"The Lost Foundation":
Kristeva’s Semiotic Chora and
Its Ambiguous Legacy

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The aim of this essay is to reclaim Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic chora by re-inscribing it as an intervention in the context of two important postmodern debates. The first debate relates to the philosophical problem of “the beginning before the Beginning.” The second concerns the necessity and possibility of mediation between incommensurable entities: the “demonic” and the social, desire and the Law, material production and representation. I contend: (1) that the introduction of the chora in RPL is part of Kristeva’s effort to restore the legacy of a materialist economy of the beginning, as this is glimpsed in Plato’s Timaeus from which Kristeva borrows her controversial term; and (2) that the chora constitutes an attempt on Kristeva’s part to explore a third space of ambiguous relationality in the context of which our transcendence to the “demonic” lies less “beyond us” than “in-between.”

Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of the semiotic chora in La Révolution du Langage Poétique (1974) in the context of her “descent” (as she calls it) to the most “archaic” origins of language and the subject (83). In her foreword to this monumental work (first presented as her doctoral dissertation), Kristeva defines her theoretical project against the modern, Hegelian understanding of science as the taking on oneself of “the strenuous effort of the Notion” (11). Such a view of science, she emphasizes, is the product of “archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs” who divorce the thinking subject from its embodied presence in history and purify logos (language as the manifestation of reason) of its biological, material traces (13). The task she sets herself is to put forward a “theory of signification” that will take into account the formation of the subject.
at the intersection of “corporeal, linguistic and social” forces (15). The chora, a term she borrows from Plato’s Timaeus, enables Kristeva to conceptualize this intersection both spatially (as the “in-between” produced by the ambiguous relatedness of two always already socialized bodies: that is, the body of the not-yet-subject and that of its [m]other); and temporally (as the beginning before “the Beginning,” the mobile origin “before” the imposition of “the Word”). Its function, then, is to displace the speaking subject, (re)tracing its emergence not only “before” logos but also, in returning it to the maternal body, beyond the Phallus as the structuring principle of the symbolic order.

In her foreword Kristeva argues that the displacement of the speaking subject is inextricable from a crisis in signification. The chora is for Kristeva the site of this crisis, which, in the second part of the book, she sets out to investigate with reference to the work of Stéphane Mallarmé and Comte de Lautréamont. At the same time, it is a generative space where a new modality of the signifying process is produced. Taking the Greek word σημείον (semeion) as her starting point, Kristeva calls this other modality “the semiotic” (le sémiotique) to denote a signifying operation based on traces and marks rather than signs, the marks of the drives on the speaking body, the traces of what Freud calls the primary processes. Kristeva’s main aim in Revolution in Poetic Language is to determine the extent to which the semiotic has been repressed in post-Enlightenment capitalist society, pointing to the moments when, breaking out of this repression, it erupts in practices such as avant-garde art (which constitutes her focus in the book), religion, esoterism, the carnival or other “fragmentary phenomena”—as she calls them (16). The guiding question of her analysis situates the book in the distinct critical moment of its production: “Under what conditions,” she asks, do these eruptions “correspond to socio-economic change and, ultimately, even to revolution?” (16). Like other of her contemporaries (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari) Kristeva attempts to reexamine the relationship between aesthetics and politics (art and revolution) by investing each separately at the site of the unconscious. If the concept of the chora was taken up with such eagerness in the late 1970s this is because it is for Kristeva the name, the very principle of this investment.

Gradually, however, and as the fear of essentialism gained more and more ground in the Humanities, Revolution in Poetic Language came under attack for its assumption of a prediscursive force and its “naive” analysis of avant-garde art. In the area of feminist theory in particular, the semiotic chora was repeatedly dismissed as “one of the most problematic aspects” of Kristeva’s work (Rose 53), one lending itself to utopian constructions of “a quasi-mystical realm” that, as Gerardine Meaney puts it, “looks suspiciously like the eternal feminine” (84). Read as a metaphor for “the maternal uterus,” the chora was criticized as one more regression to a-historical perceptions of femininity (Stone 42) while its subversive power was questioned for remaining limited “to a site outside culture
itself" (Butler 88). It is no wonder, in this light, that Kristeva herself seems to grow increasingly reticent about the chora to which merely passing references are made in her most recent writings. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate the continuous importance of the chora (and what I call its legacy) in the context of Kristeva's work. As I propose to argue, with her reinscription of the Platonic chora in Revolution in Poetic Language Kristeva introduces two interrelated concerns that remain central in her thinking and that have, significantly, acquired particular urgency in different fields of the humanities in the past thirty years.

The first concern relates to what Slavoj Žižek calls "the Beginning proper," that is, to "the primordial act," which founds the order of the Word (1996, 13). This is, undoubtedly, a fundamental concern in Western metaphysics (from Plato to German Idealism) and remains a key question in critical engagements with the metaphysical tradition (in the work of Martin Heidegger and in the context of postmodern continental philosophy). What is at stake in this question is as much the determination of the nature of "the Beginning" (Idea or matter? The Word or the deed? A process or an irrevocable break?) as the understanding of the relationship between "the Beginning" and what precedes, or indeed, exceeds it ("the point in question," Žižek emphasizes, is "the exact status of . . . 'nothing'" [14]). This is precisely what Kristeva seeks to investigate in her first seminal work. Hence her turn to the Platonic chora and her attempt to reconfigure the philosophical problem of "the Beginning" in the contexts of linguistics and psychoanalysis. As Juliet Mitchell reminds us, the question of origins (understood as "the inception of the human animal as a social being") lies at the heart of psychoanalytic theory and practice (Brennan 1989, 34). What concerns Kristeva is the logocentric bias that has taken hold on Western thought and has infiltrated the area of psychoanalysis, compelling us to posit the "Word" at the beginning. After the intervention of Jacques Lacan, in particular, Kristeva feels that psychic processes have unfairly been reduced to linguistic ones. This is why in Revolution in Poetic Language she raises "the awkward question of the extra-linguistic" (21) in order to reclaim what she calls "the heteronomy of our psyche" (Pollock 1998, 9). As she admits in a discussion with Kathleen O'Grady, this has remained a central preoccupation in her work:

