

julia kristeva

psychoanalysis and modernity



sara beardsworth

Julia Kristeva

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Tina Chanter, editor

JULIA KRISTEVA

Psychoanalysis and Modernity



Sara Beardsworth

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To my family

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INTRODUCTION



What moves the argument of this book is the thought that unacknowledged suffering is the remnant of freedom in conditions of late modernity. This is Kristeva's thought. . . . Let me begin again by outlining this project's three major objectives. The first is to explicate the central psychoanalytic, aesthetic, ethical, and political concepts in Kristeva's writings from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, with a special emphasis on her 1980s thought. The second is to develop an interpretation of her thought as a philosophy of modernity sensitive to the problem of modern nihilism, arguing that this interpretation best captures her vision and project and best enables the assessment of that project, especially Kristeva's choice of psychoanalysis and the aesthetic to structure her thought, but also her relationship to religion. Third, I revisit the most troubled questions in the reception of her writings on the basis of this interpretation, in order to clarify why so many are intrigued by them, and then all but the few move on. This book introduces and readdresses the problems but also works to illuminate and reinforce the intrigue by clarifying the reasons for it.

It needs to be acknowledged that, at first sight, the classification of her *oeuvre* as a philosophy of modernity might strike readers of Kristeva as unconvincing. Given her turn to psychoanalysis and art, it would seem to be necessary to recognize that the *oeuvre* is best characterized as a philosophy of culture rooted in the psychoanalytic view of subjectivity. However, it is the very way in which psychoanalysis structures her thought which justifies the claim that it is a philosophy of modernity. I argue that the central texts of Kristeva's writings of the 1980s contain a self-consciousness of the emergence and significance of psychoanalysis as a discourse embedded in conditions of modern nihilism. Moreover,

these writings unfold a specific conception of the aesthetic that is only fully intelligible in respect of that self-consciousness. This view of her thought is supported by the structure and content of what will be called the trilogy of the 1980s: *Powers of Horror* (1980), *Tales of Love* (1983), and *Black Sun* (1987). The overarching claim is that Kristeva's sensitivity to the problem of modern nihilism needs to be recognized if the reception of her thought is not to break off in puzzlement over such issues as the apparent ambiguities or ambivalences in her estimation of psychoanalysis, her view of religion, and the meaning of the Kristevan aesthetic. This is the central message of this book, but one that is relatively submerged at moments of close explication of textual passages, since, as is known by readers of Kristeva, her writings tend to lack the kind of critical self-reflection that would thematize for the reader what she is up to. Although such thematization is one of the challenges this book must meet, a more extensive discussion of the meaning of nihilism than appears anywhere in the chapters of this book is merited, indeed required, here. What is attempted as part of this introduction is an account of the meanings of nihilism that have appeared in the history of modern philosophy, and how they have appeared, so that the sensitivity to modern nihilism that I claim is present in Kristeva's writings can be clarified. The following account is designed both to explain the term *nihilism* for those unfamiliar with that philosophical tradition and to allow me to show how Kristeva's thought differs from it.

Suffering: A Piece of the Reality that has Come to Grief

The presence of the nihilism problematic in modern philosophy has a complex and nuanced history. Heidegger declares that the word nihilism apparently first appears in Jacobi's criticism of modern philosophical idealism (1982, 3). In the "Open Letter to Fichte," published in 1799, Jacobi responds to German idealism in the consummated shape it appears to take on in Fichte's philosophy, given the latter's attempt at a reunification of reason after Kant's critical project. The critique of reason undertaken by Kant determined the limits of theoretical reason—of human knowledge—according to a restriction of its object-domain, which becomes the realm of necessity. That is to say, the critical project aimed to overcome the illusions of thought that takes flight from the limits that experience imposes on knowledge. Knowledge is constrained above all by the forms of time and space and by the necessity that concepts cannot be divorced from the manifold given in sensory awareness—what Kant calls intuition—without voiding themselves of all cognitive power. Knowledge in Kant is the organization of the raw material of sensibility by the synthesizing activity of categories

such as existence or nonexistence, causality, and so on. The categories have “objective validity”: they are a priori universals or antecedent conditions for the possibility of experience, and so for the possibility of objects of experience. Not only are sensible individuals, or intuitions, without concepts “blind,” but concepts without intuitions are “empty.”¹ When conceptualization attempts to overreach these limits, reason itself becomes entangled in self-conflict on questions such as the origin of the world, the causality of freedom, and the existence of God and the soul. Kant’s critical project recovered the realm of freedom only by reserving it for practical reason, that is to say, for unknowable but intelligible pure practical reason as the foundation of the moral law that finite rational creatures give to themselves.² The result of the critical philosophy is that the human spirit is henceforth internally divided between freedom and necessity, whose reciprocal communication must remain impossible if both knowledge and morality are to be saved.

Fichte was a great admirer of Kant’s achievement in safeguarding actual knowledge and practical reason by dissolving the threat brought to them by metaphysical illusions. However, he was equally sensitive to the blow to knowledge that the critique inflicted, and to the self-alienation it set up at the heart of the human spirit, eternally divided between heteronomy in knowledge and experience (determination from without) and autonomy in morality (self-legislating reason). His attempt to reunify theoretical and practical reason grounds philosophy in a foundational act of the transcendental—that is to say, impersonal—subject from which all knowledge and practice flows. Fichte develops this thought out of Kant’s idea of a pure act of spontaneity—the transcendental unity of apperception—which cannot belong to sensibility. In Kant this is the “I think” that must accompany all my representations, without which nothing can become an object for me. Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* or doctrine of scientific knowledge (1797) introduces the self-positing “I” as an act that embraces the theoretical and practical aspects of reason, and which is the absolute principle of philosophy as science.

