother's desire cannot be satisfied" (1993, 21). In other words, the mother's desire lies elsewhere, in what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father. The significance of naming in the context of Lacan's thought has already been touched on above in reference to the mirror stage, in which the ability to symbolize or "name" lack allows children to have control over it. Here, Lacan is also suggesting a wordplay in the similarity of sounds in the

French *le nom* (“name”) and *le non* (“no”). It is the symbol or name of the father that offers the prohibitive “no” leading to the ultimate dissolution of the primordial mother-child dyad.

As Oliver writes, “The child cannot be everything to the mother because the mother wants something other than the child [...] the Phallus” (1993, 21). Furthermore, the child recognizes that the mother’s desire not only resides elsewhere but specifically in the person of the father. In the third phase of Lemaire’s reading of Lacan’s Oedipal drama, the child completes the process of separation from the maternal dyad, crystallizing her own identity as a subject of language and culture. Boys realize that they cannot “be the mother’s everything” and so identify with their father or other paternal figure, even if they cannot, as yet, fully function in the role that this figure signifies for them. In other words, the male child settles for *having* the Phallus rather than *being* the Phallus. Girls, on the other hand, identify with the role of the mother. Either way, the child takes on an identity of her (or his) own. In conjunction with natural and sociological processes in which the child learns her native tongue, she gains access to the symbolic order.

Critically, this identification that institutes the child’s status as a subject occurs by way of substitution. In the absence of gratification, which is symbolically deferred, lying elsewhere beyond the child’s grasp, the budding subject must effectively substitute gratification for what Lacan calls the “Law of the Father.” It is ultimately the intervention of the paternal figure, or at least his symbolic function as the possessor of the Phallus in the Name-of-the-Father, that breaks up the incestuous desire of the child for her mother, and this is all necessary in order for society to continue to function at all. “It is in the

*name of the father*,” Lacan writes, “that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (2005; 230; italics in original translation). This law, this prohibition, initiates the child into a system of symbolic gratification, which finds its metaphor in language itself.

Just as Freud’s grandson learned to master his anxiety at the absence or “lack” of his mother’s presence by gleefully uttering “gone!” and “there!” while playing with a reel and string, the initiated subject of culture becomes a master of her own destiny through naming *herself*. Oliver’s brilliant summary of the power of naming—not only as a linguistic modality but a cultural one—in the resolution of the Oedipus complex is worth quoting at length:

The child must settle for having the signifier rather than being the signifier. Founded on a lack and always inadequately, the child fills the gap between its previous imaginary gratification from its mother and its new separation from her with words. The child can now name itself in relation to others. It becomes, through language, a subject proper. [...] The subject imagines through the illusion of symbols that it has a unified ego, which is an actor, through which it can control its body. (1993, 23)

The mirror stage has thus come full circle. This is not to say, however, that “all’s well in the land of Oz.” The child, it seems, has effectively learned to master herself through the substitution of desire for words and symbols, of the free expression of the drives for the limiting modality of the ego, of heterogeneous embodiment for homogenizing subjectivity. She has gained access to the symbolic order, but at what cost? As we shall see soon, Kristeva’s subtle modifications of Lacan’s schema will reintroduce this



primordial heterogeneity into the homogenizing medium of language itself, which becomes the foundation of Kristeva's revolution.

### **The Semiotic and the Symbolic**

Through a developmental process beginning in the mirror stage and culminating in the successful disentanglement of the Oedipal triad, Lacan's "subject proper" is formed. Due to the nature of this process as involving both social and linguistic dimensions, the subject's accession to the symbolic order gives her access not only to natural language—the grammatical and semantic system specific to the child's upbringing—but also to the cultural norms, laws, rituals, etc., of the society in which she is embedded from birth (Johnston 2013). The symbolic register represents the experience of a subject who is not only a master of her own body image but the holder of a social position by which she maneuvers herself in the world through the medium of language. Language is culture, and the subject is master of both in the mobilization of the "I" function.

For Kristeva, Lacan's psycholinguistic understanding of early childhood development is indispensable to her overall project, which she sees as an attempt to breathe life into conventional—and necromaniacal—approaches to the study of language offered by modern theorists. Lacan's reevaluation of Freud's ideas on the formation of the subject, which takes into account the psychology of the speaker in the context of her social environment, acts as an antidote to what Kristeva sees as "archivist, archaeological, and necrophilic methods on which the scientific imperative was founded" (1984b, 13). She is, in fact, in general agreement with Lacan on the importance of the

mirror stage and Oedipus complex in the formation of the subject and her accession to the symbolic order. As we shall see, though, Kristeva will accuse Lacan of covering up the infant's heterogeneous experience prior to the onset of the mirror stage. In doing so, Lacan is unable to adequately explain the significance of the Freudian drives in the operation of language, which Kristeva sees as essential for a fully "living" linguistic theory—an account that can foster an appreciation of the subject as not only a speaking being but an embodied one.

In Kristeva's view, Lacan paints a picture of the speaking subject as a "highly altered 'human animal'" (Beardsworth 2004, 42). This is a result of his theorization of the Freudian drives as sublimated in symbolic "structure" from the earliest stages of infancy. "That there is nothing corporeal that does not centrally involve the structure of language," writes Beardsworth, "appears to be the consequence of Lacan's insistence that there is nothing about the body that is not detached from its natural foundations." Thus, "even the Lacanian drive [...] would be subject to representation." From the mirror stage onward, and perhaps even before that, the child no longer has access to the primordial heterogeneity of the imaginary, fragmented body. As Oliver writes, "The drives are what Lacan calls the 'impossible real.' This is why [Kristeva] claims that for Lacan we have no access to the drives in themselves; drives are always and only representations of the drives. They are always already symbolic" (1993, 32). The real, in other words, is inaccessible because the human capacity for symbolization, which distinguishes the human condition from that of less evolved animals, is so strong as to represent an

irreparable break with any kind of experience that is outside the purview of the symbolic—or “symbol-izable.”

Kristeva agrees that the drives are always already *social* but not because they are always already under the auspices of *symbolic* structure (Oliver 1993, 32). In fact, Kristeva distinguishes her theory from Lacan’s by positing a pre-symbolic social arrangement in which the working of the drives is encountered prior to the onset of the mirror stage. Corresponding roughly to the developmental period associated with Lacan’s imaginary register, in which the infant perceives its body as fragmented, this arrangement is none other than the infant’s relation with its mother. Lacan characterizes this relation—for all intents and purposes the first or “primordial” relation as human beings are concerned—in terms of biological necessity. First and foremost, though, it is viewed as an *encumbrance* to the evolution of the subject, to be overcome in the course of normal development. Kristeva, on the other hand, sees in the “maternal dyad” the seed for subjective formation and language acquisition. Preceding both the mirror stage and the advent of language, this intimate connection between the fragmented body of the child and its mother prefigures symbolic functioning.

The mother, after all, is the child’s “everything.” She provides sustenance, but more importantly she serves as the original arbiter of the infant’s biological drives, which Kristeva sees as a literal “scission of matter” and a “succession of shocks” within the fragmented body of the child (1984b, 167). Kristeva sees in the Freudian drives a seething bed of heterogeneity. Following Freud and Lacan, she insists that the unwieldy drives must be subdued in order for the child to develop into an adult subject. However,

Kristeva is clear that drive activity resurfaces in the mature subject at the level of linguistic utterance, introducing the potentially dangerous heterogeneity into an otherwise homogeneous field of subjective experience characteristic of the symbolic order of language and culture. It is this resurfacing of primordial heterogeneity that she recognizes as the foundation for her idiosyncratic notion of revolution. For Lacan, the impossibility of accessing the drives is due to the fact that they are ultimately pre-linguistic but always subject to symbolization. For Kristeva, though, taking into account the pre-linguistic relation between the mother and the infant allows for a way of thinking about the fate of the drives in an altogether different manner. The mother, or other maternal figure, *orders* the infant's drives, because the latter is as yet unable to master them through accession to the symbolic order. Infants cry in response to a feeling of hunger or discomfort stemming from a soiled diaper, and it is the mother who responds by providing food and hygiene. All of this, of course, plays out on a decidedly unspoken and pre-symbolic plane, in a relational dyad that need not—and cannot as yet—rely on symbolic structure.

This ordering of the drives not only predates the onset of symbolic functioning, it prefigures it. If the Oedipus complex provides the paternal “no” necessary for the breaking up of the maternal dyad and the development of the mature human subject, the prototype for this singular prohibition is already operational in the “space” between the mother and her infant. Consider Kristeva's description of the weaning process:

The oral cavity is the first organ of perception to develop and maintains the nursing infant's first contact with the outside but also with the *other*. His “burrowing” movement, which is meant to establish contact—indeed biologically indispensable fusion—with the mother's body, takes on a *negative* value by the age of six months. The

rotating movement of the head at that age indicates refusal even before “the semantic,” abstract word “no” appears at fifteen months. (1984b, 154)

Prior to the child’s capacity for symbolic communication with the outside world or the “other,” the mother imposes a maternal “no,” which the infant even learns to reciprocate, in a form of mutual acknowledgement incorporating bodily gestures and movements rather than linguistic signs. The mother literally orders the drives of the infant on her behalf and even promotes the mobilization of gesticulation as a primitive means of social intercourse. There is an auditory element recognizable in the space between mother and child as well, as the infant learns to associate certain sounds and the vibration of the mother’s vocal chords with feelings of pleasure or discomfort.

For Kristeva, this primal relational space opened up in the mother-child dyad calls into being a pre-symbolic “signaling” function that will stick with the infant throughout the rest of its life, in the same way Lacan’s “I” function appears in the mirror stage only to reach fruition in the imposition of the Oedipus complex, thence comprising the subject’s social and linguistic identity in perpetuity. Kristeva names this signaling function the “semiotic.” For Kristeva, the semiotic represents a “disposition” that links the subject of language and culture to the pre-symbolic body—that is, to the chaotic drives determining the experience of the child prior to the onset of language. Crucially, it is the semiotic disposition that makes language possible in the first place. As Oliver writes:

The semiotic disposition [...] is the rhythm, intonation, and echolalias of the mother-child symbiosis. [...] It is the rhythm and sounds of their bodies together fused into one. For Kristeva, this is not merely an imaginary union. Rather,

at this point, it is also a real union. The child is physically dependent on the union with the mother. Their bodies physically “signal” to each other before the onset of language proper, before the mirror stage. Their semiotic relation sets up the onset of language proper. (1993, 34)

Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic draws on the idea of the signal as opposed to the symbol, and the vocal as opposed to the verbal, as the original currency for communication. This signaling, in the form the audial rhythms and gestural movements, remains with the subject even after passing through the mirror stage and Oedipus complex.

In order to fully understand how the semiotic is prerequisite for mastery of symbolic language, it will be necessary to examine the “ordering” mechanism, which Kristeva terms the *chora*, at work in the mother-child relationship. First, though, it should be emphasized that Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic is more or less idiosyncratic and must not be confused with Ferdinand de Saussure’s proposed “science of semiotics,” which seeks to study, in a systematic way, the nature of the sign in terms of meaning-making. Also known as semiology, Saussure’s breakthrough famously posited that the relation between the constituent properties of the sign—the signifier and the signified—is purely arbitrary. While Kristeva and Lacan are indebted to Saussurean semiology, Kristeva’s usage of “the semiotic” is closer to the more general sense of the word “specifying the functioning of signifying practices such as art, poetry, and myth that are irreducible to the ‘language’ object” (Kristeva 1984b, 22-23). While Kristeva is most certainly concerned with extra-linguistic signifying practices, however, her invocation of the semiotic is specifically grounded in the psychoanalytic experience of early infancy.

Whenever she invokes the term, it is in reference to the semiotic disposition that she is the first to postulate.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva is interested, more than anything else, in the speaking subject of language and culture as it is constituted in enunciated speech acts. She envisions language as a process involving both semiotic and symbolic elements. It is precisely because the semiotic is connected with the body—including its chaotic drives and permutations, which Lacan ultimately labels “impossible”—that revolution in the sphere of the symbolic is possible. Kristeva names the process of linguistic enunciation *signifiance*. She writes, “What we call *signifiance* [...] is precisely this unlimited and unbounded generating process, this unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language; toward, in, and through the exchange system and its protagonists—the subject and his institutions” (1984b, 17). The body, through the medium of the semiotic in the process of *signifiance*, makes its presence known in and through language, shaping not only linguistic functionality, but also social and cultural institutions. *Signifiance*, which draws on the unlimited power of the drives working through the necessarily limiting medium of the symbolic, both produces and subverts language and culture at the moment of enunciated speech acts.

### **The Semiotic *Chora* and Negativity**

For Kristeva, the process of *signifiance* suggests that “biological urges are socially controlled, directed, and organized,” yet they also produce “an excess with regard to social apparatuses” (1984b, 17). It is this excess that disturbs the fabric of language/culture, which is otherwise moderated by Lacan’s Law of the Father, and is thus

the seed of revolutionary discourses. The symbolic, paternal “no” encountered in the resolution of the Oedipal drama establishes the sort of regulation that, while necessary to the foundation and maintenance of the social order, acts in a more restrictive way than Kristeva is ultimately comfortable with. By positing a semiotic, maternal “negative” that is as yet un-symbolized, she is able to point to a modality that acts as a repository for a virtually illimitable signifying operation. Identifiable with the “space” of the primal mother-child relationship, the semiotic *chora* provides a container—perhaps more aptly designated a reservoir—of all that has yet to be signified in the arena of the symbolic order. Bodily drives and primal feelings represent a heterogeneous and inexhaustible reserve of potentially meaningful “stuff,” but their unwieldy nature requires a primitive ordering mechanism that antedates the onset of language proper:

The semiotic is articulated by flow and marks: facilitation, energy transfers, the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as that of signifying material, the establishment of a distinctiveness and its ordering in a pulsating *chora*, in a rhythmic but nonexpressive totality. (Kristeva 1984b, 40)

Kristeva borrows the metaphor of the *chora* from Plato. In the cosmology of the *Timaeus* dialogue, the Chora is introduced as a practical necessity. If the universe is in constant flux—if even the elements themselves can be said to be non-differentiated—the problem arises as to how distinct objects appear as such in the experience of intelligent beings. Plato’s solution, as delivered in Timaeus’s speech, the creator of the universe, an entity known as the Demiurge, sets into motion a kind of material totality or World Soul to function rationally within an otherwise chaotic and fluctuating phenomenal realm. Because most people are incapable of modeling their inherent rationality in connection



with the Platonic Forms, it becomes necessary to organize the universe whereby intelligent beings can mirror their rationality in relation to an objectively discernible reality. The organizing principle takes the form of time and number, the means of knowing and intelligibility. This constitutes the project of the Demiurge, who existed prior to the universe, and whose governance sustains human experience itself, in that it provides for a recognizable and organized “outside” in which the “internal” rational mind finds a home.

Like the Demiurge, cosmic flux—the inherent chaos of the phenomenal universe—existed prior to the cosmos, and its effects are always apparent. Humankind inhabits a universe that is constantly moving toward chaos, as the modern law of entropy proves, despite the efforts of the kindly Demiurge. Here Plato introduces yet another “pre-cosmic” notion to explain the capacity for knowing, if only provisionally: the Platonic Chora, which literally means “space” or “place.” The Chora is, in effect, a receptacle for the cosmic rationality set up by the Demiurge. It captures the images of phenomenal objects in their seeming perfection, providing the soul the means of knowing them. The Chora can be conceived as a location wherein the soul, together with the faculties of memory and reason, processes the work of the Demiurge, snatching something positive out of an otherwise chaotic universal negativity. But because the Chora works with images only, the kind of knowledge that can be retained from its operation remains provisional.

A more “holistic” knowledge can be had only in the contemplation of the Forms, of which the Choric images serve as mere instances. Still, for Plato, only a select few are

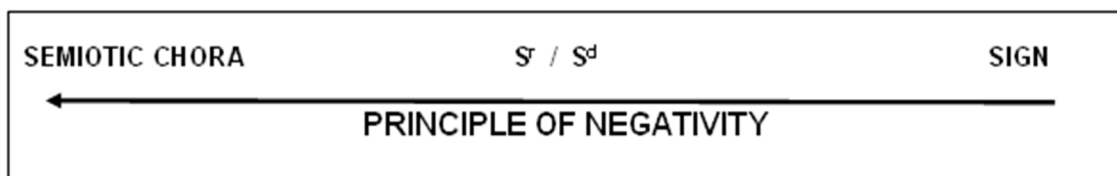
capable of encountering the Forms directly. In the *Timaeus*, the Forms are analogized in terms of a cosmic, paternal configuration, while the maternal Chora functions as a kind of archaic space in which the child-like soul assigns meaning in the world-writ-large. It is this metaphor of the Chora as mother or nurse that Kristeva picks up on in her revisiting of this passage from the *Timaeus* dialogue. The semiotic *chora* prefigures symbolic representation just as a nurse foreshadows the infant's independent functioning upon reaching physical maturity.

For Kristeva's theory of revolution to work, though, the semiotic "stuff"—bodily urges and drives—must make itself felt in the realm of language proper. That is to say, the semiotic should reappear in the symbolic mobilization of the subject. As Kristeva puts it:

Previous to the ego thinking within a proposition, no Meaning exists, but there *do* exist articulations heterogeneous to signification and to the sign: the semiotic *chora*. Though discrete and disposed, the *chora* cannot be unified by a Meaning, which, by contrast, is initiated by a thesis, constituting, as we shall see, a break. (1984b, 36)

The subject comes into being only at the point of what Kristeva calls the "thetic break." When she invokes the descriptor "thetic," she is explicitly referring to the idea of a thesis—of a putting forward or a positing. For Kristeva, all acts of enunciation, whether spoken or written, involve a dialectical interplay between the semiotic and symbolic, specifically between the semiotic *chora* and the symbolic sign. Through the *chora*, the body is given a "voice," literally irrupting into the symbolic plane at the moment of the thetic break.

This dialectical interplay unfolds on the plane of language through the working of negativity, a term borrowed from G.W.F. Hegel. Kristeva is clear that her use of the term is not meant to recall Lacan’s paternal “no,” which effectively erases the possibility of revolutionary discourses, forever subsuming the semiotic *chora* to symbolic law. Nor is she invoking the principle of negation, or outright rejection of the semantic unity of the sign, which similarly—and inversely—precludes the participation of the body within the symbolic order by effectively removing the latter from the equation. Kristeva’s denial of negation is perhaps responsible for her ambivalent attitude toward the basic tenets of Buddhism, which would seem to promote the negation of language in favor of the contemplative practice of silence. In contrast, Kristeva describes negativity in terms of a precursory rejection of the law, or a “calling up” of the body in a momentary rupture of the symbolic order. Kristeva suggests that negativity is the “fourth term” of the Hegelian dialectic, operating at the juncture of bodily drives and language proper at the moment of enunciated speech acts. The following diagram illustrates the play of negativity at the level of the linguistic sign:



The *chora*, the original organizing principle prefiguring the onset of language, “pulls back” on behalf of the heterogeneous body, shattering, for a moment, the homogeneous rule of the sign. In this diagram, designed by Canadian semioticians Johanne

Prud'homme and Lyne Légaré, the unity of signifier and signified, an arbitrary relation for Saussure, is momentarily disrupted by the heterogeneous play of the drives in the motility of the semiotic *chora*, paving the way for novel, if fragmentary, semantic features to emerge in the field of speech. In essence, negativity provides the means for disrupting the semantic unity of the sign, but it is only the initial stage in the overall process of linguistic utterance—and only one element in Kristeva's overall project of accounting for the nature and functioning of revolutionary discourses.