I am interested in language, and in the other side of language which is filtered inevitably by language and yet is not language. I have named this heterogeneity variously. I have sought it out in the experience of love, of abjection, of horror. I have called it the semiotic in relation to the symbolic. (Pollock 1998, 9)

With the introduction of the semiotic chora, then, Kristeva initiates a series of attempts to rewrite the familiar Johannine narrative. O'Grady summarizes some of the stages in this rewriting:
You adopted Céline's revision in *Powers of Horror*: "No! In the beginning was emotion. The Word came next to replace emotion as the trot replaces the gallop." In *Tales of Love* you sum up your understanding of Freud with the statement: "In the beginning was hatred." Your text on the relation of psychoanalysis and faith is titled, *In the Beginning Was Love*. And more recently your work on Proust has reformulated this statement once again: "In the beginning was suffering." (8)

As she herself suggests, of course, these are merely different names for what, in the context of the Western logocentric tradition, has repeatedly been given the status of nothing. The task of psychoanalysis, according to her, is to return to this nothing, exposing it as "the underlying" but forgotten "causality" of language and the subject (Moi 153). If, as I have suggested, the *chora* is the first of such returns, then it appears that, though the term itself has lost some of its currency, the problematic of the *chora* as the problematic of our relation with (and access to) an archaic, preverbal origin remains in force in Kristeva. Significantly, in the introduction to one of her more recent works (*Sens et non-sens de la révolte: Pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse* 1996) she reminds us of the rejected stone in the foundations of the church (10) and goes on to redefine revolution as the movement back to this "lost foundation," which she associates with the "return of the archaic, in the sense of the repressed but also the timelessness of the drive" (12). In this essay I want to contextualize Kristeva's concern with a lost foundation. My aim is to spell out the significance of her intervention in the current philosophical debates around origins, an intervention that situates her thought within the unique historical coordinates of postmodern Western society, while throwing into relief her distance from, indeed, her "strangeness" with regard to many of her contemporaries.

The second issue that concerns Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* is inextricable from the question of "the Beginning," if the Beginning is understood as a passage from nature to culture, from the biological organism to the social, speaking subject. What is at stake here is how we conceive of this passage that renders possible the order within which we live. In the context of the Western metaphysical tradition the movement from "One" to the "Other" has been reduced to a violent act of rupture, a *coupure* that separates *logos* from its *other/s* and the speaking subject from his/her material experience of suffering or *jouissance*. Hence the "necrophiliac" nature of Western thought that Kristeva complains of. Interestingly, this rupture has repeatedly taken the (metaphorical) figure of a double denial, namely, the denial of woman as the m/other of logos and the denial of the other as feminine. Kristeva's aim in *Revolution in Poetic Language* is to rethink the necessity, stakes, and character of this denial that is seen as constitutive of both speech and the subject. Her introduction of the semiotic *chora*, in particular, marks her desire to move beyond the paradigm of
a violent rupture that promotes a monolithic understanding of logos (relieved only by a feminized otherness outside it) and a metaphorics of gendered hierarchical op/positions (speech vs. silence, spirit vs. matter, time vs. space). In this attempt, Kristeva situates herself within a philosophical double bind that has become especially foregrounded in postmodernity, namely, the need to challenge the oppositional framework within which Western modernity has sought to define itself while continuing to think difference and our relation to it. What is at issue in this double bind is the necessity, or indeed, the possibility of mediation, as the process that cancels out oppositions in opening up the “One” to receive the “Other.” While some of her contemporaries (including Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Deleuze and Guattari) demonstrate a suspicion toward this process (a suspicion attributed to the Hegelian legacy that still determines our understanding of it), Kristeva seeks to reclaim its value despite Hegel, or rather, in the interest of Hegel and a materialist reinvestment of his dialectical thinking. As I intend to argue in this essay, the chora constitutes an effort on her part to explore a mediating space that preserves the alterity of the entities engaged in the process of mediation, though not at the expense of their connectedness.

A Beginning Beyond Memory

In one of the most insightful readings of Plato’s Timaeus John Sallis draws attention to the complexity of the question of the beginning in the dialogue. Despite what seems to be a straightforward injunction at its opening (“With regard to everything it is most important to begin at the natural beginning”), the Timaeus frustrates all our attempts to posit a (the) beginning. “What is the natural beginning?” Sallis asks. “When was it? . . . Is it a beginning in time or a beginning of time? Or even a beginning that . . . would precede the beginning of time?” (1999, 4). According to him, it is the proliferation of such questions in the dialogue that can account for the series of palintropic moves displacing the beginning the moment it is posited, taking us further and further back to a yet earlier beginning. The climax of this palintropic operation comes with what Sallis calls “the chorology” where Timaeus abruptly interrupts his discourse on the divine cause of beings, seeking “another suitable beginning” (προσήκονσαν ετέρων αρχήν) (Hamilton and Cairns 48b). It is here that the chora is introduced as the mother of all sensible things, associated with a more errant form of cause, ανάγκη (“necessity”) which will later be supplanted by the more rational and controlled power of the demiurge/god, as the chora itself will (in all appearances at least) be supplanted at the end of the parenthesis opened by the chorology and with Timaeus’s return to his earlier narrative.