Jacobi does not object to the Fichtean affirmation of the concept of science as the autonomous production of its object in thought, a “free action” of mind. For without this reflection would be a futile activity. What he objects to in the “Open Letter to Fichte” is the desire and belief that this free action of the mind reveals the basis of all truth *to be* the absolutely self-positing I out of which all objects, worldhood, and practical agency develop (1799, 124–125). He finds that Fichte’s thought is the philosophizing of pure understanding in which everything is dissolved into the concept. In other words, Fichte’s ambition for philosophy as science implies the dissolution of all “essences”—including all beings

and productions of unreason (the “not-I” in Fichte’s language)—into knowledge that develops on the basis of a thoroughgoing abstraction. The result of this, for Jacobi, is nihilism, a self-destruction of the human spirit whose confinement to the realm of concepts deprives it of everything that would give those concepts meaning and value. Subjected to idealism, the human spirit “must destroy itself in essence in order to arise, to have itself solely in concept; in the concept of a pure absolute emerging from and entering into, originally—from nothing, to nothing, for nothing, into nothing” (1799, 127). Fichte’s idealization of philosophy as science does not remedy but intensifies the loss inflicted upon the human spirit by the critical philosophy. It is a purification of spirit so absolute that spirit cannot *exist* in its purity but “can only be present, contemplated” in a pure identity-drive (126, 135). Jacobi opposes this fate of reason and the human spirit with an insistence upon something prior to knowing, which he calls “the true,” that gives knowing and the capacity for reason *a value* (131). Although he does not recommend a return to precritical philosophy, he would be content to be understood as affirming “chimera” over the nihilism that Fichte’s consummation of transcendental idealism enforces (136).

Jacobi’s *naming* of idealism as nihilism, his *discontent* with idealism, and his affirmation of the *privilegium aggratiandi*—“the law [of reason] is made for the sake of the human being, not the human being for the sake of the law” (1799, 133)—can themselves be located as an event of nihilism in a much wider and almost all-embracing sense of the term that arises in a later philosophy: Nietzsche’s. This is the most influential thought on nihilism. “When it comes to our understanding of nihilism, we are almost all Nietzscheans” (Gillespie 1995, xii). It is the Nietzschean thought on nihilism that I must carefully, but not overly, distinguish my claim about Kristeva from. There are two major interpretations of Nietzsche’s thought on nihilism, the Heideggerian one and the one that captures a major aspect of Weber’s and Adorno’s debt to Nietzsche. It is worth contrasting these two interpretations since this best clarifies Kristeva’s difference from the most familiar thought of nihilism as turning on *the loss of transcendence*. Both interpretations concur that there are a variety of meanings of nihilism in Nietzsche and that their connection is historical, and both agree that the idea of European nihilism in his writings presents a catastrophe with a progressive aspect. However, for one the historicity of nihilism is predominantly metaphysical and for the other it is predominantly political and cultural.

Heidegger reads Nietzsche as a metaphysician whose thought on nihilism presents a metanarrative of the formation and collapse of Western metaphysics and the opening up or chance of a “new beginning.” Nihilism means, above all,

the collapse of the transcendent that reigns from Plato's forms, to Christian-moral culture, to the apotheosis of the self-reflexive subject of knowledge in Kant and Fichte. This last is what Jacobi grasped as nihilism. So the important point about the Jacobi interpretation of transcendental idealism is that he, like Nietzsche, finds that Kant's reliance on the a priori and the universal makes him the last avatar of Platonic-Christian moral thought. With Nietzsche, nihilism means above all the collapse of "the ideal" that sprang from the reign of the transcendent; that is to say, the end of the Christian God. On this reading, Nietzsche's attack on Platonism, Christianity, and Kant sets out different but interconnected versions of a negation that institutes the domination of transcendent elements over life. Life as the infinite growth of the this-worldly being is what is negated. Western metaphysics is the formulation of ideals, norms, principles, rules, ends, and values that, in Heidegger's words, are "set 'above' the being [*das Seiende*], in order to give being as a whole a purpose, an order, and—as it is succinctly expressed—'meaning'" (1982, 4). The Christian God is a condensation of and guarantee for all the transcendent elements, an ideal enabled only by the pure thought of God as the *truth* of being as a whole. This very ideal of truth—the grounding and redemption of all being "beyond" the whole of being—contains its own undoing, and so the undoing of all the transcendent elements it condenses, as this "truth" shows itself to be untruth. "Nihilism is that historical process whereby the dominance of the 'transcendent' becomes null and void so that all being loses its worth and meaning. Nihilism is the history of the being itself, through which the death of the Christian God comes slowly but inexorably to light" (4).³

This predominantly metaphysical interpretation of Nietzsche reads the two most famous of his statements on nihilism in an immanent manner. The first statement, from *Will to Power*, says: "What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; the 'why' receives no answer" (1967, 9). Heidegger's interpretation of this historical process turns on his reading of the second statement, from *The Gay Science*, which says: "God is dead." With Heidegger, nihilism is "that event of long duration in which the truth of being as a whole is essentially transformed and driven toward an end that such truth has determined" (1982, 4–5). If there appears to be a *deus ex machina* in this transformation, to seek an external cause for the transformation would leave thinking within the metaphysics whose crisis Nietzsche has diagnosed. Any apparent *deus ex machina* is overcome by Heidegger's view that the thought of nihilism must be co-comprehended with four other rubrics of Nietzsche's thought: the revaluation of all values hitherto, will to power, eternal recurrence

of the same, and the Overman (*Übermensch*) (1982, chapter 1). These four rubrics express the possibility that arises with the loss of transcendence, once “only the ‘earth’ remains” (8).

However, it must first be noted that Nietzsche’s thought on nihilism develops out of his attention to its psychological aspect, or his discovery of nihilism in subjectivity. In Nietzsche’s psychology we find nihilism in the sense of the *critical condition* that emerges with the loss of transcendence. The critical condition is the experience of the exhaustion of meaning that comes with the collapse of all transcendent elements, a pervasive experience of gloom and terror, a nihilistic attitude that affirms nothingness.⁴ It needs to be said right off that this is the nihilism that Kristeva repudiates at various moments in her writings. She is not a nihilist. Nietzsche’s own comment on this aspect of nihilism brings us to his idea of will to power. For the famous final statement of *The Genealogy of Morals* says of the nihilistic “will to nothingness” that the will prefers to will nothingness than to cease willing (1989, 163). However, the will in Nietzsche does not point to a volitional subject underlying and surviving the exhaustion of all meaning and values. The co-comprehension of nihilism and will to power in Heidegger underlines this. Haar’s valuable essay “Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language” is particularly clear on this aspect of the Heideggerian reading. Nietzsche may find a variant of will to power in the nihilistic attitude but will to power is not a psychological phenomenon. The expression will to power cannot be divided into two parts expressing a cause or foundation (will) and its aim or object (power). Rather, the German, *Wille “zur” Macht* conveys the sense of “movement toward,” and the question is: “What, then, is this Power?”

