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WOMAN AS MORE

I want to write almost nothing. That is, I want to write what seems to mean almost nothing in our normal lives, but to me is the essence of life. I want to write what is almost impossible to write, I want to write at the extremity of writing …. Writing must outwrite itself.—

Hélène Cixous, "The Two Countries of Writing"

A single thread binds Hélène Cixous's work in the many domains to which she has devoted her great talents—criticism, poetry, novels and plays: her recognition and exploration of *sexual difference* in language and literature. She has insisted unyieldingly on *woman, woman* encore, *woman as "more"*— a stance that has been condemned as "idealist" and "essentialist."[1] Yet long before the current critical chorus, Cixous constructed multiple concrete linguistic and literary arguments against today's deploying the "neutral" third person, "the they" in lieu of "he "or "she" as labels. For Cixous, this would be an evasion, an effort to overlook, or deny the crucial importance of that *more,* that crucial *difference*. Her intention is to block the rigid and false categorizations that arise with sexual *opposition*, which is in no way the same as sexual *difference*.

In doing so Cixous baffles today's, like yesterday's, critical categories by making non-negotiable the recognition of sexual difference and *woman* in theory and, most importantly, in literary practice. To illustrate her vision of difference through her artistry we must compare Cixous with no less a figure than Shakespeare, who also demonstrated a comparably fluid sense of both sexes and how, in the "country of literature", they can occupy the same body at the same time.[2] Cixous has described herself as "a woman made of women",[3] but she has also described her artistic process as a playwright by noting that she *can* and indeed *must* identify herself with "man" in order to write:

> I write as a woman … I can use my body to inscribe the body of a woman. But I can't do that for a man [in prose]…. There are plenty of men in my plays. But that is because the theater is not the scene of sexual pleasure … in the theater it's the heart that sings. And the human heart has no sex.

> Sexually, I cannot identify with a male character. Yet the heart feels the same way in man's breast as in a woman's.

"*Yet the* heart *feels the same way in man's breast as in a woman's.*" Aspiring, as Rousseau once did, to be a historian of the human heart,[4] Cixous has given us a dazzling array of portrayals of human souls revealed entirely by their speech, their ways with language. See, for example the figure of Pol Pot/Saloth Sâr in her 1984 ten act play, *L'Histoire Terrible Mais Inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, Roi du Cambodge*.[5] As I wrote in the introduction to my English translation of this play,

> Cixous brings the full range of sympathy into play without a trace of sentimentality, she does not simply put *herself* "in the other's place", but instead writes *as* each character. Like Hazlitt's and Borges' Shakespeare, she aims at the absolute dispossession of the self. Not ego-centered by definition, then, this self is free to explore the intersubjective relation as such—between sexes, races and classes and even between the living and the dead.

Her steady gaze into the black heart of this particular male character is enabled by using Pol Pot's own words, method à la psychoanalysis, to unmask the deep pathology driving his murderous politics. Speaking of his pure hatred for Sihanouk and the monarchy, Saloth Sâr says,

> Indecent monarchy, I hate your effeminate countenance
>
> Your foolish moods, your whorish profusion,
>
> I shall tear off your silken gowns
>
> And I shall unveil to the stunned world
>
> Our next Cambodia, virgin, virile, incorruptible.
>
> [...]
>
> We will see looming before them—
>
> Invincible Cambodia descending from the mountains
>
> To hound them all beyond our borders
>
> In a magnificent slaughter.
>
> Oh! I cannot wait, I cannot wait,
>
> O, that my furious heart might pour out freely
>
> Its torrent of bitterness.
>
> I'll burn everything in my way.
>
> Arrogant Vietnamese, you who for centuries have used our sacred land as a scullery,
>
> I'll burn you to a cinder.