Judging from Timaeus’s apologetic tone at the threshold of the chorology, this turn to the chora and to a pre-originary origin is as necessary as it is reluctant, for
it seems that, in creating the cosmos, the divine nous was in need of avayρκη as a supplement, one, however, that it is all too eager to forget lest its own originary status is threatened. This is why, according to Sallis, the question of the beginning in the dialogue is inextricable from an “exercise in remembrance.” “To remember,” he tells us, “is to bring something back in mind, to bring back before one’s inner vision something remote, something past, something removed from the present, from presence. It is to bring back to a certain presence something that nonetheless, in its pastness, is—and remains—absent” (13). In other words, to remember in this context entails a move beyond memory as the Greeks have defined it: namely, as retention and representation. If, then, as Sallis argues, “nothing is more vigorously interrogated” in the dialogue “than the question of the beginning” (5), this is not so much because Plato points to a beginning before “the Beginning,” but because he suggests (a suggestion to be taken up by Heidegger centuries later) that this can only be arrived at from beyond the memory of the Greeks, from a topos outside Western metaphysics. Though, as the Timaeus demonstrates, we can (and have the obligation to) recall it, the memory of this “other” beginning can never belong to us, descendants as we are of the Greeks. It can only come back to us as the memory of an (the) other.

Hence the significance of the narrative that young Critias shares with us in the opening of the dialogue. Going back himself to a story narrated to him by his father, Critias tells us of how the archaic history of Athens came to the Greeks through Solon’s encounter with an Egyptian priest. Critias recalls the priest’s reprimand to the Greeks for “remaining children” in their tendency to erase what has preceded them, the very scene of their production. It is precisely this forgetting, it seems, that has allowed the Greeks to posit themselves at the site of logos, “the beginning of all beginnings” (Žižek 1996, 13).

“Were the Greeks, who talked among themselves of having been children, the most lucid parents of history?” Kristeva asks in a passing reference to the story (1980, 272–73). It is perhaps this realization that constitutes the impetus behind her project from the early seventies to the present. For if the possibility of Western metaphysics lies in what in reality is a double forgetting (the forgetting of its primal scene and the forgetting of this forgetting), then only a consistent practice of anamnesis (an “exercise in remembrance”) can take Western thought beyond the eternal childhood of the Greeks. Kristeva’s appropriation of the Platonic chora, therefore, needs to be seen in the context of this practice, which cannot be reduced (as it has) to a nostalgic return to an archaic maternal origin. As I have already suggested, Plato’s chora is an abyssal origin within which the very concept of the Beginning loses itself in its own proliferating doubles. Though it occupies a position of exteriority with regard to the Greek polis, being associated with whatever the latter fails to “incorporate” (“procreation, mating, birth, sexual difference, corporeity itself in its singularity,” 26), at the same time, the chora in the Timaeus prepares the ground for the emergence of the
polis (choreo = “to make room for,” 118); in other words, it provides the earthly space where the ideal image of the city can be materialized (145).

If Kristeva is attracted to Plato’s “other” Beginning, then, this is because of its ambiguity and its supplementary function with regard to the polis, not (as some of her critics have argued) because of a utopian promise inherent in it for an escape from logos, culture, and history. In her own reinscription of this beginning in Revolution in Poetic Language these are precisely the aspects that she comes to foreground: “The chora,” she tells us, “is not yet a position that represents something for someone” (1984, 26). Thus, it resists any theoretical reification—even as a fugitive pre-originary origin. At the same time, “though deprived of unity, identity, or deity,” it is subject to what Kristeva calls “an objective ordering,” dictated as much by natural as by “socio-historical constraints” (26–27). In this light, the chora should be perceived as neither a preverbal space nor as a timeless time before history. Its effect, as Kristeva has repeatedly pointed out, is transverbal (moving through and across logos) and transhistorical (alongside, opposite to and in the margins of history). “Our discourse—all discourse”—she writes, “moves with and against the chora in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it” (26). Similarly, the chora and the semiotic disposition articulating and articulated through it can only be experienced within the symbolic. “The semiotic that ‘precedes’ symbolization,” she clarifies, “is only a theoretical supposition justified by the need for description” (68).

What is the use, then, of the practice of anamnesis that Kristeva is advocating and in terms of which she defines her own task as a psychoanalyst? What is the use of (re)tracing an archaic origin, if this is ultimately “a theoretical supposition,” a fiction invented and performed (as the story of the Greeks’ forgotten history) within the very tradition that it is meant to exceed and put into question? Undoubtedly, what is at issue here is not the truth value of the fiction narrated to us but the difference it makes in how we understand and intervene in the real. It is no wonder, in this light, that in his discussion of the Timaeus Sallis points out the links between the “exercise in remembrance” that he traces in the dialogue and the act of retelling (13). Significantly, this has become an important focus in Kristeva’s latest work. In The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis, she defines anamnesis as the putting of memory into words, the repetition through “narrative enunciation” of a traumatic past that “permits a renewal of the whole subject” (2000, 28–29). In her biography of Hannah Arendt (1999; 2001) the turning of bios into a narrative guarantees not only subjective but also communal renewal. In what follows I want to explore in more detail the implications of Kristeva’s narrative reclamation of a beginning that is experienced only as an embarrassment in Plato and that still needs to be (re)activated.
A Materialist Legacy

In *Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida and the Body Politic* (2001) John Protevi draws on the work of Gilbert Simondon and Deleuze/Guattari in order to distinguish two opposing philosophical theories of the Beginning. As he demonstrates, it is what these thinkers call “hylomorphism”—the idealist doctrine that traces the source of creation in “a simple unchanging commanding origin” responsible for “the imposition of a transcendent form on a chaotic and/or passive matter” (Protevi, 8)—that has dominated the philosophical history of the West. Protevi is keen to emphasize the political consequences of such domination, drawing attention to the “simple and straightforward relation” existing between “the political physics of hylomorphism” and “fascism conceived as the fatal desire for the forceful imposition of complete organization in a body politic” (193). “A completely organized body politic,” he explains, excludes “chance, change, motion,” and in doing so, it becomes equivalent with “death” (193). His aim in the book is to “track down in the history of Western philosophy the road not taken” (11) of what he calls, following Deleuze, “material self-ordering,” an alternative version of the Beginning that foregrounds “the self-ordering potentials of matter itself” (7). In contrast to hylomorphism, which promotes unity and naturalizes identities, material self-ordering, according to Protevi, opens up a thought of multiplicity “in which changes in a field are attributed to changes in the arrangement of its immanent elements” (8) and can help us rethink the possibilities for “a radical democratic body politic” (11).

