

# JULIA KRISTEVA'S SIGNIFYING PROCESS IN KINNELL'S *THE BOOK OF NIGHTMARES*

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*... the primary point of ideology, that which defines its social function, is not to "give knowledge" or make an accurate "copy" of something, but to constitute, adjust, and/or transform social subjects.*

James H. Kavanagh

Semiotics is a field that is both communication and a signifying process. It is a transformative reading of "reality" that awakens a state of alertness in the readers opening gates for the generation of different meanings, for different reader-writers with the same text. Umberto Eco in his book *Tratado de Semiótica General*, states that "a general semiotic project involves a theory of codes and a theory of the production of signs" (25-26) (my translation). The first refers to semiotics as a signifying practice while the latter deals with the communication process that takes place everywhere. Semiotics as a science emphasizes the role of the sign systems, in every person and culture, for the construction of a personal and/or communal reality. This is a science that can help people be aware that many times what they consider a "normal" or "common" decision or situation is not so innocent. For, although everything around us exists independently of us addressing them a sign or not, we get to know and experience through signs. People cannot see beyond what their sign system allows them to see. As a result, the concept of an objective reality does not exist. That is just a mere illusion of this contemporary society.

However, it is necessary to have signs, if not, how can we dare try to understand the world and the life of the planet? Besides, it cannot be forgotten that the sign systems developed are the means for the construction

of meaning. And this is an ideological issue. According to Mario Zeledón and María Pérez in their book *La Historieta Crítica Latinoamericana*, "every human being, for his/her condition of a thinking being, is part of the ideology, and any chance for clarification or the simple choice of one definition and not another, makes him/her be ideological: 'the science of ideology is in itself and ideology, works as so and has to affirm itself as so'" (3) (my translation). All decisions made in life and all challenges taken represent the ideology being followed. Semiotics makes us aware that the cultural values with which we make sense of the world are a tissue of customs and agreements that have been handed down from generation to generation by the members of the culture to which we belong. But, this social constructed meanings may vary and can be radically different from culture to culture.

What is real decisive in semiotics is that it provides a unifying framework for working with different signifying practices in which all can be read including dressing codes, writing processes, body language, photography, speech, etc. This is how we can get to know that what seems natural and/or universal has been generated by the sign system that surrounds us.

The principle of any ideological discourse is the "subject" addressed and so constructed through the discourse; the interpellations (political, religious, familiar) coexist articulated in an ideological discourse of relative unity. As a "subject," every person receives –through the ideological processes– a social identity. As a result, it is impossible to resign to a personal ideology without losing the own "personality";

in other words, omitting the characteristics of the system to which one belongs (Zeledón and Pérez, 3) (my translation).

Within "ideology" there are not neutral signs. On the contrary, the sign systems help to reinforce different framings of what has to be, should be or must not be. As can be seen, signs not only reflect the "reality" of the group but also control the system of signs that construct meaning and as a result "reality." We, as the user of the signs, become subjects of the system for we do not have them under control. We simply use them instrumentally. Kinnell, in his poem "Dear Stranger Extant in Memory by the Blue Juniata," mirrors this reality of humanity when the persona of the sixth part of the poem states that she is an enemy of God for "[H]e gave [her] lust and joy and cut off [her] hands... [S]he asked why should [she] love this body [she] fears" (30). She has a body she is suppressed to use according to her will but according to her the social group. For Western civilization God gives a body too restricted to human needs and those who dare change this vision of life are not easily accepted by the "majority." Moreover in the poem "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight," Kinnell retakes the issue in a more innocent way when:

In a restaurant once, everyone  
quietly eating, you clambered up  
on my lap: to all  
the mouthfuls rising toward  
all the mouths, at the top of your voice  
you cried  
your one word, caca! caca! caca!  
and each spoonful  
stopped, a moment, in midair, in its withering  
steam.

Every person on earth needs to defecate; however, acknowledging this fact in front of others is not well accepted. Society has separated the good from the bad but, it is impossible to live without the conjunction of both. Eating in a restaurant is a social activity that demands certain behavior and manners at the table. Those that do not fulfill the requirements, like a toddler saying caca!, make the rest uneasy and uncomfortable. This is a denial of human biological needs that are never discussed in public or even acknowledged but that are necessary for a healthy life. "Each spoonful / stopped, a

moment, in midair, in its withering / steam." People could not eat when hearing the "word," this word is not proper in public places although all people know and experience what it is. There is a tendency to avoid "unpleasant" images of life and remember those that only bring a sometimes superficial state of happiness and peace. As a result, as long as we are part of a social group and signs keep on being produced and reinforced, we have to understand them. It becomes a matter of surviving in the world.

