Among Gods
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In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva develops the notion that all signification comprises what she terms the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic represses the *chora*, which is a rhythmic space existing prior to language, a maternal realm without separation between subject and object, and which erupts into the symbolic through the mediums of music, poetry, and art. This aesthetic revelation of the prediscursive semiotic is, for Kristeva, an act of subversion. Significantly, Kristeva’s account of the *chora* is similar to Nietzsche’s description of Dionysian energy. It is the purpose of the present paper to explore the revolutionary potential Kristeva locates in art through an application of Nietzsche’s emphasis that art necessarily combines the antithetical Dionysian and Apollonian elements. When the precultural Dionysian semiotic flows into and collapses the cultural Apollonian symbolic, the effects are disruptive and destabilizing. Art is a privileged transformative strategy because, unlike non-aesthetic subversive acts, its commitment to seemingly disparate elements renders the aesthetic gesture intelligible while simultaneously invoking the limitations of the discursive order.

Rather than suppose a unified, rational cogito at the core of subjectivity, Kristeva’s thought begins with the assumption that the self is divided and contradictory. This divisive volatility stems from the symbolic contract which characterizes sociality itself. Entering society is synonymous with entering language—coming into existence, one comes into words. Thus, the symbolic contract is the social contract. As for Lacan, for Kristeva this contract is essentially violent. Yet Kristeva moves beyond the Lacanian distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary and instead organizes an opposition between the symbolic and the semiotic processes. The interaction between these modalities makes possible signification
itself, and the form that interaction takes determines the type of discourse it is.¹ The semiotic is associated with maternity, pre-Oedipal drives, and heterogeneity: “This modality is the one Freudian psychoanalysis points to in postulating not only the facilitation and the structuring disposition of the drives, but also the so-called primary processes which displace and condense both energies and their inscription.”² The continuous movement of the drives forms and is maintained within what Kristeva terms the *chora*, which is, significantly, the Platonic term for an enclosed space, or womb.³ Kristeva defines *chora* as: “a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated…the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality.”⁴ It seems that the inexpressibility of the *chora* is one of its most essential features, particularly because it chronologically and ontologically pre-exists language. It is perhaps best understood as the source of biological drives, which must exist beyond any attempt to define them, and can be approached as a dynamic rhythm, a pulse—the primordial movement of human existence. However, no act of signification can be expressive solely of the *chora*, as the *chora* engages in a continuous and necessary communion with the symbolic order. The symbolic and semiotic are unified by the thetic function. Like Lacan, Kristeva posits the mirror phase as that which begins the constitution of the differentiated subject.⁵ Thus, the subject emerges and separates from the maternal body and semiotic *chora* by entering into the paternal symbolic order—this separation is accomplished within the thetic phase. Once fully transitioned into the symbolic order, which organizes and constrains society and culture, the subject maintains his grounding therein by continual repression of the feminine *chora* within.⁶

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⁶ Moi, 13.
For Kristeva, the semiotic realm of language has revolutionary potential when it manifests itself in works of art. Music, poetry, literature, and painting can reveal the limits of symbolic discourse by dismantling the logic governing its meanings through a return to the pre-linguistic, nonsignifying, heterogeneous, libidinal drives:

Within this [semiotic] process one might see the release and subsequent articulation of the drives as constrained by the social code.... In the case, for example, of a signifying practice such as 'poetic language,' the semiotic disposition will be the various deviations from the grammatical rules of the language...syntactic irregularities such as ellipses, non-recoverable deletions, indefinite embeddings, etc.; the replacement of the relationship between the protagonists of any enunciation as they function in a locutory act...by a system of relations based on fantasy.\(^7\)

The seeming irrationality and anarchic contradictions of poetry, of music, of riotous dancing, manage to disrupt the symbolic code, substituting meaning with the rhythms and multiplicities of the repressed semiotic chora. The aesthetic act, then, returns the symbolic to the prediscursive ground it rejects, but it does so \textit{from within} the threshold of the symbolic. Art functions as subversion: by revealing the refused maternal chora, art temporarily destabilizes the monolithic scope of the paternal law, exposing its limits. The Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote:

\begin{quote}
A rhyme's
a barrel of dynamite.