Significantly, in his brief discussion of the *Timaeus* Protevi focuses on the operation of the *chora*, arguing that, through it, “material self-ordering is hinted at” though it is, ultimately, subordinated to the hylomorphic “techne of the Demiurge” (147). In her anamnestic return to the Platonic *chora* is Kristeva attempting to explore the consequences of receiving this non-hylomorphic legacy? Is she venturing to actually walk the road left untracked by the most childlike, perhaps, of the Greeks?

It is clear that in her discussion of the semiotic she is interested in attending to what Protevi would call the “singularities” of matter (8): drive charges, energy flows, affect pulses—all separating, connecting, halting, diverting, scattering, transforming (in other words, *self-ordering*) on different thresholds, namely, the body (or, indeed, specific body-parts), language, the family and larger social structures, such as the church, the labor union or the state. The *chora*, “formed by the drives and their stases” (1984, 25) is the principle of this self-ordering, a materialist economy of the Beginning that permits Kristeva to displace all transcendental forms of origin (the Word, the divine *nous*, subjective will), at the same time, forcing us to rethink our assumptions concerning the passivity and chaotic nature of matter. In this light, it is important that she frames her
introduction of the semiotic by a discussion of the Husserlian transcendental ego, "as the single, unique constraint which is constitutive of all linguistic acts as well as all trans-linguistic practice" (32), Hjelmslev's understanding of meaning as a ""substance' preexisting its 'formation'" (38) and Frege's notion of signification as the denotation of an object separate from the subject and as the enunciation of "a displaced subject, absent from the signified and signifying position" (54). In positing a center (be it the subject or meaning as "Truth") outside all forms of signification as well as social action and insisting on the uniqueness and unified nature of this center, these theories exemplify the desire that Protevi calls "fascist." What they leave out is the process of production of what belatedly and arbitrarily institutes itself as a center, thus, keeping the systems of both the subject and language closed to their "heterogeneous components," (as Kristeva would put it), their "internal destabilization in the direction of [their] 'desire-noise' as well as [their] 'memory-consciousness'" (1987, 15). In defining her own aims against these theories, then, Kristeva is not seeking to establish an alternative centerless center. As she makes clear in Revolution in Poetic Language, what is at stake in philosophical understandings of Signification (Bedeutung), the Thetic (as the function that posits a judgment and an "I") as well as the Subject itself is not "to raise the question" of their origin, but to show that they "are producible" (36, 44). Though she rightly traces this shift of interest in the production of the ego and thetic signification back to Freud and acknowledges the contribution of Lacan, it seems to me that her use and understanding of production are a lot more radical precisely because she takes us beyond her predecessors' necessary albeit limited concern with the signifying logic of the unconscious and the (im)possibility of interpretation.

In The Production of Space, a book published in the same year as Kristeva's Revolution, Henri Lefebvre cautions against too much reliance on "codes" and the reduction of our relation to social space or reality to "the status of a reading." "This," he argues, "is to evade both history and practice" (1991, 7). Lefebvre is, of course, putting forward a critique of the so-called linguistic turn associated with the movements of structuralism and semiotics in which he includes Kristeva. In my view, however, it is not a coincidence that both Kristeva and Lefebvre, following on Deleuze and Guattari (whose Anti-Oedipus came out two years earlier), are engaged in the same project of reclaiming the materialist force of the concept of "production." Despite their different agendas, the distinctiveness of the fields within which they are working and the future directions each thinker will take, this convergence of concerns is important, not merely because it offers an interesting perspective from which to evaluate the early work of Kristeva, but also because it is becoming more and more urgent to address questions relating to identity or difference, truth, judgment or the law from the site of their own making (and unmaking). As Protevi suggests, citing Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri,
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The real revolutionary practice refers to the level of production. Truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will. Mobility and hybridity are not liberatory, but taking control of the production of mobility and stasis, purities and mixtures is. (197)

Hardt’s and Negri’s emphasis in this context on the necessity to “take control” is, undoubtedly, rather unfortunate for it re institutes a (collective) subject outside the process of production. Though this may not be far from a certain Marx, what is of interest is that, in their reclamation of the Marxist concept of production, all four thinkers (Lefebvre, Deleuze/Guattari, Kristeva) trace in it a “rationality” that promises to “release” them “from any need to evoke a pre-existing reason of divine or ‘ideal’ (hence theological and metaphysical) origin” (Lefebvre 1991, 72). What is more, as Lefebvre emphasizes, it permits them to “eliminate any suggestion of a goal governing productive activity and conceived of as preceding and outlasting that activity” (72). Hence the concern of these thinkers with process, a concept that they insist on using in relation to that of production. For Lefebvre, “process” implies a dialectical relationship (between the perceived, the conceived and the lived). For Deleuze and Guattari it is a more disseminative operation that entails, significantly, two different aspects: “the metaphysical process that puts us in contact with the ‘demoniacal’ element in nature . . . and the historical process of social production” (1984, 35).

In my reading, this is precisely how Kristeva uses the term in her early work. Whether it refers to the semiotic as that which “exceeds the subject and his communicative structures” (1984, 16) or to significance as the alternative mode of signification produced through the intervention of the semiotic, “process” is understood as “a playful permutation” (rather than an “exchange,” Moi 1986, 83) between what she prefers to call the “archaic” and the social. This is why it unfolds within “plural and heterogeneous universes” (1984, 14) and encompasses two different yet interdependent movements, namely, the movement of anamnesis (as we have already traced it) and that of “practice,” which she understands in its Marxist sense: as the supra-subjective activity oriented toward “externality, objectivity, and the real” (1984, 199).

