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HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

Authorship, Autobiography and Love

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For Sue Roe

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Preface

My aim in this introductory study of Hélène Cixous' work is to explore the development of her fictional and dramatic writing in the context of her theory of *écriture féminine*. Although Cixous is primarily known in the English-speaking world for her work as a feminist and literary critic,[1] this in fact constitutes only a small proportion of her œuvre. Of her books published to date,[2] thirty-six are works of fiction or drama. In choosing to focus here on her literary texts, I am hoping, therefore, to redress this imbalance. None the less, since I intend to read her fictional and dramatic writing in the light of her work on *écriture féminine*, my discussion will, necessarily, also encompass the main points of her theoretical and critical contribution.

For the purposes of this study I define Cixous' 'theory' of *écriture féminine* as an/other writing. This phrase is drawn from Cixous' own delineations. I argue that while Cixous' early fiction does not, on a first reading, appear to fulfil her criteria for an *écriture féminine* since it is concerned with the writing self, this self-exploration is the necessary precursor to the later writing which thus mirrors more completely her descriptions of *écriture féminine*.

My argument concerning the development of Cixous' literary œuvre is substantiated by her article 'From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History: Pathway of Writing'.[3] In this article, Cixous outlines her autobiography as a writer. She describes how the foreign, multilingual environment into which she was born,[4] the war in Algeria and her father's premature death from tuberculosis when she was eleven years old 'became the causes and opportunities for my writing' (p. 16). She suggests: 'my writing was born in

Algeria from a lost country of the dead father and foreign mother' (p. 16) and stresses 'foreignness, exile, war, the phantom memory of peace, mourning and pain' (p. 16) as crucial factors in her writing. Of these various influences, Cixous locates her father's death as the most important in her decision to write:[5]

> I believe that one can only begin to advance along the path of discovery . . . from mourning and in the reparation of mourning. In the beginning the gesture of writing is linked to the experience of disappearance, to the feeling of having lost the key to the world, of having been thrown outside. Of having suddenly acquired the precious sense of the rare, of the mortal. Of having urgently to regain the entrance, the breath, to keep the trace. (p. 19)

The correlation between loss and self-definition as the prerequisite for writing will form the subject of this study.

Although there is clearly a link between Cixous' autobiography and the genesis of her writing which both informs and sheds light on her work, my account will take as its focus the progression of the *written* subject as this figures in her fictional and dramatic texts. As will be discussed in detail in the Introduction below, Cixous identifies in language the oppressive structures of meaning and narration that organize our lives as well as the potential to deconstruct these procedures and rewrite them in other, non-coercive and thus liberatory ways. For Cixous, the literary text is the key domain of this venture, and she sees in the fictions of such writers as the Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector the model for alternative relations to differences. Thus, while Cixous' autobiography is clearly a major motivating element in her work, this account will focus on the textual development of Cixous' œuvre, tracing the progression from the preoccupation with self-identity in the early fiction to the increasing affirmation, in Cixous' later work, of other possibilities for meaning and relating.

In 'From the Scene of the Unconscious' Cixous draws a link between the missing and thus symbolic father and language. She explores this link through a reading of Clarice Lispector's short story 'Sunday, Before Falling Asleep'.[6] In Lispector's story, Cixous writes, the father, through his gift of the word 'ovomaltine', functions as 'a magic door' to the child protagonist that 'opens on to the other world' (p. 17). 'Ovomaltine' is:

> the mysterious thing with the foreign name that opens the path to pleasure. Before the father, in order to please him, one goes to a place

> to discover America, to say *extraordinary words*. The key to the secret words 'ovomaltine' or 'the top of the world' is in His possession. (p. 18)

This world of language, Cixous continues, is also domain of the mother, but as music, rhythm; 'm'other, my other' (p. 19) – familiar and *already* other.[7] Language is both a compensation for and a means of living – through inscribing – loss:[8] 'everything is lost except words. This is a child's experience: words are our doors to all the other worlds' (p. 19).

In 'From the Scene of the Unconscious', Cixous explores how these various antecedents – the situation and timing of her birth, language, her father's death – which inform the early fiction gave way to a mode of writing seeking to protect and safeguard life:

> perhaps knowing that we are mortal and saving each minute, consecrating it to life, is the task that animates certain writings. As for me joining the party of life is itself my political party. . . . I am on the side of those who have a drive towards redemption, protection, reanimation, reincarnation. I dream of protecting the living and the dead. For one can also kill the dead, one can bury them, erase them to infinity. (p. 20)

Writing preserves life – 'writing follows life like its shadow, extends it, hears it, engraves it' (p. 20) – while inscribing knowledge of loss and death. Cixous details her own experience of this progression. She suggests that she began writing in order to overcome her personal experience of loss: 'one writes from death towards death in life' (p. 21). She was, she explains, in 'hell', a hell formed from her own confrontation with death and the 'primitive primordial chaos' (p. 21) that accompanies the struggle for self-definition: 'hell is incomprehension, it is dreadful mystery, and also the demonic or demoniac feeling of being nothing, controlling nothing, of being in the unformed, tiny before the immense' (p. 21). Writing offered itself as the way through this hell, towards a present in which it became possible to *record* non-comprehension:

