

Interview

Why France, Why the Nation?

JULIA KRISTEVA

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Integration Is Not Possible for Everyone—The Myth of National Unity—The French and the Americans—National Depression and Manic Reactions (Le Pen) —Politics, Religions, Psychoanalysis—Taking Refuge in France

PHILIPPE PETIT: 'Nowhere are you more of a foreigner than in France. The French haven't the tolerance of Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the accommodating insouciance of the South Americans, or the German or Slavic curiosity that rejects and assimilates in equal measure, and so the stranger confronts that daunting French sense of national pride ... And yet, nowhere are you better off as a foreigner than in France. Because you remain irrevocably different and unacceptable, you're an object of fascination. You're noticed and talked about, hated, admired, or both.' You wrote this in *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (translated as *Strangers to Ourselves*). Do you still feel a foreigner in France, thirty years after coming here?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Of course. It's a paradoxical situation, because abroad I am taken as one of the representatives of contemporary French culture, whereas in France I am and always will be a stranger. It's normal: it's a question of language, mentality and perhaps a certain personal marginality that writers have always claimed for themselves, like Mallarmé. After all, he wanted to write 'a total word, new, foreign to language'.

PHILIPPE PETIT: Why didn't we read or hear from you during the (still ongoing) affair of the illegal immigrants? Aren't foreigners' rights in part your domain, not to mention open, respectful rights for migrants?

JULIA KRISTEVA: I haven't signed petitions for a long time now. I believe

that a psychoanalyst can make certain aspects of her personal life appear in her written work, since we analyze with our entire personality. Moreover, 'new patients' suffer from a real lack of interest in their own psyches; the imaginary experience of the analyst can reawaken that interest and pave the way to the subsequent work of dismantling and interpretation. On the other hand, taking up a political position can inhibit the patient's freedom, curb and censor his or her own biography. When I talk about politics, like I'm doing now with you, I try to express myself carefully. It's impossible when you're a militant 'sounding off'. Beyond that, much as I am sensitive to the distress of the immigrants, equally I don't think it's desirable to give the deceptive impression that integration is possible for everyone who asks for it.

PHILIPPE PETIT: Right now, the movement for the immigrants without proper papers is virtually isolated, even if some centres making claims for them are still active. The Chevènement document gave those foreign Africans reason to believe they can obtain what they request by getting their names on the administrative lists. Around 160,000 of them are asking to be given citizenship. Personally, I think that they should be, since they have been working in France for years. What is your own opinion?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Each individual's case is examined carefully at the present, it seems, and I have no reason to doubt Jean-Pierre Chevènement's intention to give legal status to those who have been working for years now and meet the criteria agreed to by the majority of the French.

PHILIPPE PETIT: You write in *Temps sensible* (translated as *Time and Sense*) that Proust is one of the writers who has best explored the clannish nature of French society. You say he got to 'the heart of the social game'. What did you mean by that?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Proust was very sensitive to the 'clans' that make up French society. He suffered by them, while trying to be part of one. He was the first to diagnose it in a way that's both droll and agonising: the French, he said, transformed Hamlet's declaration 'to be or not to be' into 'to be in or not to be in'. Could social awareness compensate for what is, all in all, a metaphysical restriction? But all that socialising, military strategy and salon play-acting, just to get himself accepted, or just to exist, work and get his work acknowledged! Until the end of his life,

Proust sought to win over the various clans, to appropriate society's collective trance. Looked at this way, this fin-de-siècle dandy was the first writer who didn't shrink from the 'society of the spectacle'—the salons, editorial offices, publishing houses, soon television ... His attitude during the Dreyfus Affair was very significant. He defended Dreyfus right up until he realised that his supporters were forming an equally corruptible group by themselves, and furthermore flawed by an anticlericalism eager to close the cathedrals! Proust didn't trust any clan, whether it was a High Society, or literary, political or sexual ones. In *Sodom and Gomorrah* he writes, 'Let's leave to one side for the moment those who ... want to have us share their tastes, who are doing it ... with apostolic zeal, like others who preach Zionism, Saint-Simonism, vegetarianism and anarchy'. To go against the group and the gregarious instinct, you have to write in the mode of the fugue, compose cruel and ridiculous 'impressions' that shock and are most effective at dissolving clannish associations. They are the conditions of that particular experience, writing itself, as the search for 'pure embodied time' and of the 'book within'. Not above clans, nor without them, but through them, at their margins, in order to bear witness to them. 'Whether it was the Dreyfus affair or the war, each event provided writers with other excuses not to decipher this book, they wanted to secure the triumph of the law, restore the moral cohesion of the nation, hadn't the time to think about literature', (in *Time Regained*). This irony, aloof and complicit at the same time, endows Proust's texts with a pained clear-sightedness about the Society circles, salons and social classes, and it made him exceptionally attentive to the clannish instinct that entrances individuals.

