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# I Poetry and Politics: Cixous and her Critics

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Percy Shelley, 'A Defense of Poetry' [1821] (1977), p. 542

I would lie if I said that I am a political woman, not at all. In fact, I have to assemble the two words, political and poetic. Not to lie to you, I must confess that I put the accent on the poetic. I do it so that the political does not repress, because the political is something cruel and hard and so rigorously real that sometimes I feel like consoling myself by crying and shedding poetic tears.

Hélène Cixous, 'An Exchange with Hélène Cixous',  
in Conley (1984)

Such provocative confessions from Cixous have tended to alienate many feminist critics, who dismiss her as something of a pampered middle-class dilettante who irresponsibly side-steps the real and hard political questions. Indeed, it might appear here that Cixous is retreating into the comfort zone of the poetic and that her response to the question of the political is irresponsible. In *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) Toril Moi finds Cixous's position 'disturbing' (124) and argues that 'the distance posited here between the political and the poetic is surely one that feminist criticism has consistently sought to undo' (123–4). What Moi means by this is that feminist criticism has on the whole attempted to politicize the poetic, to bring the aesthetic domain under political scrutiny, to analyse the operation of power

at every level of representation. No text is innocent of an investment in power and thus no text is devoid of political significance. It seems, at first glance at least, that Cixous is claiming for the poetic a type of political innocence and that her position is wilfully naïve and at odds with a broader feminist project of uncovering and dissecting the operation of patriarchal power. By avoiding the political it appears that Cixous is taking up an apolitical stance. Such a stance, it might be argued, actually reinforces the problematic distinction between the poetic as the domain of femininity and the political as the domain of masculinity.

And yet if we read her more carefully we find that Cixous is in fact making a statement about the operation of power. 'The political' is understood as repressive, and not simply that which guarantees liberation, and moreover, 'the poetic' is framed as that which can resist the repressive effects of 'the political'. What does Cixous mean by this? The relationship between the political and the poetic is central to Cixous's writing and her reception within feminist circles. I shall spend most of this chapter teasing out the distinctions between the two realms and indeed asking whether or not a separation between the poetic and the political is useful or if such a separation tends to reduce our understanding of the complexity of both Cixous's work and larger cultural forces.

In order to begin to make sense of Cixous's understanding of 'the political' it is worth reading her within the context of the history of ideas from which her position emerges. It is important to recall that a radical shift in consciousness among French intellectuals intensified around the time of the failed revolution of May 1968. Faced with the failure of Marxism to capture the imagination of the people, the Left had a crisis of faith in many of the political and philosophical tenets they had invested in. A radical disenchantment with the political and theoretical orthodoxy of socialism led to a critical re-evaluation of the founding concepts of the Left. In particular, the concept of the rational Cartesian subject came under intense scrutiny by many who argued that philosophical and political structures were founded upon the sovereignty of the rational subject. In effect, this critical re-evaluation of the Cartesian subject represented a crisis of faith in reason as a guiding political tool.<sup>1</sup> A growing avant-garde interest in psychoanalysis also contributed to this crisis. During the events of May a group of post-surrealist activists called the Situationists wrote slogans on

the walls of the besieged city of Paris affirming the unconscious and the power of individual desire. The high modernist critique of the rational subject which had been expressed since the early decades of the century influenced the Situationists.

While the events of May 1968 were significant and rippled across the world in the form of student protests and new socio-political organizations, it would be naïve to argue that this particular moment in history was responsible for a radical critique of reason. Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics and Freud's critique of self-presence certainly paved the way for a general disruption, a decentring and putting into question of the founding dichotomies which structured Western thought.

The faith the Left had placed in the economic science of Marxism and its Hegelianism had been largely predicated upon the concept of a rational subject operating within the rational political domain. When the concept of rationality became unveiled as a repressive fiction, and not as a self-evident truth, then so too did the idea of the rational political subject. The whole idea of 'the political' came under scrutiny as a repressive fiction which inevitably leads us to opposition, violence, conflict. Gradually, then, an interest in socio-economic oppression was replaced (or at least enhanced) by an interest in sexual repression and the role the unconscious plays in political life. To put it very simplistically for our purposes here, psychic repression was thought to lead to political oppression: the unconscious operation of power was tied to sexuality. For many feminists who participated in the events of May 1968 this had a particular relevance as they were dismayed to discover that their male comrades were as patriarchal as the bourgeois enemy.<sup>2</sup> Cixous was among these women who realized that the rational (political) subject was masculine.

This briefly sketched history is merely an introduction to a more complex context which can help us understand why it is that Cixous can make such controversial statements about the repressive nature of the political. For Cixous it is perhaps more important to 'put the accent on the poetic', for 'the poetic' is precisely that which rationality attempts to repress and it is the very repression of 'the poetic' which is thought to lead to violence. The poetic is the domain of excess, the unconscious, the body, sexuality, creativity, the feminine, all that the political attempts to limit and contain through the application of 'hard' and 'cruel' reason. To align

oneself with the poetic is, then, for Cixous, to commit oneself to working against the repressive forces which bring about political oppression. It is a rather round-about way of doing things but makes perfect sense once we recognize that the very concept of the rational political subject is understood to be an oppressive fiction. As Ruth Robbins puts it in *Literary Feminisms* (2000), materialist feminists argue that Cixous fails to provide us with any political solutions to the problems she describes: 'Marxist/Socialist feminisms might object to the idealism and impracticality of a political agenda based on language without action. Cixous's response to this kind of criticism is to seek a rewriting of the terms of politics and activism' (174).

While we might not want to adopt Cixous's response to the cruelty of the political and shed poetic tears, we are at least closer to an understanding of where she is 'coming' from when she confesses to what appears at first glance to be an apolitical and irresponsible position. For Moi though, Cixous remains out of touch with pressing political realities and she invokes Catherine Clement in order to make this clearer. In *The Newly Born Woman* (Cixous and Clement 1991), Clement observes that for her Cixous's 'sentences are devoid of reality', that Cixous's 'description is one where I don't recognize any of the things I think in political terms', and that the subjects Cixous describes are 'not subjects existing in reality' (124). Cixous is simply too poetic and not political enough. Behind these judgements, though, there are several assumptions which need to be examined further. First, we can argue that there is what we might term a realist (and thus pre-modernist) assumption that writing should offer a transparent reflection of social reality. In this sense Clement might be asking of Cixous that she assume the didactic genre of a political realist such as Dickens or Godwin and not the mythic poetic genre of a high modernist such as H.D. or Gertrude Stein, to use some very loose examples. My point here is that there might be an expectation of Cixous's work which fails to account for a difference in genre and writing and that an inappropriate judgement has been made of her work because of this. Secondly, it is assumed that by failing to represent 'reality' Cixous fails to offer political insight and solutions.