It is precisely the intimate law of the will and of all force, the law that to will is to will its own growth. The will that is Will to Power responds at its origins to its own internal imperative: *to be more*. This imperative brings it before the alternatives: either it is to augment itself, to surpass itself, or it is to decline, to degenerate. According to the direction that the force takes (progression or regression), and according to the response (yes or no) one makes to the conditions imposed upon life or imposed on life by life itself (as Zarathustra says: “I am the one who is ever forced to overcome himself”), there appear, *right at the origin*, at the very heart of the Will to Power, two types of force, two types of life: the active force and the *reactive* force, the *ascending* life and the *decadent* life. (Haar in Allison 1977, 11)

Will to power is therefore fundamentally reflexive, always overcoming itself through one of the two alternatives. This clears up any appearance of a *deus ex machina* in the historical process Heidegger speaks of. For what appears in Nietzsche’s thought on the death of God is the culmination of forces or types of life that the highest idea gathered into itself. This unification strengthened the most

reactive of types of life by placing meaning and values in a “*beyond*,” in denial of life. When Heidegger makes nihilism the history of being itself (“through which the death of the Christian God comes slowly but inexorably to light”) the co-comprehension of nihilism and will to power also takes in another of the five rubrics: the revaluation of all values hitherto. For the nihilistic attitude—the critical condition of the experience of the exhaustion of meaning, that doom and gloom of the will to nothingness—is but a simple negation of “truth” that only reactively repeats the death of God and fundamentally preserves the history of Western metaphysics and the Christian ideal as the only—lost—truth, meaning, and value.

The dominance of the transcendent “become null and void” has another aspect, however: that of *self-perfected nihilism*. For the consummation of nihilism opens up the transvaluation of all values. It both uproots values from their place in transcendence and “breeds” a new need of values, says Heidegger. Will to power is then understood as a nontranscendent grounding which permits a new interpretation of beings, without which the recognition of the new need of values would be a merely unanchored intuition, likely to become reattached to the foundations of the old humanism. The revaluation of values would not be a radical one. On this new interpretation of beings, all being is incessant self-overpowering: being “must be a *continual ‘becoming’*” that has no reference to an end outside itself; hence being “must itself always recur again and bring back the same.” Heidegger’s co-comprehension of nihilism, will to power, the revaluation of all values hitherto, and the eternal recurrence of the same leads to his definition of the Overman. The Overman is neither the augmentation of any prior humanity nor an “overhumanity.” It is, rather, “the most unequivocally singular form of human existence that, as absolute will to power, is brought to power in every man to some degree and that thereby grants him membership in being as a whole—that is, in will to power—and that shows him to be a true ‘being,’ close to reality and ‘life.’” This co-comprehension of the five rubrics shows that nihilism for Nietzsche is not a simple linear unfolding of the construction of ideals and their demise, but a bivalent history of the destructiveness and creativity of Western metaphysics whose “collapse” gives on to knowledge of a specific kind: one of standing “within the moment that the history of Being has opened up for our age” (Heidegger 1982, 5–10).

This interpretation of Nietzsche’s thought on nihilism in terms of Heidegger’s own philosophy of Being has not met without criticism, however. For some, Nietzsche’s account of nihilism as a historical process does not begin and end with the formation, deformation, and crisis of Western metaphysics. Rather, as Warren (1988) has argued, nihilism itself presupposes a prior negation, a

social and political one, and must be grasped in its cultural dimension. On this reading, European nihilism in Nietzsche is not only a crisis of rationality but a crisis of legitimacy (an important element in Weber's debt to Nietzsche, as will be seen).

One way of approaching the difference between the two interpretations is through the divergence between Warren's reading of "original nihilism," the nihilism of the ancient Greek world, and Haar's reading of it, which is Heideggerian in inspiration. For Haar the negation that nihilism enacts in its formation of transcendent ideals (the turn against life) is latent in the original form—Plato and Socrates. The negation is manifest in the modern form. For Warren, latency applies most importantly to the manner in which a negation that original nihilism *presupposes* persists in European culture. Better, European culture is the latency of a *prior* negation. On this view, original nihilism—the formation of transcendent ideals in the Greek world—is not some free-floating response of the will to its own internal imperative *to be more*. It rests on the prior negation in social and political relations: violence and oppression or, in a word, slavery. Original nihilism means the escape from the conditions of life through a flight into thought that tries to make sense of suffering. The escape internalizes political violence in the form of a self-enslavement that inhabits every transcendent element.⁵ For Nietzsche it is the creation of nihilistic values. With respect to this untruth and unfreedom of transcendence, *the conditions of life—unacknowledged suffering—persist as the remnant of freedom*. This paradoxical truth—one central to Adorno's thought—is expressed in a phrase of Nietzsche's from the *The Anti-christ* that Warren introduces into his interpretation (1988, 28): "to suffer from reality is to be a piece of the reality that has come to grief" (Nietzsche 1895, 137–138).⁶ This interpretation permits a stronger reading of Nietzsche's psychology and his attention to subjectivity. The widely discussed ideas from *The Genealogy of Morals* of bad conscience and *ressentiment*, which at times explicate the slave mentality, do not simply capture the reactive response to the imperative of will to power, or the decadent tendency. They are reflections of a piece of reality that has come to grief and must themselves become creative elements, even though the creations are nihilistic values.

This interpretation opposes Nietzsche the philosopher of culture to Nietzsche the metaphysician. For what Warren finds is that European nihilism is the refraction of political experience into culture. The first or original nihilism turns on powerlessness against men, which bequeaths to the slave the choice of either suicidal nihilism or a revaluation of the experience of suffering, a creative recoil against particular social relations. The moments of nihilism amongst the oppressed often lead to "new ways of giving 'meaning' to suffering" (1988, 25).

Without the prior negation in political oppression there are no residues destined to become creative elements. In other words, Warren finds in Nietzsche the idea that the capacities of humans to organize their powers as agency is tied to the constant constitution of subjectivity out of otherness: a background of culture, language, and experience. Without the prior negation that nihilism rests on, which is to say, without the political frustration of those capacities, the creative aspect of nihilism—the attempt to give meaning to suffering—is impossible.