### ***Signifiance and the Subject-in-process/on-trial***

If negativity is only the initial stage of linguistic utterance, the process comes full circle in the thetic break, the moment at which the subject of language and culture is constituted. For Kristeva, language must be considered a process in order to fully account for the re-emergence of the body into symbolic law. Seeing language as a process involving the drives, their mobilization in the semiotic *chora*, and the construction of the subject in the arena of language and culture through the thetic rupture—a process that Kristeva calls *signifiance*—becomes the seed for revolutionary language practices for two reasons. First, the operation of *signifiance* places the subject in a precarious position of having her subjectivity—her very notion of self—exposed as a product of linguistic processes involving both the homogenizing elements of culture and the heterogeneous (and fragmentary) experience of the primordial body. *Signifiance*, properly understood, thus reveals a subject always already “in process” or “on trial.” The recognition of the subject as merely another instance in the overall process of linguistic utterance effectively breaks the subject—in the sense in which a trainer breaks a horse—from the illusion of a

unitary subject, which has ripple effects on the cultural order. It is for this reason that overtly political theories of revolution founded on the idea of an agent, essentially a unitary subject from the perspective of psychoanalysis, make little sense for Kristeva. After all, revolution is an effect or byproduct of *signifiance*, which, at its core, “points up” the subject as the product of the dialectical interaction of semiotic and symbolic functionalities.

Second, when *signifiance* is viewed not only as a process but as a practice, revolutionary discourses emerge not only as byproducts of the signifying process but as legitimate tools for introducing heterogeneity—and thus change—into the symbolic order of language and culture. To be sure, all linguistic utterances participate in the process of *signifiance*, but there are certain kinds of discourses that make a practice of pointing up the subject-in-process/on-trial, and this pointing-up literally shatters the fabric of symbolic law. For Kristeva, it is as if human subjects continually stand on the brink of totalitarian subjection to the symbolic order and outright madness due to its rejection, a consequence of legitimate mental illness in some cases, because a subject cannot become a subject without ready access to language and culture. This precarious condition is maintained by a healthy balance between semiotic and symbolic experience, a balance itself sustained by the working of *signifiance*. And yet certain discourses emerge that are able to more or less marshal the revolutionary effects of the signifying process. Such a discourse allows for a subject-in-process/on-trial to “avert with the very same gesture the madness and the subordination cleaving him to the law” (1977, 21). Unlike theorists whose understanding of revolution requires more or less unitary subjective agencies,

Kristeva insists that “the subject of a new political practice can only be the subject of a new discursive practice” (20). In the main, Kristeva focuses on the revolutionary capacity of poetic language, although she never limits the possibilities of semanalysis—the term she uses for reading texts from the standpoint of their pointing up the subject-in-process/on-trial in the process of *signifiance*—to poetic language alone.

Poetry is especially pertinent to Kristeva’s notion of revolution essentially because it actively points up the subject-in-process. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she makes abundant use of what I am calling “proof-texts” to illustrate *signifiance* at work in poetic works. Consider Stéphane Mallarmé’s “A Constellation” from *A Throw of the Dice*, here quoted in full:

cold with forgetfulness and disuse  
not so much  
that it does not enumerate  
on some vacant and superior surface  
the successive shock  
siderally  
of a count total in formation

watching  
doubting  
rolling  
shining and meditating  
before stopping

at some last point which sanctifies it

Every Thought Gives Forth a Throw of the Dice

For Kristeva, this poem encapsulates the process of *signifiance*. In comparing thought processes to celestial formations, Mallarmé describes a heterogeneous contingency of loose threads, which only through a kind of effort on the part of the thinker bursts forth as a singular thought. The “proto-thought” essentially dwells in a state of negativity that is represented on the page by successive increments of blank space as much as by the words themselves, which are, significantly, gerunds—nouns used to indicate ongoing action. This dwelling in the negative eventually gives rise to a positive thought—thinking proper—in what Kristeva reads as a thetic break, here analogous to a throw of the dice in a game of craps. Kristeva writes:

This “last point which sanctifies” the throw of the dice is what we have called the thetic moment of the signifying process and is precisely what makes this game a practice. But this practice is acted upon by “chance”—the nonsymbolic expenditure, the very semiotic game of dice: this is what poetic practice means to [...] the logical madman. (1984b, 228)

The “logical madman” is, of course, the subject-in-process/on-trial, the multidimensional speaking subject with access to both the diffuse insanity of the Freudian drives and the homogenizing sanity of symbolic law.

Offering a practical application of Kristeva’s theory of revolution through the process of *signifiance* is difficult outside of providing multiple proof-texts. Chapter Three will provide proof-texts regarding my own proposed application of Kristeva’s insights in the arena of religious and theological discourses. In Chapter Two, I will argue that

religious discourses, in particular those associated with prayer and homiletics, can provide the linguistic basis for this new political practice on the part of religious bodies engaging strategically in the process of *signifiance*.

It should be noted here, before closing, that Kristeva not only privileges poetry in her analysis of the revolutionary potentialities of *signifiance*, but specifically poetic language deployed in the context of “signifying crises”—moments of historical upheaval in which social conditions change so rapidly as to produce nothing short of a universal crisis of meaning. For Kristeva, such moments are not uncommon in the history of civilizations; nonetheless, the advent of modern capitalist societies ushered in perhaps the most all-consuming signifying crisis that the world has ever seen. Kristeva writes:

With Lautreamont, Mallarmé, Joyce, and Artaud, to name only a few, this crisis represents a new phenomenon. For the capitalist mode of production produces and marginalizes, but simultaneously exploits for its own regeneration, one of the most spectacular shatterings of discourse. (1984b, 15)

In other words, capitalist economies occasion a kind of “doubling” whereby products—whether literary or ideological—are accepted into the mainstream at the same instant that they are swallowed up by it. Discourse is thus shattered but only to be reformulated again after assimilating subversive ideas in what amounts to their erasure. Kristeva insists that the only way to avoid outright assimilation is to practice discursive strategies that point up the production of the subject, an effect which she sees as the “tripling” of a process that is always already doubled: “By exploding the subject and his ideological limits, this phenomenon has a triple effect.” This is precisely why poets like Mallarmé, who typically avoided becoming involved in political causes, is nonetheless indispensable in



terms of any truly modern notion of revolution. In the next two chapters, I will argue that signifying practices that explicitly engage ideological discourses while also pointing up their own production in the process of *signifiante*, in particular socially conscious homiletics, enhance this tripling effect.

In closing, it should be mentioned that Kristeva's theory of revolution stops short of "picking sides." Technically speaking, any text that points up the production of the subject at the moment of enunciated speech acts is an example of revolutionary language. Whether progressive, subversive, or even reactionary, revolutionary language—at least from Kristeva's perspective in *Revolution in Poetic Language*—knows no ideological barriers. Kristeva, in fact, steers clear of treating the question of ethics until much later in her writing career. Arguably, it is not until *Strangers to Ourselves*, published in 1991, that she formulates a recognizable brand of ethical thinking. By this point, however, Kristeva had more or less moved on from her early interest in linguistics.

## CHAPTER 2: REVOLUTION IN RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

### **Kristeva on Religious Language**

As discussed in the opening chapter, Kristeva's theory of revolution eschews conventional approaches to the topic by problematizing the idea of agency. Rather than basing her theory on the efficacy of political actors working for concrete changes in the world—whether through the implementation of policy, involvement with social institutions, or even participation in armed conflict—Kristeva instead points to the potential of simple speech acts to break through the cultural barriers always already set up by symbolic law. Her theory rests on the notion that revolutionary capacities are inherent within language itself, seen as a process involving the dialectical interplay of the semiotic body and the symbolic order of language and culture. The psychoanalytic body, made up of heterogeneous and chaotic Freudian drives organized in the motility of the *chora*, inscribes itself into the world of the speaking subject at the moment of enunciated speech acts. The presence of this illimitable heterogeneity of the pre-linguistic body allows for the rupturing of “authoritarian” discursive practices while also pointing up the subject as always already “in process,” meaning that the idea of a political agent is not only inapposite to Kristeva's project but a hindrance to revolution in general. Any agent or subject who existed in a completely unified and self-contained manner would not, after all, have access to the bodily drives that are necessary not only for linguistic activity itself but for the *subversion* of the rule of symbolic law.

For Kristeva, the subject is “in process/on trial” because her relation to language is founded upon pre-linguistic, or semiotic, communication. In everyday life, people overlook the influence that the Freudian drives play in their utilization of language. From an early age, the infant learns to “signal” messages back and forth between herself and a maternal figure, setting up an ordering mechanism for instinctual drives and feelings known as the semiotic *chora*. When access to language proper is acquired through the course of normal human development, the *chora* continues to function, acting in a complementary fashion to the symbolic sign in the linguistic process. Through the operation of negativity, the *chora* “pulls back” against the thrust of symbolic law, setting up a dialectic between the body and the linguistic sign and thus allowing for the inscription of heterogeneous instincts and feelings—otherwise relegated to the realm of the unspeakable—into the homogenizing arena of language and culture. Essentially, this schema provides the means for all revolutionary discourses at the level of linguistic utterance, both spoken and written.

Certain forms of utterance, namely those that expressly “point up” the subject as the product of this dialectical process, known as *signifiance*, have more revolutionary potential than others. In this regard, Kristeva privileges poetry, which may seem counterintuitive at first glance. Keeping in mind, however, that revolution in the linguistic sphere directly affects both culture and ideology, as all are part and parcel of the symbolic order, Kristeva’s choice of poetic language as exemplary of revolutionary discourses makes more sense. Bracketing the question of what exactly qualifies as poetic language—see the Postscript to this dissertation—one can say that one of the defining

characteristics of poetry is that it “skirts around” denotative meaning. That is to say, poetic language is essentially connotative; meaning tends to “build up” as the poem progresses to its conclusion. For Kristeva, this mirrors the linguistic process in general, which she sees as a kind of struggle of the semiotic body to become a full-fledged speaking subject in the moment of the “thetic break.”

Revolutionary discourses lie at the threshold of the semiotic body and the speaking subject of language and culture. It is within the framework of this dialectic that the constraints of symbolic law, heretofore ingrained into the conscious mind of the properly socialized subject, are momentarily broken, and “that which remains outside symbolization” enters into the domain of culture. Kristeva writes, “What takes place is the struggle with the strictly subjective thesis, with the One, as well as with all preexisting natural, social, scientific, and political systematicities” (1984b, 204). In other words, the pull of negativity sets up a struggle for the subject-in-process/on-trial between the unconscious heterogeneity of the body and the impulse to conform to the homogenizing mandates of the symbolic order. The status of the subject “in good standing” is always at stake due to this conflict. Because one is essentially born into the specific cultural circumstances and linguistic codes responsible for generating and maintaining the acceptable array of “theses” around which people interact socially, the pull of the semiotic body is actually quite a dangerous prospect. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to function in society if the subject were to give herself over entirely to it, as the cases of the schizophrenic and autistic would attest.

As we have seen, though, for normal individuals anyway, the “counter-pull” toward the linguistic sign and symbolic law wins out in the end, but not before the inscription of the semiotic body into language and culture makes its impact felt. As Kristeva writes, “The appearance of the new object, the new thesis, is the result of this conflict” (1984b, 204). The conflict is that of the subject of language and culture and the semiotic body, and it is the “rupture” of the latter into the realm of culture that creates new theses out of the tired, homogeneous, and preexistent assemblage of theses into which the human subject is born. Kristeva goes on to say:

The new object is a moment of the process whose conflict constitutes the most intense moment of rupture and renewal. Consciousness tends to repress this struggle within heterogeneity, which takes the subject into an “externality” he rejects only to posit again, renewed.

If the symbolic is responsible for providing the arena for meaningful social interaction between subjects, it is the semiotic that offers the malleability within the symbolic that is necessary for change—or revolution—of any kind, whether linguistic, cultural, ideological, etc. As Kelly Oliver writes, “Revolution in either sphere is brought about through the introduction of the semiotic that points up the process of production, whether it is linguistic or political or both” (1993, 96).

Kristeva never limits her understanding of revolutionary discourses to poetry alone, although she does restrict her analysis to poetic language. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she hints that laughter demonstrates some of the qualities of the irruption of the semiotic body into the symbolic order “because all meaning is ephemeral there”: “In this moment of heterogeneous contradiction, the subject breaks through his unifying

enclosure and, through a leap [...] passes into the process of social change that moves through him” (1984b, 205). Still, laughter, as a gesticulation involving audial and bodily signals, remains ensconced in the semiotic order. After all, infants, whose expressions are as yet pre-symbolic, can be induced to fits of laughter. It is clear from reading Kristeva’s work on *signifiante* that semantic and sometimes syntactical structure—or “meaning proper”—is necessary for an expressive act to qualify as revolutionary, as a thetic break is required for the inscription of the semiotic body into the larger symbolic order. Even seemingly nonsensical poetry would qualify due to its utilization of signs.

Crucially, for the purposes of this dissertation, Kristeva also hints at the capacity for religious language to exhibit the salient features of revolutionary discourses. That is to say, religious speech acts can evince the revolutionary effects of linguistic utterances that make a practice of pointing up the process of *signifiante* in the construction of the subject-in-process/on-trial in the moment of utterance. In the Prolegomenon to *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she writes:

In the history of signifying systems and notably that of the arts, religion, and rites, there emerge, in retrospect, fragmentary phenomena which have been kept in the background or rapidly integrated into more communal signifying systems but point to the very process of signifiante. Magic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and “incomprehensible” poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to what it represses: the *process* that exceeds the subject and his communicative structures. (1984b, 16)

It is significant that, in this brief passage, Kristeva invokes religious utterance in the same vein as poetic language, which is, of course, the subject of her thesis in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Unfortunately, Kristeva refrains from following up on this prefatory

observation regarding the potential for religious language to comprise a subversive practice of pointing up the process of *signifiance*, aside from the following caveat:

Under what conditions does this “esoterism,” in displacing the boundaries of socially established signifying practices, correspond to socioeconomic change, and, ultimately, even to revolution? And under what conditions does it remain a blind alley, a harmless bonus offered by a social order which uses this “esoterism” to expand, become flexible, and thrive?

In other words, that the salient features of revolution as an effect of the practice of *signifiance* is present within religious language is never called into question. Rather, poetry and the signifying practices related to religion, rites, etc., are understood to embody Kristeva’s approach to revolutionary discourses.

The question simply asks what historical, political, and cultural exigencies are more or less amenable to a thoroughgoing “insurgency” making use of signifying practices that point up the process of *signifiance*. As we saw in the previous chapter, Kristeva offers up an answer to that question. Certain periods in history that Kristeva identified with “crises of meaning” tend to render the revolutionary capacity of such signifying practices more effectual. In the next chapter, I will argue that the Civil Rights era in the United States is one of those historical periods. The cultural and political turmoil surrounding the reversal of Jim Crow through the tireless efforts of workers and activists essentially set up a crisis of meaning in which conventional understandings of race were being actively challenged by means of political advocacy, acts of protest, and policy decisions. Almost universally recognized as the principal voice of this era was the late Martin Luther King.

In his speeches and sermons delivered during the heyday of the Civil Rights era, Martin Luther King made use of signifying practices pointing up the process of *signifiante*. His homiletic approach—even his speeches to largely secular audiences drew on his expertise in homiletics—engaged the semiotic realm with the result of bringing “new theses” to the table. Stated another way, King’s signifying practices influenced the way many Americans understand the theological roots of modern race relations, and through subversive semantic juxtapositions, as one often finds in poetry, he managed, over the course of his career, to alter the semantic framework by which the idea of race is posited in the national arena. In short, in drawing upon the semiotic body, he helped to change the symbolic order.

This chapter and the next will argue that religious language features the salient aspects of revolutionary discourses. For the time being, it is important to stop and analyze existing scholarship on Kristeva’s theory of revolution and its application in the arena of religious speech acts. Kristeva’s *oeuvre* is marked by vacillations in approach and subject matter. For the most part, after *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Desire in Language*, she rarely revisits in a systematic fashion her work on revolution in the process of *signifiante* or on linguistics in general. Her sundry treatment of religion—including *Body/Text*, *Powers of Horror*, *Tales of Love*, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, and various articles published over the years—hinges on later developments in her thought, especially more explicitly psychoanalytic themes like abjection and melancholia. As is the case with *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva never follows up on her preliminary impressions of the potentially revolutionary nature of religious speech acts. Feminists, literary critics,



and scholars of political and cultural theory have commented on Kristeva's writings and pointed to her relevance in their respective fields. There is, as stated in the Introduction to this dissertation, a lack of recognition of her work in the field of religious studies. There have been many books and papers published in the last three decades on Kristeva's views on religion. To my knowledge, though, only one scholar has attempted to apply, in a direct way, Kristeva's idiosyncratic notion of revolution to religious language. The next section will present and critique the findings of David Kolosytc on the potential revolutionary value of religious language in reference to Kristeva's theory of revolutionary discourses.

### **Religion, Revolt, Modernity**

In his doctoral thesis from McGill University, David Kolosytc examines Kristeva's critique of modernity from the perspective of religion's significance in providing for a textual practice to confront the crisis of meaning presented by the rise and proliferation of modern secularism. He writes:

The study argues that Kristeva's concern with the "crisis of religion" occupies a central place in her work and permeates all of her inquiries into the linguistic, textual, literary, epistemological, subjective, social, political, and ethical dimensions of what she considers an all-encompassing "crisis of meaning" in contemporary Western culture. (2010, 6)

Kolosytc situates Kristeva firmly in the tradition of French poststructuralism, which he associates with a theoretical approach concerned, first and foremost, with the fragility of language, and thus with the inadequacy of classical and structuralist understandings of

“truth” in general. The modern crisis of meaning, for Kolosytc, comes to the fore when language is no longer seen as a reliable vessel for truth.

Poststructuralism steps in not only to reinforce this growing awareness of the tenuous status of language, but to point to extra-linguistic and pre-linguistic areas of experience that prove irreducible to such critique. Kolosytc offers the word “God” as an example of a linguistic sign that actively “withdraws from the rules of syntax and logic [...] dissolving into something obscure or, indeed, inexplicable” (2010, 15-16). If God is more or less universally recognized by religious and secular people alike in the West, its actual meaning escapes easy reckoning. Kolosytc writes, “In this context, the relationship between language and God is anything but simple: ‘God,’ as it were, slips through the cracks in language and refuses any convenient identification with a given signifier” (16).

For Kolosytc, the overall reception of French poststructuralism, particularly in the English-speaking world, tended to take one of two forms. Some saw it as an inescapable critique of modern thought and culture, in which antiquated systems and structures were “exploded” from within in order to clear the way for a more free-flowing and potentially infinite play of ideas. Others worried that it was merely a symptom of the high-flown, postmodernist trend to stem the tide of advances in the proliferation of a logical and fact-based intellectual culture. Kolosytc argues that each of these camps misses the mark in that both fail to recognize the thoroughgoing, doubled-edged nature of the poststructuralist project. Invoking the work of Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, and Kristeva, Kolosytc points to the dual-tiered thrust of much of poststructuralist thought:

Both responses fail to grasp the fact that, if Kristeva and her colleagues remain intent on bringing a certain

“discontent” to the entire edifice of Western metaphysics and the social structure it produced—with its convenient repertoire of stable, “self-evident,” and often quite arbitrary truths, categories, concepts, conventions, discourses, methods, and practices—they are also keenly aware of the fragility of “meaning” and of the necessity of continually renewing the capacities inherent in it. (2010, 18)

In other words, poststructuralist thinkers are not merely concerned with renouncing meaning, reason, truth, etc., but with genuinely critiquing embedded metaphysical suppositions and the cultural institutions to which they give rise. Poststructuralist critique, though, is equally concerned with salvaging those dimensions of meaning that are indispensable for the life of individuals and societies. Kristeva, for instance, emphasizes the need for the thetic break in the provisional constitution of subjectivity. The semiotic body, on its own, lacks the capacity to “inscript” its influence into the domain of the symbolic order in the absence of the signifying subject of language and culture. Her critique of modernity—and her idiosyncratic notion of revolution itself—reflect the need to “continually renew the capacities inherent in [meaning].”

While Kolosyżc’s appraisal of French “critical theory” is on the mark, his inclination to lump these thinkers together is perhaps premature. In the opening chapter of his dissertation, he attempts to situate features of Kristeva’s notion of *signifiance* alongside Derrida’s thoughts on *différance*. This approach, while undoubtedly instructive, arguably takes some of the “teeth” out of Kristeva’s own thoughts on revolutionary discourses. Additionally, it may be responsible for Kolosyżc’s ultimate appraisal of the subversive value of religious language as contained within religious discourses

themselves, rather than as extending to the culture at large in the moment of enunciated speech acts.