Behind this judgement lies an assumption about the correct form for writing or communicating about feminism. On one level we might argue that an expectation that a feminist text conform to

a realist/political agenda is limiting. One of the issues at stake in the debate about the value of Cixous's work and the whole distinction between the political and the poetic which this debate so often pivots on, is the very nature of feminist criticism and feminist writing. What counts as useful feminist writing and criticism? Where does our assumption about what is and is not useful come from? What is the purpose of feminist writing and criticism? Where does that concept of purposeful writing come from? These are philosophical and political questions and they will remain with us throughout our examination of Cixous's writing about sexual difference. For now though it is worth continuing to think through the whole question of the political, especially in its impact on our expectations of what a text should and should not be communicating.

In some respects, the accusation that Cixous is apolitical can be compared to the criticisms which have been directed at the work of Derrida, a philosopher with whom, as we shall see, she has many intellectual affinities. In *Debating Derrida* (1995) Niall Lucy makes the provocative point that directing many of the criticisms of deconstruction work is a concept of the 'political imperative' (74). By this Lucy means that within the humanities, texts are now made accountable to particular political agendas. Lucy is careful to point out that it would be a mistake to argue that there was ever a moment when humanities pedagogy was not innocent of politics. Rather, it is now the case that pedagogic politics are more sophisticated, more identifiable and have various critical and political traditions and methodologies. Questions about the way a text represents class, race and gender, for example, have emerged as important pedagogic issues within the humanities, and for very sound reasons too. Unlike Harold Bloom's argument in *The Western Canon* (1994), which decries the corruption of the humanities by 'academic pseudo-Marxists, mock French philosophers, and multicultural opponents of all intellectual standards whatsoever' (439), Lucy is not expressing a nostalgia for a mythic past when everybody simply appreciated Great Works of Literature. Rather his point is that we need to continually interrogate the political grounds upon which we make evaluations about the worth of various texts. In other words, it is important to continue a self-reflexive critical practice which is able to question the grounds of its own political and theoretical base in order to ward off

prescriptive reading. By prescriptive readings I mean a type of criticism which prescribes what is and is not appropriate according to a more or less fixed political idea of what counts as useful. Such readings can, at the worst, ask of a poetic text the same questions it would put to a text produced in parliament. To put it another way, to criticize Cixous for failing to offer clear, pragmatic strategies for overcoming patriarchal oppression is almost to accuse a poet of not being a politician. However, it is not just a question of genre.

Perhaps all this can be made clearer by thinking of some of the pedagogic problems which feminist criticism encountered in the seventies and eighties, for this will lead us back into a discussion of Cixous and the whole distinction between the political and the poetic. In 'Pedagogies of the Feminine' (1999), Charlotte Brunson argues that a feature of some feminist discourse of this era was an assumption that the pedagogic aim of feminist analysis was to transform various aspects of feminine identity into a feminist identity. 'Feminist identity was, in some ways, understood as an identity for women which transcended – and by implication, put an end to – traditional femininity' (1999: 359). This led, argues Brunson, to a dismissal of feminine desire as inauthentic. A recruitist pedagogy emerged which sought to transform ordinary, feminine women into feminists. The drawback of such a position is that it fails to take into account the resistant power of femininity while also remaining invested in reproducing what is often a singular and rather prescriptive feminist identity. In this context, texts were judged according to whether or not they represented the preferred aspects of feminist identity.

With this in mind it is possible to argue that for Moi and Clements (and many others) the value of Cixous's work hinges on whether or not she has represented empowering images of feminist identity, or offered useful strategies for the formation of a feminist identity. Moi argues that there is a libertarian individualism running throughout her work which fails to take into account the complex political realities women face. Commenting on Verena Andermatt Conley's (rather florid) description of Cixous's lecturers at the University of Paris at Vincennes, at which Cixous wore an ermine coat, Moi writes: 'Ermine as emancipation: it is odd that the women of the Third World have been so ludicrously slow to take up Cixous's sartorial strategy' (1985: 126). Here wearing an ermine

coat comes to signify a lack of political consciousness, a self-interested aestheticism, an indulgent sensuality, and a failure to provide useful strategies for forming feminist identities. And that, in a nutshell, is the core of the problem of Cixous's investment in the poetic: it is simply too feminine. It is now appropriate that we turn to an appreciation of Cixous's intellectual heritage in order to more fully explore how the poetic and the feminine function in her work. As we have seen they are not straightforward categories and they will become further complicated once we recognize the range of inter-textual sources she draws upon in her writing. I shall return to the subject of Cixous's critical relationship to feminism in the section 'Writing the body: *écriture féminine*', but for now it is worth providing her with a more comprehensive intellectual heritage.

### Setting the scene

Cixous's intellectual heritage is very broad and she has often described herself as a 'thief' who poaches ideas. As she writes, in 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays': 'To fly/steal is woman's gesture, to steal into language to make it fly. . . . I have always practiced flight/theft, and as a thief/who-flies, I got away, flew away, moved away from lands and seas (I never crawled, burrowed, dug, trudged; but I swam a lot). And as a thief, for a long time, I inhabited Jean Genet' (Cixous and Clement 1991: 96, 99). (The novelist Jean Genet is one of the writers, Cixous argues, who offers a feminine textuality.) Stealing and re-creating language is a woman's gesture because language has so often been the property of men. While any text is woven with references to broader ideas, because Cixous's writing moves beyond a traditional academic model, her references and influences can be hard to trace at times. In terms of her literary influences the following are the more important, all of whom for Cixous display a certain femininity in their writing, or an awareness of the fluidity of subjectivity. Among her influences are, along with Jean Genet, the German dramatist Heinrich von Kleist, Shakespeare, Kafka, Clarice Lispector, James Joyce, Poe and Hoffman. Her relationship to these writers is complex and she at times works with them to show how they engage in the process of feminine writing or how they confront a

limit and struggle against the feminine. In the lengthy poetic essay 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', for example, Cixous refers to Derrida, Mallarmé, the story of Sleeping Beauty, Pygmalion, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Freud, Nietzsche, the myth of Medusa, Euripides, Plutarch, Virgil, William Blake, Hegel, Bataille, Ernest Jones, the Swiss historian of 'gynocracy' J. J. Bachofen, Jean Genet, Ovid, Valéry, Kleist, Hoffman, Shakespeare, Kafka and Engels. With regard to her philosophical heritage Derrida is perhaps the philosopher she works with most closely but her work is also influenced by Nietzsche. Cixous also challenges some of the central assumptions behind Freudian psychoanalysis, stealing some of Lacan's concepts; and her critique of Hegel is important to her attempt to rethink the antithetical relationship between self and other.