Warren proposes that the moments of nihilism among the oppressed finally lead to “the deification of cruelty in Christian-moral culture” (25). The Christian-moral worldview is thereby connected to the attempt made by victims of political violence to make sense of their suffering. In sum, the structure of nihilistic values has a political content that explains how that structure comes to be. The deification of cruelty in Christian-moral culture rests on the thoroughgoing divorce of interpretation (meaning-giving) from experience. The Christian interpretation inherits the political content of the structure of nihilism but formulates values that lack any contact with actuality. The deification of cruelty is the creation of a world of pure fiction, substituted for the world that presents itself in everyday life, and so enforces a distrust of any meaning *in* suffering and existence. In the salvation religion “such values undermine the conditions for willing in the process of ‘saving’ the will” (31). Actions are impossible.

On this reading, specifically modern nihilism stems from an internal crisis of interpretation that becomes inappropriate to experience. This crisis is twofold, however. The Heideggerian interpretation of the thought that the highest values devalue themselves only gives us one aspect of the crisis: the crisis of rationality. Recognizing the other aspect, the crisis of legitimacy, requires that the political content of the structure of nihilistic values not be forgotten. For what is crucial on this reading of Nietzsche is nihilism as the loss of self-reflexive identity that is necessary for the experience of transforming the past into the future (Warren 1988, 9). To the Heideggerian view that Nietzsche’s five rubrics, co-comprehended, issue in *knowledge* of a specific kind, which comes down to standing historically in the history of Being, Warren opposes the question: “supposing that human subjectivity (selfhood, agency) is intrinsically valuable, how can we conceive of it as a *worldly* (social and historical) phenomenon?” (7). The question asks what human agency might be in a world unsupported by transcendent phenomena. In other words, for Warren, the demise of the Christian-moral worldview *brings out* the question of self-reflexive practices.

His question, unlike Heidegger’s on how to interpret Nietzsche’s thought that the highest values devalue themselves, guides his reading toward the problem

of the crisis of legitimacy, rather than to a thought on standing historically in the history of Being, which allows the death of God to mean only a crisis of rationality. With Warren, the disjuncture between interpretation and experience in the Christian-moral worldview brings Christian culture to the point where the *absence* of experiences supporting the notions of sin, guilt, judgment, and God *imposes* itself (1988, 42). The manifest crisis is the one in which the Christian deification of cruelty—its rejection of any meaning *in* suffering and existence—brings about the experience that what is known or recognized to be part of experience cannot be affirmed. The death of God is above all the problem of the inadequacy of our value system to *practice*. With Nietzsche, we cannot believe the values and therefore cannot have the motivations for agency. In other words, because the values are transcendent the value system undermines the necessary minimum conditions for agency. This is what Warren calls the crisis of legitimacy. Morality's cultivation of truthfulness turns against morality and, as Nietzsche puts it, we discover long-implanted needs for untruth, needs that the value which makes life endurable hinges on. "This antagonism—*not* to esteem what we know [*erkennen*], and not to be *allowed* any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves—results in a process of dissolution [*Auflösungsprozess*]" (Nietzsche 1967, 10; cited in Warren 1988, 37).

The first antagonism, the inability to esteem what we know, corresponds to the emergence of the claims of experience in the scientifically oriented acceptance of the testimony of the senses. Knowledge and science become values. This is the crisis of rationalist metaphysics or "the crisis of rationality." In the second antagonism, what Warren calls the crisis of legitimacy, values become unbelievable. This is the deeper process of the "increasing *inadequacy* to the world of everyday practice" (1988, 37). It is the conditions of agency that are undermined. This is equally a premise of Kristeva's thought on the self, the other, and the world, but, as we will see below, her thought is also marked off from the Nietzschean one in a way that doubles the distance from Heidegger on the meaning of the death of God.

To complete Warren's interpretation of Nietzsche, the process of dissolution also opens up the possibility of a practice-oriented culture. The possibility of self-constituting practice therefore depends on the consciousness of its loss, which is to say, on European nihilism as a psychological condition. This means that the consciousness of the loss of the ability to orient oneself in the world must prevail in a way that is not that of demoralization or the nihilistic attitude. The distance from the nihilistic attitude has its only source in the remnants of freedom in suffering *agency*.

I leave these two interpretations of Nietzsche's thought on nihilism at this point. The Heideggerian one, predominantly metaphysical, has allowed the

event of Jacobi's naming of idealism as nihilism to be situated in Nietzsche's account of nihilism as a historical process. Jacobi's self-consciousness of the damage that transcendental idealism inflicts on the human spirit would belong to the moment in which the negation that is nihilism becomes manifest. Put otherwise, the Heideggerian inspiration has allowed the history of philosophy to be suspended in the philosophy of history. Warren's account, on the other hand, which understands Nietzsche predominantly as a philosopher of culture, clarifies Nietzsche's position in a tradition of thinking on the problem of "nihilistic modernity," a problem known to political philosophers from Nietzsche, Weber, and Adorno.

For Weber and Adorno, Nietzsche's attention to modern nihilism is a non-nostalgic investigation of the collapse of the rational appeal of values and ideals in the context of scientific methodology's undermining of the claims of religion to be the discourse of truth. Weber extends the analyses of the crisis of rationality and the crisis of legitimacy that scientific methodology cannot thematize or answer to but only intensifies in a specific direction. He extends the analysis in a sociological account of rationalization processes in modern social life. The dominion of bureaucratic organization depersonalizes everyday practices, making them unintelligible and insubstantial. This extension of the idea of the crisis of legitimacy corresponds to how the scientific advancement of knowledge restricts reason to formal calculative procedures, a further dimension of the crisis of rationality. The modern fate of practice and theory voids the world of cultural and spiritual values. The world is "disenchanted."