We have discussed the movement of anamnesis as the turn backward to a past beyond memory and our representations of it. We have tried to understand Kristeva’s chora not as the forgotten past itself (whose status, Kristeva warns us, is that of a theoretical fiction), but as the force of this palintropic move that destabilizes the subject and frustrates any effort to (im)pose an absolute origin. As Kristeva demonstrates, the radical potential of this movement lies beyond the opening up of logos (as “the Beginning”) to the semiotic process that produced it “while remaining foreign” to it (36). For the beginning itself is reinscribed as a process, or to quote Kristeva, it is made to “integrate [its] process
Hence her insistence on the necessity to reconceptualize the threshold to the symbolic (what she calls "the thetic phase" [43]). Her concern in this context lies with "prevent[ing] the thetic from becoming theological" (or "fascist," in Protevi's terms), in other words, preventing it from imposing itself as an irrevocable "break" that reifies the subject "as a transcendental ego," positing "the well-ordered signifier . . . as sacred and unalterable within the enclosure of the Other" (43, 51, 58–59). And it is here, perhaps, that Kristeva's materialist focus is thrown most into relief, for in her quest beyond theological paradigms of the beginning, she, like Deleuze and Guattari, arrives at the model of the machine.

Defined by Deleuze and Guattari as "a system of interruptions or breaks" (coupures), the machine appears, indeed, to offer an alternative to the monolithic rupture encountered consistently in different Western narratives (from religion, literature, and art to philosophy and psychoanalysis) and seen, significantly, as inextricable from an authorial/authoritative fiat (the Divine Word, le nom/nom du père). Not only does the machine annul any force that this rupture has and its originating claims by regrafting it into a series (a nonhierarchical succession of its own redoublings) but, more importantly, it establishes a very distinct relation with matter (hyle). Whereas in the Western metaphysical tradition hyle, understood as "the pure continuity that any one sort of matter ideally possesses," is precisely what needs to be negated (broken out of), the machine teaches us that "far from being the opposite of continuity, the break or interruption conditions this continuity." And, indeed, is conditioned by it for, as Deleuze and Guattari tell us, "every machine functions as a break in the flow in relation to the machine to which it is connected, but at the same time is also a flow itself, or the production of a flow" (1984, 36).

Though it may strike as strange when transposed in the context of Kristeva's work, this mechanistic thinking is, in my view, closer to her understanding of the semiotic chora and its relation to the thetic phase than Lacan's structuralist thinking. Rather than a system of signifiers, Kristeva's semiotic is a system (a machine) of breaks-flows, constantly separating from and connecting with the machine(s) of the symbolic, continually grafting onto its body-parts their process of production. Hence Kristeva's insistence on the constant eruptions of the semiotic within the symbolic (1984, 57–71), the inscription of the thetic phase within a logic of repetition and renewal (46–51), the proliferation of both the enunciating subject and its denoted object (60), finally, the dialectic of "shattering and maintaining position" within what remains "a heterogeneous process" (56).

It seems, therefore, that in Revolution in Poetic Language Kristeva has taken seriously Deleuze and Guattari's injunction to return the unconscious to the site of the factory (1984, 55), a site that, in their view, classical psychoanalysis has preferred to forget (another lost foundation!) in order to erect in the void
left by its forgetting a theatre. In doing so, they argue, classical psychoanalysis has shifted attention from the production of desire to its representation or expression. Concerned, herself, as we have seen, with Lacan's privileging of what Deleuze and Guattari call "the despotic signifier" (54), she seeks to establish the grounds for a materialist psychoanalysis, based on a materialist understanding of the origins of language and the subject. It is in this context that the non-hylomorphic legacy of the *chora* has been useful to her, enabling her to demonstrate the heterogeneousness, though not the autonomy, of instinctive life. This, in fact, becomes an important point of contention between Deleuze/Guattari and Kristeva, a point that has an impact on the ways each of these thinkers perceives the relation between the "demonic" and the social and that eventually leads them to very different directions. In her Preface to *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva openly addresses the issue:

Laing and Cooper, like Deleuze and Guattari, are right to stress the de-structuring and a-signifying machine of the unconscious. Compared with the ideologies of communication and normativeness, which largely inspire anthropology and psychoanalysis, their approach is liberating. What is readily apparent, however, is that their examples of "schizophrenic flow" are usually drawn from modern literature, in which the "flow" itself exists only through language, appropriating and displacing the signifier to practice within it the heterogeneous generating of the "desiring machine." (17)

In other words, though acknowledging the liberating potential of returning to the site of the factory, Kristeva evidently does not share Deleuze and Guattari's suspicion for the theatre of representation. Whereas Deleuze and Guattari seek to define a psychiatric practice—Schizoanalysis—that will devote itself to "destroying beliefs and representations, theatrical scenes" (314) and that will seek to liberate the lines of flight of the unconscious, Kristeva articulates her practice by pursuing the implications of what has the status of an *aporia* in *Anti-Oedipus*: "But how would these decoded and deterritorialized flows of desiring-production keep from being reduced to some representative territoriality?" they ask (1984, 315). The question acquires all the more urgency a bit further on (316) when the authors come to admit that "the movement of deterritorialization can never be grasped in itself, one can only grasp its indices in relation to the territorial representations" (which is what Kristeva reminds them in the passage quoted above). If, then, representation is "the reverse side" of the deterritorializing movement of desire and if, as Guattari suspects, "something happens between chains of semiotic expression, and material chains" (300, my emphasis), then the revolution that all three authors invoke may depend less on the liberation of the autoproducative force of the unconscious than on
our understanding of and openness to this event of the “between.” After all, as Protevi acknowledges (again citing Hardt and Negri), “what we need is not just self-ordering, but democratic self-ordering” (196). It is my contention that this is precisely where the uniqueness and value of Kristeva’s work (from Revolution in Poetic Language to the present) lies. And it is not a coincidence that this calls once more for a return to the legacy of the chora. But perhaps I am running ahead of myself for, as Sallis has taught us, we cannot appreciate this legacy unless we learn how to count to three.