A line is a fuse
that's lit.

The line smoulders,
the rhyme explodes—

and by a stanza
a city

is blown to bits.\(^8\)
\end{quote}

\(^7\) Moi, 28–29.
In a very profound sense, then, art changes the world. The process by which the aesthetic gesture conveys the libidinal drives is well exemplified in the thought of Merleau-Ponty, for whom an artistic act is necessarily one that conjures up its prediscursive sources. Also regarding art as a revelatory process, Merleau-Ponty purports that the human subject is not removed from the objects she perceives, but is immersed among them, constituting the world and being constituted by it simultaneously. Perception is not solely a visual, or even intellectual, phenomenon, which filters information from the environment to the mind, but is rather an interconnected experience accomplished with the entire body, which is itself inextricably embedded within the world. This embeddedness exists prior to the separation of mind and matter, prior to the differentiation of the senses, within a prereflexive phenomenal field, wherein perception is coherent and full. Because the human subject gazes from within the world, the artist finds oneself at the very source of this submersion, in an almost sexual communion: “so many painters have said that things look at them…‘the painter must be penetrated by the universe.’”9 The artist offers her body to the landscape she paints, and in turn, her body is inscribed with the landscape. In this communion, the roles of spectator and spectacle seem to be reversed; the inside becomes the outside, and the artwork is able to communicate the fullness and mystery of the phenomenal field. This fullness is reminiscent of the oneness with and dependence upon the maternal body experienced prior to the individuation of the subject. The artist overcomes historical and cultural facticity by decentering and (re)uniting himself with the world, experiencing himself as embodied and embedded rather than disembodied and fragmented, and he synthesizes that which is lived, but concealed, into an artwork that communicates the secrets of the prediscursive domain. Put more simply, for Merleau-Ponty, as for Kristeva, the aesthetic process reveals those features of the world which were hidden, ignored, or repressed. Such revelation, which necessarily rebels against the paternal law, carries within itself transformative potential. By returning the subject to the very ground of begetting, art, if only for a moment, grants a respite from domination.

Notably, Kristeva’s account of the semiotic and symbolic distinction is very similar to Nietzsche’s description of Dionysian

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and Apollonian energies. In the 1872 Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music, Nietzsche describes the spectrum of human experience in terms of two tendencies, which he terms the Apollonian and the Dionysian. For Nietzsche, the seemingly stable world of appearance, brimming with humans and buildings and roads and forests, conceals an underlying reality. Within this more fundamental order of existence, the “Truly-Existent and Primal Unity,” a primordial indifference reigns. The dark heart of life is eternally striving, pulsing, aimless, and utterly unconcerned with finite human beings. Because the underlying reality is formless, there can be no place within it for distinguishable entities, and consequently, it dissolves the particular human form into nothingness. There is a monstrous cruelty in this sublime and savage indifference to individual life and dignity, and beholding it with human eyes is terrifying. Nietzsche recounts the myth of Silenus, who laughed at Midas and cried, “What is best of all is beyond your reach forever: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you—is quickly to die.”

Because the world of particular entities is merely an appearance cast upon a ceaseless, formless unity, all individualizing concepts are doomed to failure. When, armed with the tools of reason and science, humanity interrogates reality to reveal its secrets, it discovers that objectifying knowledge is powerless to grasp ultimate reality, which resists fragmentation into concepts. The fundamental essence of reality is best exemplified by the drunken god Dionysus whose dangerous wildness conveys elemental, metaphysical terror. His eternal counterpart is the proud god Apollo, who represents the ordering and organizing principle of humanity. Apollo’s cool hand tempers Dionysian ecstasy just as human reason imposes structure upon, and refines, an amoral and undifferentiated reality. The Apollonian tendency presents the world as if it has an objective order, a separation between good and evil, and, perhaps most importantly, as if individual beings have a meaningful identity and function within it. Prior to Apollo’s ordering, Dionysus dwells in a dissolution of individuation. Like the chora, the Dionysian impulse is more primordial than the Apollonian, particularly because it is capable of reuniting the differentiated subject with the maternal source he represses: “Under the charm of the Dionysian...Nature