PHILIPPE PETIT: Is Proust out of the ordinary in this?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Proust is unique, and few writers after him dared imitate him or comment on him. He is always impressive, when he isn't terrifying. Some still dismiss him, calling him 'little Marcel' and accusing him of having turned the novel into poetry, and killed it off as a result! Who are the great writers that came later who paid homage to him? Mauriac and Bataille, both attracted by Proust the mystic and the blasphemer; Blanchot, who detected the 'emptiness' in the cathedral that is the *Recherche* ... No, there aren't that many. Celine is fascinated by him, but just rejects him more completely as a rival supposed to have only written in 'Franco-Yiddish' ...

PHILIPPE PETIT: Would you say that today's French society is as clannish

as it was at the beginning of the century?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Yes, and I'll say exactly why. France is one of those countries where national unity is an essential historical realisation that has an aspect of myth or a cult. Of course, each person belongs to his family, a clan of friends, a professional clique, his province etc., but there is a sense of national cohesion that's anchored in language. It's an inheritance of the monarchy and of republican institutions, rooted in the language, in an art of living and in this harmonisation of shared customs called French taste. The Anglo-Saxon world is based on the family. Certainly, in France, the family is an essential refuge, but Gide could still say: 'Families, I detest you!' There is an entity above and beyond the family that is neither the Queen nor the Dollar, but the Nation. Montesquieu said it once and for all in the *Spirit of the Laws*: 'There are two sorts of tyranny: one is real, consisting in the violence of government; the other is the tyranny of opinion that makes its presence felt when those who govern set things up that go against the way the nation thinks'. Everywhere this 'way of thinking of the Nation' is a political given, it's a source of pride and an absolute factor in France. It can degenerate into a prickly and xenophobic nationalism, and we have many to testify to that in recent history. You would be slightly mistaken (to say the least), if you didn't take this into account. What is more, this cohesion has a tendency to fragment, so that you get networks, sub-groups, clans, each one as specious as the next, and all rivals, generating a positive and entertaining diversity, as much as a pernicious cacophony. Chamfort already said it: 'In France, there is no public or nation because rags don't make up a shirt'. What you can minimally argue is that rags remained prevalent under the Fifth Republic—the different parties all know quite a bit about that!

Proust described all this well: the Verdurins, the Guermantes, the professional circles, sexual ones ... Many meta-families that are initially liberating, enabling talents and vices to flourish, art to blossom, freeing up political debate and personal behaviour, but then they close in on themselves just as quickly in order to exclude the person who doesn't submit to the clan's rules—for being too personal, too free, too creative, like the artist, the Jew, the homosexual ... This is the sado-masochistic logic of clannishness: we like you as long as you are one of us but we expel you if you are yourself. It's impossible to 'step out of line' (Kafka), 'society is founded on a crime committed in common' (Freud). Proust shares a lot with Kafka and Freud, but he's funnier; he doesn't display his chagrin too much, doesn't set up a program of therapy, doesn't ever

withdraw into personal isolation or into ‘art for art’s sake’. He plays the game the better to laugh at it, laugh at the clan, at society, at oneself.

PHILIPPE PETIT: Outside society, no salvation. Unlike the Americans, we can’t be reborn in the desert ...

JULIA KRISTEVA: No salvation outside society? I wouldn’t say that, because you should add that we immediately create clans when jokers appear to put other people’s sense of humor and endurance to the test, society’s too ... The French all want to be jokers like d’Artagnan: nothing to do with Dostoyevski’s tragic joker, nor with the Protestant conquerors chasing Moby Dick, managing their fish factory with the Bible in their right hand ...