More broadly, Cixous shares many intellectual affinities with a group of post-structuralist feminist theorists who have been influenced by the work of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. I deliberately avoid placing Cixous as a 'French feminist' because such a move risks collapsing national identity with philosophical and political positions. Intellectual movements are not restricted by parochial borders. Moreover, there are many feminist theorists in America and Australia whose theoretical and political positions are aligned with Cixous just as there are many feminist theorists in France who are intellectually aligned with English-speaking feminists. Too often Cixous has been lumped together with Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray as though this powerful triad represents the essence of French feminist thought. While the anti-representationalism of all theorists has many overlaps, this has more to do with a shared intellectual tradition than with a shared or united feminist politics. Instead of thinking of Cixous as a 'French feminist' then, I am approaching her here as a post-structuralist feminist of difference. An important distinction to keep in mind is that between the different philosophical traditions which inform various feminist paradigms: in the case of Cixous and feminist theorists of difference they often draw upon a *continental* tradition of speculative philosophy, while for materialist feminists it is an Anglo-American tradition of *analytic* philosophy which often informs their work.

Post-structuralist feminist theorists of difference argue that sexual difference is an effect of representation and, as such,

capable of being subverted and remade. Some prominent English-speaking theorists within this group include Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Moira Gatens, Jane Gallop, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti and Drucilla Cornell. In contrast to egalitarian feminisms which seek justice for women through the achievement of equal rights in the political domain, difference feminism argues that the achievement of equal rights remains caught up within phallogocentric representational systems. In this context, equality depends upon the erasure of the specificity of female difference and the consumption of women into masculine models of power. Instead, difference feminism argues that it is vital that we develop autonomous definitions of woman and femininity for it is only then that the phallogocentric dialectic of man/not-man, self/other can be challenged. To this end, difference feminism is committed to an exploration of the aesthetics of femininity and to the creation of new ways of thinking through sexual difference. This is a radical project, one which challenges the very foundations of Western metaphysics, which is thought to rest upon an unacknowledged debt to the fecund materiality of the female body.

In this context the feminine comes to stand as Otherness and alterity. As Moira Gatens puts it in *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (1991):

Otherness, or alterity, is here linked positively to the issue of sexual difference. However, the aim is not the simple reversal of the hierarchy between man and woman, masculine and feminine . . . but rather involves challenging and unsettling the coherence of the opposition itself. This aim is achieved by showing the ways in which woman, the feminine and female sexuality exceed the complementary role they have been assigned in the oppositions man/woman, masculine/feminine, phallic sexuality/castrated sexuality. (113)

Gatens's point is important, for often Cixous and other theorists of sexual difference are accused of privileging the female body, of merely re-ordering a phallogocentric binary so that the feminine is valorized over the masculine. As Gatens makes clear, it is the unsettling of the binary itself which is the aim of such theorists.

To summarize, the main philosophical and political insights of a post-structural feminism of difference are as follows:

1. The Western representational system is governed by a phallogocentric libidinal economy.
2. Inherent within this system is a hierarchical *Cartesian dichotomy* which privileges mind and masculinity over body and femininity.
3. Within this representational economy (sexual) *difference* is represented as (sexual) *opposition*.
4. Phallogocentrism excludes and colonizes (feminine sexual) difference as *Other*.
5. It follows that feminine sexual difference has no real autonomy but rather is submerged into a masculine *economy of the Same*.
6. The *feminine* as the corporeal or the body offers a libidinal economy which exceeds the logics of this (Hegelian) opposition.
7. It is vital that a *feminine representational economy* is articulated so that the repression of the body is undone.

The project of post-structuralist feminists of difference is a radical and far-ranging one, for they seek to rewrite the very grounds of representation in order to create a more ethical (feminine) culture.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, in *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference* (1993c) Irigaray has called for the radical transformation of a wide range of disciplines and knowledge in order to undo the violence associated with a phallogocentric repression of the (feminine) body. Likewise, in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Grosz has argued that phallogocentric representational systems are disembodied: Western concepts of space and time, for example, are argued to be isomorphic reflections of a disembodied masculinity – her goal is to en flesh such systems so that they represent a more fluid corporeality. All in all, it is about challenging the denial of the body within Western culture through a detailed rewriting of the relationship between representation and the body. However, in order to do this without falling prey to the very Hegelian logic of opposition in which *A* exists because of its relation to not-*A*, it is necessary to move beyond the logics of sameness so that not-*A* (as feminine difference, for example) is able to be represented without being dependent on a negative relationship to *A*. In order to make this rather complex logic clearer, and in order, too, to investigate Cixous's relationship to one of her more important philosophers, it is necessary to consider the work of Derrida.

## Derrida

Insofar as philosophy is concerned, if I refer myself especially to Derrida, it is because he, of course, works on excess. How to exceed, how not to exit from, how to go out of, and exceed without forgetting or retracting.

Hélène Cixous, 'An Exchange with Hélène Cixous', in Conley (1984: 150)

One of the best known of Cixous's contributions to a post-structural analysis of difference is the set of binary oppositions she offers in 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays'.

Where is she?

Activity/Passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Father/Mother

Head/Heart

Intelligible/Palpable

Logos/Pathos

Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.

Matter, concave, ground – where steps are taken, holding- and dumping-ground.

Man

Woman

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized. If we read or speak, the same thread or double braid is leading us throughout literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflection.

Thought has always worked through opposition,

Speaking/Writing

Parole/Ecriture

High/Low

Through dual, hierarchical oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Everywhere (where) ordering intervenes, where a law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions (dual, irreconcilable; or sublatale,

dialectical). And all these pairs of oppositions are couples. Does that mean something? Is the fact that Logocentrism subjects thought – all concepts, codes and values – to a binary system, related to ‘the’ couple, man/woman? (Cixous and Clement 1991: 63–4)

Here Cixous is clearly indebted to a deconstructive critique of Western metaphysics as a system of oppositions. For Cixous and for post-structuralist feminists of difference, the system of oppositions is also, and importantly, gendered. Within this system an autonomous representation of woman or femininity does not have a place. Rather, the feminine is that which exceeds being totally captured by logic.