11 Nietzsche, 8.
which has become estranged, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her prodigal son, man.”

What has subjugated primal, maternal Nature? The civilizing influence of Apollo, who functions in a similar way to Kristeva’s symbolic. While Apollonian symbolic represses the Dionysian semiotic, the latter, in its dark wildness, in its insistent irrationality, rebels. In its rebellion, the Dionysian reveals the dark heart of nature, while the Apollonian conceals it.

If Dionysius reveals to us that life is inherently terrible and meaningless, and reality is ultimately unknowable, what response or course of action is possible? There are several. The first is, of course, suicide. It is an option which the morally ambivalent characters of Albert Camus ponder ceaselessly, almost unendurably, and which prompts Camus to write poignantly:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.

The second option is perhaps even more dangerous than death and is what Nietzsche terms “negation of the will.” Gazing into the Dionysian horror of life, the spectator is paralyzed with disgust. Realizing that all human endeavor is ultimately meaningless, that even the greatest accomplishments are doomed to obscurity, he recedes from activity and life itself. The ultimate irrelevance of human achievement is well exemplified in Shelley’s Ozymandias:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

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12 Nietzsche, 4.
14 Nietzsche, 23.
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.¹⁵

To gaze upon a vast emptiness where a great civilization once flourished is inevitably and understandably demoralizing. How can we take the details of life seriously, a life of mortgages and dentist appointments, when even the glory of ancient Egypt is doomed to nothingness? Paralysis ensues. How to disentangle the nauseated, paralyzed being from this cruel vision? “Art saves him,” Nietzsche tells us, “and through art life saves him.”¹⁶ Nietzsche’s humanity, just like Camus’, requires saving, and so suffers from a metaphysical need for redemption. Given the underlying structure of reality, human life is intolerable, and must be justified prior to being lived. This is why, for Camus, the first question of philosophy is one of suicide. However, if reality is fundamentally meaningless, then redemption cannot come from reality, cannot arise from within the realm of nature. Meaninglessness, after all, cannot beget meaning. Dionysius cannot beget Apollo. Redemption, then, must come from a different source, from the opposite of reality and truth, which is appearance,¹⁷ exemplified in Apollonian repose. If redemption is appearance, it is necessarily illusory. Nietzsche defines art as a redemptive illusion—this is his best response to his intellectual descendant, Camus. Such an approach to artworks seems counter-intuitive, because it advocates not the mirroring or reflecting of nature, but rather a transcendence of it. The horror of reality is not denied, but overcome. In this process, the Apollonian traits of individuation and form are called upon. Thus the symbolic makes subjective experience possible inasmuch as it veils the semiotic, wherein there is no individuation, and therefore, no subject. For Nietzsche, the ultimate reconciliation between the Apollonian and Dionysian

¹⁶ Nietzsche, 23.
¹⁷ Nietzsche, 11.
forces, such that the dual aspects of human experience are represented, is accomplished in true art.\textsuperscript{18} Without the turbulent Dionysius, the source of creativity, Apollo's serene reason reigns unchecked, and art becomes existentially meaningless. But without Apollo's restraint, the Dionysian impulse results in furious incoherence.