PHILIPPE PETIT: Jean Schlumberger said, ‘France will be in a state of dialogue for ever. I doubt, I know, I believe—take away one of these three assertions and France falls apart’. Do you find dialogue in France is a bit stifled these days?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Dialogue the French way isn’t intended to establish a consensus, but to surprise, to reveal, to innovate. It can seem disconcerting, and I’ve often felt that myself after a talk, for instance. French people listening to me go up to the mike and tell me that not only do they do it better than you but they’re doing something different entirely. Americans, on the other hand, ask real questions, they want to know essential truths, like whether you believe in immortality. I start off preferring the Americans’ naive curiosity, but in the end I get taken in by the dialogue of the deaf that the French carry on, because it uncovers insolent, often interesting, characters. And, anyway, psychoanalysis tells us that there is no dialogue, just desires clashing, forces colliding. From this point of view, the French are maybe more mature, more knowing than others.

That said, the political domain is designed to harmonise these conflicting desires and incompatible forces. Is this balance more lacking in France than in other countries? Frankly, I don’t think so. The French like appearances, like to show themselves, to show off in public, let other people in on how bad they’re feeling or what the state of their bank balance is. At the same time, this exhibition of unease doesn’t mean a total concession to media spectacle: one doesn’t believe in it so much, one remains mistrustful, not really taking it seriously. The French are

impressed by the media, of course, but don't allow themselves to get caught up in a Monicagate or an O. J. Simpson trial. Although they like spectacle, the French make fun of histrionics.

As for national pride, it can become Poujade-like arrogance and a lack of enterprising energy: the French aren't open to Europe and the world, and are content to cultivate tradition as a consolation. But it also offers aspects that are real advantages in this post-industrial age. For the 'people'—the people of Robespierre, Saint-Just and Michelet, I mean—poverty isn't a flaw. Sieyès spoke of the 'ever unhappy people', Robespierre was pleased that the 'wretched were applauding me', Saint-Just's conclusion was that 'the destitute are a world power'. Is it any wonder that the people on minimum wage and on welfare make their claims heard? More than in other countries, they have a sense of superiority because they belong to a prestigious culture. They wouldn't exchange that for the temptations of globalisation, not for anything. You'd say that's a pity, because the French will stay uncompetitive and lacking in enterprise. Even our students are hesitant about studying abroad, while we have a lot of foreign exchange students, eager to come here and learn. But a lot are beginning to realise it and are making up for the unbalance. On the other hand, this sense of dignity, i.e. taking away the guilty stigma of poverty and valuing the quality of life, is an increasingly welcome new perspective for both developing peoples and the people of industrial countries feeling oppressed by automation, inhuman hours, unemployment, lack of social security and so on. Clearly, when this proud and demanding entity we call the 'people' addresses itself to the public authorities then the dialogue that one would wish for turns into an open confrontation. For all that, though, I still don't think the channels of communication are blocked. But what if we took at face value popular demands to redistribute national and global wealth? It would be a precedent that would make other countries sit up and take notice ...

PHILIPPE PETIT: I find you optimistic, because it's very often grand-standing theatricals that overshadow what is really and intellectually at stake ...

JULIA KRISTEVA: I find you pessimistic. In what other country would you find the intellectual stakes more fundamental and more in the spotlight? Really! Just to stay in my own field: we have opened up a debate on modern psychoanalysis and its relations with neuroscience and politics that you don't have in any other country. I have just come back from a

conference in Toulouse where 800 people stayed on afterwards from six o'clock to eleven thirty that evening to discuss the detective novel and new maladies of the soul, asking fascinating questions on literature, mental health, the evolution of the family ... I really don't find the French half-asleep or theatrical.

PHILIPPE PETIT: Yes, but doesn't that explain a real absence of historical perspective in contemporary debate?