Adorno and Horkheimer's collaborative work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1969), also engages with the thought of the disenchantment of the world. For them, the separation of philosophy and sociology is itself a feature of modern nihilism. The fields of study of these disciplines have been split by forces of fragmentation.⁷ When Horkheimer and Adorno thematically combine the traditional disciplines of epistemology, sociology, and psychology for their critique, they do so in "fragmentary writing" as a means of offsetting the danger of reinscribing the illusory authority of those separate disciplines in their own work, whose subtitle is "Philosophical Fragments." Horkheimer and Adorno analyze nihilistic modernity in terms of the "self-destruction" of enlightenment. The failure of enlightenment ideals, which turn on the idea of free human social life, is inscribed and even accepted within the supposedly progressive kinds of thought and practice that the Enlightenment opened up. The failure is related to the way in which the Enlightenment turned its back on discourses and practices that were deemed irrational, notably magic, myth, and religion. In turning against not only the form but the content of these practices, the discourses and practices stemming from the Enlightenment themselves become irrational.

Horkheimer and Adorno are not nostalgic about the premodern, however. Their continuity with Nietzsche shows up in the investigation of the different forms of the entanglement of rationality and domination in both modern and premodern thought and practices (in myth and enlightenment). However, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the thought of the twofold crisis of rationality and legitimacy, which Warren finds in Nietzsche, is focused especially upon the self-reversal of enlightenment in, not only the self-understanding of modern rationality, but modern economic processes and politics. The examination of nihilistic modernity in both modern liberal states and fascism is central to the project.

Dialectic of Enlightenment also shares in the early Frankfurt School's recognition that psychoanalysis illuminates many of the features and trends of nihilistic modernity thanks to its investigations of the structures of subjectivity. However, Adorno is also at times a critic of the perceived tendency in psychoanalysis to repeat the isolation of the "psyche" from social and historical questions, an isolation which reflects the same forces of fragmentation that sustain the split between philosophy and sociology. In this way, psychoanalysis loses its critical power. This brings us to the question of the nihilism problematic in Kristeva's thought.

The Tendential Severance of the Semiotic and Symbolic

The present book shows that Kristeva's thought cannot be counted as representative of the tendency to isolate the psyche from social and historical questions, and that she is a social and political thinker in her own right. It establishes that the problem of modern nihilism is precisely what connects the various dimensions of her thought: the strictly psychoanalytic level of her writings, her thought on religion, her analyses of artworks, and her own view of the social and political implications of her thought, including her feminist thought. It is the presence of the problem of nihilism in her psychoanalytic thought, especially, that links her so strongly to the distance taken from Heidegger in the second view of Nietzsche. Heidegger's story loses everything about Nietzsche being a great moral psychologist. Indeed, if one reads Nietzsche as a philosophical psychologist in the manner of Warren, letting *The Genealogy of Morals* be the central text, then it should be unsurprising to find psychoanalysis encountering the same set of issues. First and foremost, the apparent ambiguities and ambivalences in Kristeva's psychoanalytic thought belong to her discovery of the structure of nihilism—the collapse of meaning, value, and authority—in the structures of the psyche. She is especially attentive to the narcissistic crisis and its implications in late modern societies, and she is aware that the narcissistic

constriction is a problem of suffering agency. Yet she equally finds that psychoanalytic experience encounters the remnants of freedom in subjectivity: broken-off pieces of suffering that, to recall Nietzsche's phrase, present a piece of the reality that has come to grief. The 1980s trilogy investigates these broken-off pieces of suffering: our crises in love (*Tales of Love*), the upsurge of "abjection" (*Powers of Horror*), and melancholic depression (*Black Sun*). Even so, Kristeva's writings cannot be related directly to Nietzsche's philosophy. She does not situate her thought in relation to any philosophical tradition as such, repeatedly claiming that she takes the psychoanalytic and literary standpoint. Nonetheless, this standpoint depends on her sensitivity to modern nihilism.

The presence of the nihilism problematic in her thought must be distinguished from how it appears in the philosophical tradition. Neither her psychoanalytic thought nor her conception of the aesthetic turn on the premise of *a wholesale loss of transcendence*. The movement of transcendence, rescued from its placement in the beyond, is a central feature of her thinking. The way it appears in the figures and artworks she discusses is crucial to her demonstration of their, and her own, distance from suicidal nihilism or despair. There is no metanarrative of collapse in Kristeva. Nor does she situate her investigations of problems in subjectivity within overarching analyses of the crises of rationality and legitimacy. These expressions are not found in her writings. We do, however, find constant references to and discussions of crises in meaning, value, and authority, especially the first. It might seem more appropriate to take the nihilism problematic as one symptom of the crises of meaning she discusses, others being secularism, the collapse of authority, and suffering subjectivity. This would appear to be consistent with the absence of any metanarrative of collapse in her writings and with the fact that she never explicitly presents her thought as an analysis of modernity. Kristeva investigates the formation, deformation, and transformation of meaning and the subject in different moments of Western culture, doing so in ways that refuse to place them within an all-encompassing philosophy of history. Nevertheless, making the presence of the nihilism problematic in her thought the most embracing aspect of her analyses of our crises is necessary for grasping that Kristeva's attention to suffering subjectivity is a thought on unacknowledged suffering as the remnant of freedom. More specifically, it is important, possibly vital, for the following four reasons.

First, the centrality of the problem of modern nihilism illuminates the foundational categorial distinction of her thought between the "semiotic" and the "symbolic" by moving beyond the merely typological view of it, according to which the semiotic and symbolic refer to two irreducible dimensions of subjectivity and meaning: the nonverbal (sometimes presymbolic) and symbolic

(especially verbal) dimensions. This view has allowed the distinction to be taken up and repeated in unreflective ways in the reception of her thought. Acknowledgment of Kristeva's sensitivity to modern nihilism permits us to see what is necessary for this distinction *to be made at all* as one that has a fundamental categorical status. The semiotic and symbolic in Kristeva are two dimensions of meaning and subjectivity that need to be connected if self-relation, the other, and world-relation are to be possible. The claim made here is that the distinction between the two can itself be made only in conditions of the tendential severance of the semiotic and symbolic, and that Kristeva relates psychoanalytic experience of suffering subjectivity to this tendency. I use the term *tendential severance* in order to underline that Kristeva does not present a metanarrative of the collapse of what is needed for adequate separateness, connections with others, and the social bond. Nonetheless, the sufferings and crises she discusses do coexist in modern, Western cultures, and she does refer them to failings in modern discourses and institutions. The categorical distinction can appear only in conditions where modern institutions and discourses have failed to provide everyday social and symbolic sites or practices for the adequate connection of the semiotic and symbolic. Psychoanalytic insights into suffering subjectivity discover these conditions. When the semiotic and symbolic are inadequately connected, the linguistic universe, symbolic bonds with others (communication), and social bonds are felt to be meaningless and without value. Like Nietzsche, Kristeva discovers the conditions for agency undermined, since the motivations for it cannot be affirmed. Indeed, there is a tendential severance in Nietzsche, too, because of the break between desire and values (what it is not to be able to esteem our lives). With Kristeva, the failings of modern institutions and discourses have left the burden of connecting the semiotic and symbolic on the individual, and the suffering subjectivity that psychoanalytic practice encounters is the suffering of this burden. What I mean by the presence of the problem of modern nihilism in Kristeva, then, is her discovery of the tendential severance of the semiotic and symbolic.

