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*Daniel Cohn-Bendit*

HANNAH ARENDT PRIZE SPEECH 2006

Julia will understand how difficult it is for a person from Frankfurt to come to Bremen a week after losing the soccer game, but I am happy to do so for her, for you, Julia. There is a wonderful expression of hers, “*je me voyage*,” which is practically a definition of what she is. It is originally a character in one of her novels but it is also her. “I travel myself.” Let me, then, take you and her on a journey. Because Julia was born in Bulgaria in 1941 and the question is, when you want to introduce yourself, Julia Kristeva, what do you say? Bulgarian? French? I could say: welcome, she’s European, because Bulgaria just joined the Union, and it makes it easier for me to say she’s European. But it’s not that easy.

To figure it out, I’d like to use one of Amin Maalouf’s thoughts, he’s a ... But here we go again, it is again a difficult beginning: Amin Maalouf, what is he? A writer born

in Lebanon—that’s still easy. Is he French? Lebanese? That, he says, is exactly the question that people ask him all the time: yes, what are you actually? Are you Lebanese or are you French? And he answers: as much the one as the other. Yes, understood, you are both, but deep down in your heart, what are you? When you’re having a difficult time or when you must identify yourself, what are you? And he answers: I am neither nor. Yes, so you are one-half French and one-half Lebanese. No, there is no such thing as a half identity, with one partial identity here and one partial identity there, I am a whole, and as a whole, I am—and he says, I quote: “I am constantly put under pressure to choose, but this pressure does not come from fanatics or xenophobes, it comes from people like you and me who always ask the same question. Because there is indeed this habit, these bigoted efforts to try to reduce identity to a core. As if there was a core of identity—one must protest against that, and I say it with anger: I don’t have one unique unequivocal core, my identity is plural and equivocal.”

You will say, this is a platitude, everyone could say that, every intellectual, every well-meaning person, and I found one at the round table of intellectuals, an absolutely brilliant one who actually invented the lightning rod—not bad—and was amongst the first signers of the American Declaration of Independence, and also deeply impressed Tocqueville. His name is Benjamin Franklin and in 1751 he wrote a pamphlet about the Palatine peasants. It was about identity, about being. And I swear, even though I’m completely secular, I swear on anything you’ll choose that what I’m about to read to you is not a joke, it is real and was written that way. The context was an argument about Palatine peasants, i.e. German immigrants to America. These German immigrants, most of the time, were Catholics. They were coming from the Palatinate and they were different from the other immigrants, the Anglicans. Different in a simple sense. The Anglicans work seven days a week or six days a week and then on the seventh day they go to church in the morning and then they essentially stay home. You know that: for a long time, it was impossible to organize a soccer game or a tennis match in Wimbledon on a Sunday. The Catholics, the Palatine peasants, had a different tradition. They worked six days a week and on the seventh day they also went to church,

but then they went to the beer tent or the wine tent and they let loose. And that upset the Anglicans terribly, they set those tents on fire, it was a real *Kulturkampf*, a real culture war. And that's when this Benjamin Franklin wrote about America's ethnic purity. I'm not making this up: "the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionately very small. All *Africa* is black or tawny ... *America* (exclusive of the new Comers) wholly so. And in *Europe*, the *Spaniards*, *Italians*, *French*, *Russians* and *Swedes*, are generally of what we call a swarthy Complexion; as are the *Germans* also, the *Saxons* only excepted, who, with the *English*, make the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth. I could wish their Numbers were increased." [*Laughter in the audience.*] Well, sometimes it is not funny.

To this, Julia Kristeva responds in *Strangers to Ourselves*:

In the absence of a new community bond—a saving religion that would integrate the bulk of wanderers and different people within a new consensus, other than “more money and goods for everyone”—we are, for the first time in history, confronted with the following situation: we must live with different people while relying on our personal moral codes, without the assistance of a set that would include our particularities while transcending them. A paradoxical community is emerging, made up of foreigners who are reconciled with themselves to the extent that they recognize themselves as foreigners. The multinational society would thus be the consequence of an extreme individualism, but conscious of its discontents and limits, knowing only indomitable people ready-to-help-themselves in their weakness, a weakness whose other name is our radical strangeness.<sup>1</sup>

This is the challenge that Julia Kristeva set for herself.