JULIA KRISTEVA: The grand historical perspectives, as well as the great challenges in history, are a function of their time, and you can't ask a globalised industrial society to follow the models of the last two centuries. The dichotomous logic of the great men and intellectual figures who fight obscurantism and power in anticipation of happier tomorrows has given way to a more complex situation. There's no use in looking for a Jean-Paul Sartre going up against Charles de Gaulle, Voltaire against the King. In our period of transition and endemic crisis, what counts is rather the questions than the answers. Just like it is in psychotherapy, the truth of 'historical perspective' would be to let new forms of questioning come in, instead of proposing solutions to meet the anxieties of the person under analysis. Modern revolt doesn't necessarily take the form of a clash of prohibitions and transgressions that beckons the way to firm promises; modern revolt is in the form of trials, hesitations, learning as you go, making patient and lateral adjustments to an endlessly complex network ... That doesn't prevent prospective ideologies from appearing to satisfy the psychological need for ideals and seduction. But we know better now where to put them in their rightful place—as actors in the 'Spectacle'.

PHILIPPE PETIT: What are the ways open to us?

JULIA KRISTEVA: The nation, for example, which we mustn't leave to the National Front. It's a common denominator that many people need, and we still need to separate what's best about it from what's worst. The idea of the people has to be protected from Poujadist and Le Penist conceptions, and safeguarded as guarantor of generosity and a culture of *jouissance*—the very opposite of anodyne globalisation.

PHILIPPE PETIT: How do you explain the new dimension the nation is taking on these days?

JULIA KRISTEVA: I'm going to rely on psychoanalysis to answer you.

Depression is one of this century's commonest maladies, particularly in France. A recent statistic showed that our country is one of those where suicide deaths are the highest, fourth in Europe behind Finland, Denmark and Austria (not counting the ex-Eastern bloc and China). The causes of depression are complicated: wounded narcissism, inadequate maternal relations, the absence of paternal ideals, and so on. They all make the subject forget how important it is to make connections: initially language (a person who is depressed doesn't speak, he 'doesn't believe' in communication, wraps himself up in silence and tears, inaction and immobility), and ultimately connections to life itself (it ends in the cult of death and suicide). More and more, you sense that today individual depression is also the expression of social distress: losing a job, longer and longer-term unemployment, problems at work, poverty, lack of ideals and perspectives.

Above and beyond individuals, you sense that France is suffering from depression on a national scale, analogous to the one private people have. We no longer have the image of a great power that de Gaulle restored to us; France's voice is less and less heard, it has less weight in European negotiations, even less when in competition with America. Migrant influxes have created familiar difficulties and a more or less justifiable sense of insecurity, even of persecution. Ideals or clear and simple perspectives like the ones the demagogic ideologies used to offer—and they are no less tempting—are out of place. In this setting, the country is reacting no differently than a depressed patient. The first reaction is to withdraw: you shut yourself away at home, don't get out of bed, don't talk, you complain. Lots of French aren't interested in community life and politics, they aren't active, gripe a lot. And then what do you do with French patriotism, a crowing arrogance that is part of our tradition? It's a too easy contempt for others, an excessive self-assurance that makes them prefer to forget the world outside and avoid going to the trouble of undertaking something worthwhile. Today, the French are both boastful and self-deprecating, or lacking in self-esteem altogether. What is more, a person who is depressed has tyrannical ideals, and it's his draconian superego demanding a supposedly deserved and expected perfection that, at bottom, orchestrates the depression. I formulated this hypothesis in 1990, in *Lettre ouverte à Harlem Désir* (translated as *Nations without Nationalism*). Since then, this malady has had moments of growth and decline, and we were at rock bottom before the 'dissolution' of Parliament in 1997. Still, as a result of the subsequent elections and the real or perhaps simply promised economic upswing, the French mood is

visibly improving. But that latent depression hasn't gone away despite everything.

PHILIPPE PETIT: What does the analyst do faced with a patient who is that depressed?

JULIA KRISTEVA: He begins by restoring self-confidence; you do this by rebuilding both their self-image and the relation between the two partners in this cure, so that communication can begin again and a real analysis of this unease can happen. Similarly, the depressed nation has to have the best image of itself that it can, before it can be capable of going ahead with European integration, for example, or industrial and commercial expansion, or a warmer reception of immigrants. It's not about flattering the French, nor trying to foster illusions about qualities that they don't have. But it's the nation's cultural heritage that isn't stressed enough, which means as much its aesthetic as its technical and scientific capabilities, despite such a lot of justified criticism. Particularly guilty of this are intellectuals: they're always ready and willing sceptics, quick to push Cartesianism to the point of self-loathing. Giraudoux wrote: 'Nations, like men, die from imperceptible discourtesies'. I wonder if our generosity to the Third World and our cosmopolitanism haven't often led us to commit imperceptible discourtesies that aggravate our national depression. It's time to attend to it. For if depressives commit suicide first, they find consolation for their pain by reacting like maniacs: instead of undervaluing themselves, lapsing into inertia, they mobilise, sign up for war—holy wars, inevitably. Then, they hunt down enemies, preferably phony ones. You'll recognise the National Front and integrationist movements there.

