

JULIA KRISTEVA – ARIANE LOPEZ-HUICI

A CONVERSATION

Ariane Lopez-Huici : Julia, you've just published your first novel, *Les Samouraïs* (The Samurai). It's an autobiographical novel and a personal account of a generation of intellectuals. Can you elaborate on the way that you, as an analyst, wrote this book with the awareness that you risked compromising yourself, somewhat in the same manner that Freud, for example, opened himself up to criticism from other psychiatrists by becoming interested in sexuality?

Julia Kristeva : Indeed. First of all I want to say that I took great pleasure in writing this book. As opposed to theoretical writing, which demands great mastery and a sort of intellectual asceticism, fiction allows one to renew contact with one's memories, in other words with childhood and the body. It involves having recourse to one's imagination, the fact of showing oneself intimately, speaking of one's sensations, one's manner of living the sexual act, a sunset, maternity, all these phenomena which in principle are never foregrounded because they are held to pose a potential danger for the analysis and lead to a sort of reinforcement of what is referred to as transference. In other words, it risks creating a situation in which the patient intensifies either the love or the hatred he or she feels for the analyst, and in which, in any case, the relation becomes more powerful. One runs a risk in attempting to master this intensity, but if you want to get to the bottom of these things it is necessary to stir up the entirety of the patient's psychic life, and this implies, reciprocally, that the analyst too is stripped bare. In a way, this is a manner of enriching my analytic technique. This writing is not only a pleasure, but also takes its place within my professional activity as an analyst.

I've often been asked why I didn't write memoirs instead. One of the lessons analysis teaches us is that we can't tell all; not only because many contemporaries are still alive and still close to us, because our modesty makes us unwilling to reveal certain relations that link us to them, but also in a more fundamental and absolute sense, because a human being cannot tell all about what makes us go. Writing memoirs in the name of some absolute truth, one says less than ever. This became quite clear recently in the memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir, when her correspondences were published. In comparison to her letters, her memoirs seem over polished, frosty, embroidered. One shouldn't believe that the genre of memoirs involves any direct truth. The deformation presupposed by fiction bears the mark of the author and is the only possible truth; thus I did not pretend to the truth as such, but tried to speak a subjective truth that seems to me to be truer than so-called objective accounts.

ALH: The second question that interests me - and that affects both of us, since you're married to the writer Philippe Sollers and I'm married to the sculptor Alain Kirili - is to know if you find that there is room in a couple for two individualities, for I sense that there is a veritable allergy to this possibility. Obviously, I'm thinking of that most famous couple. Sartre/Beauvoir, but also of the American sculptor Carl André and his wife Ana Mendieta, whose marriage ended in tragedy, or of Althusser in France, who strangled his wife. The question is about the couple in general, and whether or not it is viable.

JK: Yes, this is a complex question. I'll try to approach it from several angles. We should not underestimate what the feminist movement has achieved in recent years by attempting to clarify the particularity of female sexuality, which was simply crushed in the ostensibly harmonious classical marriage. Yet feminism also emphasizes a notion that seems difficult, if not impossible, to admit: the war between the sexes. Lately we have gone backwards with regard to all this, and, personally, I think it's a matter of civilization to attempt to go beyond this war of the sexes and constitute a harmony.

Nevertheless, there is an element of truth revealed by this feminist gesture: the antagonism between the sexual interests of man and of woman leads to tensions and conflicts that can be stimulating, but also very mortifying. This much said. one obviously shouldn't fall back into the trap of the sort of idyll one sees in today's women's magazines, which consists in singing the return to harmony in the family, how everyone is kind, everyone is adorable, etc. This tension is constitutive of the sexual relation between men and women, and it undoubtedly becomes all the more problematic when the two partners try not only to be sexual partners, but also individuals in the fullest sense. For while a sort of equality or even a dramaturgy is admissible in bed, perhaps provoking the man's humiliation but also his pleasure. This genre of play in the social and public arena is very difficult to tolerate for both parties, and principally for men. The fact that women achieve a social role supposes that, to their traditional characteristics such as seduction, maternity, and a certain passivity, they add that of being active. And activity, in our culture, has a phallic connotation. This phallicism nonetheless seems to me an absolute necessity for feminine creativity of any sort, even giving one's children a good education. As a relation to power and to the law, the woman's identification with this phallic power - as distinct from the penile organ - is a necessity. And this identification must be assumed by every woman, who wants to create something. Her difficulty consists in woman's process of psycho-sexual maturation: there is a long path to travel which, schematically, consists in tearing oneself away from symbiosis with the mother. This is where we all come from, but women are held within it more powerfully because they are of the same sex as the mother.

Of this transition toward the world of abstraction, rules, and activity, I would say that many are called but few are chosen, for many women remain prisoners of this maternal embrace, and this imprisonment directs them toward either passivity or melancholy. Others break this relation brutally, returning to their male, virile identifications, and thereby censure their female particularity. That the path of female autonomy is extremely complex explains the difficulties confronting female accomplishment; but when this path is traveled, it produces individuals who are especially complex and mature.