> And you, Cambodians, my brothers, you who are made
>
> Out of my country's mud,
>
> I'll be your potter, I'll smash you to bits,
>
> I'll return you to primal matter
>
> And then I'll mold from this clay a new Khmer people. (15-16)

He sees his world through the lens of a masculinity at war with the feminine. Highlighting his declarations of desire for a return to a pure Kampuchea by purging colonialism from his mother country Cixous slowly reveals how uncontrollably he is driven to make all his countrymen conform to his own ideal (male) ego. The artificial group he tried to substitute for actual Cambodian culture and society, ruled by the Khmer Rouge, was one with the classical group psychology analyzed by Freud as originally motivated by envy of others' enjoyments. Its strict rule was that "everyone must have the same and be the same", and its lethal result, horribly, was the unjustified massacre of thousands of Cambodians who did not fit Pol Pot's image of an ideal "pure Cambodian." If for example, someone wore eyeglasses, or were too tall or too short they had to be killed.

Cixous's theory often has a militant tone, but it is the tone of someone who takes language as the most serious means of combat: her *Sorties* of 1975 means "exits" / the "ways out", but also the excursive raids made by a garrison to lift a siege. Like her fellow *émigrée* to France, Julia Kristeva, Cixous designates the "way out" of the impasses of contemporary culture and politics as existing in the nether side of language. But Cixous sees *human beings* as entirely made of language (Lacan's *parlêtre/par lettres*), so that the raids made by the underside of language are consubstantial with 'the body' of woman or of man. For Cixous, both body and woman are linguistic-effects, but that very fact is what makes them capable of subverting the language that oppresses them.

Cixous's stance on sexual difference has crucial philosophical, analytic and literary grounding that has nothing to do with "biologism", "essentialism" or anti-equalitarianism. It does have a great deal to do with her understanding of language, its relation to the unconscious, to drive and to the body. It is as if she takes Lacan's 1975 dictum in *Le Sinthome* that "drive is the echo in the body of speech" as her foundation.[6] She shares the Freudian and Lacanian understanding of how libidinal passion vibrates in us, unconsciously, and of the real effects those unchecked drives can have on our social and political actions. She shows how we either give in to them or learn to respond creatively to defend ourselves against them.[7] For Cixous, woman is something "*more*" than her subjection to the phallic signifier.[8]

Cixous is also firmly in accord with the anti-Hegelian strain in 20th century French thought, a position common to her fellow theorist of difference, Jacques Derrida not to mention Jacques Lacan. In standing firm for the recognition of sexual difference, Cixous intends to strike a blow against the *metaphysics of opposition,* a realm

in which any difference will inevitably become binary polarities where one will always yield to the dominion of the other, à la Hegel. (Or alternatively fuse with the opposite in a new synthesis [sublation] that honors neither side of the original couple.) The case of sex is egregious in this respect: the domination of feminine by masculine in Western culture is long-standing. In her life and work Cixous can thus be said to exemplify the comprehensiveness, scope and uniqueness that she believes "woman" as the revenge of the repressed can bring to bear on those cultural domains traditionally foreclosed to her. But only as "woman", not as an imitation man or an anti-man.

Her artistic way of resisting Hegel's overbearing metaphysical oppositions is to penetrate one side by the other, and to take the most abstract metaphysical concepts and imbue them with familiar objects—especially sex and feminine *jouissance* (*Newly Born Woman*, 1975: *Sorties*). Her prose is very different from that of Julia Kristeva, whose work is equally informed by linguistic and philosophical theory, but whose prosaic style could never be mistaken for Cixous's poetically condensed formulations.

While the anti-Hegelian stance was, of course, also adopted by the leading male philosophers and critical theorists of Cixous's Parisian circle, it was Cixous, through the very language that fosters metaphysical skewing, who devized new strategies for "righting" the system. She engaged in correcting the imbalance, and providing for what had been silenced, engulfed, or incorporated by its opposite to have its "say." That is why her first major theoretical statements take a poetic, hysterical form: as poetry is repressed by prose, a hysteric's sexual ambivalence is repressed by the prevailing order of binary sexual oppositions.

With Lacan, Cixous sees human "life" as an effect of a signifier that excises *jouissance* from reason and from a social life that is ruled by the (phallic) Laws (of language). From Lacan and from Freud both, Cixous learned to appreciate the degree to which language *is* the essence of human life, and that when woman's speech (or anyone else's speech, for that matter) is radically impeded, cut off by cultural limits, that life becomes the object of unleashed, irrational forces of repression as well as the return of the anguishing presence Lacan termed *jouissance*.[9] In the place of a *vouloir-dire* (literally, a "meaning", but also etymologically, "a wanting-to-say"), the repressed subject produces only stifled gestures, awkward jerks inconsonant with untroubled verbal expression—the sort of calm verbal expression that grants masculine speakers social rewards and assures them their superior social place and psychological balance.