> this is what paradise is, managing to live in the present. Acceptance of the present that occurs, in its mystery, in its fragility. It means accepting our lack of mastery. . . . It is not rest, but relentlessness, the unceasing effort to be there. (p. 22)

Cixous argues that only by writing *through* her personal hell was she able to write: 'not in order to mourn the past, but to become prophet

of the present' (p. 22). Such a task, she stresses, requires constant work, since it entails celebrating the present while remembering that for many it is still a hell:

> one must not forget. . . . It is in one's interest to write in order both to feel the passing of, and not to forget that there is, hell. Writing is (should be) the act of remembering what is, in this very instant, of remembering what has never existed, remembering what could disappear, what could be forbidden, killed, scorned, remembering far off, minimal things, turtles, ants, grandmothers, the good, first and burning passion, nomadic peoples, people who are exiled little by little, flights of wild ducks. (p. 22).

It is at this point in 'From the Scene of the Unconscious' that Cixous broaches the question of the other for the writer. For, in order to remember, and inscribe the present which *includes* the sufferings of others, the writer must find ways of writing those whose experiences s/he does not or cannot share. Citing Clarice Lispector's disclosure of her difficulty comprehending, from her superior economic and social position, the plight of her character Macabea (p. 24),[9] Cixous argues that this problem has been central to her own writing: 'how to arrange oneself in order to write about the Khmers? This is a question that has come back to me under its thousand different faces for the last twenty years' (p. 24).[10]

Cixous believes her personal answer to this question has come through her more recent experience of writing for the theatre:[11]

> it's only very recently that I've begun to try out an answer. It's a matter of letting them speak, the Macabeas, the Khmers. . . . I've found something which has moreover been granted me: it is the theatre that helps me let them speak. (p. 24)

Cixous suggests the theatre offers a medium in which it is possible for writers to let go of their own language and allow space for the languages of those they are writing (p. 24). She argues that this relinquishing of the language of the self is something she achieved only gradually:

> there is a certain path of development to follow: there is the path of the self, one must develop in oneself out of oneself. In the theatre one can only work with a self that has almost evaporated, that has transformed itself into space. (p. 24)

Cixous' account of the evolution of her writing here, from the necessary exploration of her own unconscious/other to an increasing engagement with the others of culture and history,[12] as well as the crucial role played by the theatre in this process, will form the background to my study.

The writer's 'I', Cixous continues:

> is an I that has come to bring itself into accord with the world's difficulties. But it is not given, it must be formed. It seems to me that there is an entire span of time, the time of the ego, through which one must pass. One must become acquainted with this self, make a descent into the agitated secret of this self, into its tempests, one must cover this complex route with its meanderings into the chambers of the unconscious, in order to then emerge from me towards the other. The ideal: less and less of me and more and more of you. This cannot be a conscious aim. The meaning of this journey comes once it's over but the itinerary is inevitable. (p. 24)

I propose to follow the self-preoccupation of Cixous' early work, in order to show how its engagement with the various forces that create the self gives rise, in the later fiction, to a writing 'I' that is no longer dependent on the other for definition, and which is thus able to undertake the writing of 'you':

> one must reach this state of 'de-egoization', this state of without-me, of dispossession of me, that will make the *possession* of the author by the characters possible. (p. 28)

I shall argue that this 'I', which refuses the glorifications available to the self in writing and which seeks, instead, to encounter and inscribe the other, is the hallmark of an *écriture féminine*. As Cixous puts it:

> thus can one someday hope to arrive at this point of accomplishment where the self will hold fast, will consent to erase itself and to make space, to become, not the hero of the scene, but the scene itself: the site, the occasion of the other. (p. 25)

I have organized my argument as follows. In the Introduction I outline in detail Cixous' 'theory' of *écriture féminine*. This delineation then provides a framework for tracing the progression of Cixous' œuvre in terms of a feminine or other writing. Chapters 1–5 follow the development of Cixous' fiction and drama in chrono-

logical order, beginning with the early work, continuing with the main period of theatrical writing, and concluding with the most recent fictional texts. As Cixous has written over thirty works of fiction and drama, I have chosen to focus the various stages of my argument around the discussion of selected texts in order to avoid a merely superficial reading of each work.

Since my argument in this book concerns the relationship between Cixous' creative writing and her delineation of an *écriture féminine*, I have preferred to base my discussion of her texts on her own 'theoretical' and 'critical' writings, analysing her fiction and plays in the context of her descriptions of *écriture féminine* and referring the reader, where necessary, to the works of those philosophers and critics – such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida – whose ideas she both draws upon and challenges.

