At the Crossroads of language and identity: Julia Kristeva’s bilingualism

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On the eve of the Holberg Prize ceremony given in her honor, Julia Kristeva gave a speech entitled “Thinking about liberty in dark times,” in which she pondered her sometimes problematic relation with France:

I have so completely invested myself in both this culture and language that I have been speaking and writing for fifty years, that I have almost come to believe the Americans who take me for a French writer and intellectual.

On a provocative and humorous note Julia Kristeva reminds us that if she incarnates a certain quintessence of French thought abroad, she is often perceived as a foreigner in France.

However, there is no doubt that Kristeva is a “French writer and intellectual,” not simply because she holds the French nationality, but rather because of her mastery and command of the language: French is the medium of her critical reflection, French is the language in which she practices psychoanalysis, French is the language in which she teaches, and it is in French that her novels take shape: The samurai in 1990, The old man and the wolves in 1991, Possessions in 1996 and Murder in Byzantium in 2004.

After having lived in France for more than forty years, has Julia Kristeva become a French woman of Bulgarian origin? A Bulgarian become French? Both at the same time? Or neither one nor the other as she herself suggests in an interview with Marie-Christine Navarro when she states: “I am no more Bulgarian than French” (Au risque de la pensée 24). She is, in fact, radically different: passing from one continent to another, at ease in Russian, English, and Chinese, far from belonging to one country, one language, one thought; she is rather an intersection. Exploring her personal polyphony and
her relationship to multiple languages, she describes herself in her unique hybrid linguistic situation as a “monstre de carrefour” (“Bulgarie ma souffrance” 43) - a monster of the crossroads.

“Un monstre de carrefour”? This is a surprising expression as well as a stimulating one. Let’s understand it as a provocative hyperbolic expression of a mediated and mediating in-between linguistic identity. Which language or rather what languages for Julia Kristeva? Let’s examine those works in which the author reveals herself, and let’s analyse them through the lens of monstrosity.

Bulgarian and French : two languages at stake

Julia Kristeva wasn’t always a “monster of the crossroads” “at the intersection of two languages” (Ibid.). Even if French arrived very early in her life, we can still distinguish three distinct moments in her appropriation of the language: a primary stage corresponding to her theoretical apprenticeship in Bulgaria, a second stage marked by her practice in France and a third, an apotheosis, characterized by a profound psychic and linguistic transformation.

Born in 1941 in Sofia, Bulgaria, Julia Kristeva first learns Bulgarian. Very quickly however she is introduced to the French language and initiated into French culture. The young girl who receives “a francophile and francophone education” (“Mémoire” 39), finds herself “from the age of four or five learning French through the recitation of fairy tales, by telling time and praying in the language of Molière” (Au risque de la pensée 17). Her childhood unfolds under the auspices of a double culture and a double linguistic experience. Her linguistic horizons expand very early and the double culture/double language matrix forms the crucible of her position at the linguistic intersection that roots itself in the depths of her being.

For political reasons, the apprenticeship will not be carried out at the French school but will continue at the Alliance française, which she attends in addition to the regular Bulgarian school.

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Passionate and talented, Julia Kristeva’s brilliance earns her a scholarship from the French government to continue her studies in France. Here, her relationship to French takes a definitive and concrete turn: the young woman leaves Bulgaria and on Christmas eve in 1965 she arrives alone in France with only five dollars in her pocket. If the first steps in France are difficult for the young expatriate, it allows her a direct confrontation with the country, its inhabitants, as well as its culture. This “in country” experience brings her into direct immediate contact with everyday practical French. But the true upheaval, the veritable transformation occurs within the context of her psychoanalytic experience in, with, and through the French language. It is an experience that proves to be the ultimate transmutation. Julia Kristeva explains to Bernard Pivot, during his interview program “Double je”:

There was a decisive moment—a radical one, I think—it is psychoanalysis. Being in analysis in French, French then became the language of my childhood.

In other words, through this psychic exploration carried out in another tongue, this other tongue becomes truly and intimately hers. Julia Kristeva insists here on a mutation carried out through a fusion with the second language. Psychoanalysis allows the move from simply possessing the language to living it, inhabiting it, being one with it. She tells Pivot that psychoanalysis bridged the gap between an experiential French and a theoretical one. French will root itself so deeply in the space and time experience of her childhood that when Bernard Pivot, trying to back Kristeva into a corner, mockingly asks if “French has become her second mother tongue”, she gravely agrees.