A rigorous deconstructive attention to the underside of representation, the repressed materiality of writing, has provided feminism with a method for destabilizing phallogocentric discourses. For Derrida, Western metaphysics is logocentric, or based on the purity of a singular self-present truth as word or Logos. Within this system, meaning is presented as unmediated, uncontaminated, immediate, given. However, as Derrida shows, the presence of reason, truth and meaning depends upon a series of exclusions. To use our example, *A* only comes into being through the exclusion of not-*A*. *A* renders its negative invisible, as no-thing. Another way of understanding this is to think of identity as something which only comes into being through an unacknowledged debt to difference. It is this careful attention to the dichotomous logics of exclusion which can be said to inform a deconstructive ethics of reading. The textual remains of this exclusion, the traces, excesses, supplements of the disavowed debt to difference (or not-*A*), are the focus of deconstructive readings. Like Lacan, Derrida acknowledges that it is impossible to escape the logics of the text of identity and difference, self and other, *A* and not-*A*, to arrive at a point outside representation – rather, deconstruction subverts from within by calling attention to the fragile logic of identity. However, deconstruction is not simply a negative practice which seeks to undo or tear down truth or meaning through a nagging attention to the complex hypocrisies which support truth or identity. Rather, recognizing that meaning is continually in the process of becoming, that identity is not fixed, means that by calling attention to the exclusions which enable identity to take up a position of truth or meaning,

identity is opened up to a more ethical, positive relationship with difference.

For Derrida, and for Cixous as we shall later see, writing has a particular significance. Writing, in the sense that Derrida understands it, is not simply words written on a page. In *Of Grammatology* (1979) Derrida argues that, with the Western philosophical tradition since Plato, truth has always been associated with the spoken word while writing has been associated with the falsification, or corruption, of truth or the spoken word. The traditional Platonic dislike of representation as an invitation to deceit is traced through Western philosophy as a guiding narrative. Within this tradition the spoken word, or Logos, is assumed to communicate a direct, self-present truth while writing or representation, on the other hand, is understood to be a corrupt copy of the truth. Writing stands in for the spoken word, or Logos. Arguing that Western metaphysics is structured around this division, Derrida goes on to argue that the division has its foundation in the privileging of presence over absence. Logocentrism is thus a system which assumes that presence is the foundation of truth and identity while absence represents a fall from truth, a corruption, a lack. In other words, Western metaphysics is structured by a dichotomous hierarchical logic which attempts to order meaning by privileging (or bringing into presence) one side of the binary. Thus a series of binaries such as man/woman, nature/culture, mind/body will work to assert the first term as the property of truth or Logos and the second term as a defective copy of the first, as incomplete. It is in this way that woman, for example, comes to signify Adam's spare rib, a corrupt version of a perfect model – man. As Derrida puts it in 'Limited Inc.' (1988):

All metaphysicians have proceeded thus, from Plato to Rousseau, from Descartes to Husserl: good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation. etc. This is not just one metaphysical gesture among others; it is the metaphysical exigency, the most constant, profound, and potent procedure. (236)

Writing, however, resists and troubles this calling into presence of truth (as the good, the positive, the pure, the simple etc.) because writing, being a system which is founded on absence,

continually defers the arrival of presence. Deconstruction attempts to show that the arrival of self-present truth in writing is achieved only by placing a limit on the process of signification. For example, the statement 'man is rational' is a self-present truth only because it denies otherwise, or closes off the ability of 'man' to signify something else (and irrationality is only one possible other signification). However, the statement 'man is rational' occurs within writing, or is connected to a broader signifying context which exceeds the self-present logic of the truth of the statement. This signifying context is potentially limitless such that an infinity of different meanings might come into play within the truth statement. For example, what is meant by 'man', what is meant by 'rational'? There are many different sociological, biological, historical, psychological, political definitions of man just as there are many definitions of 'rational'. Each attempt to define the truth of 'man' or 'rational' is itself made within a potentially limitless signifying system so that in effect the truth of the statement 'man is rational' leaks into a vast and complex chain of signifiers, like an infinite Chinese box.

Of course, one would not necessarily want to spend one's entire life deconstructing 'man is rational' and there are moments when, for pragmatic or political or ethical reasons, an end to signification is attempted. But Derrida is careful to point out that any attempt to arrive at the truth is provisional. Why a text calls for a limit to meaning is both arbitrary (in the sense that meaning can never be arrived at) and also invested with political significance.

It is this understanding of signification as a potentially endless process which informs Cixous's assertions that the female body and unconscious is the source of an infinite writing, a writing that is capable of exceeding the logics of the limit, the logic of a phallogocentrism which seeks to limit the female body within an order of signification that places the feminine below the masculine.

### Lacan

Given Cixous's engagement with psychoanalysis, in particular her use of the term *jouissance*, it is worth discussing Lacan briefly. Lacan argues that sexual identity is caught up in a relationship between the Self and the Other. Within the Symbolic Order the

Other comes to function as the source of truth about the subject or Self, but this certainty or truth is an illusionary effect, a misrecognition of the power of the Phallus. The search for meaning or certainty within the Symbolic Order, or the realm of representation, is always thwarted by the Other's absence: the truth of the Other is spectral, haunted by absence. The subject moves toward meaning within language but only ever arrives at meaning through the repression of the unthought, the unsaid. Yet this repression is never complete or total for the repressed continually leaks through language, subverting meaning, disrupting identity.

It is in this context that Lacan's concept of *jouissance* is important.<sup>4</sup> *Jouissance* is a moment of libidinal intensity which erupts into the Symbolic from the Imaginary, transgressing the Law of the Father. Associated with the pre-oedipal body of the Imaginary and thus the domain of the mother and the feminine, *jouissance* is not just a physical experience, it is also the representation of that experience. On a literary level, it is Antoine Artaud's screams in his Theatre of Cruelty, James Joyce's narrative disruptions, the experiments of the avant-garde, those moments of excess within language when meaning slides into non-meaning, when thought is opened up to the unthought. *Jouissance*, or the explosion of sexual energy, is a revolutionary moment capable of rupturing the coherence of the Symbolic. In particular, Lacan's suggestion that there is a 'jouissance of the body which is . . . beyond the phallus' (1982: 145) has been taken up by feminists such as Cixous who are interested in the possibilities of a feminine libidinality which is capable of transgressing and subverting the Law of the Father and reinscribing sexual identity in non-phallic terms.

For Lacan, feminine *jouissance* is supplementary, it is the residue, the remainder, that which is left over from the phallic dialectic woman is subjected to. She is the Other of the (phallic) Other. However, such a position tends to mystify femininity as primordial, something which is pre-discursive, outside the Law. In such a way, the feminine comes to represent the impossible, the unthought. For Lacan, however, all of this is caught up in a paradox: 'How to return, other than by means of a special discourse, to a pre-discursive reality?' (1975: 33). For Cixous, that special discourse is *écriture féminine*, or writing in the feminine, writing feminine *jouissance*. Acutely aware of the paradoxical relationship between language and the feminine, Cixous none the less moves

her writing toward an unfolding of the feminine. By refusing the psychoanalytic myths of female sexuality as the unknowable 'dark continent', the great lack, Cixous affirms the positive specificity of feminine desire.