Those in command of the word can hide behind it—behind the mask that speech provides. Recall Stendhal's dictum that "words were made to hide men's thoughts." The hysteric's unbidden gesture is, by contrast, all-too-visible—to the point that it becomes a "writing" that can never stop writing itself, even and especially when all avenues of speech are cut off to it. Cixous's aim, in "The Laugh of the Medusa", and in *Sorties*, is to read the *writing* in hysteria, to read its proto-*écriture féminine*.

But more than that, the hysteric's stance, which makes salient that her truth is what cannot open out onto speech, is a platform from which to challenge what is hidden behind the seemingly orderly discourse that is male dominated. For Cixous, "woman" is more or less the emblem of a power, an energy in language that has been prematurely stifled by a culture of the (phallic) signifier. The hallmark of her own critical prose is its singular power to compress grand philosophical, political, and psychoanalytic theories into tellingly pithy, epigrammatic formulations that communicate explosively their critical stance as much through their handling of the signifier—language, sound, rhythm, style as through systematic exposition—and at times, bitter irony. For example, for her critiques of Freud in *La Jeune née* and in *Le rire de la Méduse* Cixous consciously adopts a "hysterical" *persona* and tone that become no small part of the criticism she launches.

It is important to acknowledge and return to Cixous's double insistence on *woman* and on *sexual difference*. It is a stance that distinguishes her markedly from Judith Butler who, like Cixous, is allied with Derridean deconstruction, but whose fundamental orientation remains Hegelian. Butler contests the "Hegelian" binary opposition between masculine and feminine (in which one must succumb to the other); but her technique is to "subvert" gender repressions by undermining and loosening the cultural codings of gender, thereby detaching gender not just from any biological link, but also from any linguistic tie to its subject. And in so disconnecting gender from language, from the signifier, Butler's stance ends by vitiating gender altogether. After Butler, and for many of her followers, sexual difference no longer exists because she has destroyed the entire concept of gender. There is nothing behind or beyond the gender masquerade.

Cixous's approach sounds superficially similar to Butler's, but it is really quite different. Cixous is committed to the struggle *within language as such*; to *wresting the subject free from language by means of language itself.* Cixous's argument with the feminist position of egalitarianism is that it is premature and may too quickly override what of woman still needs to be explored and deployed. What may *woman* yield for the arsenal needed to combat language's insistent categorizations, or what the great Kenneth Burke once called the "postal address" version of semantic meanings, the giving "a name and address to everything in the universe." Cixous does not work at the level of a shifting surface *personae*, or masks, à la Butler. She instead works her way through language and its laws to have something new rise to the surface: and for Cixous, it is the moment of surfacing that counts. Liberation must be constantly re-secured through intimate linguistic struggle that takes the full measure of its opponent's force and dominance. And that opponent is, first and foremost, the unconscious drives and their libidinal power that must be confronted and challenged again and again and again.

By using psychoanalytic thought creatively, Cixous has placed herself more in the Derridean deconstructive camp than in the scientific rigor of Freudian-Lacanian thought, to which she (and Derrida) also remain indebted. The critical distinction to be drawn between Cixous's adherence to the principle of sexual difference and

that of Lacan is that for Lacan, at least in his early work, sexual difference as such is *the* response of the subject to the effect of the signifier. For Lacan, the sexualized response to the traumatic alienation of the subject by the signifier dates from the subject's very first encounter with the signifier, with language, with the phallus coming to the rescue by organizing the disarray the signifier introduces into the subject. This encounter structures the logic of the psyche and thus of sex for each subject.