A second mother tongue….an impossibility? No, not when one is born for a second time. For Julia Kristeva, psychoanalysis functioned as a virtual rebirth that allowed her, in her words, “to be reborn into a French infancy” (Au risque de la pensée 61). Kristeva’s declaration, “There is death in the loss of a mother tongue,” reminds us however that this new birth, rebirth, is not without a dark side, as it has as its correlate a symbolic death. Terms from a lexicon of death occur frequently in Kristeva’s references to Bulgarian: “For me, Bulgarian is almost a dead language” and again “Exile turned this old body
cadaverous” (“Bulgarie ma souffrance” 42). Bulgarian, progressively relegated to exchanges with her mother, literally became so unfamiliar that when Julia Kristeva had to prepare a speech for the award ceremony of an honorary doctorate (*honoris causa*) at Sophia University in 2002, she could not get past the French, and her speech had to be translated into Bulgarian by a third party.

The “thyrse” as linguistic esthetic

Bulgarian: disappeared? Forgotten, then? Far from it. In fact it emerges, making its presence felt, coming to the surface of the other language. If Bulgarian were completely dead, Kristeva would not have characterized French as “the second maternal tongue” but, instead, THE maternal language, unique, replacing the original maternal tongue. There are, then, two maternal languages for Julia Kristeva and the true internal tension plays out around the articulation of the two of them: the fundamental one, Bulgarian, and the language which acquired that status, French.

In “Bulgarie, ma souffrance” published in 1995, Kristeva starts off with the question, “What language?” The text opens on a defensive note, “I have not lost my maternal language,” a statement that is rapidly undermined by her confession of forgetfulness:

Bulgarian comes more and more slowly to me. I have to admit, in dreams or when I hear my mother speak and after twenty-four hours of immersion in this now distant body of water, I am surprised at how well I swim; or again when I attempt a foreign idiom—Russian or English for example—, when lost for words and grammar, I cling to this old lifesaver of a buoy that offers itself to me as the original spring, which after all does not sleep very deeply after all.

The first maternal language is presented as somewhat marginalized: it is relegated to the background, only called upon in difficult situations or in moments of linguistic confusion. Bulgarian is discretely
present. But if the language is only latently present, the first maternal language has not, for all that, disappeared completely.

Julia Kristeva’s choice of metaphor to describe possible moments of linguistic resurgence is interesting. An aquatic isotope (life saver, immersion, original spring or source) is used to refer to Bulgarian. It is impossible not to make the connection between these watery evocations and the mother; one cannot not resist the play of signifiers set in motion by the French homonyms: “mère” (mother) and “mer” (ocean or sea). There is nothing surprising in this slippage, in fact the interpretation would smack of cliché if it weren’t doubly motivated in this case. The play of homonyms is not innocent when used by a psychoanalyst and because the text itself suggests this tie (“hear my mother speak ….immersion in this water”). The mother here is implicitly assimilated to deep waters. A bit later, Kristeva once again links language and the figure of the mother when she states that “matricide is implicated in the abandonment of the mother tongue”. The abandonment of the mother tongue is then a kind of new murder of the mother. Matricide is, according to Kristeva, “The condition sine qua non of our individuation” (Soleil Noir. Depression et mélancolie 38) and our access to thought. So if the shift in language duplicates, then, the murder of the mother necessary to the initial access to thought, in this instance it also signals the attainment of intellectual maturity – a lesser murder in this case, I think, a murder that is not really a murder, but one that occludes and represses, as this image suggests:

Over this buried crypt, on this stagnant torpid reservoir, I built a new residence in which I live and which lives in me, and in which one could say, somewhat pretentiously, the true life of the mind and body takes place.” (“Bulgarie ma souffrance” 42)

For the French this is a discrete allusion to Verlaine. But more important is the analytical metaphor of the crypt at the center of the self. Here the crypt is not a place of unconscious secrets but instead a place of a secreted language. In Au risqué de la pensée the same intimate and disquieting image reoccurs, “There always exists a ghost of the past and of origins that haunt the foreigner, his or her secret crypt” (101).
The new fragile residence is at the mercy of ghosts: sometimes “a swell without words but which has its own music…imposes a clumsy syntax” (“Bulgarie ma souffrance”43). Julia Kristeva feels this resurgence of Bulgarian daily.