Following author Juliana de Nooy in her article “Derrida, Kristeva, and the Dividing Line” (1998), Kolosytc sets out to explore the intersection of Derrida’s and Kristeva’s thinking on the nature of the text. Kolosytc is clear that his purposes are not to offer a comparative study of the two but to point out a number of convergences between them. Recalling his earlier discussion of poststructuralist thinking, Kolosytc begins by indicating the similarity in the overall approach of Derrida’s and Kristeva’s respective projects: “Kristeva’s earliest writings echo Derrida’s attempt to bring to the language of science and philosophy a linguistic practice that cannot be reduced to a conceptual structure” (2010, 70). Derrida’s solution, of course, was his “discovery” of the textual practice of deconstruction, in which the play of *différance* lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. *Différance* is a term coined by Derrida to indicate that linguistic signs are unable, in and of themselves, to fully express the meaning of that which they are meant to signify, *deferring* instead to other signs from which they *differ*.

For Kolosytc, “Kristeva’s theory of the text acquires a number of its unique nuances particularly in response to Derrida’s deconstructive project” (2010, 71). Kristeva’s thought is, in crucial ways, “haunted” by Derrida’s, and vice versa. First, Kristeva’s understanding of language as eminently producible rather than a given is reflected in Derrida’s notion of *différance*: “This notion [of productivity] positions itself close to Derrida’s notion of *différance* [...] insofar as productivity brings to language a process of ongoing ‘redistribution’ Kristeva considers at once ‘destructive’ and

‘constructive.’” In Derrida’s formulation, words or signs fail to express their full meaning outside of their relation to other words and signs; that is to say, they only make sense as an outcome of semantic difference. “Sense” or meaning is, in addition, dependent upon the temporal deferral of difference in the operation of syntax. This destabilization of the semantic unity of the sign in the recognition that meaning is an outcome of linguistic processes shares much in common with the overall bent of Kristeva’s insights.

Furthermore, the key features of Derrida’s and Kristeva’s respective approaches exhibit “constructive” and “destructive” aspects. For Derrida, *différance* is necessary for the construction of meaning, but its recognition also spurs the deconstructive impulses that result in his critique of Western logocentrism throughout his writings. Similarly, for Kristeva, the process of *signifiance* culminates in the emergence of embodied subjects in the symbolic order of language and culture, which she sees, following Lacan and arguably Freud himself, as the benchmark for the common life of human beings. Still, inherent within this process is the seed for revolt against symbolic logic in the practice of revolutionary discourses.

Second, Derrida’s play of *différance* and Kristeva’s process of *signifiance* “remain on very intimate terms with one another, insofar as [they] evoke that which is unthinkable, unknowable, or unspeakable, but without which no language or logic would be possible” (68). For Kristeva, the “unspeakable” is a direct reference to Lacan’s “impossible Real”—the heterogeneous domain of the pre-symbolic bodily drives, which are given a voice through the working of the semiotic *chora*. Likewise, deconstruction, when all is said and done, points to that “remnant” of experience that eludes signification.

*Différance*, after all, makes meaning possible while simultaneously undermining the prospect of its ultimate foreclosure, a process that spotlights the unsaid and even the unsayable. Finally, “each author’s work leaves the reader with a sense that, on some level, it develops a singular language that can never be entirely translated into another, even when it constantly affirms the necessity of precisely such translation.”

Kolosyżc’s framing of *signifiance* in terms of Derrida’s *différance* is instructive, particularly when it comes to the history of ideas. It is important to keep in mind that French poststructuralist thinkers were not working in a vacuum and that the cross-pollination of concepts and theoretical schemas was in motion long before Kristeva came to Paris from her native Bulgaria in the mid-60s. Nonetheless, Kolosyżc runs the risk of losing sight of a key feature at work in Kristeva’s thought, namely the revolutionary capacity of language in the process of *signifiance*. Kolosyżc seems aware of this risk as he points to Kristeva’s own criticism of Derrida’s project: “Kristeva regards *différance* as a kind of linguistic extension of Nietzsche’s ‘philosophizing with a hammer’—one that lacks the necessary compensation of a new, productive language or logic” (2010, 72-73). In other words, deconstruction adheres to a kind of destructive logic that appears more like a “negation” of language than Kristeva’s own notion of negativity, which occupies a subversive space only temporarily and always gives rise to linguistic formulations writ anew.

Moreover, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva forcefully critiques deconstruction not only for having little or no “positive” value but for being limited to textual and linguistic analysis alone. For Kristeva, Derrida ignores the question of

subjectivity, leaving his theoretical apparatus unable to account for anything more than language itself. As Kolosytc writes, quoting de Nooy:

Kristeva is convinced that Derrida's terminology operates on a purely linguistic level and that, consequently, the critical possibilities contained in deconstruction perpetually dissolve themselves, offering nothing more than yet another version of poststructuralist "contemplation adrift." From this perspective, Derrida's work abandons the crucial question of subjectivity and has "nothing to say about social structure or its collapse." (2010, 73)

It is perhaps ironic that Kristeva's critique of Derrida follows the same line of argumentation as Kristeva's own future critics would invoke against her. Just as numerous writers and scholars would accuse her of promoting a theory of revolution that ignores the question of agency—and thus relegates revolt to the realm of a textual practice—Kristeva is saying that deconstruction fails to offer up anything of pragmatic importance. Derrida falls short of formulating a practicable theory of culture. For Kristeva, following Lacan, the subject of psychoanalysis acts as a kind of nexus in which language and culture operate almost indistinguishably. No theory of language could be complete without a subject, even a subject-in-process/on-trial. Furthermore, Kristeva's project provides a framework for which to describe not only the linguistic dimensions of social structure but also its self-regulation and possible transformation on the level of linguistic utterance.

Despite Kolosytc's concessions that Kristeva's and Derrida's respective approaches are only compatible in a rather basic or preliminary fashion, his framing of *signifiance* over and against *différance* risks losing sight of the very real differences between the two concepts. Kolosytc goes on to claim that Kristeva's criticism is a

misreading of Derrida: “She fails to note that Derrida’s famous assertion—‘There is nothing outside the text’—is actually an affirmation, not a denial, of that which remains ‘outside’ language, grammar, or logic” (2010, 73). Also, “‘Deferral’ always already assumes its place within a certain position—irreducible difference *within* identity—and is not defined by arbitrary movement or the play of pure chance.” While it is not within the scope of this dissertation to fully engage this discussion of whether or not Derrida ultimately offers a positive or constructive take on the matters of language and identity, Kolosyze’s insistence on the similar orientation of Kristeva’s and Derrida’s projects is significant. In the end, he argues that Kristeva’s relevance in the field of religious studies lies not in her intimations in *Revolution in Poetic Language* that linguistic acts associated with religion might constitute the practice of *signifiance* and should thus be analyzed as such in the same vein as other potentially revolutionary discourses like poetic language—one of the basic themes of this current dissertation—but rather in her later writings concerned with the “clash” between secular and religious discourses that she associates with the cultural circumstances of late modernity.

In *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt* (2001), Kristeva returns to the problem of social change for the first time since her involvement in *Tel Quel* and the publication of *Revolution in Poetic Language*. This time around, she paints with much broader strokes. She characterizes contemporary Western society as standing at an impasse between the moribund discourses associated with premodern, religious culture and the newer, secular discourses of modernity. While rejecting both Christianity and “hasty attempts by ‘facile secularisms,’” Kristeva essentially asks where sacred spaces are to be found outside of



traditional religious settings. Only in such spaces can a “new religion” be articulated to help bridge the gap between modern nihilism and the antiquated precepts of religion.

In spite of Kristeva’s persistent interest in the clash of modern cultural trends with those of premodern societies, her early insights into the revolutionary aspects of certain linguistic forms, especially poetry, is too often overshadowed, as it is in Kolosytc’s writing, by such intellectual pursuits. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva proposes the prospect of a real and literal revolution at the level of language and culture in the moment of linguistic utterance. The process of *signifiance*, highlighted in the “literary” practice of the speaking subject-in-process/on-trial, involves not only the subversion of ordinary language endeavors but, crucially, the cultural norms that both give rise to and sustain them. By introducing the pre-linguistic body of the subject into the dual realm of language and culture, *signifiance* effectively summons those features of humanity that would typically be lost forever, subsumed under the rule of Lacan’s Law of the Father and its corollary symbolic register. For Kristeva, this process represents the root of all revolutionary discourses, and it is not merely a metaphor for the psychoanalytic dimensions of language acquisition. The injection of the body into the social order is, for Kristeva, the proper source for social change, because only through the working of *signifiance* can revolt be literally inscribed into symbolic law.

In many ways, Kolosytc is right to emphasize Kristeva’s thinking on the dueling forces of modernity and the lingering desire among modern persons to return to familiar, premodern sources of meaning. Such strains of thought permeate both her later works, including *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*, and *Revolution in Poetic Language* and

related texts. I would argue, however, that there is more to her theory of revolutionary language than such an approach can hope to give credit to. It is, I believe, the fundamental flaw in Kolosytc's thesis, as is evident in the section of his dissertation on the potential revolutionary value of religious language, which follows the same line of argumentation described above—namely that Kristeva's importance to religious studies is primarily or even exclusively based in her critique of the relationship between modern secularism and religion.

A major theme of this thesis is that the salient features of revolutionary discourses that Kristeva identifies with poetic language are present and active in the linguistic practices associated with religion. These forms of religious language may include prayer and homiletics, as I will attempt to show in detail in the next chapter with reference to Anselm of Canterbury's "ontological proof" of the existence of God and Martin Luther King's sermons and speeches, respectively. Other forms can include liturgical language and even the recitation of doctrinal creeds, as I will try to bring to light in the final section of this chapter. In the end, Kristeva's analysis of poetry opens up a direct line of communication with the bodily (semiotic) disposition of the subject, which tends to remain obscured in both the ordinary and intellectual linguistic practices of cultural agents, despite the fact that all linguistic utterance contains and relies upon the semiotic order.

As we saw in Chapter One, these salient features are situated in the overall process of *signifiance*, which Kristeva sees as the foundation of language proper. For a subject to speak or write, she is, first of all, *carried back* to a pre-symbolic space, the

semiotic *chora*, the maternal body, the arena of the primordial Freudian drives themselves. Only through a kind of effort does the subject, fueled by the energy of bodily drives, attempt to speak in terms of signs, entering into the symbolic order at the moment of utterance. In the process, though, the body becomes inscribed in the symbolic system, challenging the latter's "totalitarian" reign. *Signifiance*, the provenance of the subject-in-process/on-trial, while present in all acts of speech or writing, is pointed up particularly in genres of language that emphasize the concerted practice of unconventional meaning-making, such as poetry. Meaning in poetic language, after all, relies less on the denotative or syntactical markers of ordinary speech and more on connotative methods, such as associations between similar-sounding words—associations that rely on the physical sounds of the human voice—with otherwise dissimilar semantic values. The reader is thus "carried back" to the domain of the semiotic body, her expectations of ordinary syntactical and semantic structures momentarily shaken.

And yet this carrying-back, or what Kristeva identifies as the working of negativity, is only temporary, at least in terms of the revolutionary potential, for instance, of a poem. In Chapter One, it was noted that in order for a linguistic act to reach its full potential as revolutionary discourse, it must run through the entire process of *signifiance*, necessarily culminating in a thetic break that effectively inserts the semiotic body into the familiar system of the symbolic order of language and culture. In the following (and closing) section of this chapter, I will provide an analysis of a poem that exemplifies the revolutionary practice of poetry in the process of *signifiance*, T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," followed by a comparative analysis of the classical Trinitarian statement of the

Nicene Creed in mainline and doctrinal sects of Western Christianity. My hope is that such an analysis will add clarity to my assertion that poetic and religious language, respectively, reveal the working of negativity and the breaking through to the thetic within the moment of enunciated linguistic acts, thus pointing up the subject-in-process/on-trial and serving as a subversive current over and against ordinary speech.

### **Between Poetic and Religious Language**

As noted elsewhere in this dissertation, it is difficult to come to a definitive understanding of Kristeva's idiosyncratic notion of revolution in poetic language without close analysis of poems themselves. A large portion of *Revolution in Poetic Language* is dedicated to such close analysis. However, given the nature of the French tongue in general as particularly given to wordplay and other such rhetorical devices, not to mention that Kristeva's analysis focuses on stylistically "experimental," modernist poetry, it would be outside the scope of the present thesis to offer in-depth examination of the poetic works featured in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Nonetheless, for the purposes of a comparative, practicable approach to the topic at hand, it will be necessary to offer some examples of the working of *signifiance* in modern English-language poetry in order to glean exactly how poetic language can function in the same register as religious texts. In doing so, the salient features of Kristeva's cultural and linguistic revolution should come to light in a more applicable way.

T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" represents a dark critique of modern living. The American poet's most enduring work, including his famous long poem *The Waste Land*, was written between the two World Wars at a juncture in the history of modern industrial

societies in which formerly vital institutions of knowledge and morality were giving way to more secular trends. Eliot believed that citizens of the modern world, for which traditional sources of authority mattered less and less, were essentially people who experienced a sort of “hollowing out” in which their spiritual well-being and sense of purpose lagged behind the material and intellectual advances characteristic of late modernity. While Kristeva did not include Eliot specifically in her coterie of poets—and at least one novelist, James Joyce—whose stylistic experimentation and implicit criticism of modern cultural developments spoke most strongly in support of her thesis, it can be assumed that Eliot’s historical location, in which a sense of a ripening modernity was met with either a kind of ambivalent skepticism or outright nostalgia for the premodern, places his work in a similar vein as Mallarmé, Artaud, etc<sup>6</sup>. As we have seen, though, Kristeva’s framing of revolution in terms of its applicability to poetic language is hardly limited to a particular historical epoch or intellectual milieu. In fact, it lies dormant even in the most formal, rigid language practices.

“The Hollow Men” opens, cryptically, with an instance of anaphora<sup>7</sup>—a device employed not only by poets and novelists but, as we shall see in Chapter Three, by Martin Luther King and others for rhetorical effect in sermons and speeches—in which

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<sup>6</sup> See the section in Chapter One titled “*Significance* and the Subject-in-Process/On-Trial.”

<sup>7</sup> The term “anaphora” can be used to describe two distinct features of language: grammatical and rhetorical. In grammar, anaphora is the use of a word that replaces another word earlier in a sentence in order to avoid repetition, such as the sentence “*Jill* is a blacksmith” being followed by “*She* enjoys her work.” As a rhetorical device, it refers to the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences or lines of poetry and public addresses. In the analyses that follow, the term will be used to indicate the rhetorical device—hence the use of “anaphoral” (the adjective form of the rhetorical device) rather than “anaphoric” (used to describe instances of the grammatical use of the term).

words or phrases are repeated at the beginning of successive lines: “We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men” (1964, 77). Anaphora is typically employed to draw readers or listeners into written or spoken texts. Anaphoral repetition introduces a participatory element into speeches and literary works by means of appealing to the *pathos* of one’s audience, specifically instilling a mood of anticipation. In doing so, the speaker retreats from her platform as the fixed, authoritative “subject” of the text; the “I” becomes “we.” While the effect is subtle, subjectivity is essentially destabilized not only through semantic cues, or the grammatical function associated with the substitution of the singular first-person for the plural, but through the dramatic and extra-textual device of anaphora. The semiotic is breached due to the homogeneous subject’s—in this case Eliot or the presumed speaker of the poem—dissolution into heterogeneity. Anaphora creates a sense of anticipation, involving both the reader and the audience in the deployment of the poetic enterprise, and revealing or pointing up the subject as always already in-process/on-trial. The semiotic *chora*, after all, is a place where the singularity of the subject breaks down in the plurality of heterogeneous experience, as it is none other than the primordial psychological locale of a mother and her child, who has yet to form the capacity to experience its life homogeneously.

Anaphoral repetition appears in three other places in “The Hollow Men,” which arguably stands as Eliot’s most succinct and accessible poem from the period of the early to mid-1920s, and a reflection of a growing intellectual malaise at what many perceived to be a sense of moral bankruptcy in the wake of the heyday of modern industrial capitalism. Just as thinkers like Kristeva could later point to a clash of competing cultural

trends—modern secularism versus traditional faith—Eliot criticized what he saw as a deterioration in moral sensibilities brought on by the advent of newer institutional forms and authorities, such as communism and secularism, and the decline of older forms like monarchy, organized religion, and classical education. The emerging forms, for Eliot, lacked the wisdom that goes with centuries and millennia of providing ethical standards by which to live. The result was that modern people were left with little or no sense of how to behave in authentically human ways. Human beings, formerly filled with spiritual substance passed down from the ages, are in modern times little more than scarecrows or, to use a more contemporary metaphor, zombies or the walking dead: “Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw” (1964, 77). Such a frightful scene is, for Eliot, literally equivalent to the end of the world, as the poem’s famous final lines attest: “*This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper*” (80; italics are in the original text). The world will end not with the violent destruction of people and societies; it will instead rot away from within.

For the purposes of this dissertation, though, the poem’s final takeaway matters less than how the poet and reader arrive there. As we have already seen, the rhetorical device of anaphora is employed in the opening lines, as elsewhere, giving the poem the effect of having a participatory nature by invoking a sense of anticipation by means of anaphoral repetition. The subject or voice of the poem becomes heterogeneous with its audience, giving up its position as a subject proper in the process (pun intended). In the closing lines of “The Hollow Men,” quoted here in full, Eliot again turns to anaphora before ending dramatically at the moment of the poem’s “thetic break”:

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow [...]

Between the conception  
And the creation  
Between the emotion  
And the response  
Falls the Shadow [...]

Between the desire  
And the spasm  
Between the potency  
And the existence  
Between the essence  
And the descent  
Falls the Shadow [...]

*This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.* (1964, 80)

The effect of anaphoral repetition is almost palpable here. The symbolic plane is suspended in each of the lines beginning with the preposition “between,” temporarily deferring the syntactical resolution of the respective statements ending in the predicate, “Falls the Shadow.” At the same time, the unity of the subject is challenged as poet and reader alike are whisked away in the rhythmic recurrence of the repeated lines. Even the content of these lines would seem to suggest the liminal space of Kristeva’s semiotic *chora*, a space residing “in between” nonsense and symbolic expression. The *chora* itself, for example, is literally predicated, in Kristeva’s schema, upon the mother’s “response” to the budding emotional needs of her infant child. The line “Between the desire / And the spasm” recalls Kristeva’s understanding of the Freudian drives as the energy exerted



by muscular spasms in response to the needs of the heterogeneous infantile body, as yet perceived as multiple and unconsolidated.

The poem concludes with another instance of anaphora, with three successive lines repeating “*This is the way the world ends,*” an allusion to a child’s nursery rhyme quoted earlier in the text. Finally, Eliot invokes the major takeaway of his poem in general, stated unequivocally as “*This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.*” This closing line represents the thematic break or definitively stated thesis of the piece as a whole, and it comes about as the culmination of a deferral of thematic meaning in the poetic process, which points up both the semiotic element of language and the necessarily ambiguous status of the subject. The poet, along with the reader, arrives at this point only through a series of deferrals accomplished by means of the poetic and rhetorical device of anaphoral repetition. The subject or voice of the poem, who would seem to have dissolved into an undifferentiated field of negativity, here re-emerges to deliver his prophetic takedown of modern culture and its perceived lack of moral substance. Not only is this statement “revolutionary” in that it openly condemns the status quo, but it spotlights the uncommon means by which poetic and similar forms of expression affect the status quo at the moment of enunciated linguistic acts. The point Eliot is making could have been stated succinctly in the form of a positive, denotative statement, but the power in poetic, connotative expression is that it opens up the world of the semiotic to the arena of symbolic language and culture, potentially transforming both, as that which is unspoken or even unspeakable finds its way to into existing discourses.