PHILIPPE PETIT: Ernest Renan said: 'The nation is a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's very existence is the perpetual affirmation of life'. To a greater or lesser degree, the nation is a historical unit born out of conflict. Making these conflicts come to the surface isn't an easy thing to do for the kind of individuals we are.

JULIA KRISTEVA: When contemporary psychoanalysis encounters these 'new maladies of the soul', what shows up are failures to work out psychic conflicts. It gets to the point where not only are some people today incapable of telling good from bad (both become banal as a result—Hannah Arendt had already seen that happen during the Holocaust—but for many, their psyches can't represent their conflicts for them (in

sensations, words, images, thoughts). And so they're laying themselves open to vandalism, psychosomatic illnesses, drugs. Conversely, you could say that modern society also offers spaces and occasions to try to remedy these deficiencies. Society has explicitly delegated psychoanalysis to the task, representing one of these opportunities individuals are offered to work out their conflicts and crises. It sort of takes over from politics and religion, which were traditionally the proper places for the expression of our conflicts. It has to adapt itself to historical change, be more involved in society's debates and not turn its back to the media, but, above all, build new bridges with the human sciences, medicine, and neuro-psychiatric research. More broadly, civil society is trying to find new political ways to allow its conflicts, for too long stifled by an excessively centralised national administration and political parties, to show up and develop. Associative life, which seems to be developing better and better, could be this new version of the nation: it could offer a unifying public space that provides a sense of identity, memory and an ideal—working like an antidepressant, in so many words. At the same time, it would multiply contacts between individuals, providing care geared to the diverse demands made on it.

PHILIPPE PETIT: In the talk 'Europhilia, Europhobia' you gave at NYU in November 1997, you say: 'Before you undertake a real analysis of its resistances and defense mechanisms, it is important to restore national confidence in the same way you would restore narcissism or the ideal self in a depressive patient'. Are you confident about national self-confidence?

JULIA KRISTEVA: I trust the respect for public space, the capacity to take away the stigmas that surround misery and the exercise of solidarity in the face of it. But also the pride in cultural heritage and the culture of *jouissance* and freedom. I distrust the attraction of 'the good old days,' nationalism (which isn't the same as the nation), and sexism. But I've already gone over that, so let me say a bit more about what I'm personally confident about.

Even if a nation defines itself in terms of its ties to blood or soil, most base their image of identity on language. It's particularly true for France. The history of the monarchy and the republic, given their administrative cultures, the verbal code, and their rhetorical and pedagogical institutions, led to an unprecedented fusion of national and linguistic entities. It means that literary avant-gardes have to be more subversive and extremist in France than anywhere else, just to disrupt this protective layer of rhetoric.

Those avant-gardes are severely marginalised or abolished during a time of national depression, invariably met by a retreat behind set ideas about identity. There is then a cult of traditional language, or ‘French good taste’, which shores up a failing, or even unrecoverable, sense of identity.

The foreigner, who is always a translator of sorts, hasn’t much of a chance in this kind of context. Of course, there have always been Jewish courtiers and foreigners admitted to the the *Académie française*. But these alibis, which flatter the national conscience, shouldn’t mask the basic tendency: just like the avant-garde’s daredevil feats, those who dare to incorporate themselves into an ‘other language’ are met with suspicion and quickly fall victim to ostracism. It’s easy to understand why, in France, people who are the most shrewdly nationalistic, the most insidiously xenophobi, set up and exercise their power in the institutions that oversee literature studies. He or she who speaks the ‘other language’ is invited to be silent ... unless he or she joins one of the reigning clans, or one of the rhetorics that hold sway. Naturally, she or he can also try to leave the country, to be translated abroad. Actually, the fate of the outsider is open by definition: perhaps that’s its salvation in the end ...