Second, Kristeva's extensions of psychoanalytic thought on the structure of narcissism—which work, especially, to clarify the significance of the “semiotic”—are explorations of a dimension of subjectivity and meaning that is socially and symbolically abandoned. Narcissus, in Kristeva, is an intricate array of nonverbal capacities—corporeal responsiveness and affective relations—open to combinations that support and renew social and symbolic life. The 1980s trilogy explores three moments of the narcissistic structure: prehistorical identifications (love), “abjection” (a primitive moment of separateness), and primal melancholy (a nonverbal parting sadness in respect of loss). However, psycho-

analysis has discovered Narcissus—and so the capacity to idealize and the capacity for loss—in a state of neglect. The modern Narcissus shows up in his or her infantile, that is to say, regressive form because of this neglect. Contemporary psychoanalysis, responding to what appears on the couch, is witness less to the struggles with paternal law that Freud tracked in his confrontation with the neuroses (Oedipus) than to complaints about lacks of love, meaning, and self-orientation, as Kristeva frequently avers. These are the sufferings of a “border-line” subjectivity, that is to say, of a subject sent to and abandoned at its borders, at the limit of the ties between the individual and society. The border-line subject shows up where a society does not accompany the subject to those limits, which are also the society’s own limits.

Third, this is the thought that illuminates Kristeva’s relationship to religion. For she finds that in the formation of the sacred and in the historical religions there are practices—notably rituals—that do accompany the subject on the journey to the limits of the ties between the individual and society. However, religion equally appears as a failure in Kristeva’s thought. Its attempt to meet this need of the subject and society either falls short of the need of separateness (in the sacred) or salvages separateness through a God-relation that forgets its rootedness in affective relations (monotheism’s suppression of corporeal responsiveness). However, Kristeva’s thought on nihilism is primarily an investigation of the nihilism emerging in the aftermath of secularization. For the narcissistic crisis is a central feature of the failure of modern institutions and discourses to accompany the subject to its borders, at the limits of society. Psychoanalysis is witness to the burden this puts on individuals, and tracks what they come up with. It is a “limit discourse” of modernity.

Psychoanalysis is the method of Kristeva’s thought, then, because it is an adequate means of approach to a problem of which it forms a part. This means that if the presence of the nihilism problematic in Kristeva’s thought is missed, there is no possibility of grasping psychoanalytic self-reflection on its own emergence, significance, and development as a discourse. That Kristeva’s thought, especially the 1980s trilogy, contains this reflection has been insufficiently acknowledged in the reception of her writings, even where it is fully recognized that she is concerned with the crisis of meaning and value (for example, by Lechte 1990 and Oliver 1993a).

Fourth, what Kristeva means by the “aesthetic,” and her claims for the magnitude of its importance, will be completely missed if the nihilism problematic is overlooked. Her concrete and fine-grained analyses of artworks make up an extensive and vital part of her writings. Kristeva conducts these analyses in order to demonstrate and emphasize the work of *art* as the work of reconnecting

the semiotic and symbolic. Works of art, in specific instances, are distinguished from strictly symbolic discourses—the realm of language as communication—insofar as they give a kind of symbolic form to the semiotic, and so to the traces of the reality that has come to grief. That is why, in the 1980s trilogy, the various works of art and literature she discusses are called *tales of love*, *the literature of abjection*, or works *of mourning*. For, in each case, they restore a living history to the broken-off pieces of suffering. This is not an achievement that can be fulfilled once and for all by any work of art. Rather, in each case, the artwork is related to the surrounding social conditions, or to the fate of the semiotic and the symbolic in the cultural environs of the work's production. Kristeva's 1980s trilogy presents "minor histories" of artistic practices in Western cultures. As will be seen, in the discussion of *Black Sun* especially, the need of this work and the difficulties in fulfilling it are particularly pressing in modernity. The important point, for now, is that what the aesthetic means in Kristeva is the way in which the semiotic takes on—is given—symbolic form in conditions of the wider social and symbolic abandonment of this need. Indeed, this is how the "aesthetic" can come to have a wider reach than artistic and literary practices in the strict sense. Any practice that undertakes this form-giving belongs to the aesthetic. This, too, is easily missed or simply puzzling if Kristeva's sensitivity to modern nihilism is not discerned.

The most important points about Kristeva's relationship to and difference from the meanings of nihilism in the philosophical tradition are the following. When we understand Nietzsche as a great moral psychologist, there is a convergence between the philosophical conception of nihilism and Kristeva's thought on the self, other, and the world at the level of *the psychological problems of modernity*. However, she does not embed the crisis in a metanarrative. Rather, she thinks that only the testimony of suffering subjectivity in art and psychoanalysis allow a series of minor histories of modernity to be told. She binds her telling, in each case, to suffering subjectivity. Avoidance of genealogy and philosophy of history in the big sense allows the historical features of the minor histories to bind themselves to the remnant of freedom: to particular sites of suffering and the movement of its overcoming. This doubles the distance from Heidegger. It is why psychoanalysis is the method of her thought.