THE EVENT IN-BETWEEN

At the beginning of his reading of the Timaeus, Sallis draws our attention to the first three words of the dialogue (the words “one, two, three”) and argues that these words “bespeak the dialogue as a whole” (1999, 7). He goes on to demonstrate how the counting of three is repeated throughout the Timaeus, culminating in the introduction of the chora as a third kind other than the two—the intelligible and the sensible—discussed earlier in the dialogue, although, as Timaeus tells us, it partakes of the intelligible “in some mysterious way” and despite the fact that it nurtures the sensible like a mother or a nurse (Hamilton and Cairns 1989, 51b). According to Vassilis Kalfas, the introduction of the chora in Timaeus marks an important change in Platonic thought, a change from a binary to a tripartite ontological system that permits Plato to preserve the basic tenet of his ontology (the priority of Ideas and their independence from the realm of the sensible) while solving the “problem” of the interaction and the relationship between the two (1995, 118-49):

For an image, since the reality after which it is modelled does not belong to it, and it exists as the fleeting shadow of some other, must take form within another, grasping existence in some way or other, or it could not be at all. But true and exact reason, vindicating the nature of true being, maintains that while two things are different they cannot exist one of them in the other and so be one and also two at the same time. (Plato 52c–d)

As Kalfas points out (138), this is an important passage in Timaeus, one that closes the parenthesis/chasm opened for the introduction of the chora and puts forward its double role as a receptacle/chora within which fleeting images can literally be “grasped” and as a bar/chorismos ensuring the difference between these images and eternal, immutable being (“true being,” “τὸ δὲ ὄντως ὄντι” according to Plato (Hamilton and Cairns 1989, 52c). As the passage quoted above reveals, Plato is anxious to prove that one “cannot exist” within “the other and so be one and also two at the same time.” It is for this reason that he resorts to the chora and has to acknowledge a “third kind,” a supplement,
which does not transform or problematize his binary system but strengthens
it by obscuring or effacing its own supplementary function. Hence Timaeus’s
emphasis on the formlessness of the chora: “that which is to receive all forms
should have no form,” he emphasizes (Hamilton and Cairns 1989, 50e).4

At the same time, as we have seen, (and because of its supplementary nature)
the self-effacing receptacle can turn into an abyss within which “true being”
(the intelligible origin) falls and is lost. Though apparently self-effacing, then,
blending into the invisibility of the middle, the Platonic chora is far from a
neutral mediator. It has an interruptive force that disrupts the flow from “one”
to the “other” as it facilitates it and opens up the origin to a law that multiplies
as it erases it: “One plus one makes at least three,” Derrida writes (1976, 36).

How did number three come to get dropped off when the counting was
resumed in the context of Kristeva’s reinscription of the chora? How was the
chora reduced to the “other” of the “one,” a maternal paradise beyond language
and the Law of the Father? It is true that in her brief reference to the Platonic
chora Kristeva does not draw attention to its nature as “a third kind.” And yet,
in her appropriation of the concept she foregrounds precisely those determina-
tions of it that are inextricable from its force as a third, downplaying or directly
rejecting the ones that might encourage a reading of it as either an ou-topic,
a-logic space “outside” or as a passive nourishing middle. Thus, in contrast to
Plato who emphasizes the chora’s receptivity and formlessness (the two qualities
that reduce the third kind to a welcoming, neutral vessel for the gestation of the
material world), she insists on its motility. In Plato the motility of the chora takes
a number of forms all of which have important connotations for our understanding
of Kristeva’s event of the “between.” Perhaps the most pronounced of these forms
is that of errancy, a movement which explains the elusiveness of the third kind
(it “is difficult of explanation,” Plato tells us [Hamilton and Cairns 1989, 49a]) as
well as its interruptive force as we discussed it earlier; in other words, its ability
to seduce the origin and hinder its operations. The second form that the chora’s
motility takes could better be conceptualized in terms of an ability to function as
the site of an elementary transfer that disturbs the borders between inside/outside,
intelligible/sensible, self/other. This is, in fact, what distinguishes the third from
the first kind, which is eternal, and hence, immovable: “never receiving anything
into itself from without, nor itself going out to any other,” Plato insists (Hamilton
and Cairns 1989, 52a). The chora’s motility, then, in this context is inextricable
from a kind of passage, one that cannot be reduced to the receptivity that Plato
favors in his account of the chora. Finally, the motility of the chora is associated
to a winnowing process in the course of which a provisional structuring of the four
constitutive elements of the cosmos takes place, one involving the introduction
of primary distinctions between the similar and the dissimilar.