### Writing the body: *écriture féminine*

This is how I would define a feminine textual body: as a female libidinal economy, a regime, energies, a system of spending not necessarily carved out by culture. A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there is no closure. . . . There's *tactility* in the feminine text, there's touch, and this touch passes through the ear. Writing in the feminine is passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the mother, passing on what is most archaic.

Hélène Cixous (1981: 53–4)

In the first section of this chapter we discussed some of the issues surrounding the critical reception of Cixous's work among feminists and argued that most of the debates centred around whether or not she was perceived to be political. It is now time to turn our attention to these debates again and to discuss the spectre of biological essentialism which has also played a central role in the debates around her work. One way of reading the above quotation from Cixous would be to understand *écriture féminine* as an essentialist practice which relies upon a type of biologism. If *écriture féminine* is about recuperating the lost voice of the archaic mother then surely, suggest many of Cixous's critics, this is a form of mystical biological essentialism. Pamela McCollum, for example, suggests that the stress on the mother's voice is a 'textually fervent biological mysticism' (1985: 131). Haven't we had enough of mystifying the female body as Other – isn't this a regressive move?

Biological essentialism is basically the idea that biology determines being – for example, that one is born and not made a woman. Feminists have remained wary of such essentialism because it has provided patriarchy with an excuse for framing women as the weaker, more febrile sex. As the Editorial Collective's *Questions Féministes* put it, the biological is '*an ideology which rationalizes the political*' (1980: 227). For example, a scientifically sanctioned form of biological essentialism enabled

educationalists in the nineteenth century to argue that women should not be admitted to universities because their wombs would atrophy in direct proportion to the stimulation of their brains. Ideological bias masquerades as a neutral, impartial biological truth. Indeed, many feminists argue that biological essentialism is the cornerstone of patriarchal oppression. By invoking a specifically feminine language and writing practice, feminist critics understand Cixous to be merely playing the oppressor's game, that is, simply reinforcing the idea that women are other and that the otherness of women is located in their sexual or biological difference from men. While philosophers such as Gatens might defend Cixous's position and argue that the valorization of the (m)other is a strategic move in the deconstruction of phallogentrism, many others remain unconvinced. It is time to consider these other voices.

Much of the criticism directed against Cixous is caught up in the assumption that she is an essentialist, that the whole issue of sexual difference which preoccupies her work is in fact a rather glamorous form of biological essentialism. One of the first and most unreserved critiques of Cixous came from the *Questions Féministes* of the Editorial Collective, who argued that the assumption that women are radically different from men and must therefore invent a new language of the body in order to undo the oppressive effects of phallogentric representation is romantic and regressive. 'We are only playing the oppressor's game if we deprive ourselves of knowledge and conceptual tools because he has used them before us. . . . When we claim that we are different, and outsiders in the world of men, we are only parroting them' (1981: 221). The Collective also questions the idea that 'women's language is closer to the body' and that such a language of the body is inherently subversive (219). They point out that there is no direct 'natural' relation to the body for we are all social beings and so it follows that our relationship to our bodies is mediated through a plethora of cultural texts. By invoking a timeless, natural and even mystical sense of the feminine as a space which exists outside the confines of patriarchal culture, feminists who celebrate the subversive energies of *écriture féminine* are not only indulging in a futile celebration of the essentialist myths which have been used to prohibit women from gaining power within a male-dominated culture, but they are also returning to the 'enemy an effective weapon' (ibid.). 'There is no essence. There is no

woman, no femininity, no eternal feminine', writes the Collective, only a complex social group which has experienced systematic oppression over a period of time (1981: 230). What is needed is a detailed socio-historical analysis of women's oppression, not a whimsical celebration of the subversive feminine. As socialists, they find Cixous's position a dangerous impediment to the more pragmatic task of transforming the inequitable social structures that so deform women's lives.

Most of the criticisms directed against Cixous rest upon what is perceived to be the essentialism of *écriture féminine*. For example, the literary critic Mary Jacobus (1986) has dismissed *écriture féminine* as an essentialist practice. To argue that there exists a specifically feminine textuality which directly expresses a subversive feminine sexuality is problematic on two counts. First, many of the texts which Cixous draws upon for her definition of a feminine textuality are written by a male avant-garde. Secondly, the idea that a feminine textuality offers a direct relationship to feminine sexuality ignores the powerful effects of complex socio-historical narratives which women embody.

The Marxist feminist Teresa Ebert writes that *écriture féminine* 'risks re-essentialising the feminine and constructing a new identity anchored in a reified notion of the body and language' (1996: 166). Elsewhere Alice Jardine (1985: 62–3) suggests that *écriture féminine* is limiting for feminism because by privileging a particular style as more authentically connected to femininity, women writers and feminist theoreticians who do not write in the feminine are open to being rejected on the grounds that they think and write within a phallogentric framework. The irony here is that rather than opening up new creative ways of expressing a repressed female body, *écriture féminine* restricts the expression of the female body within the constraints of what is read by Jardine and others as a formulaic and normative style. In other words, the liberation of the female body is limited to a particular style of avant-garde writing. The risk here is that an experimental disruption of generic constraints and linear logic can congeal into a new norm, a new orthodox definition of the feminine. As Janet Wolff suggests, '[i]t is likely that any new definition of "femininity" would equally provide the basis for control and self-surveillance' (1990: 127).

As some of the critics above have noted, Cixous's understanding of femininity is hardly new. For Rita Felski, 'The celebration of

“feminine” desire as plural, spontaneous, chaotic, and mysteriously “other” itself reiterates and is easily assimilated into a long-standing cultural symbolization of woman in Western society’ (1989: 37). There is nothing subversive or oppositional about Cixous’s ‘femininity’ – rather than going against the grain of patriarchal definitions of feminine desire, it is argued that Cixous is merely repeating entrenched assumptions about women. While those assumptions have been used to discredit women for being irrational it does not necessarily follow that a celebration of irrational feminine desire will transform inequitable social structures. Discussing a post-structuralist feminist approach to women’s language, Andrea Nye argues that:

Neither ‘a maternal semiotics’, nor a ‘feminine operation’, nor ‘écriture féminine’ returned speech to its concrete human situation. These strategies of French feminism either disrupted conceptual order or supplemented the ahistoricity of structure with an ahistoricity of pure bodily and emotional expression. In neither case are meanings seen as a function of historically grounded intentions. (1988: 213)

The idealization of the female body, in other words, produces an image of the body which is divorced from the complex historical and social contexts in which women live their bodies. Cixous’s female body is a poetic fiction and has little bearing on the political reality of lived bodies.