It must be said that Kristeva's minor histories leave out the moment of high bourgeois confidence that the political state can mediate all the ties between the individual and society. Kristeva—like Nietzsche, as Warren notes (1988, 12)—never specifically discusses the problem of modern institutions in a political theory addressed to their formation and limitations. She does, however, develop both an ethical and a political thought on the basis of her psychoana-

lytic and literary position. *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988) is a crucial text for understanding what an ethics of psychoanalysis becomes in Kristeva's project. *Nations Without Nationalism* (1993) presents a political thought on a "new" cosmopolitanism for the members of contemporary nation states. Even here, Kristeva does not tell us how to read her. Since she does not give indications *about* the fact that she is a writer of minor histories, many have plunged into *Strangers to Ourselves*, the political essays, or her more specifically feminist writings in order to shore up the desire that Kristeva contributes to the development of a feminist ethics or politics, or provides a theory of contemporary social and political relations. However, the post-Maoist Kristeva not only sees things in a nontotalizing way but refuses to make totalizing gestures, even about the fragmentary.⁸ She has the modernist temperament of refusing to totalize even the critical perspective (something that links her with Adorno and Horkheimer, as I will suggest at some length in the final part of the book). Everything goes back to unacknowledged suffering because this is the remnant of freedom.

The development of the chapters in this book therefore works to press the claim that the structure and content of the 1980s trilogy brings out the presence of the nihilism problematic in Kristeva's writings. Each text of the trilogy contains an analysis of the structure of nihilism discovered in the structures of subjectivity known to psychoanalysis, an argument for the remnant of freedom found in suffering subjectivity, and a minor history of the fate of one dimension of the semiotic—one aspect of unacknowledged suffering—in religion and art. The breakdown of this book into three parts reflects the three levels at which the nihilism problematic is embraced in Kristeva's thought of this period: in psychoanalysis, in religion and art, and, finally, with the posttrilogy books of the same period, in contemporary social and political relations.

Part 1 shows that her sensitivity to nihilistic modernity can be accessed only by demonstrating that there are significant differences between her early thought in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) and her later thought of the 1980s, where the problem of nihilism appears. The differences are found above all in the changing implications of her categorial distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic.⁹ In the revolutionary standpoint the import of the distinction for Kristeva lies in showing the destructive return of semiotic elements into extant symbolic discourses, transforming meaning and the subject. At this point she attempts to connect psychoanalytic insights and aesthetic practices to political movements. For in this phase of her writing, when she is a prominent member of the *Tel Quel* group in Paris, she is an advocate of Mao's cultural revolution.¹⁰ It is the significance of the disruptive potential of the semiotic for cultural and political practices that interests her. In the 1980s writings she is more

attentive to how the semiotic and symbolic fall apart, what I call their tendential severance. Implicit in this development is a changed view of the relationship between psychoanalysis and the aesthetic. The apparent transition from the more political, revolutionary standpoint to the avowed psychoanalytic and literary standpoint, which disappointed and frustrated some of her readers (for example, Smith 1988, and Rose in Oliver 1993b), is rooted in the way in which the significance of *psychoanalysis* changes. The development of Kristeva's psychoanalytic thought from the 1970s to the 1980s is tracked in chapters 1–4.

Chapter 1, on Kristeva's early position, includes a discussion of the Lacanian background to her thought at this time. One sees here Kristeva's dissatisfaction with the constraints that the Lacanian symbolic imposes on the force of negativity, but also her high estimation of Lacan's grasp of the role of symbolic functioning—of language—in the formation of the speaking being. Where Kristeva differs from Lacan is in her reformulation of the "imaginary," a second major category in his project. This allows Kristeva to diverge from Lacan on the significance and power of the symbolic function. On this issue, the discussion does not cover new ground. (See, for example, Grosz 1989, Oliver 1993a, Chanter in Oliver 1993b, and Ziarek in Oliver 1993b.) However, it leads into new ground by addressing, at length, the difference between her 1970s and 1980s writings.

The new argument made in chapter 1 is that the change in the 1980s rests above all on a serious drawback of her methodology in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. For this book divides psychoanalysis and art into the theoretical and practical components, respectively, of her analysis of the social and symbolic inflexibility of the modern bourgeois world, which is the political problem she addresses there. The division inherits the classical Marxist arrangement of theory (psychoanalysis), the problem (the bourgeois world), and work (artistic practice). The consequence is that her theory of the transformation of meaning and the subject in signs ("revolution in poetic language") must posit the historical impact of this transformation—social change—but must also leave that historical impact in endless abeyance. This is important because the continuities and discontinuities in her thought in the 1970s and the 1980s can be specified in a way that is missing from the literature on her: as a genuine *transition* resting on the rearrangement of the relationship between psychoanalysis and art, corresponding to a different view of the "problem" as the problem of modern nihilism. Psychoanalysis no longer stands to art as theory to practice. Rather, theory, the problem, and practice are intertwined to a degree missing in the doctoral thesis, so that these moments do not fall apart and thereby leave us with a thought that posits social transformation but remains empty.

Chapters 2 to 4 show that what leads Kristeva out of the revolutionary standpoint is a deeper exploration of the significance of the narcissistic structure of subjectivity discovered in psychoanalysis. This is what brings the nihilism problematic into the center of her thought. The modern Narcissus, encountered in the therapeutic setting, reveals that modern Western cultures lack the kinds of discourses of love, loss, and separateness that are necessary for symbolic life, connections with others, and the social bond. The narcissistic constriction maintains the kind of subject-object/other relationship that recent continental philosophy addresses, for example, in critiques of the structure of consciousness in modern philosophy (Husserl), the forgetting of Being (Heidegger), ontology as a form of ego-narcissism (Levinas), or the repression of the feminine (Irigaray). Kristeva's attention to the weakness of discourses of love, loss, and separateness in late modern societies does not only grasp the formation, deformation, and transformation of the structure of being with others. It also raises the question of what is lost, what loss is, and what mourning might be in these societies.

Part 2 of the book turns to Kristeva's thought on religion and art. First, chapter 5 shows that *Powers of Horror* provides a minor history of how religions took on the task, neglected by modern institutions and discourses, of elaborating the limits of the ties between individual and society. That is to say, the historical religions provide symbolizations of the instabilities and capacities which make up the less visible features of the structure of being with others. These are the instabilities and capacities that turn on a presymbolic—"non-signifying"—exposure to separateness, otherness, loss, and death (investigated by the trilogy as a whole). Religions partially took on the task of providing a site of engagement of the semiotic and symbolic, but did not accomplish the task. Most important, then, the minor history of religions in *Powers of Horror* actually works to show that religion is a failure in respect of the need to give symbolic form to this exposure, since it ties the semiotic to a foundational instance: to God. In Kristeva's language, religion has the symbolic overreach the semiotic by overreaching itself. The significance of religion for Kristeva has not been sufficiently noted, and where it is brought into the foreground, her thought on religion as a failure, or as this kind of failure, is not fully acknowledged (in Crownfield 1992 and Reineke 1997, for example).