All the above forms part of the legacy of the between in Plato, a legacy
that Kristeva receives and reinvests in the “essentially mobile and extremely
provisional articulation” that she calls “semiotic chora” (1984, 25). Like Plato, Kristeva resorts to the chora in an attempt to tackle the “problem” of the relation (or unrelation) between incommensurable entities: the “demonic” and the social, desire and the Law, material production and representation. Her aim is to turn the “problem,” the “aporia” of this relation into an enabling passage, tracing in it the possibility of a transformative practice that opens up the speaking subject as much as law and society to what comes from “outside” (outside the self, logos, the organ-ized body-politic). To this end, she follows Plato in introducing the chora as an enigmatic “rhythmic space” (26) at the intersection between conflicting operations (the not-yet-subject’s drive charges and the sociohistorical constraints to which these are subjected through the maternal body). Unlike Plato, however, she does not wish to contain the force of the event activated by the chora. Thus, her mediator is neither self-effacing nor neutral. Nor is its labor subject to the Law of the One. Its function (regulating to a degree) is not to diffuse the negativity of the drives in order to render possible its subsequent channelling into the symbolic order. While pointing to the possibility (indeed, the necessity) of transference, the chora serves neither to merge the two into one nor to substitute one for the other. As Kristeva reminds us, the transference involved in its motility is one of heterogeneity. As a result, it is a transference open (or, if you like, vulnerable) to difference as precisely what frustrates any passage (dis+ference). At the same time, it is a transference of difference that prevents the positing of a subject, an origin or a thesis and dissolves the One. In this light, I find it difficult to share Anna Smith’s view regarding Kristeva’s “failure” in developing a “structure that would mediate between semiotic and symbolic so that neither entropy nor a deadly abstraction prevails” (117). I would argue, instead, that this has remained a key concern for her from her appropriation of Plato’s “third kind” and the introduction of the semiotic chora in Revolution in Poetic Language, to the imaginary space of the Father of Individual Prehistory in Tales of Love, her revisiting of the Oedipal event in Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt and to the exploration of a nomadic, “reversible space” in her recent detective fiction. Though Kristeva’s work consistently points to (and, to an extent, exemplifies) the trials of this alternative mediating space, we should not ignore what I would not hesitate to call its revolutions. My aim in this essay has been to provide a context for the appreciation of such revolutions through an anamnesic return to the force of the semiotic chora. Significantly, this force depends on the Hegelian legacy as much as it departs from and critically engages with it. Thus, rather than structure itself around the moment of Aufhebung (suppression of contradictions through an ideal synthesis), the mediating event of the chora reclaims a forgotten aspect of the Hegelian dialectic (its “fourth term,” Kristeva reminds us, 1984, 109), namely, negativity. As she defines it, negativity is a “liquefying and dissolving agent” (109). Yet, its movement involves a double gesture, for it constitutes “an enchainement in
the choreographical sense”: in other words (as she explains with reference to Lenin), an establishment of “the necessary connection” amidst the rhythm of renewed separations (109). According to her, however, Hegelian negativity can open up the space for a materialist (re)thinking of mediation only if “one dares” reconceptualize it “as the very movement of heterogeneous matter” (113). It is to this end that she resorts to the Freudian theory of rejection. Like Hegel's negativity, rejection cannot be perceived as “simple destruction” (172). It is a scission that joins, an operation that is "corporeal and biological but already social since it is a link with others” (123). What is more, the loss resulting from the operation coincides with an “acute pleasure” (151), which (she insists) needs to be seen as inextricable from the “kineme,” the movement of the operation.

It is important, I believe, not to lose sight of the potential that Kristeva's reconfiguration of the “Event In-between” is holding for us. Confronted with increasingly mediated (and mediatized) realities and situated at a time when all sorts of hetero-phobias threaten to erupt into violence, the need for a reevaluation of the stakes and processes of mediation appears more and more urgent. Despite the urgency of the need, a significant body of postmodern theory demonstrates a firm suspicion toward any practices (the very concept of) mediation. In his chapter “‘Rights of Man’ and the ‘Rights of the Citizen’: The Modern Dialectic of Equality and Freedom,” Etienne Balibar associates postmodernity with the bankruptcy of those forms of mediation on which both the theory and the practice of modern politics depended. According to him, the modern trust in the political value of the third term has exploded, following the eruption in postmodernity of a host of incommensurable differences, the very contradictions repressed by the mediating function of the third term. As more and more theorists in different areas in the humanities acknowledge, the result of such eruption has been a turn away from politics (as the realm of shareable, and hence, mediated singularities) to ethics, the realm where one plus one (singularity in its relationship to another) never makes two. The work of Levinas and Derrida is exemplary in this context, demonstrating that what lies at the heart of the current privileging of ethics is an “unbelief” in the desirability of mediation, a term that is still understood within the legacy of the Hegelian dialectic. My contention here is that Kristeva's intervention in the debate between politics and ethics is worth our attention. In contrast to Levinas (who has sought to conceptualize an encounter without any third term) and Derrida (whose work demonstrates a growing concern with what resists mediation), Kristeva insists on taking seriously both the postmodern subject's need for politically and psychically effective practices of mediation and the philosophical suspicion toward the tradition that continues to circumscribe the potential of such practices. In this light, her exploration of a space of ambiguous relationality in the context of which the possibility of our transcendence to the “demonic” lies (to paraphrase
Stephen Watson) "less 'beyond us'" than "in-between" constitutes, perhaps, her greatest contribution as a postmodern thinker (2001, 186).

That she associates this space with art is, admittedly, one of the risks she is taking, for Smith is right, no "consistent causative relation" between psychic, social, and linguistic structures can be assumed (1996, 118). What is more, it would be easy to reduce the ambiguous event that we are tracing to the more idealistic gesture of sublimation, a gesture traditionally associated with art. Though she does not refrain from using the term, art in Kristeva is not synonymous with the conversion of semiotic violence into a culturally higher, more acceptable form of human activity. This would render it yet another form of murder, which, as she reminds us, has remained the paradigm in terms of which we have understood the institution of the social (1984, 70). In Revolution in Poetic Language, however, Kristeva openly distinguishes art from the “event” of sacrifice, which is, in her view, the epitome of this paradigm. Significantly, she does not associate art with the representation that takes place in the context of this event—a representation of jouissance in ways that contain it, confining it “to a single place, making it a signifier” (75) but with the “lining,” indeed, the reverse side of this representation. As such, the task of art in Kristeva is twofold. On the one hand, it introduces “through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it” (81). On the other hand, it mimes the very “movement of the symbolic economy” (79), throwing light on its process of production (the machines hidden in the wings of the classical theatre of representation). As she puts it, “Mimesis and poetic language do not . . . disavow the thetic, instead they go through its truth (signification, denotation) to tell the ‘truth’ about it” (60). This is precisely what makes art both an “exercise in remembrance,” “a descent into the most archaic stage of [the subject’s] positing” (83), and a revolutionary practice, or in her words, “a transformation of natural and social resistances, limitations, and stagnations” (17).