Bulgarian has left a sort of music in me. I think that I find this music in my accent in French when you listen to me or in the structure of my sentences in French, and, most noticeably, in my novels where the sentences are heavier, longer and more breathless than those of someone who has passed the baccalauréat in French. There is, then, a trace…

(Double jeu)

At the frontiers of French, Bulgarian makes it presence felt. A certain syntactical inflexion and rhythm comes from the first language, not in conflict but a fusion between the two languages, a presence that harks back to the image of the vine entwined staff, a thryse, so eloquently described by Baudelaire in Petits poèmes en prose:

But physically it is only a baton, a pure baton, a hop-pole, a vine-stake, dry, hard, and straight. Around this baton, in capricious meanderings, play and frolic vine-stems and flowers, the first sinuous and fugitive, the second bent over like bells or like overturned goblets. And an astonishing glory leaps from that complexity of lines and of colors, whether tender or showy. Might one not say that the curved line and the spiral court the straight line and dance around it in mute adoration? Might one not say that all of these delicate corollas, all of these calyxes, explosions of scent and of color, perform a mystical fandango around the hieratic baton? And yet, who is the foolhardy mortal who would dare to determine whether the flowers and the vine-branches were made for the baton, or if the baton is only the pretext for displaying the beauty of the vine-branches and the flowers?

In the place of the staff is French with Bulgarian as the vegetation. The two work together to express a linguistic duality, one that certainly is exacerbated in the place where both risk and liberty are the
greatest: the novel. It is in the novel where one can hear the very personal linguistic rhythm of the author, small Kristevan music composed in ample phrases, shimmering and overflowing with adjectives. There can be no doubt that the bilingual matrix comes into play in the composition of this music, one of two languages united in graceful harmony.

Following Jean Cocteau who says of another famous woman writer Colette, “If ‘Madame Colette’ is not a monster, she is nothing,” can we say the same of Kristeva? Is she as she has sometimes provocatively claimed, “a hybrid monster,” “a monster of the crossroads” (un monster de Carrefour)? We took this as a metaphor for her inter-lingual situation. Yet this linguistic monstrosity needs to be nuanced for the “in-between” state doesn’t exist or rather, no longer exits. French predominates but not without the Bulgarian foundation: it is a French in motion, moving to different emerging rhythms.

In speaking about her latest novel *Murder in Byzantium*, Julia Kristeva emphasized the singularity of her French: “What is at stake in *Murder in Byzantium* is this: How to write in my *migrant French* about the happiness and pain of the displaced, the uprooted,” (“Meurtre à Byzance” ou *pourquoi je me voyage en roman*, II, 81). A “migrant French”, a French renewed from within, a French once and always inhabited, haunted, by a foreign foundation which opens up to innovation:

To be reborn, to invest French with the memory of my sensations filtered by another language, by other places, other times, is like trying to pass a stream though a sieve, water the earth. Stéphanie, one of the novel’s heroines and Julia Kristeva’s implicit double, says nothing less when she writes “always caught up by vowels, consonants and syllables, I go to meet an ungraspable will o’ the wisp under the bark [surface] of signs, mood and meaning, goodness nasty and naïve, fluid, flowing endlessly changing river” (ibid. 78). A rebirth in French, then, but without leaving Bulgaria behind. Latent, it remains in Julia Kristeva and, when Bernard Pivot accuses her of having “abandoned her native language”, she laughs “You aren’t going to make me feel guilty!” before going on to specify the delightful ambiguous relationship with her
first language: “I abandoned it but it didn’t abandon me.” It is in the midst of these multiple idioms that she invents and creates her own language. It is with her entwined staff that she makes her way. And, if there is any monstrosity, it is a singularly positive one, one that can be found the positive aspects of these expressions: un “monstre de pensée” (a monster of thought), a “monstre de production” (of production), a “monstre de savoir et audace” (of knowledge). Atypical, she, who chose French, whose intimate polyphony resonates in French and who chose French as her banner is only monstrous in her uniqueness, her exceptionality. More than a “monstre de Carrefour” or because she is in fact a monstre de Carrefour, if Julia Kristeva can be considered a monstre, it can only be a “monstre sacrée” (a sacred monster, a Titan).

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