Now there is a litmus test to determine whether this is true or not and where the difficulties lie. It is a hellish sort of moment, in which one doesn't know where or how anymore. You will never guess what this litmus test is. Maybe Julia will if I mention a date: November 17, 1993. I also went through a similar hell, on July 8, 1982. You still don't know what this litmus test is. Well, on July 8, 1982 France was playing against

Germany, it was the World Cup semifinal in Spain, in Seville, and France was unfairly sent home after the penalty kicks. It was awful. On that day—and it must be faced—why was I French? Maybe because I experienced soccer as a child and a thing from childhood shapes identity more. And now comes my question for Julia: November 17, 1993. As a child, in Bulgaria, she roamed the soccer fields with her father. And on November 17, 1993, during the World Cup qualifiers, Bulgaria sent France packing. I don't know if she was watching. But if she was, because she very often watches soccer, I would like to know whether she was happy or sad on that day. It was her childhood and it was her reality, because, as we know, she has been living in France since 1965.

Let us review Julia Kristeva's journey. She is an intellectual, she embraced political theories, she tried freedom at all levels, she went to China, then wrote a book about it, *About Chinese Women*, she belonged to a group in France, *Tel Quel*, where she tried something, where they tried something crazy, along the lines of: is there something in Maoism, in what is emerging in China, some way of transcending freedom that we could wish for ourselves? After her trip to China she was a bit disappointed, one must say. The Cultural Revolution didn't seem to be the thing after all. But she had this desire to keep thinking further, to keep developing, she explored the most diverse political theories, and she was not afraid when President Jacques Chirac asked her if she would write a report about disabilities, because for her disabled people were not fully represented in our society, and so she accepted. She was not afraid, over the years, to stand up to anybody, she had a feminist point of view but she was not afraid—afraid in the sense of intellectual confrontation—to argue with feminists. She took a stand on the migration process, on political theory, found a way to psychoanalysis, in other words a path to herself, a way to grapple with oneself. Psychoanalysis led her not only to become a psychoanalyst but also to use it in the interpretation of social phenomena. And in her interpretation of literature and of people, in her interpretation of a specific literary moment, she always tried, whether to describe Simone de Beauvoir or Paul Celan, to detect sexuality, emotion, poetry.

And finally, she wrote a trilogy, “Female Genius—Life, Madness, Words,” about three women, Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Colette.<sup>2</sup> I believe Hannah Arendt stands for political philosophy, Melanie Klein for psychoanalysis, and Colette for desire, for fun, for sexuality in the widest sense. And in the course of this confrontation we come to a point where we should ask ourselves: Yes, but where is she? And isn’t it at the same time presumptuous and magnificent, this female genius that she describes in three works and three women? That she would say that and that we would accept it and wonder how somebody had the force, the chutzpah, and the courage to say: that’s me, I am also these three women or I want to be them, I want to go that road. And I find this to be one of the greatest intellectual challenges that we see ourselves confronted with—and that, to me, is Julia Kristeva.

And when one asks her what defines her thought or when she has to describe it herself—I quote:

*Je ne me sens pas d’humeur conclusive, pas encore: les épreuves m’ont appris à vivre dans l’ouvert.—I don’t have the need to come to an end, to conclude, not yet: the challenges of life have taught me to remain in an open state.*<sup>3</sup>

She continues:

*Celui qui n’a pas d’épreuves ou, plutôt, qui les dénie se contente en réalité d’une identité jalousement gardée. Il conserve ainsi ses limites, ses principes, ses protections qui lui servent d’antidépresseurs. Au contraire, l’épreuve peut nous offrir l’occasion de ‘faire nos preuves,’ elle met à mal les frontières et nos défenses et ne nous laisse pas beaucoup de choix; soit on se déprime, soit on met en question valeurs et certitudes. J’essaie, dans ma vie et dans ma pensée, de me tenir dans ce questionnement—He who doesn’t experience trials or, rather, who denies them, accepts a closed identity. He preserves what he keeps inside, his antidepressants, but he can’t open up to the world. A trial can give us the opportunity to ‘prove ourselves,’ to give proof of what we are capable of and what we want. Such a trial tests the limits*

of our boundaries and defenses, and doesn’t leave us much choice. Either we can’t master this challenge or we are able to question our certainties, our values. I try in my life and my thought, to hold myself in this questioning.<sup>4</sup>

And then she sums up her thought:

*Un projet sans programme, un état de surprise permanente face aux phénomènes, aux discours, au sens et au non-sens, qui me libèrent de ce qui a eu lieu ainsi que de mes jugements antérieurs, et qui m’incitent à une sorte de dépassement. Je vis avec ce désir de sortir de moi.*<sup>5</sup>

Thus: I have a project without a program that is going to close me in, to bring me to a close. What I want is *un état de surprise* (and remember she just quoted Hannah Arendt here), to be able to seize the surprise of being, and this surprise, the acceptance of the surprise is a moment of liberation, a liberation of thought. And she ends by saying: “I live with this desire, this need to come out of myself, to go out of myself.”<sup>6</sup>