Readers of poetry do not merely process thoughts and ideas, as is the case with denotative forms of speech like academic lectures—they are transported to the world of the semiotic, in which they dwell for a short period prior to resurfacing in the domain of concrete meaning. Returning to Eliot for a moment, the reader will note that “The Hollow Men” includes other characteristics of Kristeva’s semiotic revolution. Consider, once again, the opening stanza:

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats’ feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar (1964, 77)

This short excerpt is notable for at least three reasons. First, the imagery itself evokes a sense of the physical, extra-linguistic elements of language: “Voices [...] whisper [...] as wind.” The human voice, in part, relies on the manipulation of air to form distinctive sounds “as wind.” “Whisper,” a word derived from the German *wispein*, most likely an imitation of the sound one makes while whispering or whistling, in this case enhances the sense of language in its physical and anatomical simplicity, prior to the complex symbolic systems of natural languages that humans adopt through the course of their early development. Second, the preponderance of “-s” sounds throughout these few lines—“Headpiece,” “straw,” “Alas,” “voices,” “whisper,” “meaningless,” “grass,” “rats,” “glass,” “cellar,”—when read aloud, speaks not only to the inhalation and exhalation of air necessary for physical speech, that element of language so often overlooked in highbrow linguistic theories, but to the involvement of the palate as well.

Finally, associations and analogies are made both through conventional devices such as simile and metaphor and, crucially, by means of the similarity of the *sounds* of the words themselves. For modern people, who in Eliot's eyes have lost the capacity to relate meaningfully to one another, our "whispers" are like "wind," and they fall on deaf ears, "meaningless." Our conversation partners are like "glass" or "grass," words that should in no way be related to one another. But they are, and not only due to the logical relation of "wind" and "rats," which move over the grass and glass—respectively and in analogous fashion—but because the value of the metaphorical association of such imagery is bolstered by the association of dissimilar words that happen to sound similar.

The takeaway of all this is to say that Eliot's "The Hollow Men" manages to instill a deep emotional resonance in the reader, one which reaches below the level of symbolic communication, having appealed to the semiotic body, in which sounds and signals comprise the communicative economy. The effect of such a transposition of meaning, in which "grass" and "glass" are superimposed one upon the other regardless of their vastly different semantic values, is that Eliot's overall critique of the crumbling moral fabric of Western societies enters into literary discourse at a level that both precedes and transcends language as it is commonly understood. For Kristeva, this transposition of meaning, and particularly the means by which it is accomplished, carries over to the body politic, as language and culture are, in substance, identical. The feeling of malaise and discontentment with the unfortunate aspects of modern living are thus inscribed into the world at large through the power of poetic language. It is difficult to put into words just how literary or other discourses "revolutionize" culture as a whole, at

least on the level of a transposition of meaning of individual words and ideas.

Nonetheless, it is fair to say that for readers of Eliot, this deep resonance founded on the revolutionary capacity of the semiotic persists in the recollection of certain lines and turns of phrases such as those quoted above.

It remains to be seen if there are forms of religious speech and writing that fit Kristeva's bill for revolutionary textual practice. What follows is a preliminary "semanalysis" of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in the form of the Nicene Creed, which at face value as an explicit statement of the orthodox viewpoint that God is essentially Three Persons in One, would seem to embody the textbook definition of Kristeva's thetic principle. In its form, though, and specifically in its liturgical role to be recited by worship communities, the Nicene Creed displays a full range of elements related to *signifiante*, leading to a momentary exposure of the subject always already coming to being in a state of process. For the sake of convenience, I quote in full the English-language version of the Nicene Creed found in the Book of Common Prayer used by the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, which—coincidentally, perhaps—is appropriately published in poetic form:

We believe in one God  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen,

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
    he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
    he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
    and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
    he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
    in accordance with the Scriptures;  
    he ascended into heaven  
    and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
    and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
    who proceeds from the Father and the Son.  
With the Father and Son he is worshiped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
    and the life of the world to come. Amen. (2016, 358-359)

For the purposes of this analysis, it is important to consider this text in its liturgical role, to be read aloud collectively by congregations. Only then will its participation in *significance* and any potential revolutionary value it may possess come to light.

That being said, its placement within the Episcopal—and global Anglican—liturgy comes between the sermon or homily and the doxology, in which worshipers dedicate themselves to the ministry of the church by tithing. It serves, therefore, in a transitional capacity bridging the Liturgy of the Word—excerpts from holy scripture followed by their interpretation by clergy or other learned ministers—and the Liturgy of the Table, otherwise known as the Eucharist or Holy Communion. In other words, the Nicene Creed, as a statement of the fundamental tenets of the faith, is placed between the

instructive or educational parts of the service and the reception of God's gifts to humanity in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The recitation of the doctrine of the Trinity performs an important role in the flow of the service, and its being read aloud in unison adds to its vitality as a vehicle for the pointing up of the subject-in-process/on-trial.

The stylistic similarities between Eliot's approach in the "The Hollow Men" and the statement of faith in the Nicene Creed should become clear, on some level, almost immediately. The reader will note the frequency of anaphoral repetition throughout: "We believe," "We believe," "We believe," "We believe," "We acknowledge," "We look for" (2016, 358). As noted above in reference to Eliot's poem, the rhetorical device of anaphora has the effect of destabilizing the literary authority of an author or speaker. The audience, who learns to anticipate the next line—which is fairly easy because the beginning of each line is the same each time—becomes involved in the work as an equal participant. The reader may recall the speeches of President Barack Obama, who during his initial campaign for the White House, often included the anaphoral repetition "Yes we can" in many of his public addresses. As soon as the crowds in attendance recognized this, many chimed in with Obama, shouting the refrain along with him. (More will be said on this aspect of anaphora in public speaking in the next chapter with regard to Martin Luther King's sermons and speeches.) In poetry and even fiction<sup>8</sup>, the reader begins to feel a part of the literary process, as she anticipates the next line along with the author. As I argued in reference to "The Hollow Men," when understood in light of Kristeva's insights into *signifiance*, anaphoral repetition has the added effect of stimulating an aura of negativity as subjectivity momentarily dissolves, a feat attributed

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<sup>8</sup> Consider the famous opening lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

to the participatory nature of the rhetorical device as much as to the “trance-like” effect of repeated words and phrases in general.

As I also argued in reference to Eliot’s piece, the use of the plural first-person—“we” as opposed to “I”—relegates the subject to a status of heterogeneity or “cohabitation” with the other, a status that is predicated upon the primordial relation of infant and maternal bodies in the space of the semiotic *chora*. A distinctive quality of the liturgical recitation of the Nicene Creed is that the static, unified subject is never directly posited, as it can be assumed to be in any poem, in spite of Eliot’s modernist style with abrupt changes of voice and point of view, due to the presumed authorial authority in poetic texts. Rather, the “I” function as posited in the Nicene Creed is only ever implied as a constituent element of the collective “we.” Because of its nature as a communal statement of orthodox faith, the subject is always already merely a heterogeneous voice among other heterogeneous voices, an ironic and somehow self-subversive feature of what was intended to be the epitome of an exercise in homogeneity in response to the need for a united, universal Christian faith.

Indeed, the homogenizing language of “one holy catholic and apostolic Church” begins to unravel, or at least come off as flat, when the Nicene Creed is read out loud at a church service on any given Sunday. Whereas the statement of faith in a Triune God is meant to be recited in unison by all believers gathered together in a given worship space, in practice it sounds more like a scene from the Pentecost event in the Book of Acts than a univocal declaration of conformity. No two people read at the same cadence, or in the same tone, or with the same emphasis, and while it was certainly not the intention of the

drafters of this ancient document, the recitation of the Nicene Creed almost always points to its own inefficacy as a steadfast affirmation of a blanket, monolithic belief system. Voices lag behind; some congregants make an effort to catch up or slow down if they perceive themselves to be reading off-pace; words or entire lines are inevitably skipped over or misread. The whole enterprise is a spectacle to behold for the attentive observer. The “one voice” undoubtedly sought after by those in attendance at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE reveals itself to be a scattering of disparate voices, sometimes verging on a kind of aggregate echolalia, or “speaking-in-tongues.” Such “readings in unison” actually tend to devolve into the textbook definition of Kristeva’s understanding of negativity. The authoritarian rule of the sign and symbolic law, exemplified in the notion of a doctrinal creed, works against itself; in the very attempt at uniformity through the medium of univocal speech practices, a barrage of individual, disparate speech patterns is encountered. Everyone is reading off-pace because there is no single, “correct” pace in the first place. In the end, the singularity of symbolic communication—in the attempt to state a univocal proclamation of belief—gives way to an experience of semiotic multiplicity, which is the domain of the negative and the semiotic *chora*, especially given the fact that the experience itself relies on the empirical, physical disparity in real-life human speech patterns.

In the above discussion of the “The Hollow Men,” it was noted that the frequency of “-s” sounds, in light of Kristeva’s insights into the process of *signifiance* and her insistence on the importance of the physical, corporeal elements of language, reflected some of the salient features of revolution through the process of *signifiance* that Kristeva



analyzed in her thesis *Revolution in Poetic Language*. When considering the reading of the Nicene Creed, the same phenomenon is enhanced, again, due to the vocal dissonance encountered during group recitation of liturgical texts. The casual reader may not notice the frequency of such sounds—“all that is, seen and unseen”; “Jesus Christ, the only Son”; “for us and our salvation”; “in accordance with the Scriptures”; etc.—but the attentive participant of such communal recitations in the context of a church service will immediately realize, when these lines are read, that the disparate, slightly off-pace voices in the congregation engenders something like a prolonged “hissing” noise. Kristeva, of course, points to such elements of linguistic utterance that are undeniably physical and bodily as she analyzes the revolutionary character of poetic texts. For Kristeva, these basic and indelible features of language point up the subject as always already in-process/on-trial by effectively breaching the semiotic substructure of symbolic discourse. In the end, the straying of multiple voices from a perceived linear, homogeneous, and univocal statement of faith results in an experience of negativity in which the monolithic and authoritarian rule of the sign is momentarily resisted in the motility of the semiotic *chora*.

The most clearly “revolutionary” feature of liturgical recitation in the case of the Nicene Creed, though, is the subtle transfiguring of meaning in the concepts making up the doctrine of the Trinity itself. Throughout the text, the same terms are used interchangeably to refer to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Just as certain words and ideas in Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” are associated through means that are clearly extra-linguistic, based on similarities of the sounds of the words themselves, the Nicene

Creed includes associations that can best be described as non-intuitive—instances of metaphor or analogy seemingly lacking logical connection. For instance, Jesus Christ is described as essentially a God *from* God, but there is no explanation as to how this is logically possible. There is only a metaphorical connection in the transposition of the meaning of the two terms “Jesus Christ” and “God.” Similarly, in the first “stanza,” God is portrayed as “maker of heaven and earth, / of all that is, seen and unseen” (2016, 358). In the next stanza, the figure of Christ is essentially ascribed the same cosmic function: “Through [Jesus Christ] all things were made.” There is no denotative or logical case made to fortify this association; the same kinds of language are simply inserted with regard to both God and Christ, the respective meanings of which are thereby transposed.

At the risk of beleaguering the point, the third Person of the Triune God, the Holy Spirit, is linked in the third stanza to both God and Christ: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life” (2016, 359). The Lord, as we read in the second stanza, is identified as the Person of Jesus Christ, and the “giver of life,” as we saw in each of the first two stanzas, is the divine vocation of both Father and Son. Again, the association is made through the insertion of similar or identical words and phrases in reference to the respective Persons of the Holy Trinity, a gesture toward the connotative and semiotic aspect of linguistic utterance, rather than by means of logical, denotative statements—a hallmark of the symbolic component of language proper. The recitation of the Nicene Creed as a liturgical text, then, involves some of the salient features identified by Kristeva as highlighting the process of *signifiante* in the dialectic of the semiotic and symbolic orders: (1) the temporary suspension of the unity of the subject, (2) the

incidental emphasis on the physical elements of linguistic utterance, and (3) the transposition of otherwise unidentical terms. According to Kristeva's strictly idiosyncratic notion of revolution, the recitation of the Nicene Creed serves as a medium for the "revolutionary" inscription of religious ideas into the foreground of the symbolic order of language and culture.

The doctrine of the Trinity, in which there exist three celestial Persons in One, is difficult to argue or even account for in terms of modern, secular logic. (As a matter of faith, it is a doctrine for which a proper explanation has scarcely, if ever, been adequately provided.) And yet, in the recitation of the Nicene Creed, the subtle associations and identifications among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are given expression in the dialectical movement between the semiotic and symbolic aspects of speech, providing for a kind of inscription of these ideas into the symbolic plane of language and, by extension, culture. Depending on the particular context in which the liturgy is taking place, such an inscription may or may not serve as an impetus for various degrees of actual social transformation, at least as far as "social transformation" is conventionally understood. By way of an anecdote, I was once told by a priest serving the poor mountain villages of El Salvador that the community-wide recitations of the Anglican liturgy are viewed by villagers as acts of solidarity over and against the secular, urban political institutions and authorities that typically ignore the plight of these underprivileged and oft-forgotten localities.

This chapter has argued that the salient features of revolutionary discourse that Kristeva identifies with poetic language holds true to the deployment of certain forms

religious language. Theology thus benefits from adopting Kristeva's theory of *signifiante* in the analysis of religious texts because such a reading discloses the ways in which the semiotic body of the believer effectively inscribes religious ideas and feelings into the symbolic plane. (The implications of this thesis for the discipline of theology will be explored in the final chapter.) The next chapter will include "proof-texts," or analyses of religious texts, to further demonstrate the "revolution in religious language" at work. Anselm's *Proslogion* illustrates the interplay of the semiotic body and the symbolic order of language and culture in the form of prayer, while in regard to Martin Luther King's homiletics, the semiotic inscription of religious ideas and feelings into the broader political and cultural order can be observed at the moment of enunciated speech acts.

## CHAPTER THREE: PROOF-TEXTS

### **Anselm's *Proslogion* and the Semiotic-Symbolic Dialectic**

Composed between 1077-1078 CE, the *Proslogion*, also known as the *Discourse on the Existence of God*, was written as an extended meditation or prayer by the Benedictine monk Anselm of Canterbury purporting to offer a rational argument for the existence of God. Its composition followed a previous work, the *Monologion*, which Anselm wrote “upon the insistent adjurations of certain brothers [...] as an example of meditating about the rational basis of faith” (2000, 88). Anselm, who was not totally satisfied with the earlier piece due its verbose complexity “as a chain of many arguments,” set out to articulate “a single consideration [...] which would require nothing other than itself for proving itself.” In other words, he became interested in stating a simple, straightforward argument in favor of Christian faith in God. What emerges in the *Proslogion* is not intended to represent an irrefutable empirical proof of God’s existence; it is, rather, an exercise in *a priori* logic. Simply stated, the main takeaway unfolds in the following way. By definition, the concept “God” represents the greatest of all concepts. God can be thought of as existing either in the imagination or in reality. Because a concept of God as existing in reality is “greater” than that which is merely imaginary, God must exist. After all, an imaginary God cannot be the greatest of all concepts due to the fact that an actual God would be greater.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the details of Anselm's so-called "ontological argument"—a problematic moniker in itself—concern us less than the manner in which the proof unfolds. In the past millennium, there has been no shortage of scholarly debate regarding its merits. Critics either question the legitimacy of Anselm's "universal" definition of God or simply dismiss any argument that fails to account for empirical evidence. Nonetheless, the famous rational proof of God's existence stands on more or less solid ground when it comes to logical validity. Critics over the centuries, though, whether receptive or hostile to Anselm's claims, have typically paid scant attention to the genre of the writing itself, which the author admits to being "unworthy to be called a treatise" (2000, 88). The *Proslogion* is essentially an extended meditation in which Anselm vacillates between addressing God in the style of a devotional prayer and addressing the reader regarding his unfolding rational proof.

The present section of this chapter, the first of two, will argue that Anselm's movement back and forth between prayer and rational argumentation results in a staggering demonstration of Kristeva's dialectical understanding of the relation of the semiotic and symbolic orders. In the segments of the text devoted to petitioning God for insight into the nature of the divine, the speaker's authority as subject gives way to what Friedrich Schleiermacher would later describe as a feeling of "absolute dependence." (Perhaps Freud's correspondent from *Civilization and Its Discontents* was onto to something after all in his coining of the term "oceanic feeling.") In these fragments of the *Proslogion*, the speaker momentarily loses himself in the process of giving himself over to what he understands as the Being of God, only to re-emerge several lines later

addressing the reader as a full-fledged subject. The overall process, as I will attempt to show, results in a rather straightforward demonstration of Kristeva's *signifiante*. The unity of the subject is temporarily challenged as he pleads to God for understanding, thus breaching the semiotic element of language. The subject then emerges, returning to the realm of the symbolic after apparently receiving the understanding that he sought. The "thetic break" is achieved, in this case quite literally, because logical proofs are essentially theses. Anselm actually covers several topics in the *Proslogion* beyond the existence of God, including the nature of the Trinity, the ultimate source of "good," and the joy to which one attains as a person of faith. In the pages that follow, though, I will analyze two topics—Anselm's ontological proof and his discourse on God's mercy—from the perspective of semanalysis.

The first chapter of the *Proslogion*, titled "Arousal of the Mind for Contemplating God," reflects on the proper state of mind that believers must summon prior to meditating on the mysteries of divinity. Significantly, for Anselm, this state of mind can only be reached through the obliteration of the self in the utter dependence upon God in a relation of faith. This sentiment, of course, recalls Friedrich Schleiermacher's observation from his book *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, first published in 1799, in which he attempts to explain the nature of faith to the secularized intellectuals of his day: "The essence of religion consists in the feeling of an absolute dependence" (1994). For Schleiermacher, a feeling of absolute dependence confirmed the reality of God in the face of a growing tide of agnostic and secular thinking at the turn of the nineteenth century, and it could only be realized through acts of prayer: "I know God must be real because I

feel love for him when I pray to him.” Prayer is thus the medium by which men and women experience God’s presence within themselves, and it is prayer that leads directly to an arousal of mind for the contemplation of divine mysteries.

But Christian prayer, outside of exceptional movements in the history of Christendom—for instance ancient Gnosticism or modern-day syncretic practices incorporating Buddhist meditation—has always taken the form of a linguistic act. Whether spoken aloud, uttered silently, or written down, prayer in the Christian tradition involves the articulation of communicative linguistic features aimed at addressing God. Anselm’s extended prayer in the *Proslogion* is no different. Invoking scripture, Anselm opens Chapter One by pleading, “So come now, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek You, where and how to find You. [...] But surely You dwell in light inaccessible” (2000, 90). The reader will immediately note a striking stylistic contrast with other foundational theologians like Augustine of Hippo, before him, and Thomas Aquinas, two centuries later, in that Anselm is less concerned with delivering a theological treatise according to classical standards of composition and more concerned with expressing a deep longing for connection with the divine through prayer. Only after that threshold is met does Anselm attempt to ponder a rational basis for the existence of God, the stated purpose for the work as a whole.

And yet, in the unfolding of his prayerful discourse, the Benedictine monk highlights what Schleiermacher, nearly a millennium later, could not, because Schleiermacher, like many of the Church Fathers and intellectuals before him, wrote in a conventional, academic prose form that privileged the denotative delivery of concrete



thoughts, reflections, and arguments. Anselm, on the other hand, vacillates between conventional argumentation, in which a subject is posed for the purposes of making a clear point, and the language of prayer, in which the subject would seem to momentarily pass from the foreground in an attempt to achieve a kind of dependent, pre-subjective state of mind. In other words, Anselm's text underlines not only Christian prayer in its essentially linguistic character, it showcases the process of *signifiance* at work. In his exhortations aimed at the "Lord God," Anselm resides in a space of negativity—the arena of the semiotic and the province of pre-subjective dependence corresponding to the psychic motility of the *chora*. In the multiple thetic breaks predicated on this dwelling in the semiotic, the subject bursts onto the scene, seemingly spontaneously and without the aid of transitional or rhetorical markers, as the linguistic vessel of declarative, argumentative, rational statements.