Applying Kristeva's account here is effortless because meaningful signification is born of the intertwining of the semiotic and the symbolic: “Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.”\textsuperscript{19} In Nietzschean aesthetics, the Dionysian element dissolves the individual subject. This dissolution marks the opening scene of an artwork's subversive potential. Because the realm of signification, for Kristeva, requires the identification of a subject separate from an object, accomplished in the thetic phase, the semiotic must be characterized by an absence of individuated subjectivity. Poetic language, acting on behalf of the unindividuated \textit{chora}, tears down the fortifying wall between subject and object as well as the meaning established by that demarcation as it dissolves not only grammatical signification, and “not only the denotative function but also the specifically thetic function of positing the subject.... In this respect, modern poetic language...attacks not only the denotation (the positing of the object) but meaning (the positing of the enunciating subject) as well.”\textsuperscript{20} As the artwork summons the semiotic \textit{chora}, and thus the maternal body, it reunites the viewer with that body, plunging him into a state of interdependence, which lacks a discrete identity. In this Dionysian return to libidinal heterogeneity, the Law which constitutes speaking subjects in the first place is temporarily suspended. If subjectivity and unity are foundational to the organizing principles of an Apollonian culture, their mutual dissolution must function as an act of subversion, and art thus collapses the subject–object distinction, and with it the symbolic order.

This state of contradiction, of symbolic collapse, cannot be sustained. As Nietzsche warns in his description of the Dionysian Mysteries, it becomes evident that a purely Dionysian force must

\textsuperscript{18} Nietzsche, 56.
\textsuperscript{19} Kristeva, \textit{Revolution}, 24.
\textsuperscript{20} Kristeva, \textit{Revolution}, 58.
lead to suffering and chaos: “In nearly every case these festivals centered in extravagant sexual licentiousness, whose waves overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions; the most savage natural instincts were unleashed, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty.”

Even at the expense of the subject, balance will ultimately prevail, and the scorned Apollo will return to reclaim his place in the subject’s jarred psyche. The opposing tendencies are interdependent, and the face of Dionysus is always just behind Apollo’s, and must always take its place in a perpetual dynamic. If this were not so, if the semiotic source of subversion were indefinitely sustained, Kristeva points out that the results will be an unfortunate reduction to psychosis “and the breakdown of cultural life itself.”

When the discrete identity of the subject is dissolved by poetic language, a sense of self cannot prevail. Madness ensues. In its evocation of the prediscursive, as it balances precariously on the precipice of the status quo, art which is challenging and transformative is necessarily verging on the edge of insanity. To abandon the symbolic entirely would be disastrous.

Of course, an inevitable question emerges: if the contradiction of the symbolic cannot be maintained within the limits of culture, does this render aesthetic subversion futile? Although poetic language destabilizes the symbolic, it does not destroy it. To carve out a space outside or beyond culture itself is not possible. However, art renders the symbolic tolerable by presenting the world as if there is an alternative to its dominating scope: “We have art in order not to die of the truth,” Nietzsche tells us. What scandalized Socrates and inspired him to exile artists from the just city? The disquieting recognition that art does not exist to communicate truth, but to make life livable. The intoxication of the Dionysian aesthetic impulse saves culture from the dominating categories of Apollo, who, in turn, salvages the subject from a prediscursive wilderness where the subject is worse than meaningless—where the subject cannot exist. Nietzsche’s emphasis on the interdependence of seemingly divergent elements, creating not a duality but a symbiotic togetherness maintained through tension, reveals the subversive potential of a semiotic aesthetic. It is interesting to revisit the seemingly self-evident claim made above: meaninglessness cannot beget meaning. But what if it can? What if

21 Nietzsche, 6.
Dionysius can beget Apollo? In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche suggests that knowledge is born of ignorance and uncertainty, and that truth can be regarded as a refined version of falsity. Perhaps it is possible that meaning, too, is simply a higher, subtler, form of meaninglessness. The underlying reality must be countered and redeemed not by its antithesis, not by its obliteration by an opposite, but by a dialectical movement between truth and appearance which preserves the qualities of both. Art does not contradict nature, then, but rather echoes its qualities in a transfiguring gesture. In other words, just as the symbolic gains its strength from the semiotic, subversive aesthetics do not destroy the symbolic, but reconstitute it in the language of art. In poetic experience, the subject is disintegrated into prediscursive incoherence in order to be re-asserted into meaning. Through its destabilizing gestures, the hegemony of the Law is shown to falter, to have an outside which, although impossible to dwell within or possess in its entirety, nevertheless exists as an eternal challenge to the Law’s pervasiveness. In the simplest terms, art redeems reality. Surely, this is not futile.