When I come home to France after trips to the four corners of the globe, it sometimes happens that I don’t recognise myself in these French discourses, despite the fact that it’s been my only language for thirty years now. They are discourses that look the other way on evils, on the world’s misery, and instead applaud the tradition of irresponsibility—when it’s not nationalism—as the sole remedy to our century. For alas, it’s not the glorious seventeenth century, nor the century of Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau ... After a day of psychoanalysis sessions—where there’s a place for real speech, even if it is dysfunctional—there’s nothing worse than reading or meeting some journalist or other, punctiliously serving up the stereotypes of stylistic and philosophical protectionism. French excels in false praise, in hollow enthusiasms, in heady eulogy of those who are ‘one of us’. It’s more resistant to hybrid versions of itself, unlike English, and it’s not interested when it comes to adding new things to the language, unlike American, which constitutes a new body of language, nor even Russian, despite everything. French today has a tendency to be satisfied by an untranslatable authenticity. All in all, it’s a temple, and certain institutions and organs of the press—more than writers themselves, by definition nomadic and scorched souls—are trying to wall it in. If the outsider gets worried, starts talking or criticising, he is accused of disparaging France. Frenchness hardens into a regionalist stance, and,

like in Aeschylus's time, only allows outsiders one discourse—the humble supplicant's ...

PHILIPPE PETIT: What did you think about getting rid of military service?

JULIA KRISTEVA: You're bringing me back to serious matters. I totally approve of getting rid of it. I'm going to make a confession: I've always detested military service. I've never understood why some of my female friends, when I was a little girl, wanted to be boys. The mere idea of military service made a choice like that awful.

PHILIPPE PETIT: From a republican point of view, doesn't it shock you that we're getting rid of something that was after all a place (like school too) of social mixing?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Do you seriously think military service is the only place for social mixing? Frankly, though I'm convinced patriotism isn't passé yet, I still think there are other ways of cultivating it—scientific, artistic, or sporting competition, for example. As for social mixing, public schools and universities are appropriate places. In a modest way, I'm taking part in a rethinking of how higher education is organised; among other things, it includes a possible fusing of the *grandes écoles* and the universities. It's definitely not about taking away from the excellence of the former or the generosity of the latter, but allowing a better mix. In a civilian context—for it doesn't have to be necessarily military—there are other, similar activities you can think of, like helping the disadvantaged at school, in the so-called 'fourth world', and so on. They're activities that develop a real concern for others, i.e. love and caring. That's what 'public service' means, doesn't it? To serve, care for, preserve, revive? Caring, like a basic degree of love, is also a powerful anti-depressant. 'Service'—OK; but 'army'—no. It's not my thing ... But don't you think you're overdoing it a bit, asking me all sorts of questions, as if you take me for one of these intellectuals—though they don't exist anymore—who has an answer for everything? From military service to theories of the Big Bang—why not, while we're at it?

PHILIPPE PETIT: People have been talking recently about reintroducing lay morality in schools. Do you think we should teach children to love their country?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Why not? But a sense of 'my country' as a reserve of

memory or an imaginary limit, rather than in terms of a religious foundation or an ultimate origin. So you would go in search of the past, and get a sense of being different from others. A memory and limit that one would love: it's a long march that may give love itself a new flavour. It would be a more internalised and sober sense of love.

PHILIPPE PETIT: What is a successful transfer?

JULIA KRISTEVA: For me, it would be just like analytic transference. This implies that there is a separation: at the end of my analysis sessions, I leave my analyst. My inhibitions and censoring mechanisms are relaxed, I'm in touch with my unconscious drives and my creativity increases; it is a state of autonomy that makes me capable of freedom and choice, far beyond what my analyst has transmitted to me right there and then (literally). In short, a successful transfer is one you can question and modify, one that stimulates the creativity of the 'disciple'.

PHILIPPE PETIT: At the same time, you recognise that you can't master what you're conveying?

JULIA KRISTEVA: That goes without saying. If the two extremes are dogma and just anything goes, what a good 'master' conveys to his disciple is both a set of literal meanings and a sense of rigour. And at the same time, an ability to question, make new beginnings, re-births.

PHILIPPE PETIT: Don't you find it a shame that we've got rid of the oath-swearing ceremony that confers nationality?