All in all, both the style and substance of Anselm's meditation in the *Proslogion* demonstrates the dialectical relation of semiotic and symbolic functions that Kristeva recognizes in all spoken and written texts. Anselm's work, though, is more an exhibition than a demonstration of this dialectical play in the working of *signifiance*. The reader will recall that all linguistic utterance partakes in the process of *signifiance*, but discourses that display the quality of pointing up the subject-in-process/on-trial are those which exhibit Kristeva's idiosyncratic notion of revolution to a greater degree, as in poetic language in general. In the first few lines of Chapter One, Anselm implores humankind to suppress the urge to engage in the everyday tasks and concerns of the human subject as cultural agent in favor of contemplating the richness of divine understanding:

Come now, insignificant man, leave behind for a time your preoccupations; seclude yourself for a while from your disquieting thoughts. Turn aside now from heavy cares, and set aside your wearisome tasks. Make time for God, and rest a while in Him. Enter into the inner chamber of your mind; shut out everything except God [...] after closing the chamber door, seek Him out. (2000, 90)

In and of themselves, these lines are hardly remarkable in the history of monastic literature, nor are they particularly unique in the context of the basic tenets of ascetic practice in general. And yet, in light of Kristeva's insights into the process of *signifiance*, this opening injunction to Anselm's readers reads like a metaphor for the working of negativity, in which the believer is beseeched to stray away from the domain of the sign and the linguistic and cultural structures stemming from it in order to inhabit that "inner chamber of mind" in which God is to be found. Within the framework of Kristeva's invocation of Freudian theory, after all, the semiotic *chora* serves as an enclosure or receptacle for those basic instincts—in this case, faith—that precede the purview of the symbolic.

Following Anselm's instruction to his readers to dwell, for a moment, in the inner reaches of the mind, he briefly addresses his own soul in a single line: "Speak now, my whole heart, speak now to God" (2000, 90). But this moment of self-injunction is immediately followed by a series of questions directed toward God, and it is significant that a vast portion of the prayerful discourse that follows—comprising the remaining lines of the opening chapter—is written in interrogative form. Interrogative statements, after all, are necessarily open-ended, in contrast with declarative ones. It is impossible, as all college professors know as they must painstakingly attempt to instill this principle in

their students, to formulate a proper thesis in terms of a question. More importantly, though, the questions that Anselm poses to God underscore a sense of utter dependence on the divine presence, even to the point of undermining the speaker's own subjective authority:

If you are not here, O Lord, where shall I seek [...] Or how shall I approach unto light inaccessible? Or who will lead me to and into this [light] so that in it I may behold You? [...] What shall Your distant exile do? [...] What shall Your servant do, anguished out of love for You and cast far away [...]? (2000, 90-91)

The speaker here is at a loss as to how to proceed lacking divine direction. He is, it is assumed, in the initial stages of the “arousal of the mind for contemplating God,” a state incumbent upon the giving over of oneself to the vulnerability of complete dependence. The reader may also note, recalling the discussion in the previous chapter of this dissertation, the use of the rhetorical device known as anaphora. One of the trademark characteristics of anaphoral repetition, or repeated words or phrases at the beginning of successive lines, is the rhetorical embodiment of the inadequacy of the authoritative subject. The repetitions “Or [...] Or [...] What shall [...] What shall [...]” instills in Anselm's audience a recognition of participation through anticipation, further heightening a sense of authorial dissolution, an effect already engendered in the giving oneself over to dependence on God, but here extended to the reader.

Anselm's self-interrogation continues, again in terms of grievous self-doubt, as the speaker calls out to God concerning the frivolity of his earthly endeavors as a “subject proper”:

What did I set out to do?, what have I achieved? For what was I striving?, where have I arrived? To what was I aspiring?, for what do I sigh? I sought after good things and, behold, [here] is turmoil. I was striving unto God but collided with myself. I was seeking rest in my inner recesses but found tribulation and grief in my inmost being. I wanted to laugh from joy of mind but am constrained to cry out from groaning of heart. (2000, 91-92)

The turning oneself over to God is nearly complete, and as in the earlier quotation, Anselm's language reflects an "inward-turning" as the speaker delves into his "inner recesses" and "inmost being." It is here that Anselm encounters not the "light inaccessible" that he seeks but instead "anguish," "turmoil," and a "groaning of heart." From the perspective of Kristeva's theory of *signifiance*, Anselm has begun to breach the psychic locale of the semiotic *chora*, the repository for the heterogeneous Freudian drives and storehouse of the primordial feelings and desires of the pre-linguistic human body. The "crying out from groaning of heart" recalls the infant child's instinctual response to the basic bodily needs for food, cleanliness, and safety for which she has yet to develop the ability to meet herself. The *chora*, after all, is formed initially out of the stark reality of the physical dependence of the child for its maternal figure. The sometimes messy drives, to be quelled, tucked away from one's conscious life, and even made illicit upon entry into the paternal law, nonetheless persist in the primordial space of the unconscious, to be encountered only indirectly as they are given voice in the pre-linguistic medium of the semiotic. Anselm, too, encounters chimeras of his own baser instincts. As a practicing Catholic, he predictably acknowledges them in terms of sin: "But [this image] has been so effaced by the abrasion of transgressions, so hidden from sight by the dark billows of sin, that unless you renew and refashion it, it cannot do what it was created to do" (93).

Further on, Anselm invokes another feature of the semiotic *chora*, that is to say, its role as primary regulator of desire—the maternal “no” that prefigures the child’s entry into symbolic law. For Kristeva, the desire of the infant for its mother must be mitigated even before the onset of the Oedipal drama, and for Anselm, the “inner recesses” into which he dives headlong in prayer are inundated with desire for that on which he relies utterly for his spiritual wellbeing: “Let me seek You in desiring You; let me desire You in seeking You. Let me find [You] in loving [You]; let me love [You] in finding [You]” (2000, 92). But it is perhaps the following passage lamenting the fall into original sin in the Garden of Eden that speaks most strongly as a metaphor for the precocious child’s always provisional quest to become a full-fledge subject:

Alas, the common mourning of men, the universal lament of the sons of Adam! Adam burped with satiety; we sigh with hunger. He abounded; we go begging. He happily possessed and unhappily deserted; we unhappily lack and unhappily desire, while, alas, remaining empty. Why did he not, when easily able, keep for us that of which we were so gravely deprived? (91)

Humankind’s fall from grace, in Anselm’s words brimming with imagery of the bodily pangs of hunger, singularly captures the tragic drama of the psycholinguistic development of human beings. Once safe, but totally dependent, on the primordial dyad of mother and infant, the growing child is thrust into the limelight as a budding subject in the symbolic order. Just as Adam and Eve basked in the glow of paradise only later to be laden with the impossible burden of responsibility as a constituent member of a fallen human race, Lacan’s and Kristeva’s precocious child must eventually sacrifice the

comfort of her mother's bosom for the stark reality of life in society. And in both cases, the sacrifice is necessary for the continuation of human culture in general.

For Anselm, critically, the linguistic medium by which believers can attain a momentary return to paradise is the practice of prayer. From the perspective of semanalysis, prayer offers up a means of breaching the semiotic in order to come face-to-face with the reality of one's ultimate dependence on divine being, but this moment of return is necessarily temporary. At some point, the process of *signifiante* must play out in its entirety, and the subject proper emerges on the scene in the thetic break. This climactic instance occurs in Chapter Two of the *Proslogion*. This chapter, titled "God Truly Exists," begins as a continuation of the extended prayer from Chapter One: "Therefore, O Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me to understand [...] that you exist, as we believe, and that You are what we believe" (2000, 93). Without any transitional markers, Anselm moves swiftly, stating the thesis of his so-called ontological argument, quoted here at length:

For that a thing is in the understanding is distinct from understanding that [this] thing exists. [...] So even the Fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be thought is at least in his understanding; for when he hears of this [being], he understands [what he hears], and whatever is understood is in the understanding. But surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be only in the understanding. For it were only in the understanding, it could be thought to exist also in reality—something which is greater [than existing only in the understanding]. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought were only in the understanding, then that than which a greater *cannot* be thought would be that than which a greater *can* be thought! (93-94; italics in original translation)

In other words, for Anselm, all can agree that the idea of God is the “greatest” of all conceptual potentialities, and as such, it must exist in reality because to exist only in the mind or “in the understanding” is, in essence, *not* greater than existing in reality. But Anselm’s rational defense of belief in God is not as important, in and of itself and for the purposes of the present analysis, as how he arrived there. It is telling, from the point of view of this dissertation, that his ontological argument comprises only a single paragraph—the four or five sentences quoted above—in the entirety of the *Proslogion*, appearing as the climax of some three to four *pages* of prayerful discourse preceding it. And it is only after the author displays the pull of negativity away from the semantic unity of denotative expression, thereby dwelling momentarily in the semiotic order of language, that the subject of symbolic discourse re-emerges in the moment of thetic utterance.

By Anselm’s own admission, the *Proslogion* does not fit the bill for a conventional theological treatise, and it is precisely because the work as a whole most closely resembles a prayerful meditative exercise that it points up the subject-in-process/on-trial in the dialectical relation of the semiotic and symbolic orders of language. While Kristeva’s theory of *signifiante* encompasses all linguistic acts, a discourse is more or less revolutionary according to the degree to which it demonstrates this dialectical vacillation. For Kristeva, poetic language, through various devices and tropes available to practitioners of this literary form, is the most useful medium for elevating the process of *signifiante* to the level of a legitimate revolutionary textual practice. As has become evident in the present analysis of Anselm’s ontological

argument, however, the language of prayer may harbor a similar capacity to temporarily derail the unity of a homogeneous subject, but only in time for the subject-in-process/ontological to emerge onto the scene in the moment of enunciated speech acts.

This vacillation between rational argumentation and prayerful meditation continues throughout the *Proslogion* as Anselm addresses an array of theological topics. His most important contribution, in the form of reasoned defense of God's existence, is followed closely by his discourse on God's mercy, spanning chapters Eight through Eleven. These passages attempt to address the theological justification for a merciful God in the face of a seemingly unjust world in which some are spared from divine wrath while other, arguably more deserving individuals, often find themselves in peril. As with the chapter on the ontological argument addressed above, the vast majority of these reflections are in the form of unanswered questions directed toward God: "But how are you both merciful and impassible? [...] But how is it that You spare those who are evil if You are completely and supremely just? [...] Or what justice is there in giving eternal life to one deserving of death? [...] Is your mercy, then, begotten from Your justice?" (2000, 97-99). Just as the infant, as yet incapable of participating in the complex semantic and syntactical systems of natural languages, struggles to communicate through gestural signals and incomprehensible sounds, so Anselm literally strives to make sense of difficult theological points in a mode of inquiry that, time and again, proves fruitless. The despair evident in Anselm's words mirrors that of an insistent child desperate for answers to questions about life's mysteries that her parents appear unwilling or unable to provide:

Indeed, You are [merciful] according to our experience but are not [merciful] according to Your experience. For when



You behold us in our wretched condition, we experience the effect of Your mercy; but You do not experience any emotion. And so, You are merciful because You save [us] wretched [creatures] and spare [us] who have sinned against You; and You are not merciful, because You do not experience compassion for wretchedness. (97)

Anselm here is at pains to reconcile an apparently contradictory understanding of divine justice and mercy in which believers' experience of the world is such that God's authority often appears arbitrary at best, at least according to human standards.

The many passages—totaling three chapters—making up Anselm's discourse on divine mercy echo the above excerpt in their inability to properly posit a rational reconciliation of divine mercy *vis-à-vis* divine justice. It is precisely this struggle to posit or to formulate a straightforward thesis that Kristeva identifies with negativity, and the almost gut-wrenching manner in which Anselm—line after line and page after page—literally pleads to God for answers is evidence of the Benedictine's taking up residence in the messy and tumultuous realm of the semiotic. The theological subject, unable to fully position himself as such, stands at the threshold of the semiotic and symbolic, breaking through, at long last, in the closing lines of Chapter Eleven, which represent the conclusion of the discourse on God's mercy in the *Proslogion*:

So, then, Your mercy is begotten from Your justice, because it is just for You to be good to such an extent that You are good even in sparing. And perhaps that is why He who is supremely just can will good things for those who are evil. But if we can somehow grasp why You can will to save those who are evil, surely we cannot comprehend why from among those who are similarly evil You save some and not others because of your supreme goodness, and condemn some and not others because of Your supreme justice. (2000, 101)

The thetic break of this extended meditation on God's merciful nature takes the form of Anselm's rational reconciliation of the problem of why divine justice sometimes seems unfair to God's creatures. Human beings simply are not on par with their creator in terms of knowledge, wisdom, and ultimately judgment. It is not creatures' prerogative to question their creator's cosmic role as a granter of mercy, on the one hand, or punishment, on the other. Mortal persons "cannot comprehend" such mysteries because we cannot begin to comprehend God's all-knowing "supreme justice."

Once again, as was the case with Anselm's argument for the existence of God, the reader will note that the thesis of this selection on God's mercy hardly takes the form of a conventional, arduously articulated, argumentative treatise. Preceded by large sections of prayer, the thesis is stated succinctly, and Anselm moves on to his next theological treatment on the "unlimited and eternal" status of divine sovereignty in Chapter Twelve of the *Proslogion*. This literary form, which can best be characterized as an extended meditation, as this present chapter has shown, highlights the process of *signifiante* in the dialectical vacillation of the semiotic and symbolic orders of language, pointing up the subject-in-process/on-trial as the speaker dwells in the negative, only to re-emerge onto the scene in the moment of the thetic break. As such, Anselm's *Proslogion* as a whole illustrates the interplay of the semiotic body of the believer and the symbolic register, further demonstrating that religious speech acts share with poetic language the capacity to inscribe pre-linguistic, semiotic features into the symbolic order of language. In the next, and concluding, section of this chapter, two famous speeches by Martin Luther King will be analyzed with a view to illustrating the semiotic inscription of religious ideas and

feelings into the broader political and cultural order in the moment of enunciated speech acts.

### **Revolution in Homiletics: The Case of Martin Luther King**

To my knowledge, little in the way of close literary analysis of Martin Luther King's sermons and speeches has been published in peer-reviewed, academic literature. It is generally acknowledged that King holds the torch as one of the most celebrated public speakers of the twentieth century. In one of the best scholarly accounts of King's role in the various political and human rights movements of the 1960s in the U.S., Vincent Harding, in his biographical (and polemical) *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (2008), hints at the importance of the Baptist preacher's sermons and speeches in the coalescing of African-American Civil Rights with other contemporary protest movements, including the rising tide of opposition to the conflict in Vietnam and the unease surrounding poverty, income inequality, and workers' rights. It is significant, at the very least, that Harding organizes his book less in terms of a historical chronology of landmark events in King's life as the principal voice for the conscience of the American Left, but more so as a record of his career as marked by memorable public addresses. As noted in the Introduction to this dissertation, an essential aspect to King's revolutionary work, a characterization that Harding insists on in the face of rightwing coopting of the legacy of this "inconvenient hero," was the remarkable popularity of his sermons and speeches.

While my purpose here is not to downplay the hard work or tremendous successes of grassroots organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and others,

this dissertation is ultimately concerned with whether and to what extent language in itself is invested in what Kristeva identifies with the “revolutionary” potential in the practice of *signifiance*. As noted in Chapter One, as well as with regard to T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” in the previous chapter, not only do some literary and rhetorical forms possess a greater potential to elevate *signifiance* from the level of process to practice, for Kristeva, linguistic acts that emerge in historical locations of cultural turmoil tend to be more effective as revolutionary discourses. Just as the poets whom she analyzes in *Revolution in Poetic Language* come to prominence in an epoch in which modern, capitalistic modes of production are overturning premodern economic and societal norms, Martin Luther King emerges as a public figure at the heyday of the Civil Rights movement, arguably one of the most contentious periods of domestic life in the U.S. since the aftermath of the Civil War. To be sure, certain linguistic forms are potentially more revolutionary than others, depending on the degree to which the subject-in-process/on-trial is pointed up, but the practice of *signifiance* in itself is typically more effectual when deployed in the cultural context of volatility or uncertainty—when the broader symbolic order of language and culture would seem to be at the brink of collapse or radical transformation. It is during these moments that the inscription of the semiotic body into symbolic law reaches its peak vigor, as culture in general becomes more receptive to novelty.

A casual review of Martin Luther King’s most influential sermons and speeches reveals stylistic elements that have already been scrutinized in great detail in the several examples of linguistic acts—analyzed above—that demonstrate the practice of

*signifiante* at work in poetry, the recitation of dogmatic creeds, and prayer. Anaphoral repetition, an element common to the practice of homiletics in the black church tradition in the U.S., was utilized by King frequently, as in his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” delivered during the March on Washington:

Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.  
Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of  
Pennsylvania.  
Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of  
Colorado.  
Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.  
But not only that.  
Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.  
Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.  
Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of  
Mississippi, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.  
(1991, 220)

The rhetorical force of anaphora, of course, depends on the sense of participation from one’s audience built upon their anticipation of the next line. In terms of semanalysis, the use of anaphoral repetition works to disperse the authority of the speaking subject to active listeners hearing the address, an effect that is enhanced in the recorded version of the speech. Whether it is the repetition of the well-known lines “I have a dream,” “We can never be satisfied,” or “Let freedom ring,” the crowd gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 comes to life at the very moments when King deploys anaphora, and while there are moments of prolonged applause following certain passages in which King invokes a more denotative, reasoned mode of delivery, those in attendance actively interject—with shouts of “That’s right,” “Come on now,” etc.—during the participatory parts of the speech like the one quoted above. King, as the speaking subject, undermines his own authorial prerogative, but that is precisely the point he is trying to get across.

After all, civil rights, for King and others involved in the movement, must become a reality for everyone in all parts of the country and indeed the world—“not only” the liberal states of the Northeast but everywhere, including the Deep South. While it is never directly stated that citizens should be treated equally regardless of geographical or cultural location, the various locales making their way into this portion of the speech are basically interchangeable, and so it is suggested, through a transposition of terms rather than through conventional declarative statements, that civil rights ought to apply universally.

In this case, style reflects content, but it also thrusts the process of *significance*—here understood as a practice employed by King for a singular effect—into the foreground. The repetition of the phrase “Let freedom ring” accomplishes at least two effects that serve to point up the subject-in-process/on-trial. First, because the phrase refers to an outside text, the patriotic song bearing the same name, its inclusion here for the purpose of extending the original intention of the lyrics to “bracketed” others—that is, black Americans fighting for civil rights—constitutes something like a connotative linguistic element in that its meaning is revealed to be malleable. The use of connotation, in a broad sense, reflects a depreciation of the semantic unity of the sign, allowing for its re-imagining or extension in another context. The sign, in other words, is disclosed as having multiple senses rather than a strict definition. “Let freedom ring” no longer applies only to white Americans or to black Americans living in the North, but to all Americans. King could have simply stated his demands for equal protection under the law for black Southerners, but instead he subtly extends the idea of equal protection by

referring to a universally recognized symbol of freedom in the words of a patriotic jingle, inverting its meaning by inserting it into a different rhetorical context.

Another feature of anaphoral repetition is that the repeated phrase loses some of its semantic value. The words “Let freedom ring” simply mean less in each succeeding line as the more general insight that King is seeking to get across overrides the mere comprehension of the repeated phrase, which is appreciated more for its rhythmic and tonal qualities than for its semantic denotation. From the perspective of Kristeva’s theory of *signifiance*, this movement away from the strictly semantic value of the sign is a move toward the semiotic order. But King rarely, if ever, ends these segments of his speeches and sermons without succinctly stating and summarizing his thesis. The thetic break of this concluding portion of his “I Have a Dream” speech appears immediately following the lines beginning with “Let freedom ring”:

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring  
from every village and hamlet, from every state and city,  
we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s  
children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles,  
Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to  
sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last,  
free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”  
(1991, 220)

Here the subject re-enters the scene, following a building up of connotative or negative expression, to posit a fully formulated, denotative thesis: achieving freedom and human rights for one marginalized group is essentially the extension of freedom and human rights for all.