Furthermore, poetic language does more than destabilize and make tolerable—in a very profound sense, it transforms the symbolic domain. Avant-garde texts force readers into the uncomfortable confrontation with the source of signification, the chaotic chora. This temporary leave-taking of the status quo is not without its repercussions, because it “exposes the subject to impossible dangers: relinquishing his identity in rhythm, dissolving the buffer of reality in a mobile discontinuity, leaving the shelter of the family, the state, or religion… it destroys all constancy to produce another and then destroys that one as well.” This destruction is a type of revolutionary practice, and it aims for the very foundations of culture. Literary works are evidence that subversion is not futile because, as the avant-garde necessarily passes through the terms of normative practice, the fissures it creates result in transformations within signifying structures. The symbolic exists in tension with its other, which challenges and subverts it, for the purpose of transforming it: “All functions which suppose a frontier… and the transgression of that frontier (the sudden appearance of new signifying chains) are relevant to any

24 Kristeva, Revolution, 104.
account of signifying practice, where practice is taken as meaning
the acceptance of a symbolic law together with the transgression of
that law for the purpose of renovating it.”

As signifying structures
are altered, new positions from which to speak can emerge, a place
is suddenly opened up for a Faulkner, or a Rilke, and art can
communicate what was previously incommunicable. Such
contradictions serve what Kristeva terms the “social–anti-social
function of art.” In displacing the symbolic, the subject, too, is
displaced. This aesthetic subjective experience is not temporary,
but becomes transformative and therefore political as it ushers in “a
different kind of subject, one capable of bringing about new social
relations.”

Kristeva emphasizes that signifying practices “have been
renewing and reshaping the status of meaning within social
exchanges to a point where the very order of language is being
renewed: Joyce, Burroughs, Sollers. This is a moral gesture,
inspired by a concern to make intelligible, and therefore
socializable, what rocks the foundations of sociality.”

Thus, even as Apollo sweeps in to reclaim what Dionysius challenged, it is not
the same Apollo who emerges from the completed aesthetic act.
Their movement is not like that of a pendulum, wherein one
subverts and the other simply undoes the subversion, while they
remain, in essence, the same. New signifying chains emerge from
the cracks in the symbolic order created by semiotic bursts and
pulsations—the cracks do not simply disappear even as the
symbolic reasserts its dominance. They remain, and new structures
appear around them, because of them, and in spite of them. Surely,
this is not futile.

For Kristeva, art is the privileged scene of subversion and
transformation. Because it is capable of maintaining interlocution
with the prediscursive domain and yet not lose its place within the
terms of culture, because it must walk the fragile line separating
obedience and madness, because it reveals the unindividuated
while nevertheless positing a subject, art is more effective at
challenging the dominant order than other subversive acts.