JULIA KRISTEVA: It seems logical to me that children born of foreign parents raised on French soil, educated in French schools, and speaking French, get French nationality without having to ask for it. You would put the matter differently for new-comers.

PHILIPPE PETIT: Yes, but there isn't the symbolic act of commitment. It's a formality. It's not symbolic, or ritualised. There is no civic oath ...

JULIA KRISTEVA: I attach a lot of importance to ritual because it harbours an irreplaceable symbolic potential. I have been very touched by the ceremonies of American or Canadian universities, especially when they have elected me to honorary doctorates. The elections also include the students: there is a tangible recognition of their status as intellectual

individuals, their integration into a national and international academic community, and into the symbolic memory of their school. This tradition has been lost in France, or it's pretty perfunctory. I try in vain to revive it, and it just earns me pitying smiles. People tell me that the French have too good a sense of humour to go along with all that play-acting. That remains to be seen. You could think of rituals adapted to this ludic spirit: for example, if we're talking about the university of Paris Denis-Diderot, where I teach, it could borrow from the symbolism of the *Encyclopédie*, and include the arts and poetry, as well as a party of course ...

PHILIPPE PETIT: 'If we are only free subjects in so far as we are strangers to ourselves, it follows that the social ties shouldn't associate identities, but federate alterities.' You wrote this in the journal *L'Infini*. Can you be more specific on that?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Following on from Rimbaud, psychoanalysis makes us admit 'I is an other', and even several others. Overturning the traditional notion of a person's 'identity' is in the same spirit as the 'deicidal' movement I was talking about in the context of May '68. If God becomes a stable Value, if the Person coheres into a stable identity, all well and good, but all the energy of modern culture is directed against this homogeneity and tendency toward stagnation—what it exposes instead is fragmentation. Not only are we divided, harbouring within 'ourselves' alterities we can sometimes hardly bear, but this polyphony gives us pleasure. This is enough to threaten facile morality and compacted entities. Consequently, it's not surprising that a lot of people are giving twentieth-century culture a miss, don't want to open their eyes and see the actually troubling truths, all that reveals. However, by recognising this strangeness intrinsic to each of us, we have more opportunities to tolerate the foreignness of others. And subsequently, more opportunities to try to create less monolithic, more polyphonic communities.

PHILIPPE PETIT: What do you mean by 'federation'?

JULIA KRISTEVA: An accord between polyphonic people, respectful of their reciprocal foreignness. A couple that lasts, for example, is necessarily a federation of at least four partners: the masculine and the feminine sides in the man, the feminine and masculine sides in the woman. I dream of a public and secular space in France that stays committed to preserving the 'general spirit' dear to Montesquieu, but wouldn't erase the foreignness of each of the constituent parts of the French make-up

either; it would federate, respect, and unify them instead. And this is neither a neutralising incorporation into a larger universal whole nor English-style communitarianism that breaks the ‘general spirit’. All in all, it’s a subtle balance we haven’t yet managed to put into practice.

PHILIPPE PETIT: Outside France and its culture, what are the countries you feel closest to?

JULIA KRISTEVA: Greece is my cradle; my homeland, Bulgaria, is a part of old Byzantium. I’m writing my next novel on it—it’s another detective novel, but this time on the Crusades. I feel close to the Russians, because of the melancholy and carnivalesque sensuality of the ‘Slavic soul’. But, I get the strongest impression of civilisation from Italy and Spain. By way of reply, I’ll read a few passages from my novel *Possessions*: ‘Many fall in love with Italy, and I have too: its profusion of beauty that perpetually astonishes one, an excitement akin to serenity. Others desire Spain: it is haughty because it is unreasonable, mystical but nonchalant. As for me, I have definitively taken refuge in France ... I lodge my body in the logical landscape of France, take shelter in the sleek, easy and smiling streets, rub shoulders with this odd people—they are reserved, but disabused, and possessed of an impenetrable intimacy, which is, all things considered, polite. They built Notre-Dame and the Louvre, conquered Europe and a large part of the globe, and then went back home again because they prefer a pleasure that goes hand in hand with reality. But because they also prefer the pleasures reality affords, they still believe themselves masters of the world, or at any rate a great power. An irritated, condescending, fascinated world that seems ready to follow them. To follow us’.