When the woman accedes to creativity, then, how is this perceived by her partner? The competition that exists between two creative individuals, which itself is grafted on the already-fragile terrain of sexual partnership. makes the life of the couple extremely problematic unless a great maturity - both sexual and psychic - permits a recognition of the other. The case of Sartre/Beauvoir is quite exceptional, and it's Simone de Beauvoir who said that there may be room for two in a couple, but only when one deploys all of that sort of finesse and sexual maturity that has nothing to do with wisdom and renunciation - for if there's only mere politeness and restraint, everything breaks down.

ALH : I'd like to return to the difference you made between phallicism and the penis.

J.K: This distinction doesn't originate with me. Lacan insisted on it, referring to Greek mysteries and to the entire sacred tradition of humanity. On the one hand there is the organ, which is a physical appendage, and on the other there is what the organ represents, that is an agency of power and authority: the law. Phallicism is symbolic.

ALH : Recently I made a series of photographs that I entitled "De Viris, 1989", that deal with erotic fragmentation, principally in sculptures of nude men. I'm amused by the reaction of the public, who seem to be surprised that a woman should deal with this subject, whereas the question never arises when a man deals with the female sex. Now, if the creative act is first and always a sexual act, the variety of possible subjects is multiple. In terms of contemporary artists, I think of Louise Bourgeois who deals with the phallus, of De Kooning's Women, of Robert Mapplethorpe's homosexuality, or of Cindy Sherman's androgyny. Personally, I have a certain type of comfortable relation, an ease, with regard to sexuality, a relation without morbidity, that probably comes from a Latin tradition. I have no problem in dealing with the male sex or, for that matter, with the female sex; but the difference is always very clear and any amalgam strikes me as dubious.

J.K: I would first of all say that I am very seduced by your work and that you have told me that many people, confronted with so many male sexes, interpret these photos as an unacknowledged or complex relation to the paternal figure or the phallic power of men. In point of fact, this relation is not at all unavowed, nor is it complex. Rather, it is entirely apparent, frank, and jovial. There is nothing surreptitious or ashamed about your work, quite to the contrary, and this points in the direction we mentioned earlier, suggesting that an affirmation of women in the domain of creativity passes through a confrontation with the phallic element. But I think it would be a mistake to reduce your work to this sexual aspect which is subjacent, visible, and important, but which is less central than several other connotations. When you choose to photograph Greek sculptures like the Laocoön, works of the Italian Renaissance or of the baroque in Bernini, it seems to me that this is an attempt to render homage to a cultural tradition. It's a cult of memory that strikes me as an important dimension of experience arrayed against a certain crushing, a certain flatness or platitude of formalism that wanted to have done with content. This relation to representation, not just to any representation but to carefully chosen works, indicates that one is situating oneself in relation to history and marking one's place in a continuity.

As concerns androgyny, sexual difference was replaced in the 1970s and 80s by a sort of incantation of bisexuality. This is to say that insofar as sexual difference demands great efforts - psychic, sexual, and mental efforts - toward acknowledging the other, one simply gets rid of the problem by becoming oneself both the one and the other. One becomes everything in this totality, neither man nor woman while believing oneself both man and woman. There are excellent studies on transvestites and transsexuals which show that, contrary to certain ambitions maintained in their phantasms and thus in their truth, they are of neither sex: they take themselves to be angelic.

This is a manner of getting rid of sexuality that may appear paradoxical, paradoxical because they pretend to taste every sexual pleasure, while in fact it's a matter of neutralizing them and thus of arriving at a sort of homeostasis that is a very good representation of the myth of Aristophanes in the Symposium: beings are spherical because they comprise the two sexual elements, and everyone knows that one sphere doesn't communicate with another.

What about the presence of the female in the works of male artists? Proust, for example, whom I have been reading in the context of my teachings for several years now and who remains for me the summit of the French novel, is an enigma. Clearly he is someone whose homosexual sexuality was sometimes timid, sometimes violently affirmed, notably in his penchant for brothels and sado-masochistic practices on

animals and humans; his fascination with whips and blood. Yet he had a highly developed sensitivity to the female body, and to his female friends. The simple fact that the character who is the narrator's companion, Albertine, is a woman allows Proust to overturn the homosexual relation and love for a man into a relation with a woman, and to produce a description of her sensibility that many heterosexual men have difficulty perceiving. This reveals an extremely intense identification with the feminine, if only on the level of the phantasm and even if it doesn't involve entering into sexual relations with women.

For Matisse, a fascination and a veritable passion for the female body takes the form of a consecration consisting in the staging of harmony and an intimate, I would say almost gustatory relation. For Picasso and de Kooning, this passion takes the form of a violence that seems intended to release them from a power of the feminine that is perceived as threatening. This confrontation with the feminine is also a confrontation with the feminine part of oneself. If this dimension weren't there, some aspect of the artist's universal message would be absent. Men are often less at ease in speaking of the female univers, which has connotations of passivity and castration. Nevertheless, this female presence in their work is a guarantee of its complexity.

Ile de Ré, France, 1990.

Translated by Philip Barnard.

Published on the occasion of Ariane Lopez-Huici 's exhibition Solo Absolu , at the AC project room, New York, May 18-June 25 1994