

## A Contestatory Intellectual

**Alice Jardine, *At the Risk of Thinking. An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva*, ed. by Mari Ruti, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2020, pp. xiii-385.**

Alice Jardine is well known to those interested in 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century French/Francophone literature, poststructuralist and feminist theory. She is a Professor of Romance Language and Literature and Women's Studies, Gender & Sexuality at Harvard University. Jardine has been at the forefront of critical thought since the early 1980s. Her work illustrates her deep investment in understanding how issues of women, gender, and sexuality are at the heart of the analysis of politics, culture, and society. In addition, her life-long friendship with Kristeva adds an extra insight into this intellectual biography, which will prove enlightening to both academics and students.

Julia Kristeva is the first to admit that she is quite at a loss to know who Julia Kristeva is. It was the very first thing she said during the first of my many interviews with her: «It's very difficult. Sometimes I do not recognize myself in the demands people make of me to talk about Julia Kristeva. Because I am not entirely sure who this woman is. There is an image, there is a received idea, there is even sometimes a cult» (1).

Kristeva's plurality of images run through this intellectual enterprise. Kristeva the semiotician, the exile, the novelist, the psychoanalyst, the wife, the mother, the linguist and above all, the public, committed, «*contestatory intellectual*», as Kristeva calls it (2).

Jardine narrates Kristeva's life from her early days with her family in Bulgaria, including the vicissitudes of her parents' lives and deaths, as well as the detailed events that led to her leaving her mother country, with no

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money, to go to Paris in 1965, and the fortuitous circumstances in which she found herself upon her arrival on French soil. This trajectory follows the exiled intellectual up to 2019. In the last pages, Jardine reaffirms a crucial point: «that her life is writing, that writing is her life» (313). This statement may explain Kristeva's extraordinarily prolific career, with 50 books written across several disciplinary fields including philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics and theology, and translated globally. Jardine's Introduction, «At the Risk of Thinking», starts with «The Question of the Intellectual – Again», an issue that will run throughout the biography. The text is divided chronologically in three parts. Part I is titled «Bulgaria, My Suffering (1941-1965)». Part II «The Crazy Truth of It (1965-1979)». Part III, the longest of all, «Becoming Julia Kristeva (1980-Today)».

For Kristeva, like for Hannah Arendt, «thinking is living [...] life is thinking [...] especially when thinking is uncomfortable, challenging, or even dangerous» (4). This is why Jardine starts her text with the question of the «contestatory intellectual» (7). In this respect Kristeva is close to Edward Said's ideal of the intellectual as one who is always in exile (see Said, *Representation of the Intellectual*, 1994; *The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile*, «Harper's», September 1984). Said's «exilic intellectual» who lives as if s/he were away from “home” enters into a condition that entails the possibility of looking at life with the exile's detachment. Neither home nor language then will be taken for granted, for they cannot become nature, and consequently they cannot recede into dogma or orthodoxy. On the other hand, the condition of being a stranger or an exile brings about a crossing of borders, a breaking of barriers of thought and experience. Kristeva adds to these complex ideas the crucial importance of language displacement and of bilingualism.

Childhood, for Kristeva, does not determine one's development. She does not see her country of birth as constituting her identity or origin, as

identity for her is an unceasing state of questioning. She sees exile as a permanent condition. In addition to this, she believes that each person's truth exists not in their belonging to an origin but in their ability to exile themselves, to take some distance from their origins: «memories are not deterministic; they are invitations to travel» (21), she maintains. «Foreignness», her «status as an outsider» (15) are crucial in her life and in her thinking (14). Furthermore, Kristeva emphasizes, how «essential it is for each woman to make herself “strange” to herself» (263).

Of paramount importance is her relationship to language(s). For Kristeva her life as a foreigner in France and her life as a writer are essentially tied together through her love of language. Furthermore, she thinks, «to speak another language is quite simply the firm and minimal condition necessary for being alive» (45). In an interview in 2013, she links this estranged condition to her creativity:

My own crossing of frontiers [...] has led me to interrogate dogmas, confinements, disciplines, to question identity [...] I am convinced that this continuous uprooting is a kind of election, a source of good fortune, for it offers the possibility of psychic rebirth [...] an openness to the other is a cultural advantage. Lots of efforts, lots of anguish, and sometimes suffering, accompany this transformation – that's inevitable – but which I, for my part, try to translate into work, into sublimation, into creation (59).

In *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis* (2002), she again stresses her linguistic uniqueness, her being at «the crossroad of two languages and two durations at least», as traces of Bulgarian have survived in her psyche. She sees this condition as working to her advantage, as she considers herself fortunate in as much as she «inhabits frontiers and margins» (178). Discussing her fourth novel, *Murder in Byzantium* (2004), she explores the questions that have concerned her all her life; of her protagonists, a female detective, Kristeva remarks that she «travels through herself» (14). This idea echoes the title of a recent autobiographical collection of interviews with Samuel Dock, *Traveling Through Myself* (2016).

Jardine provides brief summaries of the major works, as she is more interested in elucidating her author's intellectual trajectories, and intriguing biographical anecdotes. In addition, she points out the importance of her lesser-known texts, like the interviews with Dock, and the influential interview with Jacques Derrida in 1968 (reprinted in English in *Positions*, 1981). These additions enhance the value of this study and I would fully recommend this work without reservation.

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