Also for Cixous, "masculine" and "feminine" are orientations toward language and its logic and nothing more—orientations that affect the body and soul alike and are the source of sexual energy—but which can be directed toward creative ends. And as such, it might well be that Cixous, as Lacan's assistant, allowed him to correct his own position on how language constitutes woman beyond the phallus and her presumed "envy" of it. In his famous diagram from *Encore,* he draws a second directional arrow in his feminine linguistic logic toward a big Other that is barred, restrained, not of the ilk of the unbarred Other found in the deep logic of the masculine side. He visually real-izes woman as not entirely determined by the phallic signifier.[10] The body of *woman* is not-all under the dominion of the phallic signifier and as such she can be—and is—an amazing resource for renewing culture—woman as *more*.[11]

What did "sexual difference" mean for Cixous's artistry? At the level of art, sexual difference is neither a given, nor an eternal opposition, but a fundamental principle of insight. In her essay, "The Two Countries of Writing", Cixous says: "I'm mostly composed of 'women'—quite by chance. I have no trace of my grandfathers except as being wiped out of life. And neither of my grandmothers had traces of grandfathers …. So I am mostly peopled with 'women.' And it's probably made me write the way I write. I might have been composed of 'men'; and I would have written differently. But then, what are 'men' or 'women' composed of?" (Cixous, "Two Countries", p. 197) She *artfully* produces her characters as linguistic effects.

If there are two different logical positions that can be taken *within language* (language is that which defines human being as such) and if these go by the name of masculine and feminine, and if their two perspectives neither fully overlap, nor diverge completely, Cixous in this last quote shows them to be holding a common, vacuous center—the phallic signifier—that they each appropriate or resist in different ways. She then makes it her work to *specify* two distinctive ways of apprehending and reflecting certain universal human predicaments in her art, where she makes full use of the energy derived from this original principle of cleavage, *sexuation*, in much the same way that Hazlitt said Shakespeare did: she works her way toward the emptying out of its cultural remainders, the restrictions produced by the metaphysics of oppositional thinking to free her to inhabit the *other* sex.

But what has "sexual difference" meant, in a non-artistic context, in practical, concrete terms to Cixous? In the various institutions in which she labored?

When Cixous founded the first program of doctoral studies in *Études Féminines* in France at Paris VIII (Vincennes) in 1974, she had been Chair of the English Department at the University of Paris at Nanterre since 1967. Even as head of the new program she continued to direct English doctoral studies: she was, after all, an internationally acclaimed Joyce scholar, and, at age 40, the youngest holder of the *doctorat d'état* in France, having published her major thesis on Joyce (*The Exile of James Joyce*) and written a minor thesis on Robinson Jeffers. Within the university system, the emphasis on women in *Études féminines* was most radical politically. Cixous has, however, claimed that, at the time, she would have greatly preferred to title the new doctoral program "Studies in Sexual Difference."[12] If she was not simply after the "study of women", what did Cixous have in mind in pursuing the politics of feminine studies, the practices of feminine writing, and the strategies of feminine reading?[13]

Cixous' commitment to the problematic of difference is most deeply attributable to her absolute commitment to *literary* language. It is a commitment that has clearly shaped her institutional practices. She insisted on hiring mainly leading creative writers at Vincennes: Michel Butor, Julio Cortazar and "poetic" literary critics like Jean-Pierre Richard and Tzvetan Todorov to teach there. It has also deeply informed her theories of feminine writing (*écriture féminine*) and shaped her literary criticism into a uniquely poetic prose. It is crucial to note that her procedure as critic, writer, and reader is to force sexual difference to the surface of writing—be it theoretical, dramatic, political, poetic in nature—so that the writing at last comes to mirror the schism of language, the internal limit that each "sex" poses to the other within the "same" language. The goal is not to achieve a Hegelian *sublation*; it is, rather, to accomplish its aesthetic *sublimation*: by "emptying the subject" of sex, its capacity for enjoyment is unlocked, but only—and this seems to be crucial for understanding Cixous—at the literary level. She does not seem inclined to bring the program into everyday life except where life itself has attained poetic insight.