King’s speeches and sermons serve as a remarkable example of Kristeva’s idiosyncratic notion of revolution in the practice of *signifiance* because they not only

point up the subject-in-process/on-trial and challenge the semantic unity of the sign, they additionally make overt inroads into the cultural realm. With regard to Anselm's practice of prayer in the *Proslogion*, the inscription of religious ideas and feelings into the symbolic order remain largely linguistic in nature. However, for Kristeva as for Jacques Lacan, culture is essentially an extension of language, and it is in King's work that the transposition and re-imagining of cultural values makes an observable impact beyond the linguistic arena. Two trends become apparent when King's homiletic style is closely analyzed. First, the Western Christian theological tradition is turned on its head as the values and approaches of the budding movement known as liberation theology, which attempts to steer theological reflection in a direction that takes seriously the plight of the oppressed, are applied to readings of scripture and contemporary church politics that are typically reserved for a more reactionary, "white-washed" brand of speculation. Second, ideas rooted in Christian theology, especially as re-imagined by King and like-minded contemporaries, are essentially inscribed into the ideological fabric of American exceptionalism. In each of these cases, King can be observed utilizing the salient features of Kristeva's notion of the practice of *signifiance* to transpose ideas and symbols, giving novel meanings to old clichés. What follows is an analysis of two sections of King's final speech, "I See the Promised Land," delivered at the Mason Temple in Memphis the evening before his assassination in 1968. The chapter will close with an analysis of another section of the "I Have a Dream" address. In both analyses, religious ideas and feelings are effectively "inscribed" into American social, cultural, and ideological institutions.



On the eve of his death at the hands of James Earl Ray, Martin Luther King spoke at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, headquarters of the Church of God in Christ, the largest African-American denomination in the U.S. His speech, “I See the Promised Land,” given as a statement of solidarity with the striking (and mostly black) Memphis Sanitation Workers, is often regarded as his most apocalyptic, even prophetic, public address. Although some have pointed out that King appears to “predict” his own death the following day, he actually delivered multiple versions of the speech—a common practice for King—in the months leading up to the sanitation workers strike. He begins the speech, which for all intents and purposes is written in the form of a Baptist sermon, by introducing a hypothetical scenario in which he is “standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of [a] general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now” (1991, 45). God then asks him, “Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?”, and what follows can be likened to a series of scenes from a documentary film reel. King is transported, chronologically, to different eras in the history of Western civilization. Interestingly, and crucially in terms of the analysis to follow, King’s imaginary “panoramic” tour of “human history” is restricted to mythical periods in the cultural imagination of white, Judeo-Christian Westerners.

In terms of homiletic style, King turns to a familiar device: the repetition of a certain line or phrase, in this case at the end of successive lines. (Repetition appearing at the end of successive lines is known as epiphora, but for the purposes of this dissertation, epiphoral and anaphoral repetition will be regarded as producing essentially the same rhetorical effect.) King goes on to describe his imagined, timeless excursion through

history: “I would take my mental flight by Egypt, [across] the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn’t stop there” (1991, 45). He continues:

I would move on by Greece, and take my mind to Mount Olympus. And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality.

After a significant pause, King concludes, “But I wouldn’t stop there.” At this point, even those in attendance at the event who had never heard King speak before would have begun to become aware of King’s intentions. This scene of a timeless, eternal Martin Luther King traveling effortlessly by the most critical moments in the mythic history of white Judeo-Christianity is far from reaching its conclusion. It is also at this point that the participatory effect of anaphoral repetition sets in, as members of the crowd chime in—with interjectory shouts of “Preach,” “All right,” etc.—in anticipation of the next line.

The next section is quoted at length here, with the repeated portion in italics:

I would go on, even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire. And I would see developments around there, through various emperors and leaders. *But I wouldn’t stop there.* I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, and get a quick picture of all that the Renaissance did for the cultural and esthetic life of man. *But I wouldn’t stop there.* I would even go by the way that the man for whom I’m named had his habitat. And I would watch Martin Luther as he tacked his ninety-five theses on the door at the church in Wittenberg.  
*But I wouldn’t stop there.* (1991, 279)

The anaphoral—or epiphoral—repetition on display in these lines works to defer King’s point, later stated in the form of a thetic break further on in the passage. It additionally

serves as a “building up” of momentum that places the utterances in the realm of the semiotic, which for Kristeva is essentially a striving of the subject to position herself as the speaker of a given thesis—a literal positing of both subject and thesis in the moment of enunciated speech acts. The longer the point is deferred or merely suggested without being clearly stated, the more intensive the pointing up of the subject who is in process, and the more the process of language itself is revealed to be a dynamic interplay of symbolic and semiotic elements. King dwells in this semiotic space of “striving” for several more lines:

I would come on up even to 1863, and watch a vacillating president by the name of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. *But I wouldn't stop there.* I would even come up to the early thirties, and see a man grappling with the problems of the bankruptcy of his nation. And come with an eloquent cry that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. *But I wouldn't stop there.* (279-280)

King has reached the climax of the passage. The transition from the semiotic space of deferral is abrupt. In the live recordings of the speech, the only transitional marker is in the form of the cheering crowd. King states the thetic break, moving swiftly toward conventional, ordinary speech patterns characteristic of the symbolic order, in the following words: “Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy.’” This statement is followed by an admission that the civil rights era, unlike many of the events and periods just surveyed, is characterized more by turmoil and upheaval than a sense of glorious progress. Nonetheless, King has managed, without explicitly saying it, to insert the civil rights era in the U.S. and around the world into the discussion of

watershed epochs and events in the history of Western Judeo-Christian civilization. Crucially, he does so not by simply making a declarative statement to the point but by means of rhetorical deferral and suggestion. In doing so, King taps into the linguistic and cultural foundation of revolution writ large, at least according to Kristeva's understanding.

Further on in the "I See the Promised Land" speech, the tangible effects of King's homiletic practice on Christian theological discourse can be observed in a passage on the parable of the Good Samaritan. King opens with a declarative plea to those in attendance at the Mason Temple to support the sanitation workers' ongoing strike by participating in peaceful protest themselves alongside the picketers. But in order to drive his point home, he digresses, in an extended passage invoking Jesus' parable to a skeptical inquirer. As the story goes, an injured man is stranded on the ancient road from Jerusalem to Jericho. A priest and a Levite, both Jews like the injured man himself, each pass him by without offering any assistance. Finally, a Samaritan, a sworn political and spiritual adversary to the ancient Jews, encounters the man. Unlike the priest and the Levite, though, the Samaritan stops to help. Recalling traditional interpretations of the passage made by white and African-American exegetes alike, King attempts to delve into the personal motivations of the priest and Levite, who refused to stop even to offer aid to one of their own:

Now you know, we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn't stop. At times we say they were busy going to church meetings—an ecclesiastical gathering—and they had to get on down to Jerusalem so they wouldn't be late for their meeting. At other times, we would speculate that there was a religious

law that “One who was engaged in religious ceremonials was not to touch a human body twenty-four hours before the ceremony.” (1991, 284)

In the audio recording of the speech, King inserts significant pauses in between these two interpretations, as an extra-verbal signal—and, from the perspective of Kristeva’s theory of *signifiance*, a semiotic gesture—expressing his own skepticism toward those who are all too willing to excuse the clerics’ behavior.

What’s more, he again employs a rhetorical deferral of the main point he is trying to get across. It is in the next line, however, that he first ties the actions of the priest and Levite to the political posturing of contemporary critics of civil rights: “And every now and then we begin to wonder whether maybe they were not going down to Jerusalem, or down to Jericho, rather [sic] to organize a ‘Jericho Road Improvement Association.’ That’s a possibility.” As many in the audience picked up on—evidenced by the interjection of laughter and applause in the audio recording—King is taking an indirect jab at those religious and political leaders who strongly criticized the movement’s utilization of direct action in the form of protests, marches, and sit-ins. For these leaders, it seemed advantageous to try to remedy the underlying systemic causes of racism and poverty. For King and his followers, however, refusal to engage in direct action was tantamount to adopting the callous attitude of the priest and Levite from the Good Samaritan parable.

King goes on, again deferring the overall meaning of his exegesis: “But I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible that these men were afraid” (2001, 284). By transposing the role of the priest and the Levite in the Biblical passage with

contemporary figures opposing the organization of public protests and workers' strikes, King condemns his critics as acting not out of a sense of pragmatism, but of outright fear. As he remarks later in the speech, "[The question before you tonight is] not, 'If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job?'" In other words, those who insist on tackling "systemic" issues but refuse to risk their own well-being for the basic rights of others are simply giving into fear and selfishness. King extends his analogy:

It's possible that [the priest and the Levite] felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man what will happen to him?" (284-285)

The priest and the Levite are thus the Biblical embodiment of modern political forces, especially white liberals in the North, who fail to see the humanity of the injured party, in this case African-Americans suffering from the oppression of a racially biased society, going so far as to question whether those pleading for relief from oppression are simply "making it up." But just as the Good Samaritan reverses the question, so too must allies of the Civil Rights movement: "'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?' That's the question" (285). Relying on the connotative resonance of speech acts that serve to defer the thesis of this passage—namely that it is a Christian's duty, and indeed that of anyone of good will, to help those in need, in this case the Memphis sanitation workers—King eschews denotative forms of speech. But doing so allows him to transpose the actors in the parable of the Good Samaritan with their modern-day counterparts, effectively injecting religious ideas and feelings—especially

those of the selfless caring for one's neighbor—into the symbolic order of language and culture. King says as much upon arriving at the “thetic break” of the passage: “Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness [to march with the sanitation workers]. Let us stand [with them] with a greater determination.” Aside from acting as the belated thesis of King's exegesis, these concluding lines point to the potential of speech acts not only to momentarily disrupt the semantic unity of the symbolic order of language, but to facilitate a more conventionally revolutionary movement on the ground.

King's exegesis of the Good Samaritan parable reveals the revolutionary potential of religious speech acts in terms of both theology, in the re-imagining of Jesus' lesson from the perspective of radical love for one's neighbor, and politics, inscribing religious sentiments into the contemporary discourse surrounding human rights. This chapter will conclude with an analysis of another passage from the “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington, a selection that does much of the same, with a greater emphasis on the inscription of King's Christian sentimentality into the broader realm of twentieth-century American ideology. Again, King will respond to criticism, primarily from the white political establishment: “There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, ‘When will you be satisfied?’” (2001, 218). King's response is, somewhat predictably at this point, in the form of a rousing polemic making liberal use of anaphoral repetition:

We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. [...] We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies [...] cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. [...] We

can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating “for whites only.” We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote. (218)

King is careful to not only address the grievances of Southern blacks, namely widespread disenfranchisement and segregation, but also the inequalities encountered in Northern metropolitan areas, especially regarding housing, jobs, gerrymandering, and the like.

In other words, all approaches to the problem of race in the country, aside from the Civil Rights movement, are at odds with the basic premise of what King refers to as “the American Dream,” namely, equality for all citizens. Northern and Southern whites alike adhere to an ideology that sells black Americans short, insisting that “separate but equal” ought to be enough of a compromise to satisfy the demands of all. As King cites elsewhere in the speech, such an ideology, birthed out of racism, whether overt or nonobvious, contradicts the spirit of the founding documents of the nation, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. But King is not content to merely invoke the words of Thomas Jefferson. He follows the excerpt above, instead, with a paraphrase of the Book of Amos: “No, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” (2001, 218-219).

In the overall context of the speech, in which King—speaking, of course, in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial statue—couches his call for racial equality in terms of the democratic values held by national heroes like Lincoln and Jefferson, the significance of King’s insertion of a line of Christian scripture rather than a quotation from the Constitution or some other political document comes into full view. For King, American



and Christian values regarding justice and equality are essentially the same. Instead of simply saying so, though, the one is subtly transposed with the other, and their identity is established through the connotative mobility of King's rhetorical style, in which scriptural references are freely substituted for ideological principles. The result is that, for many Americans, the image of "justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" is understood to refer to the struggle for equality and human rights. The meaning of the verse from the Book of Amos, together with the ideological and interpretive apparatus surrounding notions of justice and civil rights, is essentially writ anew.

This section of King's "I Have a Dream" speech concludes by transitioning to the most famous portion of the speech—and another instance of anaphoral repetition—that additionally serves as the thetic break of the "We cannot be satisfied" passage: "I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—*we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal*" (2001, 219; italics added). The identification of Christian and American values concerning the scope of justice and equality has come full circle, stated definitively in the words "all men are created equal." More importantly, though, King's homiletic practice has allowed for the inscription of religious values into the broader context of American culture and ideology.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### **Theology, Language, Culture**

Kristeva's theory of *signifiance* suggests that language consists of constituent elements or "orders"—namely the semiotic and symbolic—that interact in a dialectical fashion. The symbolic order, a term borrowed from Jacques Lacan, is understood as comprising the semantic and syntactical elements of natural languages and language in general. The communicative currency of the symbolic register is the linguistic sign. Culture is essentially an extension of the symbolic order, so it is additionally understood as constituting the "customs, institutions, laws, mores, norms, practices, rituals, rules, traditions, and so on of cultures and societies" (Johnston 2013). Accession to the symbolic order, together with the acquisition of language itself, is accomplished by means of the successful resolution of the Oedipus complex in early childhood, in which the paternal "no" demarking the repression of the Freudian drives serves henceforth as the Law of the Father, establishing the child at approximately age six as a subject proper. The subject is, thereafter, endowed with the "I" function allowing access to the cultural institutions in a given society.

Moving beyond Lacan, Kristeva, as outlined in her doctoral dissertation *Revolution in Poetic Language*, theorizes that the initial ordering function of language predates the Law of the Father. She suggests that prior to the paternal "no," the Freudian drives are already being ordered in the context of the relationship between the infant child

and its maternal figure. This “semiotic” order is established at a point in the child’s life in which she is wholly dependent on the maternal dyad. In other words, the infant’s bodily drives are being directed by the mother in a psychical space that Kristeva calls the *chora*. Because the semiotic element of communication—composed of gestural and vocal “signals” rather than linguistic signs—remains with the child for the rest of her life, even subjects-proper retain the capacity for accessing the primordial Freudian drives, which are inaccessible in Lacan’s schema in the aftermath of the resolution of the Oedipal drama. For Kristeva, every speech act is constituted by the dialectical interplay of semiotic and symbolic orders. The semiotic represents the bodily, heterogeneous, and generally messy nature of the pre-linguistic human animal, while the symbolic represents the higher levels of communicative functioning that are the exclusive right of the human subject. The subject of language and culture is established not upon accession to the symbolic order but in the enunciation of a given speech act. As the human person strives to speak, she is momentarily arrested in the motility of the semiotic *chora* until she reaches a point—the “thetic break”—in which she not only succeeds in positing a recognizable “thesis” but also manages to posit herself as a subject. Kristeva’s subject is thus always already a provisional one, established as an effect of a linguistic and cultural process. It is, for this reason, that she names the subject of language—and in the end, the human cultural agent—the “subject-in-process/on-trial,” to indicate that subjectivity comes into being tenably and intermittently as the effect of linguistic operations.

This process, which Kristeva terms *signifiance*, can be observed in all speech acts. However, certain kinds of speech acts elevate the process to a practice, especially poetry,

due to its emphasis on the physical and bodily elements of language as much as to its reliance on connotative rather than denotative expression. Such forms of meaning-making actively “point up,” to use Kelly Oliver’s phrasing, the subject as in a state of vacillation between semiotic and symbolic elements of language. The result of pointing up the subject-in-process/on-trial is far-reaching given that culture is an extension of linguistic processes. In any given speech act, but particularly those which make a practice out of the process of *signifiance*, utterances open up the realm of the semiotic—and the heterogeneous Freudian drives to which it has access—into the cultural arena. The unsayable or “un-symbolizable” is potentially inscribed into the fabric of the symbolic order of language and culture. The dual effect of pointing up the provisional subject in the breaching of symbolic law by the semiotic can lead, quite literally, to radical changes in the social order. For Kristeva, the practice of *signifiance* is the root cause of revolution, an idiosyncratic notion that nonetheless complements conventional understandings of revolt as predicated by social agents or political actors.

Chapters two and three of the present dissertation argue that certain instances of religious speech acts display the salient features of the practice of *signifiance*. Homiletics, prayer, and even the recitation of doctrinal creeds can momentarily undermine both the authority of the subject and the unity of the sign, setting in motion the inscription of specifically religious ideas and feelings into the broader cultural arena in which these speech acts are uttered. In this closing chapter, I will argue that analysis of religious texts from the perspective of Kristeva’s theory of revolution has significant consequences for the academic discipline of modern theology. Approaches to the problem of theorizing the

proper relation of language and culture to theological speculation have yet to take into account the effect of linguistic processes in the moment of enunciated speech acts. Thus, regardless of one's theological persuasion, understanding the full force of "revolution" in the practice of *significance* in relation to religious language can provide an instructive approach to the ongoing discussion of theology's relevance to modern cultural critique.

The intersection of theology, language, and culture has been explored in great depth in the last century and a half. At least two camps have emerged, seemingly aligning themselves along partisan lines: liberal theology and Radical Orthodoxy. Liberal theologians, in general, see modern cultural trends in a positive light as marks of human progress. They find the proliferation of democratic values like equality, diversity, and inclusion to be analogous to Biblical values at their best. Moreover, modernity is essentially malleable and open to incorporating theological principles sympathetic to the march of progress (Crossley 2007, 209). Christian theology, though, must become, in the process, more adaptive not only to the dictates of the modern scientific worldview—casting aside literal interpretations of scriptural creation stories in favor of allegorical exegesis, for instance—but also to societal advances in the understanding of gender, sexuality, and race. To be sure, there are currents within liberal theology falling under the rubric of postliberalism, which have "been critical of liberalism's alleged loss of Christian identity and over-accommodation to the demands of secular culture" (Hodgson 2010, 5). Nevertheless, liberal theologians, beginning with Luther, tend to see traditional, dogmatic Christianity as a relic of the past, seeking to work alongside like-minded secular voices in order to articulate a progressive vision for humanity's future.

Liberal theology, in large part, shares with “postmodernism” the precept that language is an essentially arbitrary tool for constructing meaning, and religious truths are thereby subject to ongoing interpretation. As John P. Crossley Jr. writes:

The essential element in liberal theology is the awareness that all attempts to capture in language the ‘divine’ or ‘holy’ or ‘transcendent’ that religious persons sense in their inmost being are human constructs and therefore subject to change as human perceptions change. (2007, 209)

It is this facet of language that allows liberal theologians to reconstruct scripture and tradition in ways that both invigorate theological speculation in general and prevent the discipline from becoming obsolete in the face of social and scientific advancement. It also represents the thread of “elective affinity” that ties liberal theology and secular liberalism together, permitting some degree of cross-pollination between the two:

Similarly [to liberal theology], the essential element in liberal politics is the awareness that all political arrangements designed to meet the human need to protect freedom in a secure environment are also human constructs and subject to change as circumstances change.

The other major thread in modern theology dealing with the intersection of theology, language, and culture overtly positions itself against liberalism. The movement known as Radical Orthodoxy has its roots in the 1980s in opposition to a perceived liberal bent of popular and academic theologians alike, who sought to abandon certain doctrines of the church as antiquated in an attempt to bridge the gap between secularism and Christianity. The Radical Orthodox movement is aimed at reviving traditional theological approaches of interpreting the world in hopes of lessening the cultural influence of modern secularism. For these thinkers, modernity ushered in a cultural and

intellectual climate in which theological speculation was forced to abandon its epistemological supremacy in favor of rational, scientific inquiry. Liberalism, whether theological or ideological, took center stage as the patristic tradition was quickly abandoned or brushed under the rug. Radical Orthodoxy attempts to reinterpret the modern worldview from the perspective of traditional theology:

Not simply returning in nostalgia to the premodern, it visits sites in which secularism has invested heavily—aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space—[resituating] them from a Christian standpoint; that is, in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church and the Eucharist. (Milbank, et al.; 1999; 1)

In other words, Radical Orthodoxy, which is sometimes interpreted by detractors as an outright rejection of the modern and a call for a return to premodern culture, actively seeks new approaches to the behemoth that is modernity in generative ways. The scope and ambition of the project is actually quite compelling.