25 Kristeva, J. “The System and the Speaking Subject.” In The Kristeva
Reader (Moi, T. Trans.; New York: Columbia University Press,
26 Kristeva, Revolution, 189.
27 Kristeva, Revolution, 105.
28 Kristeva, System, 32.
29 Moi, 17.
Nietzsche’s emphasis on the presence of both gods within a proper aesthetic project illuminates the way in which art must contain only a facet of the prelinguistic. Any more than that, and its articulation will become unintelligible; less, and it will simply be a reiteration of the status quo. This facet of prediscursivity, which prompts a temporary dissolution of the subject into fragments of colors, tones, rhythms, and words, is perhaps paradoxically communicated to and grasped by an individual subject firmly established into the symbolic order, and it is only subjects so established that can initiate transformation and lasting change which will be more than brief destabilization. Language itself, Kristeva explains, is ultimately a fetish which grounds culture by symbolizing, or standing in for, reality: “Language, precisely, is based on fetishist denial (‘I know that, but just the same,’ ‘the sign is not the thing, but just the same,’ etc.) and defines us in our essence as speaking beings.”\(^{30}\) Attempting to displace a fetish by replacing it with another fetish by remaining exclusively within the symbolic domain is fruitless. Art, however, is not a fetish and therefore can see through the fetishism of language precisely because of its association with the prediscursive: “The [poetic] text is completely different from a fetish because it signifies: in other words, it is not a substitute but a sign (signifier/signified), and its semantics is unfurled in sentences. The text signifies the un-signifying.”\(^{31}\) Art points beyond the limitations of culture from within the limitations of culture, and this pointing undermines culture. Furthermore, art maintains a privileged position because it is real without being actual. While the aesthetic act is capable of a political reach, its violence legitimizes itself through a strategic recourse to the notion that art is, after all, illusion. “It is quite possible for a work of literature to operate as a war machine”\(^{32}\) Monique Wittig remarks. Her novel *Les Guerilleres* depicts a bloody, terrifying battle of the sexes, as women fight to challenge oppression. The characters’ use of weapons and the novel’s assault on traditional language are quite literally acts of violence committed against the dominant order. However, this terror is fictional. In other words, art lies. The lies of art, however, reveal


the truths that matter. Art’s double allegiance makes it a unique form of critique. As the rapt audience watches Don Jose strangle Carmen, it really experiences a scene of murder while not actually experiencing such a scene at all. Profoundly real outrage, melancholy, and sympathy are tempered with the fact that these are not responses to actuality. Carmen, Desdemona, and Ophelia never actually die—they are only eternally dying, suspended in a state between existence and nonexistence peculiar to the aesthetic dimension. In the unreal city of the aesthetic, the audience identifies with murderers, cheats, and tyrants. The artwork forces us to transcend natural responses, to replace them with aesthetic ones, and we sit fiddling like Nero while our city burns. This is precisely how artworks disrupt the dominant order, lifting us from existing social relations and waging war on the tyranny of actuality. An artwork accomplishes this directly, as Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle, which ushered in federal investigations of the meat packing industry. Less tendentiously, a work challenges praxis simply by refusing to speak the dominant language, by retreating into itself, becoming difficult and obscure. By stubbornly remaining Other, by refusing to be assimilated, such works demarcate an experiential respite from the status quo.

Aesthetic features, such as narrative technique, can disturb language and its assumptions. Wittig’s novel is particularly concerned with the way language constructs notions of sexuality and femininity. Les Guerilleres replaces the masculine and universal pronoun ‘il’ with the feminine ‘elles.’ Initially, the change is jarring, as an aesthetic experience ought to be. After a while, however, the text’s cadence and rhythm become habitual, and the challenge of the work infiltrates ordinary signification, subtly, almost imperceptibly, changing it. While speaking a different, defiant language, the text nevertheless remains intelligible, altering signification and shifting the subject’s position therein from within the symbolic domain. “The work of art,” Kristeva purports, “is independence conquered through inhumanity. The work of art cuts off natural filiation, it is patricide and matricide, it is superbly solitary.”33 The signifying gesture of an artwork communicates meaning, but it does not function as an ordinary sign because the object it points to does not exist. Poetic language signifies a world which contradicts the hegemonic scope of this one, a world

33 Moi, 14.
wherein women brutally kill for freedom, because “by a stanza/ a city/ is blown to bits.” The autonomous reality an artwork creates is capable of transformative power that a purely political, non-aesthetic gesture cannot replicate. Art thus ensures that we do not simply die of the truth, but rather that we challenge its very foundation as truth, and that we are able do so from within the boundaries of culture. The prediscursivity revealed in poetic language demonstrates the existence of an outside to the symbolic and, by reclaiming a ground within that outside without abandoning the symbolic, art transforms from the inside out. What, then, will be art's function in a fully transformed society? Will it cease to exist? Perhaps it will be reimagined.