Ethnicity is one of those signs to which a meaning and a response has been assigned and which cannot change so easily and has become a term for surviving and helping others survive. The Greek terms "ethos" has a great variety of usages that depending on the intentions of the speaker and the life experience of the listeners, the meaning ascribed will be different for every person. Richard Adams, in his work "Internal and External Ethnicities," states that there are two definitions of ethnicity. According to him, the first is an "internally-defined ethnicity" and the latter is the "externally-defined" one. For him an internally defined ethnicity is a "a population whose members self-defined their collective survival by replicating a shared identity through cultural and biological self reproduction" and an externally-defined ethnicity is a human group to which certain characteristics are ascribed by an external agent.

However, if studied through semiotics we know that any sign is a construction of the ideological process in specific time and space coordinates. People believe that common sense suggests that they are unique individuals with a unified identity and ideas of their own. Through semiotics we can get to know that is the sign system of every culture the one that creates and maintains a sense of identity. The sense of "self" emerges from conventional and pre-existing conventions that we did not create. We cannot say that we are pre-determined for this or that kind of life but what we can affirm is that we are shaped by our system of signs.

Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten that there are many inconsistencies, incoherencies and gaps in life that offer a chance for social change. And most important, that the role of ideology is to suppress all this instances in the interest of the dominant groups. Either it can be felt or seen, the construction of reality is part of a struggle



between those in power and those who are not, but that would very likely accept that position.

In order to fully understand ideology as a key to try to understand ourselves it is essential to remember the two levels of signification: the denotative and the connotative. The first is seen as fundamentally representational and relatively self-contained. The latter mirrors the values which are associated to the sig. But besides these two levels of signification there is a “forgotten” third one: myth. Myth reflects the variable and culturally concepts that support the structure of a specific worldview.

The reference to myth takes us to fables and legends of gods, semi-gods and heroes that work as primordial types in a primitive view of the world. Nevertheless, for Roland Barthes, myths are the dominant ideologies of the world. In his book *Mythologies*, Barthes states that “myth is a type of speech... myth is a system of communication, that it is a message” (109). This message however, does not only refer to oral speech or written discourse but to other realms of life like publicity, photography, films, cartoons, comic strips, etc. Hence, the “message” refers to “any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual” (Barthes, 111). As stated before, if we know that any significant unit or sign belongs to a construction an ideological process then, myths become shared ways of conceptualizing a sign within a culture. How does this process occur? Who are the ones that lead the process of signification? John Guillory, in his article “Canon” (in Lentricchia and McLaughlin) states that it is obvious that “if the ones who decide are all male, or upper class, or white, then the works they judge to be good will tend to reflect their social position and their beliefs” (In Lentricchia and McLaughlin, 235). I would like to go beyond in the sense that Guillory is talking about literary works but, his quote can be ascribed to life, culture and the signifying process. Moreover, according to Barthes, one of the functions of myths is that of making normal or natural what is cultural. For him, myths naturalize the cultural. Myths control the values –cultural and historical– beliefs and behaviors of people. For example in some indigenous cultures, incest was a “normal” and accepted practice of the groups. It was see as a “natural and timeless” true reflection of the values and beliefs of the people, especially those in power, who wanted to keep their

blood "pure." There was a political purpose for the practice: power. However, when another culture conquered these groups there were others in power and then culture, history and ideology changed. The concealed power in these myths lies in that they appear to have no need to be interpreted or demystified.

As part of a myth, people become defenders of an ideology and they compare and contrast themselves in terms of others, myths reinforced by the canon, for example: beauty, suffering, joy. Being poetry a signifying practice of a time and a place, it can reflect or reject the myths culture has accepted as true. For example, in Kinnell's poem "The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible," the persona ironically states the myths in which we have fallen. The persona introduces death as an experience that has caused suffering and pain in the search of power and domination. But death is not an ignored fact any person, any class, any gender. It is only "[A] piece of flesh" that "gives off / smoke in the field" and were:

carrion,  
caput motuum  
orts,  
pelf,  
fenks,  
sordes,  
gurry dumped from hospital trashcans.  
*Lieutenant!*  
*This corpse will not stop burning!*

The opening of the poem projects what has been considered not wanted for anybody but what we will become when death steps on our life. Every person on earth sooner or later will become a corpse and the television will no longer remind him/her the questioning of:

On the television screen:  
Do you have a body that sweats?  
Sweat that has odor?  
False teeth clanging into your breakfast?  
Case of the dread?  
Headache so perpetual it may outlive you?  
Armpits sprouting hair?  
Piles so huge you don't need a chair to sit at a table?

