Book review


Sara Beardsworth’s *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* is one of the best books on a French figure to be published in recent years. Beardsworth brilliantly and provocatively deepens our understanding of the foundations of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic position and situates her thought in the broader fields of modern and continental philosophy. It is a book that challenges not only our most basic assumptions about Kristeva, but also those concerning psychoanalysis itself, which emerges in the book as a vital resource for understanding Western modernity and our own current, socio-political problematic. Beardsworth argues that Kristeva’s psychoanalytic must be understood as a philosophy of modernity that grapples with the problem of modern nihilism and provides insight into the contemporary social and political problematic at the theoretical and institutional levels. She shows not only that ‘loss’ is the deepest moment of Kristeva’s interrogation into the failings of modernity, but that ‘the loss of loss’ is what renders that moment philosophically, historically, and politically significant. In demonstrating that the nihilism problematic is what makes Kristeva’s thought cohere, Beardsworth shows that it is also what, in the final instance, must inform our understanding of the social, political, and feminist implications of her thought. Further, Beardsworth’s reconstruction of the significance of Freudian psychoanalysis as descriptive of the failings of modernity and the fate of the modern subject has implications not only for how we read Kristeva’s work, but more broadly for how we approach psychoanalysis in the Anglophone reception of French philosophy and in the humanities and social sciences in general. Beardsworth’s book thereby proves to be indispensable reading for those interested in Kristeva, French feminism, and French social and political thought, but also for multiple disciplines across the humanities and social sciences.

Beardsworth situates the significance of Kristeva’s work within the history of the nihilism problematic and nineteenth century readings of philosophical modernity in German Idealism, Nietzschean existentialism, and early Frankfurt School critical theory. Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* plays a particularly important role in the book for establishing Kristeva’s relationship to philosophies of modernity. Most importantly,
Kristeva psychoanalysis is adopted as witness to the historical failings of both religious and modern secular authority in the West. Psychoanalytic discourse is not a discourse of metaphysical truth, but an historical discourse that appears in conditions of false authority in order to diagnose the failure of socio-symbolic discourses to negotiate the fragile boundaries between individual and society. Psychoanalysis, under Beardsworth’s and Kristeva’s reading, can no longer be dismissed as a subjectivist discourse. Rather, subjectivity is articulated as the permeable limit between the individual and the social. Psychoanalysis emerges to diagnose the shape that limit takes in conditions where that boundary is no longer negotiated by an authority that would give it meaning. Beardsworth calls the loss of this ability to negotiate what now appears as the fragile limits between individual and society “the tendential severance of the semiotic and symbolic.” The semiotic, for Kristeva, roughly denotes the affective, corporeal element of signification, and the symbolic roughly marks the domain of meaning and reference. Subjectivity and language are theorized as the dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic. Beardsworth compares the semiotic and the symbolic to Kantian intuition and concept, where the semiotic without the symbolic is blind and the symbolic without the semiotic is empty. Modernity is thus understood as a fragile moment of non-convergent truth and false authority which results in the historical severance of semiotic and symbolic, in which the symbolic no longer functions in relation to the semiotic as the giving of form and meaning to it and the semiotic no longer functions as the affective investment in social and symbolic ties, discourses, and institutions. In other words, the less visible dimensions of subjectivity, its trials, and its relations to otherness are left abandoned in social and symbolic life. The point is that the less symbolizable or non-symbolic dimensions of the self and its relation to otherness need to take on some kind of symbolic form in the life of the individual and society. This need and its difficulties in modernity are presented in Part I at the strictly psychoanalytic level of Kristeva’s thought; Part II re-introduces religion and the artwork as negotiations of this need; and Part III outlines its social, political, and feminist implications.

Part I, “From the Revolutionary Standpoint to the Nihilism Problematic,” contains four chapters that track the shift from Kristeva’s earliest views on psychoanalysis and art in Revolution in Poetic Language to her more developed view in the 1980s of the problematic of nihilism in Tales of Love, Powers of Horror, and Black Sun. Part II, “Religion and Art: Kristeva’s Minor Histories of Modernity,” contains two chapters: the first examines Kristeva’s relationship to religious discourse and representation within the nihilism problematic, specifically around the minor history of abjection and its religious codification; the second reconstructs aesthetic modernity and exhibits explicitly the