In this context, the idealization of the liberatory potential of feminine desire is understood to be problematic. As Ann Rosalind Jones states in her comprehensive overview of *écriture féminine*: ‘The French feminists make of the female body too unproblematically pleasurable and totalized an entity’ (1981: 254). Claiming that the female body is the source of a radically different and subversive libidinality which when released will somehow destabilize entrenched phallogocentric structures is seen as politically naive. Indeed, Cixous is often dismissed as a revolutionary phrase-maker, someone who is able to craft spirited revolutionary texts but who cannot offer useful pragmatic solutions. Moreover, by privileging feminine desire as a revolutionary force *par excellence*, other aspects of women’s experiences are marginalized. Cixous’s celebration of feminine desire is read as a counter-productive reiteration of conservative masculine myths about

femininity and not, therefore, a radical position. For many of Cixous's critics the focus on the female body invariably leads back to the problem of essentialism.

Another issue which critics have focused on has to do with the historical connections between high modernist claims about the subversive effects of art and the radical potential Cixous accords *écriture féminine*. As Felski points out, an assumption that a subversive experimental writing is capable of transforming society is itself the hallmark of an earlier utopian strain within modernism which heralded the revolutionary potential of art. In this sense, Cixous's celebration of *écriture féminine* carries with it a number of conceptual and political problems associated with a Utopian avant-garde idealization of the relationship between art and society, the poetic and the political. In this context, the avant-garde over-estimates the liberatory effects of its own productions through a rather naive faith in the transformative power of art. Artistic innovations are often only accessible to an educated elite and thus hardly capable of effecting larger social changes, if indeed the avant-garde effects any real change at all. As Andreas Huyssen (1986) has pointed out, postmodern culture has a canny ability to incorporate and to mass market radical aesthetics, neutralizing their subversive impact by redeploying them as witty adverts and so on. Moreover, Cixous's celebration of what she argues is a specifically feminine style of writing is largely derived from male avant-garde writers. How is it, ask many feminist literary critics, that one can say that such a style offers a special expression of the female body and feminine sexuality when it is a style of writing largely indebted to men? Tina Chanter observes that Cixous's assertion that writers such as Genet offer a feminine textuality is often read by wary feminists as 'an indicator of a post-feminist sensibility' (1995: 29). While Cixous's concept of feminine sexuality reiterates patriarchal myths, her concept of feminine textuality relies upon male writers. What appears to be radical is revealed to be a form of conservatism.

The strange twists which lead a radical politics or poetics into a form of conservatism are also the subject of Pauline Johnson's (1994) critique of Cixous. Johnson suggests that many post-structuralist feminist theorists of difference such as Cixous can be understood as reproducing a Romantic opposition to modernity, logic, reason and established cultural roles. Romanticism grew out

of a frustration with what were perceived to be the alienating and corrupting effects of scientific rationalism, industrialization and the mechanization of humanity. Broadly speaking the Romantics offered one of the earliest idealizations of the revolutionary potential of poetry and art. Irrationality, nature, an edenic past, mysticism, sensuality, the sublime and the exotic were all valorized against the alienating effects of modernity. In effect, Romanticism was an anti-Enlightenment movement in so far as it questioned a belief in the ability of a sovereign reason to bring about social progress. A mistrust in the culture of the Enlightenment also led to the celebration of the anti-hero, an oppositional figure whose cultural exile communicated a profound truth about the limits of modernity. For Johnson, feminists of difference such as Cixous have taken up the position of the anti-hero, idealized women's exile from a phallogentric culture, and offer a feminism of the anti-role. In effect a feminist anti-role would be a continual rebellion against phallogentric definitions of femininity, an ironic and parodic subversion of the very roles (or identities) that have been ascribed to the feminine by masculine reason. In this sense, we can argue that Cixous's 'femininity' is self-consciously resisting any particular role, for all roles are masks which phallogentrism has imposed on women.

There are, however, some limits to this Romantic rebellion against feminine roles and identities. If phallogentrism is understood to permeate culture and impose numerous feminine roles which must be continually rebelled against, there must be a concept of self and agency which enables this very opposition. Johnson points out that 'the strategic evocation of a feminist anti-role inevitably hosts a positive description of a particular type of feminine subjectivity' (1994: 61). This self, suggests Johnson, runs the risk of becoming a normative and limited image of feminine identity as pure opposition. Moreover, by emphasizing, re-creating and rewriting the female body/self, Cixous also runs the risk of being seen to espouse a private-aestheticist creed, a sort of dandy-esque self-fashioning which has more to do with satisfying individual desires than with bringing about social change. Again, this is seen as a retreat into an essentialist poetics of the body and an inability to deal pragmatically with the multiple socio-historical constraints facing women. Such an attitude, identity or politics runs the risk of simplifying the relationship between

centre and margin and producing blanket rejections of language, for example, as simply phallogentric. Indeed, such a stance has been argued to be a form of anti-intellectualism. Identifying what she terms 'the logic of a psycho-politics' in specific feminist work, Marion Tapper argues that one of the pedagogic effects of a feminist rejection of phallogentric representations is that it risks repressing the very autonomy of the subjects it seeks to liberate (1993: 141–2). In other words, it is important to avoid an uncritical uptake of theories of subjectivity which appear to be self-evidently liberatory.

The major points made in the criticism of Cixous's work can be summarized as follows:

1. She relies upon a concept of phallogentricism which is *ahistorical* and thus unable to account for complex social change.
2. *Écriture féminine* is *utopian* and so potentially reactionary and unable to offer pragmatic, situated interventions.
3. Sexual difference becomes a *meta-narrative* which erases all other (racial, class, etc.) differences and so risks a simplistic, even reactive, account of social and political reality.
4. Cixous *idealizes* the revolutionary potential of language and confuses linguistic change with social change
5. The feminine is *romanticized* as oppositional.
6. Her position is based on a form of *biological essentialism*.

Having dealt with some of the more pertinent issues at stake in the critiques of Cixous's work we can now consider more positive responses. This is not to say that the critiques of Cixous are negative, indeed they are highly productive and enhance our understanding of the context in which her work is situated. The majority of the defences of Cixous's work depend upon what is perceived to be a misunderstanding of her essentialism. Important to this misunderstanding of Cixous's essentialism is a distinction between anatomy and *morphology*. Anatomy basically describes the physical, biological body. It is through reference to women's anatomical difference that biological essentialism gains ideological currency. As Freud once said of women's sexual difference, 'anatomy is destiny'. Women are hysterical because they have wombs, and so on. What this amounts to is an understanding of cultural (and other) differences as simply a reflection of natural differences.

Such an ideology is not particular to Freud though and has in fact supported multiple forms of sexism and racism. The Nazi classification of the subtle and sometimes imaginary anatomical differences between the Aryan and non-Aryan body, for example, was based on a racist ideology which confused anatomical differences with moral differences: Aryan culture was morally superior because Aryan anatomy was biologically superior. As Gatens succinctly puts it: 'It is not *anatomy* which decides cultural value or status but rather the way in which that anatomy is represented and lived' (1991: 106).