Like Paz states: "Nobody is aware of it" –death (192). For him, as for Kinnell, everything suppresses death: "politicians, commercial advertisements, customs, cheap happiness, and the promise of everyday health offered by hospitals, drugstores and sport courts" (192-193) (my translation). He as Kinnell affirms that the world has made people believe that death is not part of life but its punishment (192). In Rilke's "Eighth Duino Elegy," the child:

With all its eyes the natural world looks out into the Open. Only our eyes are turned backward, and surround plant, animal, child like traps, as they emerge into their freedom. We know what is really out there only from the animal's gaze; for we take the very young child and force it around, so that it sees objects –not the Open, which is so deep in animals' faces. Free from death (193).

Paz states that "the child –the being in its primitive innocence– stares the Open" and we adults on the contrary never "see beyond, to the absolute." For him people are frightened and do not dare see death as what it is: "a whole that has death in it" and "the Open is the realm where the contraries reconcile and light and darkness become one" (197). Life and death complement each other, one cannot exist without the other. In ancient cultures, death was part a continuation of life and the corpses were buried with their belongings for their life would continue after this; nevertheless, it seems that this reading of the world has changed for this contemporary society and the others before. Kinnell gives his daughter Maud a present with this poem book, telling her that she belongs to life but that life is part of death when the persona of the poem says:

And in the days  
when you find yourself orphaned,  
emptied  
of all wind-singing, of light  
the pieces of cursed bread on your tongue,  
  
may there come back to you  
a voice,  
  
spectral, calling you  
*sister!*  
from everything that dies.  
(*"Under the Maud Moon,"* 8)

It is a fact that all human being suffer and that their lives will not remain as perfect stages of peace and happiness. Moreover, we all know that sooner or later death will reach our lives. But, what is ignored by many is that we are siblings of “everything that dies.” No matter what is done to look younger and good looking, death cannot “escape though the little ribs of [our] body.”

The concepts of aesthetic beauty and youth have become major signs in today’s world. Most people want to be physically beautiful and young as long as possible. However, the definition of beauty has somehow changed through the world but what has not changed is that if a person does not fit in the cultural idea of “beauty” the chances to improve a social and professional life narrow down. Television, as a massive means of communication, has brought many benefits to society but has also brought unfavorable patterns that people follow in order to try to fit in. Hence “[W]e shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed” (42). It does not matter if we finally succeed trying to change the body corporal fluids into more accepted smells, or we can buy new white and polish teeth, or we find modern and practical to temporarily annihilate our hairy inheritance. As part of a demanding group, we will never “sleep” nor achieve peace but it is a fact that we will be changed. We have to remember that no sign makes sense on its own but in relation to the world in which it exists. For there are not only physical characteristics that want to be attained but also psychological ones. These refer to actions we have taken in order to follow an ideology that may not represent what is wanted:

“That you Captain? Sure,  
I remember –I still hear you  
lecturing at me on the intercom, *Keep your guns  
up, Burnsie!*  
and then screaming, *Stop shooting, for crissake,  
Burnsie*  
*those are friendlies!* But crissake, Captain  
I’d already started, burst  
after burst, little black pajamas jumping  
and falling... and remember that pilot  
who’d bailed out over the North,  
how I shredded him down to catgut on his strings?  
one of his slant eyes, a piece  
of his smile, sail past me  
every night right after the sleeping pill...”

“It was only  
that I love the sound  
of them, I guess I just loved  
the feel of them sparkin’ off my hands...”  
 (“The Dead Shall Be Raise Incorruptible,” 41)

In *Walking Down the Stairs*, Kinnell himself states that the “person who says ‘Lieutenant! This corpse will not stop burning!’ is just some soldier on some battlefield somewhere –presumably Vietnam, since death by burning characterized that war” (109). Besides, the man that addresses the Captain is “supposed to be a conversation during a hospital visit. The Captain comes to see his tailgunner who has been put in the mental ward. [I] –Kinnell– copied down that speech nearly verbatim from what a man told me who’d been in the Korean war” (110). Killing is not what can make a person happier or better, and it is even worst if the one that kills does not really understand the significance of his/her actions. Undoubtedly, there are unresolved broodings in respect to the war and what it brought to life. According to Kinnell, this first part of the poem took form after giving a poetry reading against the war. He, James Wright and Robert Bly met a man that:

sat down and told his story. He had been the tailgunner in a plane assigned to fly over Seoul to protect the city from enemy aircraft. From time to time when he saw civilians in the streets he would fire a few bursts at them, sometimes wounding or killing them. After a number of such incidents, he was given a medical discharge. For the next fifteen years, evidently, he had remained unable to understand his behavior. As he talked, one moment he was boasting of the feeling of power the machine guns gave him as he fired at the scattering figures, and the next he was weeping with shame. So he had become the town drunk– or one of them (110).