Cixous depicts her own her particular "coming to language" as shaping her poetic as well as her critical practice. Her earliest discussion of her artistic process (*La Venue à l'Écriture*, 1977) links it to the fact that, as a child in her peculiar circumstances, she found herself opened to the heteroglossic light that different tongues shed upon each other. For her a language exists beyond languages, something like Benjamin's *reine Sprache*, that is "universal" to human being, but it is a *concrete* universal that she calls different "countries" in language: the country of poetry, the country of theater. This "universal" face is always particularized by reference to her own familial biography: she looks to her father (and his premature death when she was eleven) as crucial for bending her toward poetry in her earliest reflections; but by her 1994 book, *Photos de racines* (*Rootprints*), Cixous also begins to track part of the history of her own poetic language to her maternal language, German, with its particular resonances and rhythms.

The theme of exile in language often informs her theory of poetry. It has drawn her to write about poets like Osip Mandelstam (whom she pairs, unexpectedly, with

Nelson Mandela on the basis of the common part-signifier in their names; *Manne* 1988), Anna Akhmatova and Tasso, playwrights like Kleist and Shakespeare, and novelists like Kafka and Joyce, whose language bears the indelible mark of an internal exile. At the same time, Cixous conscientiously admits that her critical predilection for such authors is rooted in her own sense of the linguistic exile she felt as a child of Jewish parents (one of Spanish descent whose family had lived in Morocco, the other an Austro-Hungarian, who emigrated from *Mittel Europa* in 1933) in French and Arab speaking Algeria.

It is thus entirely legitimate, in Cixous' critical theory, to tie literary language to the biography and elective theoretical alliances and affective political allegiances of its author.

Notes

1. She came into conflict with an early French feminism that had adopted a militant stance regarding the sexes as absolutely equal and interchangeable (e.g., Monique Wittig). In Anglo-American feminist and critical circles Cixous was quickly labeled an "idealist", "uneasy about the power of words to hold out against the power of opposition"; her unique way of moving back and forth among "text, performance, unconscious, and biography" (Schiach, p. 33).

2. Although both of her French forefathers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Stendhal, also sought to describe the experience of having two souls in a single body; and for Stendhal, that "other" soul of his is feminine. See *La vie d'Henry Brulard* and my chapter, "Becoming and Unbecoming a Man" in *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). One might also recall that Simone de Beauvoir praised Stendhal for having portrayed, uniquely, *"des femmes vraies"* [*"real women"*].

3. Cixous, "The Two Countries of Writing", in Juliet Flower MacCannell, ed. *The Other Perspective in Gender and Culture (*New York: Columbia University Press 1990), p. 203.

4. Cixous says, "I want to tell the epic of the heart", (*"*The Two Countries", p. 201).

5. *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*, trans. Juliet Flower MacCannell, Judith Pike and Lollie Groth (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. ix.

6. *Seminar XXIII,* lesson of 18 November 1975 (London: Polity Press. 2016), p. 9 [Orig. *Ornicar?* 1975, p. 4]

7. See my chapter, "The Echo of the Signifier in the Body: How Drive Works (Or Not) Today", for *The Science of the Signifier: Analyzing the Cultural Unconscious*, eds. Lilian Munk-Rösing and Ida Nissen (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 27-45.

8. She differs entirely from Kristeva's "revolution in poetic language" which attributes to a choric reserve the "semiotic" rhythms that disrupt surface discourse but never fully overthrow it, Cixous is determined to have the feminine re-write and re-invent that "surface"

9. Some of the biographical record may clarify Cixous's relation to the thought of Lacan. Lacan was interested in James Joyce, about whom he would eventually write in his seminar on *Le Sinthome, Seminar XXIII*. Because of her great knowledge of Joyce, Cixous's

thesis director, Jean-Jacques Mayoux, introduced her to Lacan, and she and Lacan worked together for two years, from 1963-65. Her long-time partner Antoinette Fouque, a political activist in the *Mouvement des femmes* and co-founder of the publishing house, Éditions des femmes, was analyzed by Lacan, creating another tie between Cixous's sensibilities and the French Freudian, Jacques Lacan.

10. See my argument on this in "The Open Ego: Joyce, Woolf, and 'Mad' Subject", in M. Steinkoler and P. Gherovici, eds. *Lacan and Madness: Madness, Yes You Can't* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 205-218.

11. See my discussion in "The Open Ego", *op. cit*., pp. 209 -210.

12. Mireille Calle-Gruber, p. 211.

13. Morag Schiach, p. 38ff.

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