What constitutes an even greater risk for her is her association of this ambiguous space of “in-betweenness” with femininity. Again the legacy of the Platonic chora cannot but be reckoned with. In his 1987 essay on the Timaeus Derrida discusses a similar risk “run by Plato himself when he seems to ‘compare,’ as they say, khôra to a mother or a nurse” (1995, 97). At issue here is what Derrida calls “anthropomorphism” (97), in other words, the tropological reduction of what is radically other and "eludes all anthropo-theological schemes" (124) to a human (in this case, a feminine) form. For it is clear in Derrida's analysis that the qualifiers “mother” or “nurse” in the chorology are mere images that tell us nothing about the essence-without-essence of the khôra. They are “so many tricks for approaching the enigma of khôra” (113). Yet, in his own discussion of Plato’s “third kind” Derrida keeps these images in playful suspension. Taking advantage of the double connotations of the pronoun “elle” in French, he invokes a femininity that is neither a mere image (a metaphor) nor a proper
quality (the property of the *chora*). "She does not belong to the 'race of women'," he insists (124). Femininity here becomes the marker of an excess, the excess of the oppositional logic in Western metaphysics, the excess of logos as an origin, the very excess of philosophy. That this excess is for Derrida a "necessity" (xvi) rather than a threat or an embarrassment (as it is in Plato) should not obscure the gesture that remains similar in both: namely, the turning of femininity into the privileged metaphor (even if it is a metaphor under erasure) for alterity—indeed, "a metaphor without brakes," as Alice Jardine remarks (5). This gesture that has strangely locked femininity and otherness into a tight embrace has, in fact, become a central concern in contemporary feminist theory. In her own essay on the *chora* Elizabeth Grosz draws attention to the familiar tendency in Western philosophy to "depend on the resources and characteristics of a femininity disinvested of its connections with the female, and especially the maternal, body [and] made to carry the burden of what it is that men cannot explain, cannot articulate or know" (1995, 124). It is because the *chora* is "emblematic" of this tendency that, according to her, Kristeva's appropriation of this space is limited by (and ultimately strengthens) what remains for her "a phallic fantasy" (Walker 1998, 115–16).

It is true that Kristeva retains the maternal/feminine connotations of the *chora* (1984, 26), which does not mean, however, that she is not aware of the dangers involved. In *Des Chinoises* (also published in 1974) she cautions against letting "Woman" be turned into the "Truth of the temporal order . . . an unrepresentable form beyond true and false, and beyond present-past-future" (Moi 1986, 155). This is why in her introduction of the semiotic *chora* she emphasizes the need to remove it from "the ontology and amorphismusness where Plato confines it" and to "restore this motility's gestural and vocal play . . . on the level of the socialized body"—which is precisely what this ontology leaves out (26). If, then, the *chora* invokes a concept of "femininity," this is not at the expense of the female/maternal body which Kristeva places at the heart of the event of the *chora* as its "ordering principle" (27). A number of questions have been raised regarding Kristeva's understanding of the maternal body and its relation to the experiences of "actual mothers" (Walker 1998, 125). As the passage quoted above suggests, Kristeva is determined not to essentialize the maternal body, not to reduce it to what she calls the "maternal," that "ambivalent principle that is bound to the species" (1987, 234–35). Though subject to biology, it is a socialized body, in other words, a body that has crossed to the other side and has taken (is always ready to take) "a chance with meaning" (1987, 235). In fact, the maternal body serves as a counterbalance to the more abstract principle to which Kristeva resorts at times (especially in her analysis of avant-garde poetry)—though not, as "Stabat Mater" demonstrates, without an awareness of its historical contexts and political stakes. It is significant, therefore, that in her discussion of the *chora*, it is the maternal body that is foregrounded,
whose function cannot be reduced to that of a mere metaphor, "a metaphor for transgression" (Walker 1998, 125) or for a forgotten and forbidden jouissance. Rather than point to an enigmatic essence beyond it, it draws attention, instead, to the immanent material process of which it is a part, the "Event In-between" (as we have called it) that reinscribes the speaking subject as the product of an alternative form of relatedness despite/in-difference. Due to its dual nature, the role of the maternal body in this process is twofold. On the one hand, it epitomizes the mechanistic aspect of the process that cannot be traced back to one or more particular female subjects, which would then serve as its source or as agents within it. On the other hand, as a socialized body, it opens up the process to the embodied experiences of "actual" subjects, for the situation and situatedness of the maternal body are lived differently by different women.

It is precisely this openness of the chora to a restructuring prompted by the (mechanistic or social) other that renders it, not essentially revolutionary, but what Protevi calls "a permanent revolution," which is how he invites us to think of democracy (2001, 192). In the context of this revolution the maternal body is neither an alias nor an alibi for the other but a socially experienced situation of alterity that compels us to rethink our relation to the other (and others). In reclaiming what has (culturally at least) formed part of female experience for both male and female subjects, Kristeva warns us against reading the event of the chora as essentially feminine. However, paraphrasing Protevi, we might be justified in reconceptualizing this event as a permanent revolution of the feminine; in other words, as a return to (a negotiation with, reclamation, displacement, and re-inscription of) what has come down to (or has been withheld from) us as an ambiguous, a forgotten legacy.

Notes

1. For an early critique of Revolution in Poetic Language see Michel Beaujour’s "A Propos de L’écart dans La révolution du langage poétique de Julia Kristeva" 1975.
2. See his Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus.
3. In Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence, Michelle Boulous Walker is also discussing Kristeva’s engagement with the Marxist notion of “production” (85–99). Her understanding of “production,” however, is closer to the concept of “productivity” (85–86). This is why she is interested in Kristeva’s “theory of non-productive language practices” that “points us toward [an] unquiet silence” (99).
5. This is the exact quote from Watson: “But as such the transcendence . . . at stake is less ‘beyond’ us than ‘between us,’ a matter less of our being ‘mutually’ held hostage by one another . . . than a matter of this between and ‘the extraordinary everydayness of my [and our] responsibility.'"

References