Probably the tailgunner did not know why and for what he was fighting a war against those with “slant eyes” but, he was being loyal to his ideology. He respected authority and the canon, those who establish the myth. Killing was his job and it became his hobby for he did not understand why he “loved the sound /of them,” he only knew that he “just loved / the feel of them sparkin’ off [his] hands...” Just as those who cannot “sleep” but that will “be changed,” he shall not

achieve peace but it is a fact that he did change. The images of horror and helplessness of the people do not leave his mind and he has been sentenced to "see his smile, sail past [him] / every night right after the sleeping pill...".

Like Zeledón and Pérez state "in every society there is a dominant ideology, the ideology of the group that has the economic and political power; group that controls the means of production and the broadcasting of signifying practices. This dominant ideology is in charge of the support of the system"(5). This is what happened to the "town drunk". He fought to really for him or his interests but for those that retain power. The myth of the brave soldier in a war has been successfully exploited in all semiotic modes. Barthes, in *Mythologies*, refers to a copy of "Paris-Match" where there is a black soldier saluting the French flag, and as he states, this photograph signifies that all men, without distinction of color serve the country. But this indiscriminate soldier embodies more than that. For, as one of the characteristics of myth, it talks about everything and simply gives them a justification for its existence. As Barthes states, myth abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions. Things appear to mean something by themselves (*Mythologies*, 124).

When myths are culturally analyzed we can get to see how certain values, beliefs and attitudes are supported and others are suppressed. However, when trying to attain this task, being a product of the same culture becomes troublesome for as part of the culture we also take "things for granted," and we agree with the dominant ideology. Then, "trespassing on earth" and "exterminat[ing] one billion heathens, / heretics, Jews, Moslems, witches, mystical seekers, / black men, Asians, and Christian brothers / every one of them for his own good..." ("The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible," 42). Paul A. Bové in his article "Discourse" (in Lentricchia and McLaughlin) states that "discourse produces knowledge about humans and their society" (56); in fact, through the analysis of the discourses of different eras and cultures much information can be discovered. The writings and verbal manifestations of a certain historical period are based on its own notions of truth, power and reality. According to Bové, the aim of

discourse is "to describe the linkages between power, knowledge, institutions, intellectuals, the control of population and the modern state as these intersect in the functions of the systems of thought" (54-55). Power has been exercised by those who have grabbed economic and political control. This concept of discourse, power and myth is what Kinnell portrays in the extermination of so many humans by other humans. How can one know that exterminating a person will be good for him/her? According to whom or what do people label other people as heretics, witches or mystical seekers? Or, how can one know that exterminating "a whole continent of red men for living in unnatural community" is what they deserve? What is the difference among red, white, black, brown or yellow people? Are not all they people living on earth and striving for survival?

Alan Williamson, in "Language Against Itself: The Middle Generation of Contemporary Poets," does not ignore that Kinnell is part of the first generation of poets "to confront concentration camps and the atomic bomb, the fully revealed destructiveness of civilized man" (WDS, 171). For humanity is still exterminating:

one billion species of animals for being sub-human,  
and ready to take on the bloodthirsty creatures  
from the other planets,  
I, Christian man, groan out this testament of my  
last will.

Kinnell faces the facts of life with those of death and extermination by humanity itself. The first person of the poem represents each and everyone of the people on earth. And even though there is no redemption, as people now it today, of going to heaven or to eternal life, there is an enjoyment of life as it comes. Life is to live as content as possible with all the "reality", if there is such a thing, that we can bare. The rain, the sun, the insects, the animals, the people, we are all here to live not to kill or destroy.

For some other critics, like Donald Davie, "Galway Kinnell is a man who hungers for the spiritual, who has no special capacity for spiritual apprehensions, who has been culturally conditioned moreover to resist the very disciplines that might have opened him up to the spiritual apprehension he hungers for" (WDS, 159). It is a fact that nowadays people hunger for spirituality



and that many label themselves “seekers of truth;” however, this is not the case with Kinnell’s poetry. Could it be the problem with Davie as Kinnell himself states that he notices “that readers, especially those trained in universities, tend to look straight off for a symbolic interpretation” (WDS, 61). His poems are about life and about all what he has experienced for his poems stop “telling what once happened to this or that person, and turn to reader and try to generalize about what happens to us all” (WDS, 42). He works with life and what it entangles. Supporting this thesis, Denise Levertov declared that:

I read the whole *Book of Nightmares* to my class at our final meeting, a grand farewell, and everyone, including me, thought it magnificent. “A universe,” said one, after the last words and a long silence. It encompasses within the breadth of it both political rage and satire, and the most lyrical tenderness, and holds them together: coheres.

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