Nonetheless, Radical Orthodoxy sets itself up as an enemy of modernity from the outset. Its standard-bearer, the British theologian John Milbank, accuses the modern world of naively adopting an ideology built upon a foundation of violence and a limiting worldview that only admits truth claims generated within the confines of rational, scientific inquiry. As the introduction to the collection of essays titled *Radical Orthodoxy* states:

And just how is [the movement] *radical*? Radical, first of all, in the sense of a return to patristic and medieval roots, and especially to the Augustinian vision of all knowledge as divine illumination—a notion which transcends the modern bastard dualisms of faith and reason, grace and nature. Radical, second, in the sense of seeking to deploy this recovered vision systematically to criticize modern

society, culture, politics, art, science and philosophy with an unprecedented boldness. (Milbank, et al.; 1999; 2)

Thus, as liberalism intends to bridge the gap between the Christian faith and modern cultural trends through a kind of cross-pollination, Radical Orthodoxy favors the transformation of modern society through a return to premodern, doctrinal theology in which the gap between faith, knowledge, and culture had yet to be breached—an epoch epitomized in the thought of Augustine of Hippo. In doing so, Radical Orthodoxy explicitly criticizes modernity for delegitimizing faith as a medium for the generation of meaning in the world, privileging as it does the relatively banal worldview of modern science and philosophy. The result, for the champions of the movement, is a nihilistic culture lacking any moral basis on which to stand.

Like theological liberalism, the Radical Orthodox movement adopts a postmodern stance toward the relation of language and culture, in which meaning is essentially fluid and subject to the vagaries of change. Whereas liberal theology seizes on this facet of language and culture as the basis for dialogue between secular modernism and the Christian faith, Radical Orthodoxy sees the postmodern situation as an opportunity to reestablish the supremacy of doctrinal Christianity as a cultural paradigm. For liberals, both modern culture and religion stand to gain from a relation of mutuality, in which each works alongside the other in the name of human progress. For adherents to Radical Orthodoxy, postmodernity represents the culmination of the modern project, in which a rejection of truth claims on the part of the faithful has played out to its inevitable end, leaving in its wake a void that translates to a widespread sense of cynicism. For Milbank and his colleagues, though, this degeneration into nihilism opens up the possibility of



filling the void left by a collapse of meaning with a patristic, doctrinal theology reimagined for the postmodern world: “For this new project regards the nihilistic drift of postmodernism (which nonetheless has roots in the outset of modernity) as a supreme opportunity [...] In the face of the secular demise of truth, it seeks to reconfigure theological truth” (Milbank, et al.; 1999; 1).

Liberal theology and Radical Orthodoxy thus stand diametrically opposed with regard to the proper relation between modern culture and Christianity. While they share a common theory of language and cultural institutions as essentially malleable, theological liberals see the postmodern situation as an opportunity to open up dialogue between secular and religious voices with the goal of advancing a progressive agenda. Doctrinal orthodoxy need not stand in the way of progress, and cultural malleability need not equate to nihilism. Adherents to the Radical Orthodox movement, on the other hand, seek to take advantage of what they see as a void or crisis of meaning—the end result of a modern epoch that rejects theological truth claims—by re-introducing doctrinal orthodoxy, albeit in a re-imagined way. Neither liberal theology nor Radical Orthodoxy, however, offer a thoroughgoing theory of language and culture that is able to fully articulate the effects of religious speech acts *vis-à-vis* the cultural structures of late modernity. Taking into account Kristeva’s theory of revolution via the linguistic practice of *signifiance* serves to benefit both theological movements due to its strictly nonpartisan approach. Because Kristeva’s idiosyncratic notion of revolution applies to any and all speech acts, regardless of whether the speaker subscribes to a reactionary or progressive agenda, it has the potential to enrich both sides of the debate. The application of this

“revolution in religious language” to the intersection of theology, language, and culture is not, therefore, an attempt to offer a middle ground to the approaches advanced by theological liberalism or Radical Orthodoxy. Instead, it serves to provide additional tools for theological speculation regarding the role and impact of religious language in the realm of culture.

In addition, it provides a “third way” of theorizing theology’s relation to culture that avoids the pitfalls of strict adherence to ideological assumptions concerning the clash of modern cultural trends and religious conviction. Liberal theologians may, in fact, as the Radical Orthodox movement contends, be too quick to dispose of traditional expressions of faith and a doctrinal understanding of the church. Similarly, Radical Orthodoxy often appears uncompromising in the face of social change and glibly dismissive of the many advantages brought on by the advent and subsequent development of the modern project. Understanding religious language as subject to the process of *signifiance*—and potentially comprising a *practice of signifiance*—reveals the impact of religious speech acts at the moment of utterance, arguably a more incisive and explicitly theoretical approach than those put forward by theologians entrenched in what amounts to an ideological debate. What follows is a more detailed account of theological liberalism and Radical Orthodoxy, with an emphasis on the respective theories of language and culture put forward by these movements. The chapter concludes by articulating how analysis of religious speech acts from the perspective of Kristeva’s theory of *signifiance* offers a new approach to the conversation concerning the

intersection of theology, language, and culture—an approach that eschews partisan rancor.

Before closing this section, it should be noted that the term “postmodern” will be used—admittedly in a somewhat ambiguous fashion—to describe the cultural and philosophical conditions of late modernity, particularly when it comes to the question of language. In particular, language and the cultural structures to which it gives rise are effectively devoid of static meaning, as they are seen as malleable and subject to change. Language, moreover, cannot contain absolute truth, as there is always a derivative or trace of human experience that it cannot fully encapsulate. Such usage is in keeping with the tenets of the Radical Orthodox movement, which regards the status of language and culture in the postmodern condition as “having roots in the outset of modernity” (Milbank, et al.; 1999; 1). In essence, postmodernity is the culmination of the modern project, which sought to contain truth within scientific and philosophical discourses, an approach that ultimately proved untenable. Theological liberalism, while not offering an explicit theory of language and culture in terms of postmodern philosophy, generally adheres to the idea of the malleability of linguistic and cultural manifestations.

### **The “Ambiguous Heritage” of Liberal Theology**

Unlike Radical Orthodoxy, liberal theology falls short of amounting to a definitive movement in the history of Christian thought. Comprising a wide range of thinkers spanning at least two centuries, liberalism has nonetheless proved to be a significant, if diverse, force within theology. Arguably, it was the first to directly address the social and cultural effects of modernity on the continued relevance of Christian faith.

Various theologians and philosophers have attempted to explain or re-define Christianity in ways that made sense to an audience steeped in an intellectual milieu that prized the discoveries attributed to the proliferation of the scientific worldview. Friedrich Schleiermacher sought to define faith as a deeply felt sensation of dependence on that which is greater than oneself. Søren Kierkegaard argued that faith was not so much passive belief but an active decision to respond to God's calling. Paul Tillich set out to re-imagine a person-like God as the "Ground of Being." In each case, these theologians avoided careful deliberation of doctrinal orthodoxy in an attempt to reclaim a notion of faith that had been discredited by modern science and philosophy. As Peter C. Hodgson writes, "Liberal theology had its beginning in the German Enlightenment of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which demanded new ways of thinking about the relation between religion, culture, and science" (2010, 5). For many, theology needed an update in order to deal with a budding skepticism regarding the truth claims of traditional church doctrine. In time, Hodgson continues, "Religious orthodoxies were criticized by philosophy and science, and religion was recognized to be a product of culture." Rather than abandoning theology altogether, though, writers like Schleiermacher and even G.W.F. Hegel set out to place the ancient discipline on new foundations that could embrace the developments of the modern epoch while holding fast to the continued relevance of faith traditions. The notion that religion was ultimately a product of culture did not bother liberal theologians, because it opened the door to expanding the intellectual foundation of faith claims beyond the rigid strictures of doctrine.

The relegation of religion to the status of a cultural construction additionally represented a breath of fresh air for theologians who were open to the idea of a more sophisticated dialogue between secular and theological thought. “At their best,” writes William D. Dean, “liberal theologians have understood liberal theology to be the product of a particular kind of interaction between theologians and secular thinkers, in which theologians adjust to but, typically, also reach beyond secular thought” (2009, 25). In other words, liberal theologians acknowledge the indispensability of secular thought and cultural trends, but they pointedly disavow any suggestion that theology is no longer relevant. Indeed, theological liberalism insists that theology, liberated from the bonds tying it to antiquated methodologies and especially the reliance on doctrinal speculation, is capable of providing systems of meaning that step in where secular thought inevitably leaves off. While strains of liberal thought run through most traditions in modern theology, eschewing any formal delineation as a particularly Protestant phenomenon, liberal theology across the board can trace its roots back to the emergence of German idealism in the late eighteenth century. Liberal theologians univocally take Kant’s assertion seriously that “theologians could infer the existence of God neither from patterns in nature nor from the realm of ideas” (Wildman 2011, 46). The advent of modernity markedly thrust science into the forefront of the intellectual arena in matters concerning empirical knowledge and reason, due in no small part to its methodological superiority in these areas. What’s more, doctrinal formulations in the patristic tradition, relying on classical models of reasoning adopted from ancient Greek philosophy

predating, by millennia, Kant's rational critiques, were revealed to be inadequate in the face of modern developments.

Rational inquiry and empirical analysis became the exclusive prerogative of scientists and secular philosophers, but there remained facets of human experience for which secular and scientific accounts were sorely lacking. For liberal theologians, the future of theology depends on a willingness to address this impasse. While it is all but impossible, in the space provided, to include an exhaustive survey of the many diverse attempts<sup>9</sup> made over the course of two-plus centuries to this purpose, Wesley J. Wildman offers an excellent summary of the features held in common by thinkers in the intellectual tradition that has come to be known as liberal theology, quoted here in full:

- attempt to engage cultural wisdom and to accommodate traditional beliefs to it in such a way as to remain faithful to a particular faith tradition [...]
- date back to the European Enlightenment, with some having earlier links to the Protestant Reformation;
- share in various ways the Enlightenment wariness toward externally imposed authority and superstition;
- share the Enlightenment hope for a peaceful future based on science, technology, medicine, the overcoming of tribalism, the rejection of ingroup-outgroup exclusion, the collapse of hierarchies, the refusal of fanatical aggression, and the affirmation of a moderate form of religious belief and practice that sustains people in meaningful lives while enhancing creative cultural expression. (2011, 45)

The spirit of theological liberalism is thus one of cooperation with social and intellectual developments characteristic of modernity. At stake is the degree to which faith is to be

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<sup>9</sup> Included among individual "movements" of theological liberalism in the Christian tradition are the so-called Liberal Protestants and the Catholic Modernists.

modified to suit the exigencies of a world in which religious orthodoxy is no longer the primary source for the generation of meaning. Implicit, though, is the understanding that religious convictions potentially exert an influence in the unfolding project that is the modern epoch. Theological liberalism seeks to make the playing field even by conceding the supremacy of secularism in terms of its ability to “civilize” populations through a rejection of religious superstition and fanaticism and to improve the quality of life by means of medical, technological, and economic advancement. Theology becomes one modern discourse among many, but as such it is capable of settling into a new role as the moral conscience of societies. Moreover, it stands ready to offer insights drawn from careful theological reflection as an ancillary vehicle for the generation of meaning in matters beyond the intellectual purview of secular discourses.

For theological liberals, a clear distinction is made between the respective domains of the secular and the sacred. Harking back to its “earlier links in the Protestant Reformation,” liberal theology accepts at face value Martin Luther’s delineation of the powers of church and state. Often called the “two kingdoms” doctrine in reference to John Calvin—and arguably Augustine of Hippo many centuries earlier—Luther actually invoked the terminology of “two governments.” In “Temporal Authority: To What Extent Should It Be Obeyed,” Luther describes two governments existing side by side: the temporal and the eternal. On the one hand, the temporal or “left-hand” government administers worldly affairs, while on the other hand, the eternal or “right-hand” government is under the dominion of grace through the free exercise of faith. While Luther characterizes the affairs of the church as fitting under the rubric of the

“worldly”—and thus falls short of articulating the modern secular understanding of the separation of church and state—liberal theologians have seized on this delineation to theorize a clearly demarcated division of secular and sacred authorities. In doing so, theological liberals effectively cede the authority of the administration of societies to secular institutions while retaining sovereignty over spiritual matters. Crucially, for Luther, people of faith were encouraged to act according to their religious convictions from within the secular order itself as dignitaries of worldly institutions. Luther’s “give and take” brand of theology thus paves the way for Christians who generally agree that secular authorities are preferable to churchly ones in matters pertaining to societal advancement but who also feel that faith can provide additional impetus for human progress.

Walter Rauschenbusch, the *fin-de-siecle* American liberal theologian, is a great example of a thinker who accepted, albeit without actually affirming, the supremacy of modern secular institutions, but whose religious convictions spurred a deeply held personal investment in seeing to their progressive improvement. Rauschenbusch, an avowed communist, offers a scathing critique of modern industrial societies, polemicizing on the indignity of poverty and the social harm brought on by class warfare. Invoking the primitive social structures implemented by early Christians prior to the homogenizing efforts of the Church Fathers to build up an institutional church, he contrasts the proto-socialist organization of the first Christian communities with the social conformity of the later church, which shared with contemporary nonreligious institutions an emphasis on acquiring land and wealth:



It is significant that for a long time the churches did not accumulate property. If real estate was given, it was sold and the proceeds used up. If there was any special need, a collection had to be taken to meet it. In the Greek fraternal associations the accumulation of income-bearing property was essential. The later Church, too, derived its income from landed wealth. The primitive Church was on principle without property. (1907, 125)

For Rauschenbusch, Christians began to stray from their founding principles in an effort to mimic the successes of Gentile fraternities—and much later on, the imperial aspirations of Western civilizations following the Greek and Roman models. Even the ritualization of the Eucharist is seen as a degradation of the spirit of sharing communal meals as practiced by the earliest Christians. Moreover, the recycling of funds back to the infrastructure and administration of churches rather than to the needy spoke to the budding decadence of primitive Christianity, a decadence that persists in modern times:

[The] income of the Church was wholly for those in need. In modern church life the bulk of the income goes for the support of the clergy and the expenses of worship, and even of the expenses for benevolence only a small fraction is for charitable help of the needy. (125-126)

Rauschenbusch's critique of the modern church is not so much a lamentation but a call to action. In no small part, the advent of secular socialism in the wake of Marx and Engels led Rauschenbusch to revisit the civic role embraced by early Christians in their focus on ministry to the poor and marginalized. In terms of the broader culture, he recognized that the social crises of imperial Rome mirrored those of the recently industrialized societies of modern Europe and North America. Modern Christians, he insisted, like their ancient forbears, should invest the time and energy to address these crises rather than holding to a stance of cool neutrality. For Rauschenbusch, Christianity

retains a treasure trove of resources for resolving the modern problems of poverty amongst the working classes. His recommended approach fits nicely into the framework of theological liberalism. Standing alongside the secular left, Rauschenbusch calls on Christians to practice their faith in a way that stresses the early Christian communities' dedication to rendering services to the working poor. Dogmatic theology, which represents the Golden Age of Christian thought to those who seek to maintain the status quo, is abandoned in favor of what Rauschenbusch calls the "Social Gospel" as practiced by the first Christians. The implementation of a modern Social Gospel means working within the imperfect social institutions of the day in an effort to take seriously the words of Jesus to tend to the "least of these." Rauschenbusch, then, seeks cooperation with those advocating to address the problems faced by the working classes of the world.

What's more, though, Rauschenbusch believed that Christianity, at least from the outset, exhibited a unique willingness to aid the poor and marginalized in a spirit of selfless giving. Even the modern institutional church had a role to play, if released from the bondage of its medieval decadence, and indeed the stakes are high for all involved:

This is the stake of the Church in the social crisis. If society continues to disintegrate and decay, the Church will be carried down with it. If the Church can rally such moral forces that injustice will be overcome and fresh red blood will course in a sounder social organism, it will itself rise to higher liberty and life. (1907, 341)

In spirit, theological liberalism recognizes a distinction between religion and the broader culture in which it is practiced; nonetheless, the relationship is not one of opposition but of cooperation. Liberal theologians acknowledge the value of modern democratic ideals like "liberty and life" because the continued existence of the church depends on them.

This modern social crisis, in which the industrial elite flourishes off the backs of the workers, must be addressed by the church as well as by those working under the flag of secular socialism. Rauschenbusch, moreover, admits that while certain strands of early Christianity may serve as inspiration for modern pursuits, people of faith must be able to adapt to contemporary cultural issues:

[It] is futile to attempt to reform modern society on biblical models. The principle underlying the Mosaic land system is wholly right. The spirit pervading the Hebrew laws protecting the laborer and the poor is so tender and noble that it puts us to shame. But these legal prescriptions were adjusted to an agricultural and stationary population, organized under patriarchal and tribal conference, and they would be wholly unworkable under modern conditions.  
(345)

Society must evolve, but so also must faith traditions. Any attempt to resuscitate premodern, faith-based legalisms to protect the working poor is wishful thinking.

Rauschenbusch goes on to offer ways in which the modern church, drawing inspiration from the original “socialist” sects of Roman imperial civilization, can further the cause of workers in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Christians have the advantage not only of sharing a sacred history rich in ministering to the needs of the poor and oppressed, they tend to run in all circles of life. On a given Sunday, representatives of both capitalist and working classes can be found congregating together, giving Christians a unique opportunity to serve in mediator roles in matters of class strife:

A minister mingling in both classes can act as an interpreter for both. He can soften the increasing class hatred of the working class. He can infuse the spirit of moral enthusiasm into the economic struggle of the dispossessed and lift it to something more than a “stomach question.” On the other hand, among the well-to-do, he can strengthen the

consciousness that the working people have a real grievance and so increase the disposition to make concessions in practical cases and check the inclination to resort to force for the expression of discontent. (1907, 368)

Christianity thus stands at the forefront of a vital reconciliation process between the forces behind an unhinged capitalism and the class of workers on which it depends, but of whom it also exploits. Although Christian faith is effectively relegated to the level of one modern agency of change among many, it has much to offer in the way of an institutional intermediary that perhaps secular institutions cannot attain to.

As stated above, the tradition of theological liberalism has yet to theorize a thoroughgoing account of the relation of language to culture and theology. Specifically, liberal theologians have offered scant evidence that the linguistic practices associated with religious speech acts do anything toward the progressive transformation of societies. In general, it can be assumed, following Crossley, that liberal theology accepts a broadly postmodern view of culture as a product of linguistic acts, and that cultural constructions are thus arbitrary and subject to change, much of the theory behind this assumption is largely implicit and gleaned, in retrospect, through a careful survey of thinkers who fall under the umbrella of “liberal theologians.” The best example of a liberal theologian who addresses the question of language in an overtly theoretical way is undoubtedly Henry N. Wieman, whose *The Source of Human Good*, first published in 1946, incorporates linguistic phenomena as a principal factor in a far-reaching account of the nature of human progress.

The central problem for Wieman is how the concept of value can be accounted for. For Wieman, value is a product of the interaction between subject and object that

brings about qualitative meaning in relation to a particular “event,” which is retroactively and intuitively understood as good on the part of the human subject. An event is here defined as a particular interaction between a subject and object that brings about a sense of being valuable or “good.” The subject enriches her life by virtue of her interconnectedness with objects in the world around her, whether it be tasty food, delightful conversation, a thought-provoking novel, a night out on town, a beautiful sunrise, etc. The meaning generated from these encounters is described by Wieman as “qualitative,” meaning that it is a product of complex interactions that cannot be boiled down to quantitative expression, as in language:

Quality is always intrinsic to the total situation. It does not characterize merely one object in the situation, even though we do say, “The tree is green,” “The person is joyous,” “The wound is painful.” Analysis reveals that the total situation, which is always a complex, total event, bears the quality and not merely the particular object which may seem to be the bearer of it. (2008, 302)

Nonetheless, language is a necessary vehicle for communicating one’s experiences to others. Only then does the relation of subject and object become a relation of subject and subject. Interconnectedness is elevated to the level of intersubjectivity, and although no one is capable of fully communicating one’s experience of her “total event,” which she perceives as good, linguistic communication serves as a means by which the human subject can enrich her own sense of what is good by incorporating others perceptions of qualitative value.