Morphology, on the other hand, refers to the cultural representations of anatomical differences. The concept of morphology achieves two strategically important moves. First, morphology challenges the ideological 'purity' of scientific truths about anatomical difference by calling attention to the fact that such 'truths' are historically and socially situated representations of 'natural' differences. Secondly, an emphasis on the morphological construction of the body refuses the 'anatomy is destiny' model (and thus the idea that culture is merely a blueprint of nature), and so opens up the possibility of producing more empowering representations of the body. For Gatens, when Cixous writes about a woman's body she is referring to 'the way in which the shape or form of the female body is represented in culture. Morphology is not given, it is interpretation, which is not to say that it has nothing to do with our understandings of biology' (1991: 115). Indeed, the discourse of biology can be understood as culturally privileged representation of anatomy. If we recognize that biologists in the late nineteenth century asserted that women's wombs atrophied when they studied we can clearly see that it was a morphological body which was being represented in these discourses. This is not to say that biology is merely a system of ideologically polluted representations or that bodies do not bleed, get sick and die, but rather that the ways in which bodies are represented are not immune to ideological contamination. It is how we interpret and give meaning to the anatomical body which is the issue.

Once we recognize the distinction between anatomy and morphology the issue of Cixous's essentialism becomes more complicated. For Gatens, it is precisely at this point that Moi's reading of Cixous falters. 'Cixous's writing', Moi claims, 'is about the *female* body. This is to apply categories to Cixous's writing that

are inappropriate. . . . This is certainly not to say that French feminists do not make a distinction between biological and social aspects of sexual difference. However, the distinction is not made in terms of another binary polarity, like sex and gender, but rather in terms of a middle term, a term which is *reducible* to neither anatomy nor socialization: that term is *morphology*' (1991: 115). Here Gatens makes clear that the term 'morphology' attempts to move beyond a sex/nature/body and gender/social/mind binary. This is in keeping with the critique of the dichotomous metaphysics which underpin phallogentrism. The body understood as morphology is not reducible to either nature or culture but is, rather, the scene of a dynamic writing which exceeds the limits of either category. The body as morphology also opens up the possibility of a radical rewriting of the place of the body within the nature/culture, mind/body by exploring the relationship in between. This is why Cixous states that *écriture féminine* is capable of transforming previous definitions of the female body and opening up new horizons for rewriting the body. As Cixous writes in 'The Laugh of the Medusa': 'The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative' (1980a: 245).

A related point about the confusion between anatomy and morphology is made by Pamela Banting (1992), whose focus is on the body of the hysteric in Cixous's work, which she reads as a model for resistance. As Banting puts it:

For Cixous, the hysterical or 'poetic' body inscribes the outlines of a signifying practice that is neither logocentric nor strictly Derridean. The poetic body, the body as pictogram, allows her to hypothesize women's writing as, in part, translation between language and corporeality. (231)

In effect, Banting reads *écriture féminine* as a process of translation, not simply representation, of the female body. 'Feminists such as Cixous', writes Banting, 'are trying to unname the Cartesian body. Not back to a natural or maternal source or to a body prior to Descartes or prior to language but toward a new conception of the body' (239).

Banting also argues that many of the anti-essentialist criticisms remain invested in a model of the body as a passive *tabula rasa*, or blank page, upon which culture inscribes itself. In contrast to this negative image of the female body as a passive surface onto which phallogentric texts are written, Cixous's 'body' writes and speaks back – 'biting the tongue [of phallogentric language] with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of' (257) – and in doing so creates a language which moves beyond a phallogentric separation between mind and body. Banting is careful to point out that Cixous is not advocating a language of the body which is composed of grunts, wails, screams or nonsense, and if we find it absurd that Cixous might be accused of this we only have to recall that the Editorial Collective's *Questions Féministes* implied just that. Rather, Cixous is suggesting a language which is capable of translating those moments when language fails us and the body attempts to speak. Quite simply, Cixous is attempting to forge a new language which communicates the space between language and the body, a space of the (m)other. When one is lost for words and overwhelmed by experiences of pain or pleasure those moments call attention to the limits of language in expressing the injustices and joys which render us speechless. *Écriture féminine* is not simply about speaking out instead of remaining silent or crying, or communicating those silences or cries as symptoms of women's lack (which is precisely how Freud read the body of the hysteric); rather it is about producing a language which is able to move beyond the very phallogentric Cartesian duality which renders the body speechless. For Cixous, the hysterical body is profound because the hysteric calls attention to a language which is in the difficult process of being born through the body. As Cixous writes: 'Language is a translation. It speaks through the body. Each time we translate what we are in the process of thinking, it necessarily passes through our bodies' (1988: 151–2).

### **An avant-garde feminist?**

One way of avoiding the conceptual deadlock which can ensue when Cixous's work is judged according to whether or not she is political or an essentialist, is to situate her work within the tradition of the avant-garde. This is not to avoid the question of the

political but rather to understand Cixous's work within the historical and literary context of a movement of ideas which she works within and against. It has already been noted above that Cixous's work is indebted to the avant-garde and it is now appropriate that we explore this debt more critically. By situating Cixous within the avant-garde I have in mind her close affinities with Surrealism, which have been touched upon by Susan Rubin Suleiman in *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-garde* (1990).

First though, some background information on Surrealism. The Surrealist movement was most active in the 1920s and 1930s in France and western Europe and some of the more prominent members of that group included André Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard and Salvador Dali. The aim of the Surrealists was to create a perpetual revolution against order, which, for them, signified the oppression of freedom. As Maurice Nadeau comments, 'If surrealism rests on a dogma, it is indeed on that of "absolute revolt, of total insubmission, of formal sabotage"' (1973: 175). For Breton, 'The immediate reality of the surrealist revolution is not so much to change anything in the physical and apparent order of things as to create a movement in men's minds. The idea of any surrealist revolution aims at the profound substance and order of thought' (Nadeau 1973: 114). To this end, the surrealists revolted against culture, logic, reason and society, stressing instead the primacy of desire, the liberating power of free love, the unconscious and the imagination. Madness was celebrated against reason, as a state which offered a special insight into repressed creativity. Significantly, Breton and Aragon celebrated hysteria as 'the greatest poetic discovery of the nineteenth century' (Nadeau 1973: 158). Refusing pathological explanations for hysteria, they claimed it as a densely poetic expression. Mummified in the shrouds of logic, the desiring body withers and with it the creative spirit. The Surrealists aimed to create a new body, a new creative spirit, which would move beyond the bourgeois constraints of reason and logic and bring about a joyful and radical poetic revolution. 'The true revolution, for the surrealists, was the victory of desire' (Nadeau 1973: 207). Desire was thought to constitute the essence of man: I desire therefore I am. Or as the post-Surrealist group the Situationists put it, on the walls of Paris in May 1968, 'I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires.' Libertarianism

was politicized, and it is no coincidence that the surrealists idolized the Marquis de Sade as a revolutionary.