This is, I think, what Hannah Arendt—you see, I knew this would happen at some point—this is what Julia Kristeva tells us. And then, politically, she stands by it—and it is quite rare for people of our generation to stand by it—Yes, she says, one has the right to revolt. Yes, she says, revolts are part of it, and here I will quote her again because I see there are also a lot of parents here, and what I will quote is difficult for all of us if we agree to it and most of the time we do because we are from the right generation, yes, but in the end:

*Oui, on a raison de se révolter.—Yes, one has the right, one is right to revolt.<sup>7</sup> Et ce n’est pas simplement un bon mot censé flatter.—This is not just said to please. La révolte constitue notre intégrité psychique.—Revolt structures our psychic integrity. La vie psychique, le psychisme comme vie.—It is inside our psyche.<sup>8</sup>*

And here it comes, parents, pay attention:

*Si l'enfant ne se révolte pas contre le père ou la mère, si l'adolescent ne crée pas une réalité rebelle contre ses parents, contre l'école et contre l'État, il est tout simplement mort.*—If a child doesn't revolt against his father or mother, if a teenager doesn't create a rebellious reality against her parents, against school, and against the state, she is quite simply dead.<sup>9</sup>

Right? How many adolescent children do we have? And do we suffer from their revolt or not? And are we able to hold out against it? This is, in my opinion, an important question.

*Il [l'enfant] se prive de la possibilité d'innovation et de création, il devient un robot.*—A child deprived of the possibility of innovation and creation becomes a robot.<sup>10</sup>

Is that what we want?

*Cette grande question générale est d'une actualité quotidienne, brûlante.*—This is a big question and a burning issue.

For us parents in any case. What I want to show with this, when she then speaks about Sartre in her lectures, or about Simone de Beauvoir, is that she is not blind, she describes how Sartre rejected his Nobel Prize, with this whole antibourgeois attitude, while at the same time accepting communism, totalitarianism—how this antibourgeois stance was coupled with a bourgeois blindness, and so forth. She disenchants the whole enchantment of life, and yet one is enchanted over and over again by this quest for a non-, not only a non-correct thought, but the quest for a thought that is also able to rebel, to say no to what happens in the world.

To conclude, I would like to quote her again, to quote from the book that she wrote about Hannah Arendt. Because it is fascinating how she tries to remove this whole antimotherhood from feminism. A woman, she says, the thing that creates, defines a woman, is precisely to create life. And she analyzes—and it is very interesting—how

Hannah Arendt, although she was not a mother, described it very early on as a human gift. And this is how her book about Hannah Arendt ends:

A full experience of natality would inevitably include birth, life, an affirmation of the uniqueness of each birth, and continual rebirth in the life of the mind—a mind that *is* because it begins again in the plurality of other people, and only then does it act like a living thought that surpasses all other activities. But the “miracle” [not the Bern Miracle] also occurs, if only in a single fragment of this “full experience,” which justifies the miracle through the promise it provides and the forgiveness it articulates. Arendt shared in that miracle, for she was without a doubt one of the few people of our time to attain the state of bliss in which living is thinking. Did she not write once that, although the rapture of thought is ineffable, “the only possible metaphor one may conceive of for the life of the mind is the sensation of being alive”?

As for a political action that would be tantamount to a birth and that would shelter us from estrangement, Hannah Arendt—without indulging in too many illusions—invites us to think about it and to experience it in the present, while always remaining inside the realm between promise and forgiveness.<sup>11</sup>

This is also Julia Kristeva.

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NOTES

1. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 195.
2. Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); *Melanie Klein*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); *Colette*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
3. Julia Kristeva, “La Chine telle quelle,” Preface to *Des Chinoises* (Paris: Pauvert, 2005), 9.
4. Julia Kristeva, “Je vis avec ce désir de sortir de moi,” *Le Monde*, November 17, 2005.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. See, for example, Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002), 83.
8. [For these ideas in her writings, see Julia Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis Volume 1*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 6–17, and *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis Volume 2*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), ch. 1.—Ed.]
9. [For this notion in her writings, see Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), ch. 9, and “L’Adolescence, un syndrome d’idéalité,” in *La Haine et le pardon* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).—Ed.]
10. Julia Kristeva, *Au risque de la pensée* (Paris: l’Aube, 2001), 40.
11. Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 239–40.

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Translated from German by Daniel Argelès. This is the speech given by Daniel Cohn-Bendit at the ceremony of the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought, when it was awarded to Julia Kristeva in Bremen in 2006. Daniel Cohn-Bendit is laureate of the 2001 Hannah Arendt Prize.