The importance that Wieman places on language in the overall experience of qualitative meaning hinges on his progressive theological vision, in which the universe is

understood as a succession of interconnected events that play out in linear time. These events, which can extend to cosmological occurrences such as the formation of the solar system or to biological mutations creating new and more advanced species through the process of evolution, create order out of chaos and serve to move creation forward in the way of progress. The introduction of human beings onto the scene represents a landmark event in the history of the universe. For the first time, qualitative meaning and the experience of what is good could be communicated efficiently between human subjects. From the perspective of increasing value in the world, the proliferation of linguistic communication is as significant, in some ways, as the advent of life itself. Perhaps most importantly, the uniquely human endeavors of language and aesthetic expression allow subjects to become active participants in the generation of value, goodness, and meaning through intentional involvement in the cosmic dynamic of interconnectedness. Creative good, as Wieman calls it, involves the human subject assuming a role as the progenitor of “events” in addition to her capacity as an objective observer. The process of generating value through linguistic expression and artistic endeavor unfolds according to a fourfold schema, broken into distinct “subevents”:

The four subevents are: emerging awareness of qualitative meaning derived from other persons through communication; integrating these new meanings with others previously acquired; expanding the richness of quality in the appreciable world by enlarging its meaning; deepening the community among those who participate in this total creative event of intercommunication. (2008, 58)

In this way, language and art play a direct role in the progressive transformation of the human condition, understood as requiring an expanding richness of meaning in order to be deemed valuable.

Ultimately, though, it is God that is the source of all creative events, in that living out the dictates of religion furthers the value of communities by enhancing the common life. The concept of God, which Wieman sees as rightly nontheistic—meaning God is best conceived not as a transcendental “person” but as a symbol for “creative power”—is indispensable for the betterment of the world. As a liberal theologian, Wieman admits that the modern institutional framework of science and technology should dictate the manner in which societies advance in the realm of epistemology, and religion should not seek to rework scientific claims for the furthering of specious faith claims: “Knowledge is needed today not primarily to engender faith but to guide faith in the service of creative good when science and technology are the tools we must use in rendering this service” (2008, 48). In other words, the church should work alongside secular institutions for the purpose of advancing the common good through the communal proliferation of interconnectedness. However, Christian faith in particular has the advantage over other modern discourses by virtue of being founded on theological principles that are able to serve in a corrective role over and against the excesses of modernity. As Wieman writes,

The best in Christianity, put into the form of ancient doctrine, is revelation of God, forgiveness of sin, and salvation of man—these all by way of Jesus Christ. These three are different strands woven together into a single complex event, the character of which can be simply stated: the reversing of the order of domination in the life of man *from* domination of human concern by created good *over to* domination by creative good. This event saves the world

when it includes the establishment of a community which carries the new order down through subsequent history. (2008, 268-269)

In spite of the great achievements of modernity, it is nonetheless plagued by a history of domination and exploitation at the hands of those with influence over the bureaucratic and infrastructural framework of modern technological societies. Christianity thus stands at the ready to communicate the value of selfless concern for the qualitative good of humanity in the face of a world order that values the selfish advancement of individual concerns.

For Wieman, though, it is not through instruction in doctrinal creeds or personal faith commitments that Christian institutions carry out this work, but through the building of communities, because good is increased only by means of intersubjective relationship. Communities fostering interconnectedness through aesthetic and linguistic endeavor are the sole fountainheads for the progressive expansion of meaning and value in the world. Language, as a medium for enlarging the richness of human experience, is thus at the forefront of societal progress. And yet, while Wieman goes further than most liberal theologians in theorizing the role of language in the progressive advancement of modern culture, he falls short, in his decidedly metaphysical approach, of recognizing the effect of linguistic statements at the level of enunciated speech acts. As such, from the perspective of Kristeva's notion of revolution in the practice of *signifiante*, his treatment of language remains undertheorized. Theological liberalism as a whole—keeping in mind its somewhat “ambiguous heritage” as a highly diverse and multivalent field of research—has ultimately failed to provide a distinctive theory of language that takes into



account the dynamic relation of biological bodies and the cultural arena in which they participate. The application of Kristeva's theory of *signifiance* to the realm of religious speech provides such an account, in that it postulates the intersection of language, theology, and culture in a way that allows it to recognize the effect of individual speech acts on the part of speaking subjects—in this case the bodies of believers with access to the symbolic order—within the larger arena of the modern secular world.

### **Radical Orthodoxy, or “The Word Made Strange”**

The Radical Orthodox movement stands in stark contrast to theological liberalism. In particular, its approach belies a thinly veiled animosity toward modern secular culture and toward its perceived champion, theological liberalism. Radical Orthodoxy has picked up steam among academic theologians in the course of the past three decades under the influence of writers like John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, and even the secular philosopher Slavoj Žižek. As noted above, Radical Orthodoxy represents an attempt to reclaim the epistemological supremacy of doctrinal theology against a backdrop of secular modernism:

For several centuries now, secularism has been defining and constructing the world. It is a world in which the theological is either discredited or turned into a harmless leisure-time activity of private commitment. And yet in its early manifestations secular modernity exhibited anxiety concerning its own lack of ultimate ground. [...] And today the logic of secularism is imploding. Speaking with a microphoned and digitally simulated voice, it proclaims—uneasily, or else unashamedly—its own lack of values and lack of meaning. (Milbank, et al.; 1999; 1)

Secularism and the modernist discourses of science and rational critique that accompany it are unable to even pose the big questions for which religion unabashedly provides

answers. Despite the great material advances spurred by the modern project, its denizens are left spiritually bereft, their lives devoid of deeper meaning.

But the stakes are much higher. As Milbank writes:

[The] faith of humanism has become a substitute for a transcendent faith now only half-subscribed to. [There] is a perceived need to discover precisely how to fulfil Christian precepts about charity and freedom in contemporary society in an uncontroversial manner, involving cooperation with the majority of non-Christian fellow citizens. Purportedly scientific diagnoses and recommendations fulfil precisely this role. (2008, 2)

The predominance of secular humanism in the aftermath of the European Enlightenment has effectively pushed traditional, doctrinal Christianity to the side. Whatever is considered salvageable—for instance, ideas surrounding charity and freedom—are thought to be safely aligned with humanistic principles, and thus the terms for faith’s continued relevance are already decided by humanists from the outset, and not the faithful themselves. For those theologians who have gotten on board with humanistic ideology, namely liberals, any hope of cooperation with like-minded secular humanists is also dictated by secular authorities who offer sociological or “purportedly scientific diagnoses and recommendations.” Again, the conversation, which may seem equitable for well-meaning Christian liberals, turns out to be one-sided.

This seemingly overbearing stance of secularists toward any and all religious teaching is indicative of what Milbank calls the “*ethos* of original violence” upon which modernism was founded. Secular culture, humanism, and modern scientific discourses demand complete allegiance, and at their base lies a foundation built upon domination. In contrast to the tenets of a Christian tradition that prizes peace and charity, secularism and

the modern project in general are sustained by materialism, individualism, greed, and exploitation. The elision of a genuinely Christian *ethos* from the realm of culture is far from accidental; it is the result of concerted efforts on the part of secularists to dismantle the theological underpinnings of modern society. In fact, though, the tactics of secular thinkers are indicative not of humanism's supremacy but of a deep anxiety pervading modern thought and culture as a whole, an anxiety stemming from an implicit knowledge that secular humanism cannot hope to provide meaning for people's lives to the degree that religion can.

In essence, Radical Orthodoxy seeks to step in where secularism ultimately fails by re-imagining—or simply revisiting—doctrinal theology in light of modern concerns. In terms of theology, the Radical Orthodox perspective “should in many ways be seen as undercutting some of the contrasts between theological liberals and conservatives.” As Milbank, et al., explain:

The former tend to validate what they see as the modern embrace of finitude—as language, and as erotic and aesthetically delighting bodies, and so forth. Conservatives, however, seem still to embrace a sort of nominal ethereal distancing from these realities and a disdain for them. Radical orthodoxy, by contrast, sees the historic root of the celebration of these things in participatory philosophy and incarnational theology. (1999, 4)

Radical Orthodoxy thus represents neither a blind acceptance of modern cultural trends nor their outright denial; instead, it seeks to interpret the exigencies of modern life from the perspective of church doctrine. In doing so, orthodox Christianity takes its place as an alternative approach to secularism as an arbiter of meaning within a cultural context that lacks a legitimate interpretive apparatus in matters pertaining to human experience—

including sexuality, morality, etc. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide a far-reaching survey of the efforts of contributors to the Radical Orthodox project, it may be helpful to take a closer look at one example of its methodological application, which can best be described as the extension of patristic theological principles to modern issues and experiences. Milbank's analysis of Christ's atonement in terms of the postmodern linguistic turn will serve both as a model for the Radical Orthodox approach to modern culture as well as a more detailed explanation of the movement's theological account of language than that outlined in the first section of this chapter. The chapter will conclude by arguing that, while Milbank's insights are compelling, Radical Orthodoxy's theory of language falls short of providing a concrete schema by which religious language influences modern culture—an account that is offered exclusively by appropriating Kristeva's contribution to linguistics, psychology, and poetics.

The Radical Orthodox movement, in general, supposes that the so-called “linguistic turn” characteristic of late modernity, in which language is seen to be incommensurable to “truth,” can point in one of two directions. As Milbank explains in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*:

[Language] is first and foremost expressive and “poetic,” and [...] this requires us to re-think our sociality, historicity and ethical constrainedness. It shows us how these considerations open up certain *aporias* which either point to a nihilistic abyss, or can only be resolved by the *supremely* poetic figure of Jesus, the incarnate *Logos*. (Milbank 1997, 3)

Rejecting positivist accounts of knowledge based on the assumption that language can encapsulate the full range of human experience—whether it be through empirical analysis or the dynamic interplay of ideas—the very notion of truth is ultimately put into question. *Aporias*, or moments of irresolvable, logical incoherence arising upon close analysis of linguistic texts—the foundation on which Derrida based his project of deconstruction—are inevitable.

The postmodern situation, at least from the perspective of Radical Orthodoxy, leads the human subject down two potential paths—namely, outright nihilism or redemption through a poetic rendering of Christ’s atonement. Poetry alone offers the means by which language can continue to communicate meaningful discourse in a world in which ordinary forms of speech or writing fall short of their promise to fully render truth claims. At first glance, it would seem that Milbank and Kristeva are on the same page with regard to the value of poetic language. However, Milbank’s philosophy of language is situated in a mythological framework that draws on contemporary understandings of linguistic processes, while Kristeva’s is entrenched in a psychoanalytic methodology incorporating human biology, linguistics, and cultural theory, and is therefore conducive to a more concrete rendering of the intersection of language and culture.

Nonetheless, Milbank’s exegesis of the scandal of the Cross, otherwise known as atonement theology, is intriguing. He begins by stating, “The body and blood of Christ are supremely [...] broken signs and moreover, these are signs in which Jesus chooses to become in his very being” (1998, 138). Christ’s sacrifice, symbolized in these rather

macabre terms, speaks not only to the broken nature of the martyred body but to its redemption in the voluntary, selfless act of giving himself over to the Roman authorities. Milbank continues, “Here we are presented with death, but here we have a particular death, death that is literally incorporated into the character of a man, death that is not other to his life.” Death, normally a sign of negation, is here transformed into a symbol of life in that Christ purposefully gives himself over to its finality while simultaneously memorializing his particular death as part and parcel to his living legacy. Moreover, Christ incorporates the “broken signs” of his mutilated body into his own “character.” The transformation of “body,” “blood,” and “death” from signs representing negation into signs representing life—the very meaning of the resurrection—is literal in the sense that language itself is transfigured in the process.

As Milbank puts it, “The necessary counterpart to the significant and signifying death is the subject which has collapsed into the sign without thereby surrendering, but rather realizing, its subjectivity” (1998, 138). Christ’s own subjectivity is realized through his identification with a sign of ultimate negation, but because he refused to allow it to define him, he achieves victory over death by revealing its finitude. The sign is revealed as a sign, necessarily finite, arbitrary, and thus potent in the sense of its connotative malleability. The subject, a harbinger of life, incorporates the sign into his own infinite destiny in God and transforms the meaning of death into something altogether novel:

For a sign does not have the restricted material potency of a finished, definable, artefact. And this complete but potent character of the sign is a *function* of its lifelessness. *Only* for God is completeness and total sign-being [...] a fact of

realization of potential being, and so the sum of total life  
and not the curtailment of death. (1998, 138-139)

The finite, static, and monolithic nature of the sign—in this case death—is indicative of its inefficacy as an end in and of itself, but also of its status as something that is, in itself, dead. Christ's sacrifice is thus poetic in that it reveals the incapacity of signification to encapsulate that which is infinite, which is the immortality of life in Christ. Signs in themselves are dead artifacts compared to the "sign-being" of God.

Death, then, is here redefined as the completeness of life, a necessarily poetic rendering of the Christian *mythos* because in Christ's willful suffering, death is exposed as a fraudulent product of human reckoning: "The falsities in the meanings engendered by man can only be *transfigured* if their false end of *misrepresentation* is realized and so critically exposed and surpassed" (1998, 139). Because of the finite nature of signification, the infinite life of the subjective Christ is able to yield the necessary transfiguration. As Milbank writes:

To be a sign for us at all, [Christ] must pass through death, since our signs speak only death; but to signify *absolutely* for us he must also re-define the sign of language as life, as eternal *logos* in the resurrection. Thus the resurrection of Christ, still bearing the marks of his death, exposes death as in reality the completeness of the divine-human person.

The tragedy of the cross is poetic not only for its dramatic character, but for its transvaluation of the linguistic sign from deathly finitude to infinite abundance in the divine life of Christ. To be sure, such a rendering of the doctrine of the atonement incorporating the tenets of poststructuralist accounts of language sheds some light on the continuing relevance of patristic theology for the modern situation.

In the end, though, attempts by Radical Orthodox theologians to revisit doctrinal theology in light of modern developments fall short of theorizing the effects of linguistic utterance by people of faith on the broader cultural front of modern societies. It is difficult to say whether doctrinal interpretation, even when carried out to the degree of subtlety and erudition of a thinker like Milbank, actually transforms the cultural structures and institutions of late modernity. It is only through the practice of *significance*, as exemplified in the deployment of religious language in contexts ranging from the homiletics of Martin Luther King to the prayerful exhortations of Anselm of Canterbury, to name only a few examples, that the believing subject is capable of transforming not only linguistic norms but the cultural arena to which they give rise. Revolution, or the transformation of cultures and societies that is the product of the linguistic process of *significance*, is revealed as the sole prerogative of the “revolution in religious language.”



## POSTSCRIPT

The Canadian rock band Rush, in their 1977 album *A Farewell to Kings*, recorded what is perhaps their most iconic track. “Closer to the Heart,” with lyrics by drummer Neil Peart, became their most well-known anthem—and a favorite among new fans internationally to this day. Vocalist Geddy Lee opens with the following lines: “And the men who hold high places / Must be the ones to start / To mold a new reality / Closer to the heart / Closer to the heart.” These lines speak to classical theories of revolution in which people at the top—elected or otherwise—are the driving forces behind social change. They also suggest that humanity’s only hope to reach levels of civilization worthy of the title “a new reality” lies in the transformation of political discourse toward a more holistic understanding of humanity itself.

This sentiment is, of course, dripping with cynicism as to the prospects of such a transformation, as becomes apparent in the second verse of the song: “The blacksmith and the artist / Reflect it in their art / They forge their creativity / Closer to the heart / Closer to the heart.” The artists and artisans of the world, whose intentions are not driven by power or prestige but by a sincere longing for a new reality, carry this vision for a more holistic humanity with them, while the “men who hold high places” continue on with business as usual. Revolution, understood in the sense of the fulfillment of human destiny, is reserved for the sensibilities of poets, painters, blacksmiths, and those with the capacity to imagine a “better way.” But it is precisely this capacity that must become

realized in the ruling classes, even if this means relegating the advent of a better way to the status of hopeful anticipation for a distant future. It is the responsibility of the artist to keep hope alive, in all times and places, but especially in modern times.

Believers across faith traditions share this same responsibility to keep hope alive, and their sensibilities and skills, developed in some cases over several millennia, lend themselves to such endeavors. Throughout this dissertation, I have implied, without saying it outright, that religious language is qualitatively different from other forms of speech and writing, in the same way that poetic language, for Kristeva, represents a break with the norms of standard language practices. What this entails is that religious language, which tends to relate internal experiences of self-reflection with an eye to the larger human condition—as it exists in the present and as it *might* exist in some future situation—operates as a “check” on far-flung secular exceptionalisms. Modernity cannot rid itself of religion as long as believers feel a calling to believe, and the status quo is never safe as long as religious people *speak* this calling.

When Julia Kristeva stumbled upon her theory of revolution in the practice of *signifiante*, in an effort to breathe life into the otherwise “necrophilic” domain of modern linguistics, she briefly considered the capacity for religious utterance to serve as an exemplar for her idiosyncratic approach. In the end, she privileged poetic language, which she saw as “pointing up” (Kelly Oliver’s words) the subject-in-process/on-trial, but also as investing the body in the body politic. Elevating process to the level of practice, poets challenge the strictures set in place by symbolic law in the motility of the semiotic, inhabiting the fluctuating and generative movement of the negative only to burst forth as

a subject proper in the moment of the thetic break. The rootstock of revolt, for Kristeva, lies in this intentional vacillation between the semiotic body and the symbolic order, which is as much cultural as linguistic, following Jacques Lacan's schema.

This begs the question: what is poetic language? For that matter, what is religious language? In the case of poetry, the process by which meaning is generated via the medium of language is revealed in its component parts. Perhaps the best analogy is that of a surgeon in the operating room. As the surgeon's scalpel penetrates the outer layers of flesh, her patient, formerly perceived as a "whole" and "singular" person, is soon revealed to be the end result of complex interactive systems of pulsating organs. In poetry, the notion of language as a singular, abstract totality is shown to be the culmination of cultural and bodily processes—literally pulsating drives feeding a primitive ordering system or *chora*. Crucially, the dependence of linguistic and cultural phenomena on this pre-symbolic substructure allows room for the expression of extra-linguistic features of experience that had previously remained unsaid—and even yet unsayable—in ordinary "symbolic" communication. Poetic language can thus be defined as a literary genre that operates along the unstable boundaries between semiotic and symbolic elements of discourse.

Still, if poetry is more or less recognizable as a major genre of literature, the same cannot be said of "religious language." It is for this reason that I define religious language as utterance—whether spoken, written, or simply "thought"—on the part of individuals relating the experience of feelings, impulses, ideations, and the like, which have been attested to throughout the course of the history of world faith traditions. While my

analysis of religious texts is limited to Christianity, it is only due to my familiarity with that particular tradition. And while it would be impossible here to offer a thoroughgoing definition of religion itself—and inadvisable, given recent critiques suggesting the very idea of religion to be a Western construct<sup>10</sup>—I think it is of utmost importance to emphasize the *embodied*-ness of religious seekers. Stepping outside of the unsophisticated dualisms dividing body and soul in popular theological parlance, religion is ultimately about *feeling*, and feeling is ultimately the domain of *bodies*.

Echoing Friedrich Schleiermacher, for whom religion was identifiable with a feeling of utter dependence, and Romain Rolland, Freud's correspondent in *Civilization and Its Discontents* and coiner of the term "oceanic feeling" in relation to religious experience, I have come to understand religion as the response to a deeply felt calling within individuals<sup>11</sup>. This response can take the form of linguistic utterance, but speech acts on the part of believers are nonetheless forged inside the psychical apparatus of speaking bodies, which turns out to be their proper domain, because feeling called is essentially feeling. And responding to feeling called is essentially an act of revolt. It is an act of revolt against the stagnant cultural norms associated with symbolic law.

In my introductory survey of world religions, my students learn to break down the "worldview" of the various faith traditions included in the course. This breakdown assumes three pertinent questions relating to the way people of faith view themselves and the world around them: (1) What is the nature of the universe? (2) What is the destiny of

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Daniel Dubuisson's *The Western Construction of Religion*.

<sup>11</sup> A version of this definition can be attributed to Dr. Laurie Cozad, formerly Croft Associate Professor of Religion at the University of Mississippi.

humankind? (3) How does humankind reach its destiny? It matters little *how* people of different faiths answer these questions; it only matters *that* people of faith are asking them. And it matters also that their responses, which may be incommensurably diverse, are being communicated on a level that is not only subversive to linguistic norms but to culture itself. It would seem, in conclusion, that Rush could have included believers alongside blacksmiths and artists in their coterie of the hopeful, who may one day sing out, in solidarity, the final verse of Rush's iconic vision: "You can be the captain / And I will draw the chart / Sailing into destiny / Closer to the heart / Closer to the heart."

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