Cixous also celebrates the hysteric as an anti-hero, as a figure who speaks from the edges of rational discourse, hinting at new understandings of desire, new poetic ways of imagining the relationship between the body and desire. Moreover, for Cixous love and desire are also revolutionary forces capable of undoing the repressive constraints of reason and logic. Poetry too plays a central part in Cixous's radical vision and we might compare *écriture féminine*, with its challenge to create a new language of the body, with the Surrealists' espousal of automatic writing as something which was thought capable of releasing the unconscious and unlocking desire. They drew upon Rimbaud who, in 'The Alchemy of the Word' (1873), writes, 'I boasted of inventing, with rhythms from within me, a kind of poetry that all the senses, sooner or later, would recognize. And I alone would be its translator. . . . What was unutterable, I wrote down' (1976: 204). In brief, automatic writing involved going into a trance state in which free-association and the inhibition of literary constraints produced a long, flowing discourse which was thought to uncover repressed meanings. Automatic writing was also a means for achieving self-awareness. As Suleiman comments: 'Like automatic writing, H.C.'s practice is "at once a vocation and a technique," "a practice of the greatest passivity" which is actually "an active way – of getting to know things by letting ourselves be known by them". Cagey H.C., to rewrite the avant-garde by feminizing it!' (1994: 80).

For Cixous, every woman has access to a revolutionary unconscious, every woman is capable of becoming a liberated and liberating writer – 'Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide' writes Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1980a: 259). The unconscious is thought to be the wellspring of creativity and thus every woman is capable of nourishing herself with her (specifically feminine) unconscious. A similar notion informs a Surrealist refusal to create a hierarchy of talent and genius – 'Surrealism is within the compass of every unconscious' (Nadeau 1973: 97). The Surrealists mocked the realist representationalism of the novel and argued that the literary canon was an undemocratic and repressive system which limited thought. The novel was mechanistic, logical, a slave to repressive reason (ibid.: 95). Similarly, Cixous writes in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' that 'Nearly the entire

history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis' (1980a: 249). It is only the poets who have escaped reason, 'not the novelists, allies of representationalism' (250).

Central to both Surrealism and Cixous are the following fundamental assumptions: a revolution in language will bring about a social revolution; poetry and experimental writing is the favoured method of revolution; the repression of desire by reason and logic must be undone; the hysteric is an anti-hero who communicates a radical language; laughter, irony and parody are subversive forces; the unconscious is the source of a revolutionary creativity. Of course, having put it like that one can understand why it is that both Surrealism and Cixous have been dismissed as hopelessly romantic. I have risked a vulgar reduction here of the overlaps I perceive between Surrealism and Cixous because there is not enough space to fully elaborate the more subtle connections. However, we shall return to the question of Surrealism and Cixous in the chapter on Angela Carter. Carter offers a decisive critique of the Surrealist imagination in *The War of Dreams* (1972) and by applying Cixous's own work to Carter we will be able to test the limits of both Surrealism and Cixous. For now though, it is important to discuss the ways in which Cixous can be read as appropriating the central tenets of Surrealism in order to theorize writing and sexual difference.

The central difference between Cixous and Surrealism is of course to do with sexuality and in particular Cixous's figuring of the maternal. In her insightful work on the avant-garde, Suleiman explores the ways in which many male avant-garde texts reveal a pathological repudiation of the maternal and argues that this betrays a deep-seated patriarchal fear of an engulfing maternal body. One example she cites is the Surrealist document *Hands off Love!* (1927), which was a vitriolic diatribe against Mrs Charlie Chaplin who was at the time suing her husband for divorce. Signed by Ernst and another thirty-one male Surrealists, it is a savage attack on the bourgeois repression of free love, poetry and the creative life. It is directed at 'those bitches who become, in every country, the *good* mothers, *good* sisters, *good* wives, those plagues, those parasites of every sentiment and every love' (Nadeau 1973: 265). And there is Paul Eluard's and Benjamin Peret's infamous Surrealist 'proverb': 'You must beat your mother while she's

young' (Nadeau 1973: 156). The 'rejection' of motherhood (for want of a better way of describing it) was not just a proto-punk sniggering at 'good girls', for the Surrealists, as Suleiman points out, read the mother in particular as a representative of the very values they were fighting against. As Suleiman argues, the mother was despised by the Surrealists for embodying a self-righteous and stifling morality and supporting the repressive and hypocritical beliefs of the bourgeoisie. Mother represents the weight of tradition, appropriate conduct, limited social roles.

In contrast to this pervasive avant-garde rejection of motherhood (and Suleiman is careful to note that this attitude towards the mother is not particular to male surrealists but also informs the work of many women of the avant-garde), Cixous offers a different story. For Cixous, the mother is an ironic and creative figure who shows no alliance to paternal authority, whose energies are not husbanded by male power. Rather, the mother is a radical innovator and a slightly threatening one too. Cixous invokes the Medusa as mother. In Greek mythology Medusa turned men into stone because she was so hideous. Later, in Freud, Medusa is appropriated as a symbol of the mother's castrated genitals and thus, for the men who gaze at her, a representation of the possibility of their own castration and symbolic annihilation. And for Cixous? 'Too bad if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. . . . You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing' (1980a: 255). The mother as Medusa, as castrated female genitals, as women's lack (of symbolic and sexual power), is transformed here into a positive figure of Convulsive Beauty (to borrow a term from Surrealism) through a typical Surrealist use of parody and reversal. The Medusa's laughter is rebellious for she not only mocks the fragility of patriarchal myths about the mother's lack but she also opens up the possibility that it is the mother's sexual/symbolic power which is feared – 'Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated' (ibid.). The psychoanalytic presumption that the mother lacks is revealed here as a defence against the recognition of woman's creative power. Cixous's rewriting of the mother through a rebellious and humorous parody of the myth of Medusa is just one example of the ways in which she subverts an avant-garde poetics. More broadly, she can be said to take up many of the strategies of

Surrealism – Suleiman notes her use of parody, reversal, humour – and reframe them as feminine. In effect we can read ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ as a post-surrealist feminist manifesto.

While Cixous is still most widely known for her theorization of *écriture féminine*, in her Medusa text her work is much more complex and wide-ranging than that. In the next chapter we turn to a consideration of Cixous’s major concepts in some order. This will allow us to become familiar with her overall work before applying it to a number of writers.

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