In addition to her delineation of an *écriture féminine*, which will be discussed in detail in the Introduction below, Cixous has pioneered a corresponding mode of feminine reading. The clearest exposition of Cixous' reading practice is given in the 'Conversations' in *Writing Differences: Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous.* [13] Here Cixous explains how Freudian theory and poststructural accounts of language (p. 144) combine with close attention to the text's composition:

> we work very close to the text, as close to the body of the text as possible; we work phonically, listening to the text, as well as graphically and typographically. (p. 148)

These theoretical and formal 'tools', she stresses, are not employed to fit the text to a predetermined 'grid' (p. 147), but are used to hear the text's specific meanings:

> we aren't looking for the author as much as what made the authors take the particular path they took, write what they wrote. We're looking for the secret of creation, the same process of creation each one of us is constantly involved with in the process of our lives. (p. 148)

The theoretical and critical aids adopted are suggested by the text itself, and Cixous underlines the need for a variety of approaches if we are to apprehend all its complex meanings and operations. This plurality of approaches entails a number of perspectives, including a theoretical overview and the careful reading of the words on the page (p. 148).

As will be discussed in the Introduction, for Cixous the literary text presents a space in which diversity can disturb and challenge the desire for unicity and control. Cixous' own texts are sensitive to the multifarious possibilities of their meanings, and seek to reinscribe this multiplicity in ways which inevitably frustrate the reader's longing for coherence and self-substantiation. My reading of Cixous endeavours to follow this feminine mode, employing contemporary literary theory, Cixous' own insights into the genesis of her work, and a detailed and variform examination of the texts' composition. Since my aim is to explore Cixous' fiction and theatrical writing in the light of her work on *écriture féminine*, it appears vital to adopt a reading position that will remain open to the processes and opportunities for meanings within the texts, rather than seek to impose any pre-established conclusion. At the same time, to avoid a purely descriptive summary of my reading, it seems important to have an at least provisional schema as a guide: hence my decision to follow the line of development suggested by Cixous' article. The pitfalls of adopting Cixous' own reading practice and account of her writing – namely, that such an approach prevents the critic from furnishing other, negative interpretations – are hopefully circumvented by the inherently plural and open nature of Cixous' descriptions.

Introduction

In *The Newly Born Woman*,[1] Cixous warns of the dangers in attempting to 'theorize' *écriture féminine*, a process, she argues, that will inevitably reduce, distort or obliterate its essential features:

> at the present time, *defining* a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be *theorized*, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist. (p. 92)

The importance of feminine writing for Cixous is precisely its capacity to circumvent the binary structures embedded in our current, 'masculine' system of thinking, whereby whatever is designated as different or other is appropriated, devalued, excluded.[2] Cixous believes a feminine writing will challenge the present modes of perception and representation, and thus herald into being a new schema to replace the existing hegemony.

Before turning to Cixous' descriptions of *écriture féminine*, it is important to understand her concept of masculine and feminine and to examine in more detail her view of writing's revolutionary potential.

The economies of masculine and feminine

Cixous' notion of masculine and feminine is most easily explained with reference to Freud's theory of castration.[3] In *The Newly Born*

Woman, Cixous argues that Freud's reliance on his own view of sexual identity is reductive, since it derives from the very concept of biological 'destiny' that has hamstrung men as well as women throughout history.[4] Cixous suggests that Freudian psychoanalysis is based on :

> the formidable thesis of a 'natural', anatomical determination of sexual difference–opposition. On that basis . . . [it] implicitly back[s] phallocentrism's position of strength. (p. 81)

Both sexes, Cixous stresses, 'are caught up in a web of age-old cultural determinations that are almost unanalyzable in their complexity' (p. 83). She refutes the 'voyeur's theory' (p. 82) adopted by Freud as 'a story made to order for male privilege' (p. 81), insisting that sexual difference cannot be delineated 'simply by the fantasized relation to anatomy' (p. 82). Cixous does not, however, believe that this means the Freudian model should be abandoned. She argues that it provides a helpful account of the way sexual difference is organized in response to patriarchal 'law', and hence an opportunity to understand and challenge its tenets.[5] Thus, while she criticizes Freudian psychoanalysis for its 'mirror economy' (p. 94) and complicitous privileging of man's narcissistic need to love *him*self, she believes its theories can be usefully adopted. Cixous suggests that Freud's descriptions offer an instructive insight into the way our innate bisexuality is structured according to a single, masculine libido.[6] She condemns his insistence on and allegiance to castration, which she sees as illustrative of his reverence for a 'glorious phallic monosexuality' (p. 85), and concludes there is 'no *woman's* reason' (p. 85) to comply with its system of repressions.

It must be noted that Cixous' reading of Freud in *The Newly Born Woman* depends to some extent on a simplification of his position since it ignores both the contradictions in his work and his investigations into 'natural' and constructed sexual identity.[7] Cixous' messianic reading should be viewed in the context of the radical and militant debates for women's liberation taking place in France in the early 1970s (*The Newly Born Woman* was written in 1973).

Cixous describes what she sees as the two possible responses to patriarchal law in terms of gender 'economies'.[8] In her essay 'Extreme Fidelity',[9] she illustrates her description with reference to the legend of the quest for the Holy Grail and the story of the Fall in Genesis. She argues that when Perceval, the key protagonist in the Arthurian legend, arrives at the court of the Fisher King he does not,