Chapter 6 brings out most strongly the relationship between Kristeva's affirmation of art and the strictly psychoanalytic level of her thought. This is an area of dispute. Some specify the continuity and discontinuity between the artwork and subjectivity (for example, Lechte 1990). Others hold the view that Kristeva imposes psychoanalysis as a metadiscourse on other objects (artworks)

and thereby reduces their significance to the subjectivity of the artist (for example, Hill 1993). This book does not agree with the latter view. It lets Kristeva's cognizance of the problem of modern crises have a larger place in determining the meaning of the artwork in her thought. The chapter proposes that *Black Sun* is the centerpiece of Kristeva's thought on the "presymbolic" features of the structure of being with others, and the need for these to take on a kind of symbolic form. This is not only because *Black Sun* brings the nihilism problematic fully into view, but also because it reveals the power of Kristeva's recognition and investigation of the fate of *loss* in late modern societies. To recall the second interpretation of Nietzsche discussed above, it raises the question of how the consciousness of *loss* of meaning and values might prevail in a way that is not that of demoralization or the nihilistic attitude. What is remarkable about Kristeva's sensitivity to nihilistic modernity is that, while she does not presuppose a wholesale collapse of transcendence, she discovers that Western cultures are afflicted by the *loss of loss*. Even the consciousness of loss is threatened. This is not to understand her as proposing a further phase in a metanarrative of collapse, however. Rather, Kristeva's investigation of the loss of loss, one developed on the basis of her psychoanalytic thought on the relationship to the early mother, is a singular contribution to the analysis of nihilistic modernity that feminist debates would do well to accommodate. For Kristeva raises the questions of what is lost, what loss is, and what mourning might be in a manner that really brings out the connection between the failings of extant forms of representation (failings that are criticized elsewhere and otherwise in recent continental philosophy and feminism) and the questions of subjectivity and sexual difference. Kristeva's exploration of the loss of loss is also crucial for grasping the strength of her conception of the aesthetic. Chapter 6, especially, shows how, for Kristeva, only the testimony of suffering subjectivity in art and psychoanalysis lets a fragmented minor history of modernity—or, better, a series of fragmented minor histories—be told.

Part 3 approaches Kristeva's ethical and political writings as contenders to the title of providing an ethics or politics capable of accommodating the discoveries of psychoanalysis with respect to the structure of being with others and the possibility of the social bond. Chapter 7 interprets *Strangers to Ourselves* as an argument for how modern secular institutions and discourses can make good on their failings by taking on the ethics of psychoanalysis. *Nations Without Nationalism* is read as a project of working out a social logic of the part that "identification" with an ideal, in the psychoanalytic sense, plays in the social body. Kristeva's affirmation of the world of politics or of political movements is always somewhat gingerly delivered, and is unfailingly turned in the direction of

the psychoanalytic and aesthetic standpoint. It is well known that she rejects feminism as a body of thought, and does so on the basis of personal experience in a particular political environment.¹¹ This remains a puzzling impediment for her reception in the anglophone world, where she is predominantly known and promoted as a “French feminist.” However, light is shed on the tricky question of Kristeva’s feminism, especially, by recognition of her sensitivity to nihilistic modernity, for this is what clarifies her conception of the “feminine” and her apparent frequent reduction of it to the maternal function.

Chapter 8 turns specifically to the question of Kristeva’s feminist thought. The chapter is composed of two discussions. The first stages an encounter between Kristeva’s thought and another project attentive to the psychoanalytic investigation into the structures of subjectivity, one which deploys the same psychoanalytic concepts as Kristeva—abjection, idealization, and melancholy—but which also stands as a prominent critical line on her thought. This is Judith Butler’s project.¹² The encounter I stage between the two thinkers argues for a deeper agreement between them than is usually discovered in their writings, but also considers what prohibits the respective frameworks of their thought from being receptive to what the other delivers.

The second discussion in chapter 8 focusses on Kristeva’s theory of sexual difference. Her close association of “woman” and “nature” has led to charges of both essentialism and heterosexualism in the reception of her *oeuvre* (for example, Coward in Kristeva 1984, Butler 1990, 1993, 1997). The charge of heterosexualism is addressed at various moments in the book. Chapter 8 introduces a thought from the early Frankfurt School in order to show that the charge of essentialism misses the import of Kristeva’s thought on sexual difference, which is an effort to confront a process in which “woman” and “nature” come to be associated in the way—often simply tagged as “Western”—that is the target of feminist critique. The arguments I make to clarify and support Kristeva’s discussions of “woman” involve a delicate rapprochement between her thought in two famous essays (“Stabat Mater” [1977] and “Women’s Time” [1979], whose significance for her is attested to in their republication in later, book-length works) and the analysis of nihilistic modernity that Horkheimer and Adorno deliver in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. These arguments show both the significance and the scope of Kristeva’s thought on “woman.”

With Kristeva, the association of “woman” and “nature” belongs to the way in which pieces of reality that have come to grief have been projected onto women, who are made to carry the burden, or at least the distorted image, of unacknowledged suffering. I argue that the connection between Frankfurt School critical theory and Kristeva’s thought lies in their respective acknowledgments of

the import of interrogating *phantasmatics* for the distorted return of the pieces of the reality that has come to grief in modernity. In both Kristeva and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the term *nature* must be understood in the context of this fate. The chapter is above all an attempt to bring together the two areas of psychoanalysis and critical theory, on the one hand, and psychoanalysis and feminism, on the other, in order to show that the space where they intersect provides the most substantial articulation of the problem of nihilistic modernity. The emphasis made here on the presence of the nihilism problematic in Kristeva's writings is therefore meant to illuminate, and not supplant, the issues centrally discussed in her project, and to strengthen what is already a fruitfully diverse reception of that project in the anglophone world.